

The bad boys in education

By Anna Edgar

RECENT PRESS reports claim that "problem" pupils are on the increase and are holding schools to ransom. At Manton Junior School, Worksop, governors overturned a decision to expel a boy. The NASUWT threatened to strike if he stayed. The school had to find £14,000 from its own budget to provide isolated one-to-one tuition. Eventually, after much conflict, the whole school was closed.

It is simplistic to blame "bad" boys and girls for these incidents. There are many causes of "bad" behaviour in schools. Class size is one of them. As classes of 35-40 become common in primary schools, insecure children lose motivation, fallen behind and express frustration through disruption. It is worse if children have learning difficulties. We need smaller class sizes.

Scotland has a legally protected class maximum of 30, but central government has recently changed health and safety laws on space in English classrooms so children can be crammed like sardines. Notts Education Committee minutes (1996) admit "providing for (disruptive) pupils with special needs in mainstream schools, whether primary or secondary, will not be sustainable as class sizes grow". This is a real and worsening problem.

Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) or Emotional or Behavioural Difficulties (EBD) need support. Notts County Council has a long history of providing this and often well. In 1991 Government legislation forced the integration of pupils with special needs and emotional difficulties into mainstream schools. Experts agree this is an excellent policy, if properly run, but complain that the government failed with funding, although figures from Notts County Council show their efficiency in managing the transition within the limits set by the government.

Karen's dyslexic child for example is in a mainstream class of 30 but is given no special-needs support because other children are "more needy". Karen has to pay for a private tutor. Tracy's child's dyslexia was identified but no solution was offered. She had to contact the Dyslexic Institute for advice and read up to find out what was available. She battled to get her child examined by an educational psychologist. Two and a half hours a week of one-to-one tuition was officially recommended. The

school reluctantly provides 40 minutes a week in a group of three. Tracy is also paying for a private tutor.

Julie's story is more dramatic. Her child has hydrocephalus, mobility problems and epilepsy but it took her six months to get a statement so her child could go to special school. She had to write to the press, and her husband had to occupy a county official's office, before a statement was granted.

In all these cases, the children have recognised learning difficulties, and understandably such parents are bitterly disillusioned. There are many more cases, all demanding more structured support for parents, more training for teachers, and more resources to allow the system to cater for all who need it.

The head teacher of Nethergate special school expressed concerns about inadequate resourcing for mainstream integration. Children get frustrated, play up or play truant. Outreach teachers from her school can only provide primary schools with one session of special-needs teaching a fortnight and secondary schools once a week. She believes Government legislation prevents realistic solutions to the problem of half-empty special schools and over-stretched outreach teachers.

Pupil Referral Units take mainstream pupils for mornings or afternoons for counselling. Head teachers feel this service is stretched so thinly that it has become "woefully weak". Many children need long term and consistent support, but this cannot be provided, so schools expel the pupils, who can then only move into another mainstream school.

Teachers also mention league tables and media pressure as contributing factors. Schools are pressurised into prioritising resources for pupils who will "produce the goods" for the league tables. Less academic children lose out, even being segregated into "drop out" classes. It creates terrible discipline problems when pupils are labelled "losers" and become disaffected.

The issue of discipline, "bad" behaviour and "problem" children is not one of individuals. It is one of a system so poorly resourced that it is failing vulnerable children, who are reacting by becoming disruptive. Perhaps, rather than expelling scapegoat schoolboys, it is time for the real "bad boys" of education to be given a taste of their own "kick out the offenders" medicine.