**Article in The Examiner newspaper written by the mother of a child with SEN.**

We cannot draw definitive conclusions from the literature that one type of educational placement is better than another, says **Victoria White**

Stop trying to shame us, please. Stop trying to tell the 2% of school students who attend special schools or classes that they are being “segregated” instead of included.

The National Council for Special Education’s (NCSE) latest emission is a progress report, including policy advice on special schools and classes which says the Government should consider the abolition of all special schools and classes in the Irish education system.

This is not because the NCSE has found that students with disabilities ranging from Down syndrome with a mild intellectual disability to profound autism will all do better with Mary, Pat and Joe in the local mainstream classroom.

They have not found this.

They have made no conclusive finding, on strictly educational grounds.

As they say:

We cannot draw definitive conclusions from the literature that one type of educational placement is better than another.

Instead they “tentatively suggest” that some studies say mainstream is better, but even if this were the case, surely the results would have to be disaggregated for different disabilities to exclude the possibility that some children’s educational outcomes might suffer in mainstream?

The NCSE’s attempt to abolish special schools and classes is based on ideology, not pedagogy, however. As they explain, the UN has advised that having a mainstream system and a separate special education system is “not compatible with its view of inclusion”. That’s very nice for the UN, sitting in its air-conditioned office. Provision for a child’s education should not be dictated by ideology, however.

The National Council for Special Education’s interim report is full of ideology. It champions the fully inclusive model of education which is provided in New Brunswick, Canada, to the point that the only international site visits which were carried out to inform the report were by two NCSE staff members in five New Brunswick schools.

Interestingly, no one was sent to the UK where special education provision is actually expanding.

As the NCSE state in their report, the New Brunswick educational model was not born in pedagogic research but in the US civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s which finally stopped the US segregating people on the basis of their skin colour.

It is indeed hard to believe that such barbarism existed in the relatively recent past. It is ridiculous, however, to try to equate the provision of special education for people with disabilities with the segregation of black people from white people. Simply put, black people are the same as white people underneath their skin. Simply put, disabled people differ from people without disabilities in that they have disabilities.

Except the thing is, the word “disability” doesn’t really mean very much.

Why should a boy with an IQ of 140 but without the use of his legs be considered under the same educational parameters as a girl with an IQ of 25 , no language and profound autism? In the first case, you’re looking at ramps and accessible toilets; in the second, you’re looking at a completely different curriculum for a completely different educational outcome.

The NCSE’s complain that kids who are placed in a special school rarely return to mainstream but maybe that’s because it’s the right setting for them?

Why should they leave an educational setting which suits them in order to conform with the ideology of the UN? Let’s get real here. While the vast majority of our kids can be educated in mainstream schools there is a tiny minority — currently 2% — who can’t.

My son is one such kid. He has ASD and a moderate ID and has been in one mainstream and two special schools. The sensory overload of a mainstream classroom of 30 kids in it constituted mental and physical torture for him.

I will never forget leaving him clutching a teacher’s hand in the playground of his special school for the first time. Bit by bit, he realised he was going to be safe there.

Six kids in the classroom with a teacher and an SNA. Peace, calm and educational provision so targeted that his profound dyslexia was tackled with virtually every reading programme known to man.

He progressed from this school to a secondary school specialising in autism where the pupil-teacher ratio was better still. He works an allotment. He goes out for lunch every Friday. He shops and cooks and learns about appropriate sexual behaviour. It costs the tax-payer a fortune but that is the only disadvantage of special education in my son’s case. He deserves it.

Autism may be, in itself, a special case among special cases, because the challenge a mainstream classroom presents to a child with a sensory processing disorder can be such that no learning can happen.

Sadly, this can be the case even for highly intelligent students with ASD and there is currently no appropriate provision for these kids who need to access mainstream education from a position of safety and calm.

For kids with significant autism and a significant ID, however, the NCSE’s warnings that special ed can diminish the chances of building friendships in the local community ring extremely hollow as these chances are unlikely to present.

And the interim report’s consistent drone about the poor children who have to take buses to special schools, sometimes for long distances, rings hollower still.

Kids often enjoy the bus which arrives at their front door every morning and brings them safely and securely to school. Their parents often love the little bit of extra time it gives them for their work, their other kids and themselves.

What can’t be disputed is the NCSE’s warnings about the cost of the scheme — currently €2m annually — which we know the Government has under review.

Is cost the real agenda here?

I don’t dispute the NCSE’s advice that there should be a formal, uniform process to admit a child to special education; nor that the placement should be periodically reviewed. I don’t believe, however, that a child who is “happy and content” in special ed — as was every single such student interviewed for this report — should be threatened periodically with a forced exit.

While barriers to mainstream education should be constantly pulled down — and the provision of the Education (Admissions to School) Act 2018 which forces schools to open special classes if there is demand is positive — I don’t believe a school should be prohibited from asking if a potential student is disabled as will be the case from 2021.

This will be a State in which schools can ask what religion a child is and can admit only boys or girls but cannot ask if a child needs a ramp or a Special Needs Assistant.

Is disability now so shaming that we cannot even speak its name?