

**(From 'Disabled We Stand' (1981) Sutherland, A. T., London: Souvenir Press).**

One major obstacle that many of us have had to face has been the low standard of education that has been available to us. Though the standards of schooling for children with disabilities have undoubtedly improved in the past couple of decades, with higher teaching standards in special schools and more specialist units within ordinary schools cutting out some of the need for residential education, these facilities did not exist twenty years ago, when most of the more radical and vociferous of us were receiving our education.

One thing that emerged very clearly when I discussed this question with people who had been to special schools was that a major part of such schools' role tends to be one that has nothing to do with providing special educational facilities at all. They serve as useful dumping grounds for children who might otherwise prove to be inconveniences: to their parents, to their local authorities, to the staff of ordinary schools who think their routine might be disrupted by having to cater for the particular needs created by the child's disability.

Thus, at the boarding school that Micheline Mason attended at the age of thirteen, 'As far as disability was concerned, at least half the girls there were fairly able bodied. A lot of them had come from ordinary schools, had things like asthma or heart conditions that made it heavy going for them in ordinary schools ... And there were not many there that were really severely disabled.

'Ordinary schools should have been able to adapt to their needs. I think they probably do now. This was in the time when it was considered unfair to the child, rather than unfair on the school. They found, walking round a huge building, particularly people with asthma and heart things, it was very exhausting, so they were ill a lot, they missed a lot of school. There's not much they could have done about that without a tremendous amount of reorganisation.

'A lot of them came because of problems at home. Under the circumstances, I think it was a beneficial place to go, but I think it's an exception.'

Edwina McCarthy found something similar at the school to which she went: 'I think many of my schoolmates needed somewhere to live. Many of the kids, their parents were horrified at some of their bodies. Some of the parents couldn't cope with your disabilities until you were older, when you could cope by yourself up to a point. I could cope by myself anyway, dressed myself, not actually cooking at that time but I was able to feed myself. So if you had a unit attached to a

boarding school where they could stay ... But not away in the country where they see no life at all'.

If an adequate standard of education is provided, there is not necessarily anything unacceptable in the idea of boarding schools for children whose parents find they can't cope with them. Indeed, Edwina went to boarding school as a result of her own decision: 'It was my choice that I went to boarding school, partly to give my parents a chance to know each other and bring the kids up. I felt that I needed something to exercise my brain a bit more, because at day school they said I was severely handicapped. I was quite bright, though I couldn't spell. I had an insight into where I was going.'

But many children who end up in special schools need not be there at all, as in the case of one of Derek McCarthy's schoolmates: 'One of my friends had a disease of the eye which basically didn't affect his eyesight at all, and why he went there I'll never know. I can't understand it. They put him in a school for people who were partially sighted and basically he wasn't. He's driving a car now! And if his eyesight's good enough to drive a car, I can't see what he was ever doing in a special school.'

One reason for the existence of anomalies of this kind is undoubtedly the fact that strong pressure is sometimes put on parents to send their child to a special school. Paddy Ladd, who in fact went to an ordinary grammar school, and then went on to study English at university and do a postgraduate degree in linguistics, points out how near he came to being sent to a special school:

'At the age of four or five the doctor at the clinic I was attending suggested that I be sent to a residential school for the deaf in Manchester. My parents really freaked out about that. They had been married for something like seventeen years, twenty years, something like that and they hadn't any children and so they were particularly obsessed about keeping the one they had. It's very important to realise that it was very exceptional circumstances that made them say no to the doctor.

'They then hit another bit of luck. They went to the local infant school and said we've got a little boy who's deaf; the doctor doesn't think you'll be able to cope with him. And it just so happened that it was the kind of headmistress who said, "Who said I wouldn't be able to cope with him?" A challenge! And it was set up on that level.'

Derek McCarthy and his twin brother escaped being sent to a special school at first, because their parents were opposed to the idea and had their doctor's support: 'My doctor, who used to test my eyes every six months, to see if they were deteriorating or getting better, never wanted me to go to the school. Because

originally I was due to go there at six and he put his foot down and said no way, he can cope at a normal school.' But their parents eventually gave in because of concern that they , might be suffering academically:

`I was sent to special school because I couldn't read. I couldn't see the blackboard, so when the teacher wrote something up we had to go up and stand by the blackboard and write it all down. We knew the alphabet, and we could read up to a point. The headmaster said, "Oh, these are stupid". He wanted to send us to a special school for backward kids. My Mum went absolutely round the twist. She went up the school and nearly broke the headmaster's door down. She said, "Derek's third in his class for maths, and his brother's good at music, and you want to send them to a school for backward children!"

`We could actually read music. We couldn't read words, but both of us could read music. And I was playing chess at nine. We had an intelligence test done. We never actually found out what they said, but he changed his mind.

`Then they suggested we should be sent to a school for partially sighted.' My Mum said, "Fair enough, what's it like?". They said well, basically it's like a normal school, but they make concessions like the books have bigger writing and they write larger on the blackboard. So I thought, "Super! Won't have to keep getting up." I went there.'

It turned out, however, that they had been misinformed: `The books weren't any different from ordinary books. If you couldn't read, then you had a magnifying glass, which is the obvious answer. The only concession they made, literally, was to write bigger.'

Obviously, it is not now possible to say whether this misinformation was deliberate. It seems reasonable, however, to assume that it was merely the result of simple ignorance. But that is still no excuse: it is one thing for a headmaster to advise parents to send their children to a special school if he knows that the school has facilities which are likely to benefit the child; it is quite another if his advice is based purely on unfounded assumptions about what the school might be like.

Having spent five years at an ordinary junior school, Derek very rapidly became conscious of the difference in academic standards at the school to which he moved:

`I got to the school. The first few weeks were alright. And then it dawned on me that I and my twin brother were being given one lot of lessons and everybody else was being given another lot. In maths they were given what they call colour

factors, which is just blocks. A green block is worth two, a red block is worth one ... And that's all they were using. And I was doing algebra at the time. That carried on for a year and we made no progression at all on the reading. No homework was ever given, so I actually started getting lazy, because I was so far ahead of the work. They said to my mum that, age-wise, the school was a year behind most schools. Looking back, I think they were doing stuff when I was an eleven-year-old that I was doing at eight.

`In the second year, they decided to move myself and my twin brother to the highest class in the school, because they just couldn't teach us in the lower classes except for the reading. Eventually they decided to open a special reading unit. I think it took about six months for me to get to a reasonable reading level.

`We used to go to a different school for science because they just didn't have the facilities in my school. They had all the science equipment but our science teacher had it locked up in a cupboard and used to give us all academic stuff, theory, and never let us do practical work. I don't think he thought we were capable of doing it, because we had bad eyesight. Yet I, at that point, thirteen, decided I wanted to do an O level in science. The headmistress said that it was absolutely unheard of, and told us: "You can take CSE, but you can't take O levels." We had one person leave our school because of that, their parents took them away.'

`At that time we stopped going to the other school for science - the teacher left and they couldn't get a replacement - and as we couldn't take science any more the headmistress put us down for the nearest equivalent: domestic science. Which I have to admit I got the exam in.

`I can't see why half the people in my school were ever at a special school anyway, including me. That's literally all they had to do, write bigger on the blackboard. And surely that's not going to hurt any teachers.'

Derek questions the whole idea of special schools for partially sighted children, suggesting that they could easily be integrated into ordinary schools and that the major reason many partially sighted children are at special schools is simply that other schools are unwilling to make the very simple adjustments that would make integration possible:

`The majority of them never went to a normal school: the majority of them started at five and left at sixteen or seventeen. That was the general rule. That was what was expected and they never got exposed to normal school. Well quite a lot of those kids, relatively speaking, had better eyesight than I did, and I'd coped in a normal school until I was eleven. I would have been in a normal school if I could read, it's as simple as that. If I could read, I would never have

been sent to a school for people with partial sight. Apparently it's better now, they've done quite a lot of improvements to the basic school, the academic standard. I think the whole concept of partial sighted schools is wrong. Most of it is simple things they need.

`It's no hardship for anyone to write a bit bigger on the blackboard. And it means that even kids with normal eyesight can see that much better. You don't need special books, you need magnifying glasses. If they supplied magnifying glasses, or even special glasses - you can get bioptic glasses, they're like a pair of binoculars, designed for reading - and supplied the kids with those, they could read normal books. I didn't need them, because all I had to do was take my glasses off'

One of the advantages of such integration might be that it would save many children from feeling stigmatised on account of their eyesight: `Until I was about ten, I knew I wore glasses, but that was it, I didn't realise I was any different to other kids. No one bothered to tell me, so I didn't know!'

Micheline Mason, who stresses that her experience is not a typical one, went away to a newly opened grammar school for girls when she was fourteen, but her experiences prior to that indicate how low was the standard of special schooling generally available at the time:

`I've been singled out from the age of about five as being exceptionally intelligent, and so I've had very preferential treatment. They wouldn't send me to a special school, because they said I was too intelligent, they said I wouldn't get an education. So that's their own indictment of their own special schools. I had home tutors, which they provide for people in "exceptional circumstances". That can mean all sorts of things, one of which is that you're too bright for special schools.'

Up to the age of ten and a half, Micheline received five hours a week of one-to-one tuition. `Educationally it was good. It sounds as if I was given very little, but of actual one-to-one teaching it was quite a lot. But what was bad about it was not having any children around me, which was horrible. That's this idea that education is one thing only. And it's not. It's the whole thing about making friends and being part of the world.'

But when that tutor started going blind, and was forced to give up her job as a result, the education authority had great difficulty in making any alternative arrangements for Micheline: `They'd got this band of people who were special school educators, people that were home tutors, and most of them couldn't go beyond, or even up to, eleven plus. It was very much primary-level education,

which is what was generally needed and expected. They didn't know what to do with me.'

Eventually they solved the problem by approaching a man who had just retired as headmaster of a girls' grammar school, who agreed to act as a tutor to Micheline. 'I got eight hours a week from him, plus an hour each of Art and French from other tutors. I only did two subjects with him, Maths and English. In a way I loved it, I loved him, but I was incredibly bored.' Eventually this tutor too had to retire, when he developed cancer. It was at this point that an Inspector of Schools drew Micheline's attention to the newly opened grammar school mentioned above. 'He just came one day and said, "Are you bored?". I said, "Yes!" His suggestion was that I applied to go to boarding school. I was nearly fourteen then.

'It wasn't like most special schools. There were only forty girls there at that time, of all ages. They were really anxious for us to prove that they were right in their hypothesis that a grammar school for girls was needed. So it was a very selective first batch of people, all of whom they guessed were going to do well.' This was the school to which Micheline was referring in the comments quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

One criticism of special schools that has repeatedly been made to me is that they tend to cut children off from the outside world. Derek McCarthy states: 'They're going to be with other kids who have disabilities of some sort, and it cuts down contact with nondisabled kids. If you think about it, as soon as you leave that environment, everybody you meet is going to be the opposite. I found that what happened to me is that I made friends with some kids younger than me - you'd get up to three or four years' age difference in the same class. I ended up leaving school and my friends were still at school or they were scattered so wide that I just lost contact. If I'd been in just a special unit, or not even a special unit, if they'd made the right concessions, that wouldn't have happened. Most people go to school locally, and don't lose contact.'

Edwina McCarthy, who went to a boarding school, makes the point even more emphatically: 'I wasn't conscious of being cut off at the time. I thought it was great. But it hits you when you come out. God, I pity anyone who didn't have my background. I knew what it was like, because I came home at weekends. I went out with friends and my parents didn't keep me behind closed doors. If they went out for a drink, I would go. If the family went out on an outing, of course I would go.

'Now, I would like to have gone to a normal school with a unit that would cater for my particular needs. It would make you more aware of the bloody

problems you've got to face for the rest of your life. No matter how liberated you are, other people are not. You're going to be knocked down and you've got to get up so many times.

`Some kids will know anyway, because of their background and parents who have brought them up to know what it's going to be like. They can work out for themselves how they're going to react. They can either say I'm going to give in or I'm bloody going to fight for what I believe. I think I'm bloody-minded anyway, so I think I chose what path I was going to take.'

Edwina also suggests that special schools tend to condition people into regarding themselves as more limited by their disabilities than they actually are: `I would like to know how people can pressurise you into being really disabled. Because they thought I was severely disabled. I don't think so. I can hear. That's very important to me, hearing; I never thought about it before. My speech may be difficult, but I can hear, and that's important.

`I was trained how to dress myself and eat, and type after a fashion. But I got a bit disillusioned about jobs - it was always job-orientated; you'd always got to have a job. I had a good brain, but I couldn't write. My speech was a lot worse than it is now.

`The weaker characters are trained to be disabled. They said you can go home or you can go to a home. Anyway, you can have your own room and you can work at our workshop or you could go to college. But what did I have? My typing speed wasn't up to much. So I thought oh, I'll go to college and do O and A levels. It was better than going straight to a work centre. At the time, leaving school, I was naive...'

Derek also draws attention to the particular isolation that can be created by special schools which are day schools, which have much larger catchment areas than ordinary schools: `I was lucky, because my twin brother went. We were very close, so that I had that, but some of my friends there were completely cut off from what they'd known before, all friends, everything. Really it's like being sent to another school, but our friends lived all over London. So until I was thirteen or fourteen I didn't get to see anyone after school. So the first two years I was, at school the number of friends I had cut quite rapidly back to four or five, if that. I tended to have the same friends as my brother. Schoolkids tend to mix with other kids from the same school, because they're seeing them all the time. And we used to get home a lot later than kids from the other school because we had to come home by coach. So they'd already gone off somewhere by the time we got home. And it was time for tea anyway.

`I remember some of the kids saying, "Oh, you went to a special school", as being something that's different. I didn't realise at that time that it was never ever necessary, because all they needed to do was give me some special coaching for reading.'

As I mentioned earlier, many improvements have taken place in special schooling; the grammar school which Micheline attended represented one. Similarly, in the education of deaf children, striking advances have been made in early diagnosis of deafness and, for children who are not born profoundly deaf, in hearing aid technology. When these are used in conjunction with manual communication, which gives deaf children access to language - and thus to the many aspects of learning which are dependent on language - while the arduous process of learning speech and lipreading progresses, deaf children can grow into proud, literate and articulate deaf adults, able to participate in the hearing world without being cut off from the language and culture of the deaf world. Yet many schools deny deaf children -these benefits, by continuing to reject sign language and fingerspelling, relying on purely oralist methods of teaching.

This is an area where the question of standards of teaching is of absolutely crucial importance. Poor academic education can be compensated for later; the child who has difficulty learning to read can, as Derek McCarthy described, catch up when eventually given special tuition, or even remain illiterate and then learn to read as an adult. But the same does not apply to the learning of language; the first years in a child's life are crucial to the acquisition of language, being a period where, so long as they are exposed to language, children acquire it with a facility that is so remarkable that many linguists believe human beings are innately disposed towards language acquisition. The child does not need to be taught language; if exposed to it, she will acquire it for herself.

Note that I refer here to `language', not to `speech'. It is language itself - a vocabulary of words and a set of grammatical rules for structuring those words into sentences - that is important here, not the particular outward manifestation that those linguistic skills may take. The child who is severely deaf before she acquires language cannot be adequately exposed to speech, but she can easily be exposed to language, in the form of - signing. If this happens, she will acquire language naturally, in the same way as any other child, by taking note of the communication around her and starting to copy it, from a natural desire to communicate, gradually building up her linguistic skills from a single item of vocabulary to complete linguistic competence.

There is no reason why this should limit the child's acquisition of spoken language and lipreading; those around her can employ what is known as `total

communication', using oral and manual communication (including fingerspelling) in conjunction with each other, so that the child learns to do the same, each skill (signing, speech, reading signing, lipreading, fingerspelling and the use of whatever hearing she has, with the aid of amplification) complementing the others and aiding her in her acquisition of all of them.

Such is not, however, the view of oralist educators. They are committed to an approach which uses only speech, lipreading and whatever residual hearing the child possesses (which, even with the most powerful amplification, may well be, for all practical purposes, none at all). They reject the methods of total - communication, because they claim that the use of signing or fingerspelling would hinder the child's acquisition of speech and lipreading. This is simply not true; in an incisive paper on total communication', the American psychologist and researcher Dr McCay *Vernon*, a leading proponent of total communication, cites eleven separate independent research studies carried out between 1954 and 1970 which demonstrate that early manual communication improves language skills rather than impairing them, improves academic performance and does not impair speech and lipreading skills. A typical set of results came from a study<sup>2</sup> which compared a 'manual group' of 134 deaf children of deaf parents (who would, according to the kind of oralist ideas that hinder deaf people from finding teaching jobs, be at an added disadvantage because of their parents' poorer voice quality) with an 'oral group' of 134 deaf children of hearing parents. 90 percent of the manual group did better than matched oral students, and 38 percent of the manual group went to college, as against 9 percent of the oral group. The results of the other studies provide equally impressive evidence in favour of manual communication.

The proven success of total communication might be less important if oralism actually worked, if it were simply a question of replacing an adequate method with a good method. But oralism does not work. On the contrary, it causes immense and unforgiveable damage. It denies children access to language at the very age at which they are best equipped to acquire language, and instead forces them into grotesque attempts to hear inaudible sounds and interpret baffling lip movements. (Lipreading is, even for people who have gone deaf in adult life and so have some idea of what may be being said, a strenuous exercise consisting largely of guesswork; for children who have no experience of language it cannot be anything but futile.) As McCay *Vernon* says, referring to oralists' reliance on complex amplification equipment which is of no benefit at all to many children: 'We do not put glasses on blind children and tell them to paint. Why do we put hearing aids on deaf children and expect them to hear?' Inevitably, oralism severely limits deaf children's linguistic development, a process that Paddy Ladd refers to as 'dummification'.

By denying children access to language, oralism also denies them access to all the subsidiary skills which are acquired through language, both those that are directly language-related, such as reading, and those which are not, such as other school subjects. Thus, for example, many prelingually deaf people have so little literacy that subtitling on television programmes or films is of no value to them. That this is the direct result of oralist methods can be seen from the results of the survey mentioned earlier, where 90 percent of the manual group eventually went to college - no literacy problem there!

But perhaps the most damaging result of oralism is the effect it has on children's psychological development. When deaf children are denied access to language, they are denied access to communication with other people. They are thus left isolated, severely limited in their opportunities for social interaction and, unable to ask detailed questions at the age when children are at their most curious and inquisitive, deprived of a whole range of the most basic information about the world around them. The effects of such deprivation are irreversible. This should in itself be an adequate argument in favour of total communication even if it did inhibit the development of speech and lipreading in the manner claimed by the oralists.

So why does oralism persist? A major reason is straightforward ignorance: the bulk of the people who decry total communication with such fervour do not themselves know how to sign; they are talking about something of which they have no knowledge. (This is presumably how it is possible for people to hold the view that signing is not a 'proper' language, but merely a collection of gestures - an attitude which I have encountered, which in itself goes a long way towards explaining an attachment to oralism.) They are almost always hearing people, with no personal experience of deafness and usually with little contact with the deaf world, where they might learn to respect signing through meeting the people who use it. And they presumably lack the imagination to understand the situation of the child who is unable to communicate in any but the most basic way. They may be in daily contact with children who are actually experiencing that situation, but when did that ever count for much, even in hearing schools where children are not deprived of the means to express their experience?

A further factor is that there exists a generalised expectation that people with disabilities should constantly strive to appear as able bodied as possible. This is particularly relevant to oralism because, as Paddy Ladd explains: 'Speech is very, very crucial, it seems, to people's concept of normality, so much so that the oralists think about speech coming first rather than language or understanding. When deaf children nowadays use their speech, when deaf people make noises on the continuum between noise and speech, that can freak people out even more than just the deafness.'

Paddy also links oralism to a more generalised hostility towards signing. 'Because you need to be a normal, they obviously try to cover up the fact that one needs to use sign language as an adult. It's very interesting that the only thing that could characterise the deaf community in the same way that other groups of people can be characterised by the colour of their skin, facial appearance or whatever is something they're trying to stamp out, as if it was something evil, like wanking - things you do with your hands that you're not supposed to do.'

The parallel with sexual repression is a very apt one. To a person who is sexually repressed, or physically inhibited for any other reason, signing does not come easily; the prospect of having to communicate by using bodily movements and facial expression is for many people a deeply embarrassing one. Much of the unease that some people feel about those who use sign language springs from their fear of their own bodies. McCay Vernon's paper also stresses the fact that sign language expresses feelings and emotions, both conscious and unconscious, much more clearly and directly than speech. And Paddy Ladd comments on the stigma often attached to signing: 'I think that sort of stigma goes back to Victorian protestantism, repression of emotions and not using your hands in any way. You can see the resurgence of sign language as a part of the things that have happened in the last ten or fifteen years like people dressing more freely, dressing in a different kind of relationship to their bodies than before, touching people more. The repression of those things was a part of the same thing that repressed sign language.'

Such personal repression appears to be common among oralist educators, and accounts for much of the irrationality with which they cling to their appallingly inadequate methods. This means that deaf children being taught at oralist schools are likely to suffer a double psychological damage. First, from oralism itself, which denies them language. And second, from the attitudes which cause those methods to be used. Though they may well be unaware of their own subconscious motives for doing so, the teachers who rigidly deny deaf children access to sign language and fingerspelling, and attempt to prevent them using the argot of signs that will spring up in any oralist school, pass on to their pupils their own fears of their bodies, their sexuality and their emotions.

Oralism remains in existence because a group of educators cling stubbornly to a set of educational methods which have been clearly demonstrated to be greatly inferior to the available alternatives. It oppresses all of us who have disabilities, for, by reinforcing the isolation of deaf people from the hearing world, it robs the rest of us of their strength, and them of ours, thus helping to maintain a system of discrimination which tends to keep us all isolated and powerless. If further proof is needed that human beings disable us far more thoroughly than any disability

could, oralism provides it. It is time we ceased to tolerate this disgraceful practice.

<sup>1</sup>M. McCay Vernon, 'Total Communication', in pamphlet *Spotlight on Communication*, issued for British Deaf Association Congress, 1974

<sup>2</sup>Stevenson, 1964

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