

# HEADLINERS

## Including me

### Young people with disabilities hope a change in the law will finally put their education on a level playing field with their peers.

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Most young people would say that they value the right to a free and equal education. Even if they don't enjoy going to school they most certainly enjoy having the privilege. But for disabled young people this has not been the case; many have faced discrimination on all levels within the education system and in many cases are excluded from it.

However, with the introduction of the new Special Education Needs and Disability Act 2001 it is now unlawful for mainstream schools to discriminate against disabled people. The act also covers all areas of education, to include colleges Universities and adult education youth services. So does this mark the start of equality for all in education?

We spoke to Lucy Mason who is a wheel-chair user, and Richard Pearson who has Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism, about their time in mainstream education and about their hopes and desires for the future.

"Luckily for me I didn't have the problem of having to fight to get into mainstream school, but there are thousands of young people that do. I know a lot of people who do," Lucy says. "One of the major problems I had was I always had to have a Learning Support Assistant to get me around the place."

Learning Support Assistants are employed by the local authority to assist disabled people within the education system. However, Lucy believes that because the role of Learning Support Assistant is given a low status, she sometimes didn't get the support she needed.

"This work is underpaid in some of the boroughs so, in my opinion, you often got people doing this work that weren't really right for the job. I never got a Learning Support Assistant that stayed very long. It got really hard to make a relationship with anyone."

With the introduction of the new act Lucy believes that mainstream schools will have to make some major changes to make them completely accessible to disabled young people.

The Department of Education says there is 8.5bn available for upgrading schools between 2002-04. And the Access Initiative which provides funding for making schools more accessible to disabled young people has funded 6,000 schools' upgrades since 1996. But how long will it take for people's attitudes to change towards disabled people in mainstream education?

"When you are the only disabled young person in mainstream school you get all the stuff about being different. You always have to explain to people what your disability is," says Lucy.

Lucy is all too aware of the discriminations faced by minority groups within the education system. But she still finds it hard to understand why disabled young people have, until now, been singled out to be educated separately.

"No-one would think for a second that it makes sense to educate ethnic minorities separately. That would never help to break down any barriers, or get people used to diversity. So why do people think that it makes sense to take disabled young people out of mainstream education?"

"I'd like to see a time when young disabled are no longer seen as a burden on the system. It would be something that we could be proud of as a country, that we have actually done a big piece of human rights work in a sense."

For Lucy the word inclusion is very important, she feels that all disabled people should be given the right to a good education, and believes that being included in mainstream schools will not only benefit those with disabilities but also able-bodied young people.

"The more diverse the education system is the less prejudices we have when we grow up."

Having disabled people in mainstream education would also make others aware that disabled people are not only wheel chair users as Richard points out.

"Some staff, within schools, think that disabled people are wheel chair users only, unless it is very obvious to tell. With very severe autism it is easier to tell because of the lack of communication, but with Asperger's Syndrome it's a lot harder to tell that there is something wrong."

So does Richard think that the new act will change attitudes and make more people aware of the needs of disabled young people in education? "At school the teachers, didn't know I had a disability, they didn't think that it was something that would affect so many people."

At primary school Richard said that the non-acceptance of his disability was very apparent, they treated him as if he didn't have Asperger's Syndrome, therefore did not take his special needs into consideration. But when he attended secondary school the situation changed and he received more understanding and help. Richard feels that there's a need for people to be better informed about disabilities.

"There is some information in the media about disabled people but there isn't enough in schools, so that teachers and schoolchildren know that they may come across people that are disabled, and know how to make them feel comfortable with the way they are. I would like to see less prejudice towards disabled people."

Richard feels comfortable with his disability, he found out that he had Asperger's Syndrome at the age of eleven.

"I seemed different from everyone else, and the way people treated me, I was glad that I knew what was affecting me, it made me feel more comfortable. I tell people, about my condition, so they are more aware of Asperger's Syndrome."

Richard feels that there are many wider social advantages of disabled people attending mainstream schools. Like Lucy, he sees the important of all young people being educated together. "It can help other children to be more aware and tolerant."

With many organisations campaigning for the equality of disabled people hopefully more awareness will be brought about to empower disabled people within the mainstream education system. The Disability Rights Commission which has actively campaigned to bring about these changes has outlined a code of practice that is designed to help schools include disabled young people in their schools.

It will certainly be some time before the overall impact of this act will be seen, but even in the short term more disabled people will be included in the education system. No longer will they have to feel set apart and unwelcome. As Lucy states "let's do some sort of 'human rights work', and move towards making our education system a system one that will educate not discriminate.

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#### About the team

This story was produced by Gabriella Gay, 16. It was published in [0-19 magazine](#).

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