

Lived Experiences of Special Schools in England: Key Considerations for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

This article presents the lived experiences of attending special education schools in England from the perspectives of three individuals over different times and for different reasons. The focus on the lived experiences is to detail the real-life impact that attending special schools can have on individuals. The accounts highlight that whilst all the individuals had positive experiences from attending special schools, a recurring negative theme from all three individuals is that of a pervading sense of low expectations. The accounts detail the long-term impact of this recurring negative theme for the individuals, and key considerations for social work in the context of the increased use of special schools through the practice of Education Health and Care plans.

Keywords: Co-production, education, health and care plans, participatory research methodology, social exclusion, special schools, structural barriers

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A special school is a school that is specifically designed to meet the specialist medical, social or welfare needs of children and young people. In England, these needs will usually be stated in an Education, Health and

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Care (EHC) plan [the equivalent in Scotland is a Co-ordinated Support Plan, in Wales, it is the Additional Learning Needs framework, and in Northern Ireland, it is the Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN)]. An EHC plan is a legal plan that first sets out the assessed SEN that a child and young person have, and secondly the extra support that should be provided by the educational setting to ensure that the assessed SEN of the child or young person are met. In the EHC plan, the identified extra needs have to be specifically matched to the extra support that will be provided. The extra support can be provided in a variety of ways including extra teaching, extra funding, extra activities or extra time to complete education or training. The EHC plan also needs to include the views and wishes of the child or young person on what they wish to achieve in both the short term and the long term, including achievements in adulthood. In some circumstances, an EHC plan can be made from the birth of the child and may continue until the age of twenty-five years. [Adams *et al.* \(2018\)](#) provide a detailed analysis of the effectiveness and limitation of EHC plans, which is not the focus of this article. The relevance here is that it is only children and young people with an EHC plan who can go to special schools, although there is no legally guaranteed entry to a special school with an EHC plan. This means that the child or young person going with an EHC plan will go to a special school and has an education with other children with an EHC plan, meaning an educational experience with children assessed as having SEN, and not with children without SEN. However, a key advantage of special schools is that they typically have significantly smaller class sizes than mainstream schools, which can be highly beneficial in enabling greater attention to the SEN that children with an EHC plan have.

The article presents the lived experiences of three people who attended special schools in England for significant periods of time between the 1980s and 2010s. These lived experiences were provided through the participatory research methodology of co-production ([Bergold and Thomas, 2012](#)), from members of established Service User and Carers Groups at the Universities of Worcester and Birmingham. This includes carers of learning-disabled relatives, mental health survivors, people with long-term physical disabilities, care leavers, survivors of domestic violence and people with dementia. These Service User and Carer groups are focused on improving both the overall experiences of service users and carers in an academic context and enhancing the student learning experience. This is done through actively involving members of the groups in the teaching and learning, recruitment, selection, research and consultancy across the Universities. To facilitate this, members of the groups are provided with training on teaching, research and ethics. The training also respects and retains their dignity in their unique positions as service users and carers.

Consistent with the co-production methodology, a variety of approaches were used to enable the service user and carers to detail their lived experiences as authentically as possible. This included face-to-face conversations, self-authored accounts and indirect contact. The respective approach reflected the wishes of the service user and carer. This means that the experiences detailed below are the outcome of a longitudinal process of communication, co-operation and co-production over a period of months, rather than the typical cross-sectional ‘snapshot’ approach that typically occurs in academic research. Again consistent with the co-production methodology, this facilitated the reciprocal exchange of knowledge between all participants, rather than the unequal exchange of knowledge that typically occurs in academic research.

Julia Smith

My name is Julia Smith, and I am fifty-five years old. As a young teenager, I had been fortunate to be offered a bursary for a private girl’s convent school where my elder sister was already attending. It was located in old buildings with many staircases, and in my second year I began to notice my legs tiring as I climbed up the stairs, often tripping and likewise falling behind when taking part in school running competitions for no obvious reason. Concerns grew when in the school canteen, I would routinely drop cutlery or school books in the classroom. I deteriorated rapidly, and within twelve weeks, I had gone from being an actively mobile young teenager enjoying the learning environment and making new friendships, to one who was paralysed from the neck downwards, unable even to lift a finger. Some years later, I learned that doctors had spoken to my then newly widowed father and told him that, whilst they were not sure of the exact cause of my condition, the prognosis was of a suggested life expectancy of six months to a year. This information was not shared with me, due to my young age and the fact that at the time I was grieving, having lost my mum to cancer just three months earlier, at the very same time as the onset of symptoms. At the age of thirteen years, with no improvement in my condition, and now a long-term patient in a children’s ward of a local hospital, I unwittingly heard murmurs among the medical professionals about the need for me to have a permanent wheelchair and also that I would possibly need to attend a special school. Until this point, I had somewhat naively assumed that I would be able to return to my previous school environment. Here it is interesting to note that there is a presumption in England that children with SEN should be educated in mainstream schools. This is set out in ‘The Children and Families Act 2014’, which legislates that mainstream schooling should be the default mode of education for children with SEN ‘unless that is incompatible with: the wishes of the child’s

parent or the young person; or the provision of efficient education for others' (Black, 2019). It is evident that there was no attempt to understand my wishes here.

I then spent eighteen months in the children's ward, which at my age was not good as I was too old to be there, as there was no meaningful stimulation and education for me there. I was then moved to a local special school to resume my education. Whilst the opportunity to spend some hours each day away from the ward excited me, I had no real idea of what to expect, in reality having no prior understanding of what a 'special school' was. However, very soon over time, it became apparent to me that whilst I had an expectation that I would resume learning the ten subjects I was learning at my previous school, this was not going to happen. Subsequently, my experience of the special school was much different from my previous educational experience. In particular, it was clear that the academic expectations that the school had for its pupils were lower than my previous school, as pupils were only allowed to study to exam level for CSEs in English, Maths and Biology, and they were not allowed to study for O' levels, which is what I would have worked towards in my previous mainstream school. One possible reason for this is that teachers in special schools have different views on teaching, learning and collaboration than students in mainstream schools (Goransson *et al.*, 2020). Also relevant here is the fact that compared with mainstream schools, special schools have had great autonomy in terms of the curriculum that they offer (Day *et al.*, 2012), and that there is a general preference by special school teachers to focus on teaching life skills rather than academic content (Bobzien, 2014). Additionally, as observed by Essex (2020), it is often the case that staff who work in special schools frequently lack confidence in their own ability to teach subjects, especially more specialised subjects such as science (Essex, 2020). I did appreciate that the school made special arrangements for me too so that a French tutor came into school in order that I continued to learn something which I had previously enjoyed and shone in; however, it was nonetheless frustrating that very often these lessons would be interrupted by physiotherapy or hydrotherapy sessions. Similarly, weekly clinics were held in the school by the local paediatrician, the hall resembling an outpatient clinic and if attendance was deemed necessary, then taught classes were not a priority.

With long lunch periods, given many of the pupils including myself needed to be fed by staff members and additional breaks during the day, the hour of academic learning could often seem insignificant especially when transport would arrive early to return me to the hospital ward. Also noticeable as I went to and from the school was how it was tucked away in the countryside the school was, along deserted lanes and among secluded wooded areas, almost as if we were deliberately hidden from sight, as children who were not to be on public view. During the school

day, there was little opportunity to be outside, though occasionally a small class group would have a 'ride out' to a local tea room on an adapted minibus emblazoned with the words 'Special school bus'. This reflects Norwich's (2008) observation that the main likely disadvantage of special schools is the segregation of children not just away from other mainstream schooling in particular, but from wider society in general. This segregation limits the possibility for inclusion, wherein 'knowing individuals personally provides opportunities to realize our shared humanity, individuality, competence, and complexity, and can diminish the power of labels and stereotypical ways of knowing that often cloud and taint interpretations of difference' (Rutherford, 2016, p. 131).

Disappointingly, there was little encouragement at the special school towards working hard for academic achievement, as a result of the fact that there was the general expectation that there was little likelihood of entering into employment when schooling had finished, which meant that working hard to achieve qualifications was deemed somewhat unimportant. This was because typically, for many pupils (who unlike myself I came to learn had been born with their disability) the pathway after finishing school was to attend the local day-care or training centres. Therefore, pupils were not encouraged to aim higher academically, as for many, their futures were already preordained. However, it is well known that adolescents' educational and occupational expectations are a significant predictor of their future educational and occupational attainment, meaning that low educational and occupational expectations do lead to similar future outcomes (Margraf and Pinquart, 2016). I was fortunate to have two teachers for whom I was grateful for striving to provide me with the opportunities to achieve, given the educational knowledge I arrived at the school with. I subsequently left after three academic years with the equivalent of four O levels (CSE Grade 1), far removed from what I would have hoped to achieve at my previous school but for which a lack of wheelchair access had made that impossible. The relevance here is the well-established reality that disabled people have lower achievement than the rest of society, and my experiences support Chatzitheochari and Platt's (2018) claim that the low expectation of disabled people in the education system is an important point of significance to this reality. In particular, it suggests that this low expectation of disabled people in the education system is a factor that significantly affects the future outcomes and achievements of disabled people, and is therefore something that needs to be addressed.

Frustrating though my experiences of attending special school were in the early 1980s, as I left changes were beginning to emerge and a local secondary school was beginning to make their premises accessible to pupils with disabilities. Likewise, support staff were becoming available to work alongside pupils to assist with any practical help that they may need during the school day. Ultimately, this was the start of a major shift

towards integrating children/pupils of school age with a disability into mainstream education and thus enabling the same educational opportunities for all, which is a positive change from my experiences.

In the year after leaving special school, I was fortunate to find a local sixth form unit that had wheelchair access which enabled me to build on the CSEs I had completed and begin A' level education among other able-bodied students. Some five years after leaving the special school, I was heartened to learn that it had all but closed, remaining open only for a short whilst longer for those pupils with complex needs who required a level of support that may not be achievable to provide within a mainstream setting.

Today, I think we have come a long way and special schools today exist predominantly for pupils of school age with complex needs. That said I know how many parents still struggle to get an appropriate level of educational support in the right environment for their children overwhelmingly down to lack of provision and resources.

Mark Lynes

I am aged forty-eight years and live in Birmingham where I was born. I am the youngest of the four siblings. My personal interests are listening to audiobooks, watching TV, playing pool and watching most sports, including being an Aston Villa season ticket holder in recent years. I was born with cerebral palsy, which is a lifelong condition that occurs if a baby's brain does not develop normally whilst in the womb or is damaged during or soon after birth. This impairment means that I am unable to walk or stand at all, and I am also unable to do most everyday personal care tasks such as washing, dressing, preparing meals, cleaning and driving. My impairment affects my left side more than my right side in terms of muscle strength and balance.

From the age of four until I was aged sixteen, I attended a special school in Birmingham. I feel my greatest achievement there was being able to take exams. This is because I did not get the opportunity to study anything other than the basic level in all subjects, so my education basically consisted of Maths and English. This was in part because the three schools on our campus did not have facilities for disabled students or pupils as we were called back then and were not really geared towards mainstream education. For example, there was no examination possible for disabled people.

I loved the school, as I made loads of friends and I did lots of sports competitions, and still had lots of positive memories from being there. However, reflecting back on this now, this has saddened me because you do not realise until you leave school what the effect of such a basic level of education and being denied an academic education will have on you

in the future. I feel that this has had a serious impact on my life as I had spent too much time catching up on the basics of what I needed to at least give me life choices, and I will give you two examples of this. One was at the age of twenty-five years; I took a GCSE maths course for the first time. In one of these lessons, a reference was made to a GCSE history item. I had to raise my hand and say I had never been taught history. This was difficult because it was clear to me that this was routine knowledge, and this was really the first time I realised how different my education had been. There was also confusion from the course tutor on how to support me and continue with the lesson, as the course was one day a week. Another example of the possible impact was just a couple of years ago when I decided to apply for a social work access course, but I did not pass some of the Maths and English tests although I did gain qualifications. I feel that the fact that I only studied these subjects for nine months compared to two years minimum for most people contributed to the limitations of my educational opportunities despite a decent level of what I call everyday education. However, at least I hope that my generation showed something to the powers that be to ensure that others could benefit. People often ask me what impact I think it has had on me, and the truth is I do not really know beyond the examples that I became aware of outlined above. However, if you imagine that educationally you are operating at a different level to your peers in society, but then are expected to operate at the same level pretty much as them in the real world, then it is bound to affect you. This is particularly the case when you become responsible for your choices in life and you are trying to improve your skills in a field. To put it another way, imagine all your achievements not seeming to be worthy enough just because of your background. As [Atkins \(2016\)](#) observes such thinking can determine and reproduce how people think and behave, the impact of which is to constrain aspirations and agency, which is contrary to social justice.

Not so long ago, I watched two documentaries on the two colleges I went to. I was struck by how similar they were during my time there almost thirty years on, although one of the colleges is now mainly a college catering for students with learning disabilities/difficulties, something that was starting to happen towards the end of my time there. The other college has remained more mixed. Watching the documentary, I felt students had the same life skills problems that the majority of students had when I was there, such as relationship issues, lack of disability awareness and lack of options after leaving. A friend I was speaking to who now works at the school I went to told me that students can now stay on for a further three years, which means they could leave at the age of twenty-two years. The reason given to me for this was the lack of resources and options elsewhere. My post-schooling experiences lead me to question this for a number of reasons, such as whether it enables people to move on if they are in the same environment for so long. Also, by enabling

people to stay there until the age of twenty-two years, there is a tacit admission that there is a lack of resources and options for them to move on, but it is unclear how this lack of resources and options is suddenly dealt with when the person turns twenty-two years and has to leave. I think it would be better to develop a range of progression options similar to the rest of society that provide life opportunities for disabled people and ensure all disability-related needs are met, rather than providing services that seems more about serving the needs of staff, family and carers.

Charles Mark English-Peach

I am aged twenty-four years, and I live with my nan and have done so since the age of one when I was fostered by her. I am currently at university. For about a third of my time was spent in primary and secondary education, I went to a special school. It is tricky to say if this was the right decision, as I did not have learning difficulties, but at the same time I was clearly not fitting in at the school I was at and being picked on. So, a positive of changing schools was that it helped me to avoid that, but it did not help me academically. I felt that they had lower expectations at this school. A special school will naturally have lower expectations, but perhaps I could have been treated as an exceptional case. This is definitely something that I was up against, not just at school but throughout the time that I have been in care. Despite this, I left with the highest qualification possible, which was an ASDAN vocational qualification which is just below a GCSE. I would also like to say that my teachers at school really pushed me and said that I could go further educationally.

It is important to understand that I was not asked whether I wanted to go to this school. The decision was made through a crisis review meeting, where the decision was made that the school I was at was not the right one. This kind of exemplifies the point that the thread running through this period was that things were always just done to me; I was never consulted on the things that happened. The decision to send me to a special school may have been a different decision with a completely different set of professionals if they had actually asked me what I wanted. I think the fact that I went to a special school worked against me and I was labelled due to this. I feel that in fact, it slowed me down, and because of effectively having to catch up educationally due to the school I went to, I have been at college for five years instead of two years. This means that I have had to work harder just to catch up, due to the education I received earlier. This supports the observation made by [Atkins \(2016, p. 15\)](#) that 'where particular assumptions and characterisations implicit in the language used to characterise them are perceived to be normal and

natural—and thus not questioned—this contributes to the maintenance of a status quo in terms of societal views of disability, and makes the journey towards full inclusion and social justice more difficult’. In particular relation to social work, as [Zaviršek and Lawrence \(2012, p. 441\)](#) note, an ongoing ethical dilemma for social work ‘is that people with disabilities are partially excluded from ordinary life by the disability label in order to be re-included through welfare system provision. They are part of society, but their participation is exclusionary and their identity formation is based upon negative images, stereotypes, stigma and parallel institutional provision (e.g. special schools and segregated employment places or occupational activities)’.

Summary

The lived experiences of Julia Smith, Mark Lynes and Charlie Mark English-Peach of attending special schools presented above represent a period spanning thirty years, from the 1980s through to the 2010s. They also represent different reasons for attending special schools. All participants outlined positive experiences of attending special schools. However, the theme that recurs in all the accounts is of low educational academic expectations that existed within special schools, and the impact that this has had in the longer term. This means that individuals were categorised and assigned to schooling that constrained their potential educational ability. This had the impact of limiting their educational outcomes, which in the longer term has had the impact of limiting their employment outcomes, and could go a long way to explaining why disabled and disadvantaged individuals are less visible in the workplace, especially in positions of responsibility and power. So a clear message from the accounts is the need to counter the prevalent low educational expectations of individuals that exist within special schools.

These lived experiences have relevance to social work practice in several ways. First, as [Shaw \(2017\)](#) observes, following on from Warnock’s ‘opinion change’ from inclusion in mainstream schools as the primary goal towards the advocacy of greater use of special schools, there has been an increase in the use of special schools in recent years. For instance, [Black \(2019\)](#) found that although the number of special schools has been falling, the proportion of children in special schools has been rising from 1.12 per cent of all the students in 2005 to a high of 1.38 per cent in 2018. Therefore, this article presents a timely discussion of what this could mean for the lived experiences of those attending these schools.

This rise is likely to be linked to the use of EHC plan, wherein as detailed above special schools are only available to those with an EHC plan, something which social workers are intimately involved in the

process of creating. However, a key principle of social work, as set out in the International Federation of Social Work's (IFSW) *Global Definition of Social Work* (IFSW, 2014), is advocating and upholding rights, and for social work, the right to a reasonable level of education is a second-generation right. However, the accounts above bring into question the ability of special schools to enable this right. Additionally, social work's core mandate explicitly acknowledges that structural barriers, such as barriers to a reasonable level of education, contribute to the perpetuation of inequalities, discrimination, exploitation and oppression, and this was also evident in the accounts above in relation to special schools.

The accounts above provide two relevant points of learning for social work. First, in the context of the emphasis on EHC plans and the increased use of special schools, which may or may not be linked, it should provide pause for thought to social workers when they contribute to the EHC plan as to whether special schools meet the key principles of social work. And secondly, the accounts make evident the importance of listening to the voice of those excluded, as that can provide insight and focus to social work on marginalising structures of society relevant to their practice, in this case, the education system (Atkins, 2016). In this sense, the aim of this article is not to deter social workers from supporting special school placements where this has been determined in EHC plans, but to ensure that such special schools' practice does not become what Schirmer and Michailakis (2013, p. 59) terms 'exclusion administration', meaning creating individuals who have no prospect of regular inclusion.

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