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Mainstream schools can't manage special needs pupils, say teachers

BY **TONY HALPIN**

Union calls for an end to the policy of inclusion after a study suggests that it harms all children

THE policy of educating children with special needs in mainstream schools has failed and must be changed immediately, the country's biggest teaching union said yesterday.

The National Union of Teachers dramatically reversed decades of support for "inclusion" and demanded a halt to the closure of special schools. It called on the Government to carry out "an urgent review of inclusion in policy and practice".

The union issued a report by academics at Cambridge University, which suggested that inclusion was harming children with special needs, undermining the education of others and leaving teachers exhausted as they struggled to cope with severe behavioural and medical conditions.

John MacBeath, one of the authors, described inclusion "as a form of abuse" for some children, who were placed in "totally inappropriate" schools where they inevitably failed.

Pupils with special needs were nine times more likely to be expelled and teachers were leaving the profession because they could not cope with the pressure of working with them. Teachers were being given responsibility for tasks such as clearing out tracheotomy tubes, changing nappies and managing children prone to harming themselves in outbursts of extreme violence.

Other pupils lost out as staff devoted excessive time to special needs children. Many students witnessed highly disturbing behaviour as special needs pupils reacted in frustration and anger to their surroundings. Teachers often delegated responsibility for special needs pupils to classroom assistants.

Parents felt betrayed as their children's educational needs went unmet and the children sunk into a spiral of misbehaviour that often ended in expulsion. Parents of other children were unhappy at the repeated disruptions to their education.

Steve Sinnott, the union's general secretary, said that "inclusion has failed many children". Teachers supported the idea in principle, but felt let down by the practice. He said: "It demonstrates very clearly the failures in policy and practice in our education system and in our schools."

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The Cambridge researchers interviewed teachers, children and parents at 20 schools in seven local authorities. They concluded that the reality of inclusion was very far from the "world of fine intentions" inhabited by policymakers. "While there are many examples of social benefits both for children with special needs and their peers, there is much less positive evidence that learning needs are being met across the whole spectrum of ability," the report said.

But Lord Adonis, the Schools Minister, said: "Children should be taught in mainstream schools where this is what their parents want and it is not incompatible with the efficient education of other children."

David Willetts, the Shadow Education Secretary, said: "This report should lead the Government to a radical rethink on its inclusion policy."

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