

Once Upon an Outreach Teacher

Stories, Tips and Insights into Special
Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools



A **Speechmark** Book

GINNY BROWN

ONCE UPON AN OUTREACH TEACHER

An outreach teacher's job is full of challenges, questions and surprises! *Once Upon an Outreach Teacher* is a collection of stories about young people with special educational needs and disabilities at the heart of mainstream schools, and about the people who support them and help them succeed.

The authentic, insightful and sometimes humorous stories explore themes ranging from the learning environment, pupil independence and the importance of self-esteem, to working with parents and other professionals. Each chapter is accompanied by checklists or helpful tips drawn from real-life situations to increase understanding, offer solutions and provoke further thought. The stories and anecdotes, which follow the author's life as an outreach teacher, span from nursery to secondary settings and share both the struggles and the triumphs of children and young people. The author goes on to consider inclusion more broadly and what the future may hold.

This unique and informative collection will appeal to anyone who works in mainstream or special schools who is looking for an entertaining read which will also enable them to better support their pupils. It will be of particular interest to working and aspiring outreach teachers, special educational needs coordinators, teachers and teaching assistants and anyone who is interested in what is happening in our schools today.

Ginny Brown qualified as a teacher in Nottingham in 1980. Since then, she has taught in a range of special and mainstream schools and has held various positions including classroom teacher, teaching assistant and deputy head. Ginny is now an outreach teacher, working within a team that supports the needs of children and young people with a range of learning needs in dozens of schools, from nursery to secondary.



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SCHOOLS**

Ginny Brown

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This book is dedicated to all the wonderful teachers and teaching assistants I have been lucky enough to work with, be friends with, and learn from, over many years.

And to Jake and Rachel, my amazing son and daughter.



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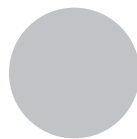
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CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
1 Making a Difference <i>How outreach teachers can help</i>	1
2 Safety First <i>Practical tips for the job, working in the community</i>	6
3 Lobby <i>The busy job of the office manager, and other school teams</i>	12
4 Mud and Twigs <i>The importance of play for primary and secondary pupils</i>	17
5 Shiny Things <i>Passing on good advice, start and finish trays</i>	23
6 Dogs <i>How animals can help, parent's point of view</i>	27
7 Wrong Again <i>Talking to children, trigger words</i>	32
8 What's the Difference <i>Inclusion, gender dysphoria and history of special education</i>	37
9 System <i>Dyslexia and self-esteem</i>	44
10 Tweaks <i>Ways to help engagement in primary school</i>	50
11 Yes, but ... <i>Teacher's point of view, and quick and dirty tips</i>	57
12 A Word about Phonics <i>Phonics and whole word methods of learning to read</i>	62
13 Upon Reflection <i>Masking in autism, not making assumptions</i>	67

14	Just like Mum and Dad <i>How children copy, and how we can use that</i>	75
15	And the Award Goes to ... <i>Motivators used in schools</i>	82
16	It's Not Fair! <i>Perfectionism, sense of right and wrong</i>	87
17	Feeling Cross <i>Feelings in school, pupils and staff</i>	93
18	Leaving Mum <i>Emotion based school avoidance</i>	99
19	Away with the Fairies! <i>Attention and focus</i>	106
20	Chat with Liam <i>Young person's point of view</i>	111
21	Ups and Downs <i>Supporting child with Down syndrome</i>	118
22	Don't Forget to Remember <i>Working memory and retention</i>	126
23	Top of Every Field <i>Dyslexia</i>	133
24	Best Half Hour of the Week <i>Complex needs</i>	139
25	Outreach Confidential <i>Ethical dilemma, involving young people</i>	146
26	Ouch <i>Self-injurious behaviour</i>	151
27	Independence <i>Growth mindset, learned helplessness</i>	156
28	Environment <i>Classroom and sensory issues</i>	162
29	TA Very Much! <i>Teaching assistants' points of view</i>	168
30	End <i>Leaving the job</i>	174
31	Dysartia <i>Imagined disorder, if creativity were valued more than literacy and maths</i>	177
	Appendix 1 List of Resources	182
	Top tips, checklists and strategies	185
	Index	185



PREFACE

‘You couldn’t make it up!’ we say to each other in the corridors as inspectors come in on school picnic day, the emotional support dog has escaped or little Michael has set off the fire alarm again.

‘Someone should write a book about it!’ we say. And so, I did.

I have worked in schools for most of my adult life and for the last ten years have been an outreach teacher, supporting the learning needs of children and young people in mainstream schools. I find my job absolutely fascinating and it gives me such a good insight into schools and education.

I write a lot in my job; reports, lesson observations and suggestions, and I began to sometimes write for myself – what if I wrote down what that teacher said to me, that conversation with the young person, my thoughts about education? Little by little, thoughts became essays, essays looked like chapters and the chapters came together (supported by my publisher) as a book.

I have tried to include different experiences of school and I have talked to, formally and informally, parents, students and colleagues. I wanted to tell the stories of those young people struggling in our system and the people who are trying, and often succeeding, to help them flourish.

Things are changing in mainstream schools – many special schools are full and children with a range of learning difficulties are being included in mainstream schools as a matter of principle and choice. All teachers are expected to be teachers of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Teachers, teaching assistants (TAs), special educational needs coordinators (SENCo) and inclusion leads are looking for advice, guidance and connection. Often, staff will ask ‘Is it the same in other schools?’ It often is and knowing that can be helpful.

Outreach teachers can provide much needed support and because we travel from school to school, class to class and lesson to lesson, we gain a unique insight into what is happening in our schools today.

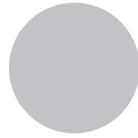
This book shares those observations honestly and respectfully and is packed full of humour, stories and thinking points.

Top tips accompany many chapters – they are written with individual children in mind but have more general applications and ideas that can be used for other students in other situations.

All characters in this book are based on people I have met but are completely made up and many of the situations are fusions of things I encounter. For example, in the chapter on the environment, I have never seen so many errors in one place but I have seen one or two of them in many places.

Commonly used acronyms and initialisms are listed below, they won’t necessarily be spelled out at every occurrence in the book:

EHCNA	Education, health and care needs assessment
EHCP	Education, health and care plan
ICT	Information and communication technology
IT	Information technology
PE	Physical education
SEN	Special educational needs
SENCo	Special educational needs co-ordinator
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SENDCo	Special educational needs and disabilities co-ordinator
TA	Teaching assistant.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

What I have shared here, I have learned from other people and that I have been able to produce a book, is down to the support of other people.

Thanks go to:

My outreach pals, Alisa and Rachel and Tania. I love working with you all and have learned such a lot from you.

Geoff and the team at school who always make me feel as if I belong, even though I am hardly ever there.

All the teachers and teaching assistants I have worked with and leaders such as Angela and Marion from whom I learned so much.

Fiona, Jane, Laura, Rachael and Rachel who provided feedback that helped me shape the book.

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My family and friends – I have nothing but support from them all and I count myself lucky to be related to, and friends with, so many caring, creative and curious people.

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MAKING A DIFFERENCE

'I think I am going to have to give up my job,' I said to my daughter over the wooden table of her favourite wine bar.

'It's just that every day I see children who are struggling,' I went on, 'I see the system doesn't meet the needs of all children and I feel a bit guilty being part of it.'

Rachel smiled and leant forward in a counsellor sort of way. She had heard it all before.

'Sell your job to me!' she demanded, 'Pretend I am wanting to be an outreach teacher – tell me the good things.'

I sat up straighter. 'Well ... there are some good things about it,' I said, 'come to think of it ... I get to manage my diary, I have full autonomy, I get to see the most fantastic children, I am in schools every day, I love talking to the teachers and parents and teaching assistants (TAs), I can listen to Radio 4 as I drive around, I've got better at parallel parking, I have learnt so much from my colleagues, I can do the training I want to at home in the evenings and don't have to stay behind for staff meetings,' I was really into my stride now, 'and being a bit detached from the main business of school really suits me, I have done my time as a class teacher and going to every staff meeting, summer fete, parents' evening and thought-showering mission-statement training day. I can't remember the last time someone put a sticky note in my hand and asked me for my vision for the school.'

I am sure my eyes were shining now as I thought about how much I did, after all, love my job.

'It's just that I'm getting a bit cynical so it might be time to go. I wonder if I am just being used sometimes, so schools can tick the box to say they've brought me in before they try the next thing. I'm just not sure I'm making a difference you know?'

‘OK,’ said Rachel, ‘tell me three times you *have* made a difference.’

‘Well,’ I said, Rachel smiled, triumphant, ‘just today I was at a school where they had a little girl who had learning difficulties – I spent half an hour with her, having the best fun ever, playing with oats, singing about cows, signing and using words. She was watching me, smiling, and connecting with me. The teaching assistant, who was new and keen to learn, was watching and taking note. The special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) came in and watched as this little girl smiled, looked and copied. It was magical ...’

‘That’s one ...’

‘There was the time when I helped change the homework expectations for a young man. Meeting him and his parents and head of year made all the difference. We have reduced the pressure – he now does homework in school time and a member of staff helps him; he gets it, he’s learning, he’s happier, and I think I helped the staff tweak their opinion of him.’

‘And lastly ...’

‘I might have helped with relationships between parents and school. I was at the meeting and was able to explain what fantastic teaching I had seen and how well the child had responded. The parents were expecting faster results but I said that I thought the school had done just the right thing to prioritise relationships and routines for the first term and that now was the time to crack on with learning. This reassured the parent, nudged the school into thinking, yes, it was time to crack on, and I think it made a difference ...’

Rachel went to the bar as I thought about another time I think I made a difference – by making connections. I spent many years working in special schools (most of us outreach teachers are special school practitioners, now using our experience and expertise in mainstream schools) and learned so much from the speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and other professionals I met there. This gives me an understanding of when other services could get involved and how they can help.

I was called in to give advice about Freya who was six years old but still not speaking clearly. There were sounds that she couldn’t

make and she tended to vocalise with vowel sounds only. She was shy and quiet in school. She worked one-to-one with a teaching assistant. I came to see her in class and saw she was pale and slight, a sweet child with a smile that could light up a room. She was clearly not working at the same level as the other children and was practising her letters and numbers when I saw her. She loved getting stickers and dinosaurs were her favourite.

Later, I had a meeting with the class teacher, Miss O'Hare; the SENCo, Ms Ezra; and Freya's mum, Mrs F. We met in a break-out room, used for children who needed some time out of class, and sat on beanbags. I love to hear about the child at home, it gives me a fuller picture. The school staff enjoy this too, there isn't always time at pick-up and drop-off times or even at parents' evenings. To spend an hour focusing on one child is a real luxury and privilege.

I found out more about Freya's love of dinosaurs, how she watches Peppa Pig on her mum's laptop and enjoys her bath. She sleeps well. 'What about eating?' I asked, 'Does she have any sensitivities around food?'

Freya's mum said, 'Well, she doesn't eat anything much, she used to have prawn cocktail Skips and sometimes a Malteser, I sliced them in half, but now she just eats yogurt – strawberry ones, from Asda.'

I was amazed although I hope I didn't show it.

'So, she's never eaten anything else?'

'No, not really,' said her mum. She had been worried and had taken Freya to the doctor. She was supplementing her diet with a fortified milk-shake – this gave her all the nutrients she needed and although slender, Freya was growing, so the doctor wasn't worried.

'The thing is,' I said, 'she is not using her mouth and jaw muscles, she's not really using her tongue – Skips and Maltesers will melt in the mouth. This might be linked with her speech.'

I am not an expert so we made referrals to a speech and language therapist (SaLT) and an occupational therapist (OT) and Freya's mum took her back to the doctor. The OT did an assessment of Freya's sensory needs and worked with the SaLT to devise some 'messy play' sessions. These are sessions that help children

to become more comfortable around food – they may play with cooked spaghetti, pumpkins or chopped fruit, for example. There is no pressure whatsoever for the child to try the food, but it becomes a bit less scary. And if a blob of jelly or lump of banana gets to their mouth and they try it – all well and good.

I've noticed that many schools no longer use food for art and craft – no more macaroni necklaces, lentil collages or potato prints. We have realised the value of food and are aware of people going hungry in our communities so it hasn't seemed right to use food in this way. It is still used for therapeutic purposes though.

I popped back after six weeks and learned that Freya was beginning to increase the range of foods she will tolerate and the SaLT was helping her to practise speech sounds. They were small steps but definitely in the right direction. I was pleased to have helped.

I relayed this to Rachel as we finished our drinks, 'I think I'll keep going a bit longer – I do love my job you know, it's fascinating and it does feel good to make a difference.'

'Do you know what would make all the difference to me?' asked my daughter. She didn't need to say any more. It was my turn to go to the bar.

TOP TEN QUALITIES NEEDED TO BE AN OUTREACH TEACHER

1. Patience. Understanding that you won't know everything when you start, or even when you have been doing the job for ten years.
2. Having great communication skills and, in particular, being a good listener.
3. Excellence at taking notes, reading your own notes and writing reports.
4. Empathy. The willingness to try to put yourself in the shoes of that child, parent or teacher.
5. A positive attitude.
6. A liking for children and wanting them to be happy and to achieve their best.
7. Ability to research, to keep learning and to find strategies that work.

8. A sense of humour – it can help to see the funny side.
9. Ability to collaborate – you may be working with many different people, parents, young people, health, social work and education professionals.
10. A good sense of direction so you can find your way around roads and corridors without getting lost. I am still working on this one!

SAFETY FIRST

I laughed out loud as I did my display screen equipment (DSE) training quiz. This is training most people who use computers do annually to make sure they are as safe and comfortable as possible at work. As an outreach teacher, travelling from school to school with no office, desk or swivel chair, I have got used to working wherever I can.

DOES THE WORKER HAVE AN ADJUSTABLE CHAIR?

Sort of, my car seat goes up and down and I can push it back. If I am in a school, I can pile two Year One chairs on top of each other and if I am in the park, I can use my rucksack as a cushion.

HOW DOES THE WORKER GUARD AGAINST MUGGING?

I take my rucksack with the work computer with me everywhere I go, I have nightmares about it being taken from my car seat while I am at a petrol station or from the café while I nip to the loo. Hang on, this may protect the computer but might this increase my risk of being mugged? I could be blackmailed if anyone steals my notebook with details of the child I have just seen. But the chances of anyone being able to read my handwriting, translate my short-hand or make anything of it all are slim.

DOES THE WORKER GET CHANCE TO CHANGE POSITION?

Yes, I am always changing position, from sitting in a car seat driving, to sitting in a classroom to observe, to sitting in the conference room chair for meetings, to sitting at a desk to type up my notes. Sometimes I will turn my car around in a supermarket car-park to avoid glare while I am working.

CAN THE WORKER ADJUST THE COMPUTER SCREEN TO BE AT THE RIGHT DISTANCE?

This is difficult on my laptop but I can take my glasses on or off.

IS THE KEYBOARD SEPARATE FROM THE SCREEN?

Well, it was that time I broke it and had to manage with school's emergency one for six weeks while it was being mended.

DOES THE KEYBOARD TILT?

When it is on my knees, yes.

DOES THE USER HAVE GOOD KEYBOARD TECHNIQUE?

Excellent actually, I am proficient at touch-typing while sitting in my car – typing away despite the brightness of the sun, the dazzle of frost or the fogged-up atmosphere from drinking hot coffee in here.

CAN THE USER COMFORTABLY REACH ALL THE EQUIPMENT THEY NEED?

Yes, I am now an expert packer and within reach is my outreach teacher's kit of diary with erasable pen, dabber for signing in on schools' welcome screens, tissues, sanitiser, mints, water, phone set at satnav and pot of bubbles.

ARE LEVELS OF NOISE COMFORTABLE?

Does this include traffic on the dual carriageway, upset children, upset staff, workers digging up the road, and Year Three singing assembly? I carry earplugs for when I have to hot desk in a busy office.

IS AIR QUALITY SATISFACTORY?

I have learned not to park in school car parks after 2.30 pm on a winter's day when all the early parents and grandparents, nannies and carers are sitting in their cars doing crosswords and keeping warm with their engines on.