My name is Susan Wells and I’m a specialist assessor & teacher at Beech Lodge School. My area of expertise is specifically Dyslexia, Dyspraxia & Dyscalculia (which is the dyslexia of number). I’m also very experienced in pretty much most of the other learning needs you will typically see in schools.

80% of prisoners have literacy skills equal to or below that of an 11 year old child – due to a combination of learning difficulties or social & emotional difficulties – 48% of those are reading below level 1 – that’s reception/year 1.

I’ve been in education for last 9 years, before that I had a very different career & part of my job required me to interview people in police cells who had been arrested. Having worked in that field for many years, I decided to retrain as a teacher, more specifically a dyslexia specialist because I wanted to make a real tangible difference – to give the gift of reading to a child. I quickly became disillusioned because I just couldn’t do enough. If I worked every hour God gave me, I still couldn’t do enough.

What I soon came to realise is that Dyslexia is just one of the very many barriers to learning that face some children. Dyslexia is a drop in the ocean – In reality, in any mainstream classroom, not just dealing with dyslexia but also with:

* ADHD
* Dyspraxia
* ASD
* Speech & Language
* MLD – expand – low ability children ,slow processing, poor memory
* Children with challenging behaviour as a result of early trauma – abuse, neglect.

These children are failing, not just in academic terms, but in other aspects such as their social functioning, confidence, self-esteem and ultimately their behaviour.

When I first qualified as a special needs teacher (before beech lodge) I worked 1 day per week in a primary school & 4 days per week in a secondary school. Working in the two side by side gave me a unique perspective on children – it allowed me to map the pathway of the child with barriers to learning, whose needs are not met. On Monday I would go to the primary school & I would work with ***a*** *Fred* – aged 7. I say ‘*a Fred*’ because he’s generic - there isn’t just one Fred, there’s quite a few of them. He is quite bright and has lots of good ideas and in fact when his IQ was tested at a later date, he was found to have completely average & age-appropriate intelligence. However he has dyslexia and he can’t access the learning independently or get his good ideas down on paper. He also has poor fine motor skills and when he sees his own work with his scrawly handwriting and illegible spelling he is immediately demotivated and ashamed because what he sees on paper bears no resemblance to what he envisaged in his head and it certainly doesn’t reflect the effort that his put in to produce that piece of work.

Fred hates having a teaching assistant with him, it makes him feel different. By aged 6, children are already well aware of ‘the pecking order’ – where they fit in comparison to their peers. He is well aware that he is in the ‘**low ability table’** and he compares his work to his classmates and decides that he must be stupid. In addition, Fred has sensory needs. He can’t bear to wear his uniform with his stiff cotton shirt and he hates having to have the top button done up because it feels like it’s choking him. He hates wearing a jumper because he gets too warm and his stiff black school shoes are uncomfortable. However, he HAS to wear them because that’s the school rules.

Fred is permanently uncomfortable and so he fidgets, and because he fidgets he is not attentive and the teacher often gets cross with him, which makes him feel even more of a failure. He can’t think about his work but only how uncomfortable he is feeling. So he is irritable and sometimes bad tempered.

Fred also has ADHD – his attention jumps to any stimuli visual or otherwise. He has a lovely classroom filled with wonderful, colourful displays, which as beautiful as it is, Fred finds it very distracting because he struggles to block out all that visual stimulus. Fred is in a class of 32 children – that’s a lot of noise and Fred struggles to block out all of the noise. He is fed up with his teacher telling him to sit still and concentrate – because he can’t.

So with the best intentions, his teacher tries rewards to motivate more acceptable behaviours that conform to school expectations – that doesn’t work. Then his teacher imposes punitive measures & sanctions – neither approach works because his actions are not deliberate or premeditated but are impulsive and driven by sensory needs. (they should have adopted preventative measures).

By aged 8 Fred lacks confidence & has low self-esteem. He spends most of his time outside the head’s office but he actually prefers that to being in lessons & failing. He misses his favourite lessons or break times as a punishment or because he has to do the work that he didn’t manage to get done in class. Fred is by now, way behind his peers in his learning & he feels completely overwhelmed. He is thoroughly miserable. His difficulty doesn’t end at the school gates but it impacts at home too. He is reluctant to come to school and has to be dragged in every morning by his parents and there are lots of rows at home. His parents are at their wits end.

On Tuesday I go to the secondary school. I see **a** Charlie. He’s Fred 6 years on. Charlie has forgotten he was ever bright. He is completely disaffected and he doesn’t bother at school at all. He doesn’t like/trust teachers because they have never been able to help him and he feels that they are *always on his case.* They have unrealistic expectations and every piece of work just reinforces his failures and his low self-esteem. Charlie has no aspirations. He doesn’t care & he can’t see a future for himself – it’s all about the NOW.

By now his behaviour has escalated. He is not intimidated by teachers or authority because he spent his primary school years sat outside the head’s office. Charlie doesn’t want to be at school and he does whatever is necessary to get removed from the lesson or excluded – whether that be acting as the class clown or disrupting other students learning. His teachers stop trying to help because they don’t like him, because he’s very difficult. Charlie is 14 and his hormones have kicked in & he’s angry, frustrated and bored. He either refuses to come to school or he truants.

He is no longer with his ‘nice sensible friends’ because they have been set into ability groups. - He’s with all other like-minded children who hate school & don’t want to be there and together they develop a pack mentality which makes Charlie & his friends feel much braver. His behaviour escalates further & the teachers spend their time just trying to contain them. They have long since stopped educating them. At that point you have lost that child – he cannot be reached. Charlie leaves school barely literate and with no GCSEs.

That takes me right back where we started this story – to that 80 % statistic, to the person I used to interview in a police cell. That’s Fred & Charlie 5 years on, 10 years on or 20 years on. The demotivated child will grow into a disaffected teenager who will grow into a dysfunctional adult.

That’s their only available pathway because other avenues are simply not available to them – the paths that their primary school friends took.

There is another path – the **withdrawn** child travels down that path. Let’s talk about a Sarah**.** There are many Sarahs**.** In a way Sarah’s path can often be even worse. The child that withdraws into herself doesn’t tell you how they feel, they don’t vent their anger or frustration. More often than not, they go on to develop mental health problems. They are diagnosed with clinical anxiety or depression. There is nothing sadder to see than a 10 year old diagnosed with depression and being put on anti-depressants. They become school refusers, the girls in particular develop eating disorders and self- harm. They seek solace in the internet to try and find like-minded people who understand them. They put themselves in vulnerable positions and become targets for grooming and exploitation. They develop long term mental health problems.

Fred, Charlie & Sarah are not fictional characters, nor are they worse case scenarios – they are all Beech Lodge children. You will find them in every primary & secondary school & in the pupil referral units, the young offender units and in the prisons.

When I heard about Beech Lodge, I approached them, keen to come and work for them. I saw an opportunity for an alternative pathway. Three years on we have an alternative model of education that to date is proving to be hugely successful. We are all agreed that we are unique and that there is no another school like us in this part of England. Our school ethos is ‘*If they can’t learn how we teach then we must teach how they learn’.*

We now need a bigger school so we can save more children & get them on the right pathway. We need outdoor space & a woodland environment. I can’t stress enough the therapeutic value of being in the woods, with its ever changing canvas depending on the seasons & the weather, the nature and the wildlife. It provides opportunities for learning both academically & socially that we can’t replicate in the classroom or the playground. Opportunities for our children to shine. Most of our children will never shine in the classroom, not even in non-academic subjects.

The child with unique visual processing difficulties who produces illegible work in class can spot a tiny green frog in a green field at a distance of 50 meters. When he catches it and shows the children, they are amazed at his skills. For a brief moment he shines. When we walk through a field of hay bales, the ASD boy with his narrow band of interest can tell the children every detail of hay baling & all the equipment used and the children are captivated by his knowledge. For a moment he shines.

Our walks & outdoor activities prompt conversations & learning experiences that we could never dream up in the classroom or in the playground. It’s called experiential learning & it is far more memorable than classroom based lessons in which they often fail to generalise their knowledge and transfer their skills.

At Christmas, our yomp across the fields generated a spontaneous game of football which was unheard of for our children. Our children don’t do team sports. Their motor coordination problems combined with their weak understanding of social rules mean that they find team sports too tricky to navigate but we saw cooperation & teamwork that we had never been able to instigate in the playground during a PE lesson. In the woods, what started off as a game of hide & seek developed into a more elaborate game with all the children putting forward their ideas and they displayed communication & negotiation skills that we rarely see in the classroom.

We can’t replicate those spontaneous and valuable learning opportunities in school – we need to be outdoors. We also need to maintain our close links with BCA and be close to them to use their facilities. Our responsibility to the children doesn’t end at 17. We work to get them on vocational courses and to prepare them for the next stage of their lives after school.

Yesterday you heard from one of our parents Jason Hicky who had adopted two birth siblings. The younger child the girl, came to Beech Lodge where she has flourished – like all our other children. Unfortunately, Beech Lodge wasn’t around when his older son Kyle was younger and he didn’t have the same opportunity as his sister – his outcome has been very different. Had there been a Beech Lodge for him to come to – perhaps he wouldn’t have turned into the Charlie that I spoke about.

We desperately need this site at stubbings. We need to get on & build our new school & save more children. We have been hearing about the balancing act, about the spoilt views and about the importance of the footpath. What about the views of our children. What about the rights of our children to have a safe pathway that leads to a bright & positive future and NOT towards that 80% statistic. The path that helps them to become fully functioning members of society. Simply to be the best that they can be.

Yes we want to build on green belt land. We want to build a future for 96 children and we think that constitutes VERY SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES.