



# Mainstreaming vs Segregation

*Miro Martin explores the pros and cons of segregating disruptive children*

Those of you who have read my articles over the years will know that political correctness is not my forte. I usually don't hold back when expressing my opinion and often use colourful metaphors to get my point across. Everything I write about comes directly from personal experience working at the coalface over a period of 32 years. My current topic is based on my experience as a teacher and principal.

Over the last three years I have written articles about a pilot project at my last school. It was called Gold Class. It wasn't actually a pilot. Rather it was the revival of an ancient practice where we removed children with special needs and placed them in a special school or class. It was a great success and is now in its third year.

## ***One of the biggest categories of special need I have encountered is Social-Emotional***

The children concerned had needs that weren't being addressed in the normal mainstream. Several had extreme behaviour issues, some had social and emotional problems and others specific learning needs. On the whole, they took up a disproportionate amount of teacher time and were often disruptive, preventing the other children from learning. Fortunately, I had a couple of outstanding teachers and aides who thought

outside the box. They came up with the Gold Class concept.

Removing those children from their mainstream classes resulted in an immediate improvement in classroom climate. The teachers weren't spending all their time controlling individual students and could focus on the majority of students. The Gold Class students received specialist intervention from staff who were passionate and talented. This model worked because I had the human and financial resources to make it happen. It was a situation specific to that school at that time.

Most of my career has been spent working in low socio-economic areas in Tasmania, New Zealand, New South Wales and Queensland. I can state without fear of contradiction that low



### ***Removing these children mostly benefits the teachers and doesn't help the children***

Class, removing these children mostly benefits the teachers and doesn't help the children. These social-emotional students, more than others, need the social experience of being with other 'normal' children. Withdrawing them only makes it worse. Putting them with other children with poor social skills is probably not a good idea unless you have the resources to set up a Gold Class scenario.

Throughout my career as principal I have had many students transferring to my school from other schools. There were many examples where these students were performing poorly or behaving badly at their old school or were placed in special units or withdrawal scenarios. They were mainstreamed in a new environment and became model students at their new school. Often, all they needed was a fresh start.

There is a simple experiment you can try with your staff. Give them 20 seconds and ask them to identify all the blue objects in a room. At the end of the 20 seconds ask them to tell you all the red ones. They'll protest that you didn't ask them to identify red ones. We do something similar with our students. The negative side is the only side pointed out to us. We see what we are asked to see and nothing else. I have a powerful anecdote to back this up. Years ago I had a 'delicate petal' teaching in my school. She couldn't tolerate any child with any sort of special need and only taught 'perfect' children. I had a transfer from another school who had a colourful history. In particular, he had been suspended for swearing at his teacher and throwing a chair in anger. A phone call to his last school revealed that he had a personality clash with his teacher and prior to the suspension had been a good student. I decided to enrol him in Petal's class and didn't tell her about his history. For three terms he was a model student.

Petal went to an in-service and happened to meet his former teacher who described in great detail how awful this student was. I copped an earful from Petal on her return and within a fortnight of term four starting the student had sworn at Petal and had to be removed from class. She expected the worst and got it.

Most schools have their share of special needs children. A teacher may be able to cope with one or two special needs students in their class, especially if they are simply learning needs and if teacher aide support is provided. I have been in a school where the number was around four or five per class and these were children with extreme behaviours. Unfortunately, special needs children attract only five or six hours of aide time each. This would be great if school was only one day a week. Often, these hours are used

up totally with playground supervision. Some children have to be monitored closely so they don't hurt the other children.

What do the teachers do with these children in the classroom when there is no teacher aide support? Aide time is part-time but aberrant behaviour tends to be full-time. Even the most talented teachers have a breaking point. I had to expel a prep student who kicked, bit and spat at his teacher almost every day. The final straw came when he picked up a pair of scissors and stabbed another student. I felt sorry for the parents of this child because there was nowhere to send him other than another school. The last I heard of him, he had been expelled yet again for putting another child in hospital when he threw a chair at him. I have come across many children like this over the years. You cannot mainstream them! But, where do you put them? For some of them even a model Gold Class wouldn't work.

Despite the success of our Gold Class, my overall feeling is that it's best to try and accommodate special needs students in the classroom as long as there aren't too many in the one class and as long as there is support in the way of aides or learning support teachers. Having three or four special needs children in one class with only 18 hours aide support puts a strain on the classroom teacher and is unfair. However, it is my experience that this is often the norm, especially in low socio-economic areas.

Apart from funding, mainstreaming works only if you have talented teachers who can see the red as well as the blue. Being a principal is like being a bus driver. A driver can choose who gets on the bus. Ideally, you want passengers who have the same destination in mind as you do. You definitely don't want 'Petal' on your bus. You want passengers who are enthusiastic about the journey as well as the destination. They will point the way in case you get lost and each passenger encourages the others when the trip gets difficult.

### **Ethical dilemma**

Each child deserves an equal amount of teacher time and effort. The talented or gifted child needs extending just as much as the special needs child needs support. While there is funding for aide time for special needs students I'm not aware of similar funding for gifted or average students. This is OK if we are trying to make all students equal, but it's not OK if we are giving each child equal opportunity.

Many parents have approached me over the years to ask why their child doesn't receive teacher aide time. They are often upset because the students who constantly disrupt their child's learning get special treatment. It really is a case of the squeaky hinge getting all the oil. Other parents have been so concerned about the behaviour of students in their child's class that they have withdrawn their child and gone

socio-economic schools have far more children with special needs than other schools. There are several reasons for this – which would require a separate article.

One of the biggest categories of special need I have encountered is Social-Emotional. This is an area recognised by Catholic schools in Brisbane. I don't think state schools recognise it. Children in this category tend to have extremely poor social skills. As a result they may be violent or be victims or perpetrators of bullying. They may be loners and have few friends, if any. In the classroom they are constantly in the firing line because they cannot get on with their classmates. They seek attention, usually in the wrong way. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to like these children. There were several students I taught in my career who I was very happy to see the back of. It would be great if these children would be taken out of the class and put somewhere else. It would be great, but not right.

Apart from specific examples such as Gold



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elsewhere. This is when it gets really difficult for a principal. You have students that are almost impossible to expel, due to strict protocols and fear of litigation, who make life unbearable for the other students and drive nice families away or prevent nice families from enrolling in the first place.

I have never bowed to parent pressure, but when they're right, they're right! Most parents I have dealt with have the belief that no student has a right to be in a mainstream classroom if their behaviour or special need impacts on the learning of the other children. This seems quite harsh, especially in the context of my career in Catholic schools where we are known for our treatment of the marginalised in society. Withdrawing students should be a last resort after all practical solutions have been exhausted or when the withdrawal can be shown to have a positive impact on the students, as is the case with Gold Class.

I don't know why special schools were phased out. I believe there is still a place for them. Some students have a real negative impact on the morale and climate of their classroom despite all the best efforts of the best staff at your disposal. Like the prep student I mentioned above, there needs to be a place for these children. Segregation is politically incorrect these days. We have to be all-inclusive and not exclusive. I wonder if the people who think this way have ever taught in a classroom. Unfortunately, many policy makers in education have no experience working at the coalface and spend their time living in the ideal rather than the real. **ET**



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## NOTICES AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

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# Reading to children: strong sign of school success



Assoc Prof Susan Walker, from QUT's Faculty of Education says readers perform better all round

**R**eading to children daily before formal education starts is an important predictor of success in primary school after taking into account socioeconomic factors, language background and gender.

New Queensland University of Technology (QUT) research shows children who are engaged in reading for up to 20 minutes a day perform significantly better in literacy and numeracy in grades three and four.

Associate Professor Susan Walker, from QUT's Faculty of Education, recently presented her findings at the European Congress on Developmental Psychology in Bergen, Norway. She told the meeting that although people knew reading was important, they underestimated its impact.

"If a child is being read to on a regular basis and enjoys it, that is a strong predictor of language, literacy and maths outcomes at age eight and nine," Prof Walker said.

"Read to kids on a daily basis as early as possible. Start when they're babies."

Prof Walker analysed data of more than 3600 children from the Federal Government's biennial Longitudinal Study of Australian Children taken over six years with QUT Prof Donna Berthelsen.

The research examined the children's home learning environment, including the number of days and minutes parents spent reading books to their children, prior to starting school at age four.

The information was then compared to the children's academic outcomes at ages six and eight.

Prof Walker said after controlling for each child's socioeconomic position, language background, gender and whether they were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, reading was the most important factor for school success.

"Despite children coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, for example, if they are read to on a daily basis, they are still performing better in language, literacy and maths four years later than children who weren't read to regularly," she said.

Children who were read to daily prior to formal schooling performed better at literacy and language tasks including: understanding and interpreting stories, reading age-appropriate books independently and composing stories.

In mathematics, these children performed better in areas such as understanding of place value, making reasonable estimates of quantities and used a variety of strategies to solve maths problems.

Reading also contributed to a child's school readiness skills such as organisation, working independently and paying attention in class, which was another predictor of school success.

"Research shows that children's success in the early years of school is fundamentally important because it has implications for future achievement in school and beyond," she said.