

Praise for *Don't Send Him in Tomorrow*

Jarlath O'Brien has lifted the cloak on the invisible children in our system. With a humbling combination of academic rigour and deep passion and care for children, he shines a light on the thousands of children who should have a better deal than they do. But what is so uplifting about this book is that it is filled with stories of how pupils, supported by their teachers and other professionals, have achieved extraordinary things. At times, it challenged me to think about my own leadership and what I could have done differently. This is a must-read for all those leading schools today.

Andy Buck, Managing Director of Leadership Matters, author and speaker

In intricate detail, drawn from profound personal and professional experiences, O'Brien paints a picture of a special needs system rapidly running out of options. With urgency and acuity he sets out imperatives for government, school leaders, teachers and agencies to build a future for those young people whose entitlement should be, but isn't yet, the most accepted truth.

Barney Angliss, Special Needs Jungle

This forthright book is a must for every staffroom. It shines a light on the shortcomings of the education system for children with SEN. It highlights inequalities, whilst going a long way to bringing these valuable yet vulnerable members of our communities out of the shadows.

Jarlath is honest about his own professional failings in the past, as he seeks to educate other teachers by example and create a culture where SEN is everybody's business.

Until a holistic approach to understanding the uniqueness of each pupil, and how their strengths can be developed and celebrated, is implemented we will never move beyond mere labels.

This is truly a book that will galvanise change.

Hayley Goleniowska, parent, speaker, former SEN assistant and author

This is a hard-hitting and timely read at a moment of intense educational change that affects all children – including those with special educational needs and disabilities. Jarlath pulls no punches when he sets out the current situation and future prospects for the most vulnerable young people in our society and demands change from policy makers, school leaders and local authorities.

This book is well-researched, and full of real examples that give meat to the bones of a disturbing story that challenges us in the way that we as a society treat our weakest members and their families.

Everyone who has an interest in education, particularly school leaders and policy makers, should read this book – because a good education, one that prepares young people for adult life, belongs to all our children.

Nancy Gedge, SEN teacher and *TES* columnist

I have long enjoyed Jarlath O'Brien's wit and style, and this book is no exception. The author has a winning formula of anecdote and gossip, rooted in deep experience, reflection and research.

Roy Blatchford CBE, Founding Director, National Education Trust

Extremely considered, reflective and honest, *Don't Send Him in Tomorrow* is a thought-provoking and informative read for anyone who has experience of the education of people with learning disabilities. Perhaps more importantly, it is an essential read for anyone who doesn't.

Simon Knight, Deputy Head Teacher, Frank Wise School

Jarlath O'Brien

Don't Send Him in Tomorrow

Shining a light on the marginalised,
disenfranchised and forgotten
children of today's schools

First published by

Independent Thinking Press

Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK

www.independentthinkingpress.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

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First published 2016.

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Edited by Ian Gilbert

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135253-3

Mobi ISBN 978-178135261-8

ePub ISBN 978-178135262-5

ePDF ISBN 978-178135263-2

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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Foreword by Timothy Novis

'Monday's child is fair of face
Tuesday's child is full of grace,
Wednesday's child is full of woe,
Thursday's child has *far to go*...'

My daughter Vivian was born on a Thursday, and I can remember that night with chilling clarity. As the doctor held her towards my mother-in-law, I could see a mutual look of concern tinged with an antiseptic certainty, and then their eyes turned to me, and turned downwards.

Then it was home for the agonising wait for the results of the blood tests and the empirical evidence, as scientific as it was undeniable, that she has an extra pod on her twenty-first chromosome – Trisomy 21 – Down syndrome.

My first telephone call, in an attempt to assuage my own anxieties, was to my spiritual director – a much wiser and somewhat older fellow priest with whom I regularly met. 'In a year from now, you'll tell me what a blessing she is.' It didn't take a year. Very quickly, Vivian established herself in a very special place in my heart and in the hearts of so many others. She was to be a violet in a field of daisies. She was the ticket we bought to vacation in one particular place, only to discover we were to be taken by forces beyond our control somewhere very different indeed, but yet no less amazing. We had just received membership in a club we really hadn't ever thought about joining.

If I were to describe my outlook on life as a kind of Venn diagram, my three conjoined circles would be titled 'Dad', 'Chaplain' and 'Chair'. Vivian's proud Dad. The Chaplain at Wellington College. And Chair of the Board of Governors of Vivian's amazing school – Carwarden House. And of course, at the centre of my Venn diagram, is Vivian herself – informing, enriching and enlivening all my other roles.

But until I happened upon being in such a close relationship with a child with special needs, I was like the thousands of others who never really saw such children or knew anything about them. I took the attitude that 'children are an investment in the future', and failed to see that such an approach looked at the younger generations in terms of a kind of economic transaction – what we put in will be paid back with interest. I didn't realise that I tended to see people as a means to an end, rather than as ends unto themselves. And that really, all of us are human *beings*, and were never meant to be merely human *doings*.

I suspect that departments of education throughout the world really struggle with those attitudes towards our children. When making policy, that is the lens through which they make sense of their decisions.

Children with special needs force us to change reading glasses. Even just to move around the room and sit in a different chair to gain a new perspective. And that is their very gift.

If we do, as Jarlath so wisely recommends, shine a light on them, we will come to realise that it is really they who exude their own light, who call us, 'average people', out of the shadows and into a deeper understanding of – you name it.

Vivian, my violet, is a bright light in her own special way. I wouldn't have said that on that baffling Thursday, 16 years ago.

Father Timothy Novis is chaplain at Wellington College

Introduction

'The moral test of government is how it treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the aged; and those in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.'

Hubert Humphrey,
former Vice-President of the United States of America (remarks at the
dedication of the Hubert H. Humphrey Building, 1 November 1977)

One of the occupational hazards of the life of a teacher is the inadvertent encounter with a student outside school: the crossing of paths in the bread aisle at the supermarket or, more surprisingly when it happened to me, in Macy's department store in New York one bitter February half-term. It can be uncomfortable for both student and teacher; the teacher's internal computer instantly reverts to work mode and, usually depending on the age of the child, they are either delighted or horrified to run into someone who doesn't exist in their mind beyond the boundary of the school gates.

How was it possible, then, for me to live within 50 metres of Sean, one of my students, for two years before I became aware of it? Our finely tuned radar will normally spot a child from school long before they have seen us. If a student lived at the bottom of the street, you'd know about it, surely?

I discovered that Sean and I are neighbours when I was signing off the paperwork for the annual review of his statement of special educational needs (SEN). The address caught my eye as I was sure it contained a typing error – he couldn't possibly live there; I'd know about it. How could a student in my school live within shouting distance of my front door and yet be invisible to both me and the local community? A moment's thought told me why.

Sean has profound and multiple learning difficulties. He relies entirely on adult support to survive. He is tube-fed. He is incontinent. Sean has

very limited fine motor skills. He can communicate in two ways: he can point with his eyes to indicate a preference for one of two simple choices, such as a choice of food, and he will cry when he is unhappy.

I used to leave for work at 7am, whereas Sean would be collected by a specially converted minibus an hour later. Sean would leave school at 3.30pm, whereas I would remain at school for some hours afterwards, getting home long after him. If you happened to be passing his house at pick-up or drop-off time you might catch sight of him. At all other times he was totally out of sight and, therefore, out of mind.

Sean, now in his early twenties, and I are still neighbours. I have lived in our village for nine years now and have *never* seen Sean there. Had I not seen Sean's address on that document I would still be blissfully unaware that we live in such close proximity. As I write this, sitting on the sofa in my living room, I can see the entire street, but I can't see him. To all intents and purposes, he is invisible.

Sean was the epitome of the invisible child, but unfortunately he is not the only one. There is a group of young people in this country who are effectively invisible to the rest of society. They are not with their friends in a coffee shop doing their homework after school; they are not in the local football team; they aren't playing in the street with their friends on their bikes at the weekend; they are not in the school play; they are not at a sleepover on a Saturday night; they aren't invited to birthday parties.

This group is not just defined by some profound disability; the group is larger and more diverse than that. They are invisible. Their needs are made invisible. Comments like 'There's no such thing as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), just bad parenting,' and 'Pathological demand avoidance (PDA) just means a kid who doesn't like to be told "no"', are statements I've heard many times, and they never fail to irritate me. Imagine the impact of those statements on the parents of such a child.

Not only are their needs denied, but their ambitions are then stunted by barely believable Henry Ford-inspired school policies such as streamed option booklets for Year 9s. (You can choose any subject you like, as long as it's not history.)

Then their social development is impeded by the creation of separate play areas at break and lunch times. Worse still is when parents are strong-armed into collecting their child to take them home for lunch. Even their domestic circumstances are invisible, unless they are highlighted and then mocked in a Channel 4 documentary or a *Daily Mail* headline.

This invisibility suits society in the same way that we prefer the elderly, those with dementia, asylum-seekers or prisoners to be cared for, managed, kept away, locked up or just made to disappear.

Even politicians, whose role it is to fight for every member of society, seem unable to acknowledge their existence. 'We will expect *every* pupil by the age of 11 to know their times tables off by heart, to perform long division and complex multiplication, and to be able to read a novel,' said Nicky Morgan, the then Secretary of State for Education, in February 2015 (emphasis added).¹

The achievements of this group of young people count for as close as it is possible to get to zero. They are marginalised, disenfranchised and, ultimately, forgotten.

These children are in your classroom. They are in your school. Yet the way our education system, and society more widely, is currently organised makes it very difficult for them to be seen, let alone thrive.

We have taken action, and rightly so, to promote the achievement of children who are in the care of local authorities, the group with the poorest academic outcomes of all. This has manifested itself in mandatory completion of six-monthly Personal Education Plans (PEPs) by an equally mandatory 'designated teacher for looked-after children'. Note that PEPs are completed more frequently than annual reviews of the statements or Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) of children with SEN. Schools or local authorities (it varies by region, as some local authorities retain control over this money) also receive £1,900 per child who is currently looked-after or has been adopted. Each local authority has a so-called Virtual School for Looked-After Children, with a head teacher who could reasonably be considered to be the champion of these children in that part of the world.

This is great and how it should be, in theory at least. However, no such post exists for children with learning difficulties.

We have taken action, again with clear justification, for children who are living in poverty and who are, as a result, entitled to free school meals. Schools receive money, known as the Pupil Premium and currently set at £1,320 for each child in primary schools and £935 for each child in secondary schools (but not beyond Year 11, interestingly). Schools are required to produce an annual Pupil Premium Report accounting for how they have spent this money and the effectiveness of that expenditure. Failure to show that this disadvantaged group are catching up with their peers (colloquially known as 'closing the gap') can sink a school in an Ofsted inspection. This action went as far as the then Minister of State for Schools, David Laws, who wrote to individual schools congratulating them on their successes with this group of children. I am sure that those schools are justifiably proud of those achievements, but similar letters from a minister to schools lauding the achievements of their children with learning difficulties are conspicuous by their absence. To be a school that has a strong reputation for giving a massive boost to the life chances of children living in poverty is clearly a desirable thing. I suspect that there are some schools that do not want a similar reputation for their work with children with learning difficulties.

Why is this?

The cohort of children who qualify for free school meals is dictated by a school's catchment. Parents of those children do not suddenly gravitate towards another school in the same town because of its reputation for doing great things with this cohort of children. Also, these children do not feature as a defined group in the admissions priorities of schools, unlike looked-after children (who, by law, must be given priority on places).

The same cannot be said of a school that gets a reputation for the quality of its teaching of children with learning difficulties. A statement or EHCP is a lever that can be used, rightly, to secure a place at a school that a parent would like their child to attend, so it can be seen how schools can use this to suggest that they are not particularly good with 'that type of child' and the parent would be better off visiting the school down the road.²

Yet, for children with learning difficulties and disabilities in both mainstream and special schools we, as a society, are content for them to struggle to negotiate a steep gradient just to get within shouting distance of the rest of us. Our main achievement for this group has been to build a soul-destroying bureaucracy that drains professionals, infuriates parents and patronises children.

England has a system of support for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities that many would consider to be the envy of the world. I have come across parents who have moved countries, let alone postcodes, to secure a place at an English school for their child. The mother who moved from Moscow to Berkshire so that her daughter could go to school there is but one harrowing example. To be a young child in Moscow, she explained, with autism and currently unable to speak, meant that no education would be provided. It was expected that the child should remain indoors, out of sight and out of mind. The tough, grizzled Muscovite grandfather whom I once had the privilege to show round his granddaughter's school is a man I'll never forget. His daughter interpreted. He cried. I cried. He shook my hand almost constantly and thanked me incessantly. I have heard reports that in Malaysia, parents are paid not to send their children to school if they have learning difficulties; a practice that would not be tolerated in this country.

The Mental Disability Advocacy Centre (MDAC) and the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities released a report in August 2015 on the human rights of persons with intellectual disabilities and/or mental health problems in the Republic of Moldova.³

The biggest barrier however [in Moldova] is stigma, still so palpably felt. We are not yet at the point where the public believes people with disabilities belong – belong in the sense of living and working among us and deciding about their own lives. We do not yet see a society where having a disability is an uninteresting fact, rather than a cause for shame or pity.

Moldova operates a system of guardianship in which people can be deprived of their legal capacity to do things such as get married or sign an employment contract. The process of appointing the guardian may take place without the person with disabilities being present, or they may even be unaware that the process is occurring at all. Guardians can be also appointed without the consent of the person in question, even

though the guardian has powers that allow them to place the person with disabilities into a so-called closed institution, against their will, use their allowances and control any assets they may have.

Despite these obvious difficulties it is pleasing to note that the report finds:

Despite being one of the poorest countries in Europe, the impressive progress made by Moldova in recent years should serve as an important example to its richer neighbours that children with disabilities can study together with other children, and inclusive education is indeed possible and desirable for all.⁴

Human Rights Watch produced a devastating report in 2015 entitled '*Complicit in Exclusion: South Africa's Failure to Guarantee an Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities*'.⁵ It detailed how an estimated 500,000 children with disabilities have been shut out of South Africa's education system. Human Rights Watch unearthed the jaw-dropping fact that children with disabilities who attend special schools often have to pay fees that children without disabilities do not. They also found that some parents cannot send their child to school because they cannot pay these fees and the transportation costs of sending their child to school.

We should be proud of our more enlightened and supportive attitude to children with special needs, especially as it has not always been that way. In their 1947 book *Learning and Teaching – an Introduction to Psychology and Education*, A.G. Hughes and E.H. Hughes⁶ suggest a basis for dividing children up into 'various types of education.' This can be seen in the table on page 11.

IQ	Type of education	Percentage in the population
50 and below	Ineducable idiots; occupation centres	0.2
50–70	Mentally defective pupils; special schools	2.0
70–85	Dull and backward pupils; special secondary school education	10.0
85–115	Normal pupils; secondary school education	76.0
115–130	Bright pupils; grammar or technical secondary school education	10.0
130–150	Very bright pupils; grammar secondary school education	2.0
150 and above	Exceptional pupils; grammar secondary school education; ultimately university	0.2

It is easy to be shocked by the labels, but this was 1947. I note the neatness of the bell-curve distribution of the percentages, indicating a preference for easy symmetry over the actual number of children who would in 1947 be regarded as exceptional pupils or ineducable idiots, as if the number of ineducable idiots in any society exactly matches the number of children bound for university. Note also that they believe an eye-watering 12% of children require a special school education, compared to today's figure of 1.1%.

I am amused to find that a 1940s version of me would be regarded as normal and destined for a secondary education. I do wonder what occupations would have been open to me in the 1940s, but whatever they were I am sure that an ordinary lad from a secondary school would not have been expected to amount to anything particularly extraordinary. I am sure that the intellectual demands of leading any school, let alone a

special school, would have been considered to be beyond a boy such as me. I am thankful that the 1980s and 1990s were kinder.

I am less amused by the label *backward*. My mother informs me that this is precisely the label that was attached to my uncle Thomas in 1950s Ireland. And that is all that Ireland ever did for him. It gave Thomas and my grandparents a label with which to excuse the state's complete lack of interest or sense of responsibility towards him, and left him to it. *Backward* has the stench of counterfeit cologne. It implies someone who's not even facing in the same direction as the rest of society. It's worse than the use of the word *retarded*, along with its counterparts *slow* and *behind*. It's a proxy for a society that has no expectations of that person. Uncle Thomas's learning difficulties were a direct contributor to his traumatic death at the tragically early age of 36. Uncle Thomas's short life is not unusual when it comes to people with special needs:

They die far earlier than the rest of us.

They are far more likely to be bullied at school than the rest of us.

They are far more likely to be excluded from school than the rest of us.

They work far less than us. When they do work, they earn less than we do.

They are far more likely to have mental health problems.

Every single indicator of well-being for a child or adult in this group is dire.

They are marginalised, disenfranchised, rendered invisible and, ultimately, forgotten. Even the things they do achieve count for as close as it is possible to get to zero.

A greater proportion of special schools are judged as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, England's education inspectorate, compared to mainstream primary and secondary schools. Despite this, Ofsted's annual report for 2014⁷ makes no comment on this *at all* in its 42 pages. Indeed, special schools are only mentioned three times, and then only for statistical purposes. Bizarrely they are omitted entirely from the section entitled 'Ensuring that pupils with special educational needs fulfil their potential'. It is inconceivable that Ofsted would somehow manage to omit either mainstream primary or secondary schools from their annual report. It indicates how little thought and respect is afforded this sector. That is a problem.

Everyone who has an interest in education, particularly school leaders and policy makers, should read this book.

Nancy Gedge, SEN teacher and TES columnist

Every health and wealth indicator that you could use to measure people with learning difficulties and special educational needs (SEN) reveals something alarming. They die younger. They work less. They are much more likely to be excluded from school. They are more likely to be bullied at school. Leaders in education – politicians, regulators, head teachers – and even parents are marginalising, disenfranchising and isolating these children. We are creating an underclass that is invisible to society.

The percentage of children in Year 6 achieving the government's expected standard is national news every year. The same is true for GCSE and A level results. The progress that children with learning difficulties and SEN make is never discussed, because it is not understood. That is a problem. The bone-crushing infrastructure which professionals have to negotiate is a problem. The fact that so many parents have to fight tooth and nail so that the needs of their children are met, something the rest of us would consider a basic entitlement, is a problem. This chronic and pervasive lack of understanding is a problem: one which this book seeks to redress.

Jarlath O'Brien has been a teacher for fifteen years and has spent ten of those years working in special schools. He has become increasingly frustrated at the lack of interest in this sector and the varying quality of provision for children with learning difficulties and SEN in mainstream schools. This book describes how the system and this provision can be improved if and when these marginalised children are given higher priority by the powers that be.

For all politicians, head teachers, SENCOs, teachers and parents.

This is truly a book that will galvanise change.

Hayley Goleniowska, parent, speaker, author and former SEN assistant

The author has a winning formula of anecdote rooted in deep experience, reflection and research.

Roy Blatchford CBE, Founding Director, National Education Trust


Extremely considered, reflective and honest, *Don't Send Him in Tomorrow* is a thought-provoking and informative read.

Simon Knight, Deputy Head Teacher, Frank Wise School

This is must-read for all those leading schools today.

Andy Buck, Managing Director of Leadership Matters, author and speaker

Jarlath O'Brien is head teacher of Carwarden House Community School in Surrey. Jarlath has worked in comprehensive and selective independent schools and in three different special schools. He is a National Education Trust Leading Thinker, a board member of Wellington College's Teaching School and a member of the Headteachers' Roundtable. He also writes for the *TES* and has spoken at the *Sunday Times* Festival of Education.

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ISBN: 978-178135253-3



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Education Teaching of specific groups
and persons with special needs