

Battle Weary

[January 3, 2015](#)[motherhood](#), [TeachingDown;s](#), [Education](#), [SEN](#), [Special education](#)

There is something strange happening in Edu World. After a (more than) decade long drive towards the inclusion of children with learning disabilities, or special needs if you want a broader term, something unexpected has cropped up. After years of special school closure, the acceptance and education of the vast majority of special kids in mainstream schools, the parents of said kids, and the children themselves, it has to be said, are voting with their feet. Like me, they are sending their children, not to the local mainstream, but to the (hopefully) local special school.

Why is this happening? These parents, and their predecessors, have fought long and hard for the right of their children to take their places in the mainstream world, to no longer be deemed ineducable, to, simply by their presence, do a bit of educating of other people themselves, to be accepted and acceptable.

First up, training. Let's be honest here. Mainstream teachers just aren't trained to deal with complex needs in their classrooms. Classes are big, my first class was 33 children, and children like mine are a challenge. They are a challenge in terms of teaching them academically, in terms of their behaviour, in terms of the way they change the balance so much in the class, and that's before you get to the accountability measures that mean high stakes testing and jobs on the line, and progress and all that jazz. Classrooms with 30 children in them and a prescriptive national curriculum dictating what you teach in them are not flexible places. They are a bit like ocean liners. They take a long time to turn.

Resources. Many of our school buildings are old and difficult to negotiate. I went to a school that was 100 years old in 1980. I've taught in two storey Victorian buildings (where the boy who was recovering from Leukemia had to have a person with him so that he could get to the music room), mobile classrooms with and without their own toilets, in and outside classrooms in varying states of repair, and not one of them, not one of the crowded spaces that are my stamping ground, has been set up for someone who might need a hoist to get out of a wheelchair (even though there is a disabled toilet with the

PE mats stored inside it). Ok, that's an extreme example, but you get my point, I hope. Physical adjustments can be hard to squeeze in to your common or garden classroom.

The yearly nature of schooling. Like it or not there is an element that is all about surviving the year. So your child doesn't get on particularly well with their teacher, they haven't done as well as you would like? Hey, it's only a year. We can all afford to write a year off here or there. Eighteen year olds do it all the time. So you've got a nightmare class with children you find really difficult to teach. It's only a year. It'll be over before you know it. And before you know it we have forgotten what went before because we are on to the next set of challenges, we are taken up with the next lot of obstacles. Nothing gets changed because we are too busy mountaineering/fighting the next set of fires, and we start to wonder how many years off it's acceptable to have.

Unseen difficulties. I've written about the hidden power of labels before. I've written about the insidious effect of having your own personal TA (who may or may not subscribe to the labelling effect) before. I've wondered aloud at the wisdom of entrusting our most vulnerable, and our most difficult to teach, to the least paid and the least trained members of our educational workforce before (and really, no disrespect intended). I haven't written about the day that Sam fell off a wall and I took him straight from school to A&E. I haven't told you about the time he walked for miles with his class on a day out, or sat on a church floor for the carol concert and was poorly for a week after the experience. Needless to say there are plenty of tales to tell of the unexpected, the events preventable by a little experience, or specialised knowledge, or effective knowledge sharing.

Home and school. I can't count the times I see the relationship between parents of children with special needs and the schools they attend characterised as a battle. As a parent I've been labelled as pushy, or fussy, and difficult; precious. I've alluded to the magnifying effect of Down's syndrome, the way that everything is harder, slower, in sharper relief. Parents are under pressure. Teachers are under pressure. Add to that a challenging child, and I don't mean that in a perjorative sense, but what you have is a powder keg, a road crash waiting to happen, and one that echoes, continues to affect families and subsequent teachers, for years to come. It was a shock to realise that maybe I wasn't as awkward as I was made to feel.

Friendships. What it is that we want when we send our children off up the road, tiny in their miniature uniforms, is acceptance; a public acknowledgement that our children are worth just as much as everyone else's. That, when we were told that we wouldn't be going on holiday to Italy, but in fact were heading to Holland, they lied; that we were taking our two weeks in Italy just the same as everyone else. And one of the benchmarks of our citizenship on planet normal? Friendships, playdates, birthday parties, after school clubs; involvement in the extras. Over his primary school years, Sam had few birthday invites and one play date, and those were confined to the infant years. A try out at the school football club resulted in me being told that to have him there 'wasn't fair on me' (not me). If there's one thing that this blogging process has taught me it's that I am not alone. It's that my experience is echoed up and down the country, and is the subject of academic research papers (qualitative probably).

In a school system where the emphasis is fairly and squarely on academic results, where the pressure is on from the moment the children step through the door for pace, pace, pace, not a moment wasted, heads down (but not thumbs up), where is the space for children with difficulties to learn how to be friends, to learn about the oh-so-important incidentals? Did we forget that the point of education is not so that we can have nice pretty sheets full of pretty data, but to prepare our young people for adult life? Did we forget that part of being an adult is the ability to make and form friendships, to accept that other people do not exist in order to service our educational needs?

Sometimes, when I see that my daughter (she's in Year 4) has 15 minutes in the morning and less than an hour at lunch to play with her friends, I wonder if that is exactly what we have done. When I see or hear of children with SEN consistently excluded from playtime because of playground difficulties, and by this I mean things like fighting with other children, or causing or getting into constant trouble because it's easier just to keep them in than get to the heart of the matter, or worse, excluded from the school itself, I worry. I'm not saying that the playtime thing is particularly different in special schools – after all, they are under the same inspection pressures as everyone else – but what they and great mainstream schools like them *do* have is an explicit care and attention to social learning, a recognition that this is part of the picture.

Put all of those things together and what you have is a monumental struggle to communicate, to explain, to ensure that all is working properly, and let me tell you: I love my son from the top of his greasy unwashed teenaged head to the tip of his uncut toenails, but life with Down's syndrome, or ASD, or ADHD, or sensory processing disorder or any other label you care to mention, from gifted to cerebral palsy is struggle enough. Just parenting children, especially if you have multiple offspring, the ones who don't have labels, is struggle enough.

I'm too tired. I haven't the energy. Is it any wonder that we, the extraordinary, are heading elsewhere?