

DON'T WRITE THEM OFF



GOOD SPORTS Jason, right, enjoys the outdoor curriculum, including coaching from Lawrence Dallaglio's RugbyWorks. Left, Jade (left), who spent one holiday alone when her parents were in custody



How do you keep kids excluded from school out of gangs? *Sharon Hendry* gets rare access to a pupil referral unit and sees the challenges up close. Photographs by *Tom Barnes*

Jade, a year 10 pupil, laughs nervously as she assesses the atmosphere in the room and prepares to appraise a series of intense drama scenes. But it is not Brecht or Shakespeare the pensive 15-year-old is being asked to scrutinise under the watchful eye of her two teachers. Instead she is preparing to judge her own lead role in a violent attack launched on a fellow student the previous day.

The playback of the security camera footage is part of a process called “re-entry”, aimed at helping students to reflect on troubled behaviour at the Limes College, an “outstanding” pupil referral unit (PRU) catering for permanently excluded students aged between five and 16.

Jade, who has just returned to campus after a 24-hour exclusion, seems unsure of the response teachers are seeking, but volunteers: “I don’t know why it happens. Sometimes I think violence makes me feel calm. It’s confusing.”

I am spending two weeks at the Limes as a teaching assistant to learn first-hand the challenges of educating troubled and disruptive children excluded from mainstream schools. Although I have worked in journalism for more than 20 years, I am also currently training as a child psychotherapist at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. It is this that has convinced the head teacher, Emma Bradshaw, that I am equipped to take on a more hands-on role in her classrooms.

The Limes sits on the edge of a housing estate in the outer London borough of Sutton, once part of Surrey. Just a few miles down the road wealthy parents in gleaming 4x4s deposit their offspring at leafy private schools, but here most pupils amble alone down a concrete pavement, ready to be “wanded” for knives once they pass through the imposing steel gate.

PRUs such as this one fulfil local authority obligations to educate youngsters excluded from mainstream education, as well as teenage mothers and children with physical and mental health issues. The aim is to put these pupils back on a firm educational footing before reintroducing them to the mainstream system.

The number of permanent exclusions has reached its highest point in nearly a decade, with more than 40 children a day now being banned from state schools in England. Last month, a government watchdog found that children excluded from school faced a heightened risk of exploitation by “county lines” gangs, who recruit youngsters to transport and sell drugs to rural areas and are responsible for fuelling high levels of knife crime. A report by Anne Longfield, the children’s commissioner, last year estimated that 27,000 children in England identified as a gang member, while the St Giles Trust charity found that all of the

teenagers referred to it after being caught up in county lines gangs had been excluded from school or had spent time in a PRU.

Such headlines inevitably lead to an image of PRUs as being filled with feral and feckless pupils — dangerous by-products of a British underclass. Yet my fortnight at the Limes shows the truth is far more complex and sobering.

Sitting patiently next to Jade is Sali Goodrich, the deputy head. Her small office is peppered with thank-you letters from grateful former pupils. There is also a large sweet jar for “moments where comfort eating is required” and a drawer stashed with condoms. Goodrich left a lucrative City recruitment job to retrain as a teacher.

“Most people think PRUs are dumping grounds and that angers me because it is very ignorant,” she tells me. “A teacher in a good PRU needs to be at the top of their game to deal with the most disenfranchised

could lead to the end of all decent educational options.

Jade’s path to the PRU is not untypical. In vulnerable moments, she recalls violent family feuds with neighbours, threats of rape from rival gang factions and one school holiday spent alone awaiting her parents’ release from custody. Occasionally, traumatic flashbacks cause Jade’s temper to flare — a handicap that began soon after the transition to secondary school.

She says: “I liked my primary school and felt settled there because the same people were always around. I didn’t want to go to secondary school and got my first detention within two weeks for talking to another girl. The classes felt too big and there wasn’t one teacher to build a relationship with. By the time I was in year 8 I got my first fixed-term exclusion for being involved in five fights during one week, and by Christmas that year I had been permanently excluded.”



NEW HORIZONS
Limes College pupils receive a sailing lesson on the Solent

and ignored group of children in society. Mainstream [education] is never going to work for these children, who have experienced a lot of trauma, including domestic violence and parents struggling with substance misuse, but we can turn things around for them — and we do.”

Goodrich’s dogged belief in her pupils’ potential is evident in her handling of Jade, whom she describes as “fiercely bright with bags of potential”. She sits calmly next to her unpredictable pupil as they watch the video footage, which shows Jade being triggered into a blind rage within seconds of seeing a younger female pupil walking towards her. According to Jade, the student “deserved it” because she had aligned herself with one of Jade’s enemies during a weekend party and failed to protect another mutual friend who had become dangerously intoxicated. Goodrich firmly steers the narrative back to reality, reminding Jade that she had not even attended the party, but instead received unreliable intelligence via Snapchat. Empathy is evident, but clear boundaries are also communicated, making Jade aware that further misdemeanours

At first she didn’t want to go to the Limes “because I thought people would just be good at fighting. It’s where all the mentals are,” I said to myself — but it’s not like that. There are more teachers. People really need help when they come to a PRU.”

The current PRU system was created in 1993 and there are now nearly 400 in England and Wales. More than 20,000 pupils are catered for by “alternative provision”, the heading under which PRUs fall. Because of the need for a high staff-to-student ratio, the units tend to be small, with some teaching just a handful of pupils. Yet the system is not without its detractors, who regard them as a fertile breeding ground for gang recruitment.

“Students in PRUs are vulnerable, often because of problems at home, but also because of the shortness of the PRU school day, often only two to three hours long, which means they are especially ripe for gang members to pick off,” Rebecca Bryant, chief executive of Resolve, a not-for-profit group tackling antisocial behaviour, has said.

With up to 180 students, the Limes is one of the largest PRUs. Classes begin at 9am

and finish at 2.30pm, and the timetable also allows staff to deliver voluntary “twilight sessions” where students who lack parental support can get pizza and help with their homework. They are surprisingly well attended.

Next day, Jade is back in class at 9am, eyeing up my presence along with that of a new teacher, Mandy, a special needs expert who is tasked with introducing a new sociology GCSE, as well as policing stray legs on chairs and tables. She ducks a stream of paper-ball missiles heading for the bin. This is not teaching for beginners.

While Mandy attempts to engage her pupils, a teenage boy arrives late, to a barrage of insults from a female classmate. He rests his head on the table and leaves it there. Another female student asks the teacher a question: “Could you stab someone and not even feel anything about it?” Mandy does not respond. Now a pupil

Mandy ends the lesson by asking her students what their first experience of culture was. Jade’s hand shoots up. “Hospital,” she says, her sharp intellect breaking free from the usual bravado.

I retreat to the staffroom to catch my breath. Bradshaw, the head, is there to check my progress. The 51-year-old mother of two has dedicated her life to helping disadvantaged children since she first started volunteering in an education centre as a teenager. She is not surprised when I tell her about the intelligence I have encountered among the expletives.

“The first thing to understand is that behaviour is always a form of communication,” she says. “All students end up here for a reason — for some it’s unmet special educational needs [SEN], for others poverty or family dynamics. More than 90% of our students have domestic violence [DV] in their profiles.”



CLASS ACT Deputy head Sali Goodrich doles out tough love to her students, Jade and Jason among them

“OVER 90% OF OUR STUDENTS HAVE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THEIR PROFILES. ONE CHILD TOLD US HE REGULARLY SEEKS REFUGE IN HIS DOG’S CAGE”

from a different lesson is hovering at the door, triggering further disruption.

I attempt to help the pupil next to me by offering to decipher text on her worksheet. “What’s your name?” I ask. “Jesus,” she replies deadpan. I continue with the task, sensing an assertion of dominance would be futile, but notice my heart racing.

At the Tavistock, we are taught to work with a psychoanalytic concept called “transference”, meaning that our feelings are often a reflection of the child’s. I wonder if my own anxiety is a reflection of the sense of chaos these children feel in their own daily lives.

She says all children are asked to fill in a DV safety checklist that “helps them to consider safe places they can hide at home until police are called. One child told us he regularly seeks refuge in his dog’s cage.”

“We have to be aware of the possibility that some children in PRUs have been traumatised and try to help them process those experiences,” says Professor Peter Fonagy, the chief executive of the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. He explains that adverse experiences only become traumatic when “a child feels alone — the child needs someone to say ‘It’s all right’ to help down-regulate their feelings.”

Providing students with strong, nurturing role models who offer unconditional support is at the heart of the philosophy at the Limes.

“Children who come out of mainstream school have fallen off the top of a cliff, but many are still on a ledge where you can reach them with the right help in a PRU,” says Bradshaw. “If you leave them, they will spiral down and end up costing taxpayers millions in high-end mental health

provision and youth custody. Currently, the average PRU place costs £20,000-£25,000 per annum, compared with some privatised secure accommodation for young people with severe mental health provisions that can cost the taxpayer as much as £26,000 a week.” That’s a whopping £1.35m a year, which starts to make the costs of PRUs look like a bargain — assuming they work.

The Limes’s success lies in small class sizes, teachers with SEN experience, an impressive outdoor education provision and specialist “booster groups” for children with conditions such as autism and ADHD. Last year, 17% of pupils left the Limes with five GCSE passes with grades from 9-4 (equivalent to grades A-C), compared with a national rate for PRU pupils of just 1%.

Food is also at the heart of the Limes formula. Today, a hearty lunch is being prepared in one of two large kitchens by a friendly cook, Sheena. Chicken salad, lasagne, jacket potatoes and spaghetti carbonara are just some of the staple meals that students who lack nourishment at home can eat together at a large round table. “Many of them do not have access to regular meals,” says Bradshaw. “So we need to teach them how to cook good food with basic ingredients. Also the time sitting round the table is a crucial experience because it gives them an insight into what a family atmosphere feels like.”

Assisting Sheena in chopping peppers and grating cheese is 13-year-old Alesha. Alesha joined the Limes in December 2018 after being permanently excluded from her mainstream school. Now she has a tendency to disappear from home overnight to ride trains. She thinks such adventures are great fun, but staff are concerned she will be groomed by gangs running county lines operations.

Where does Alesha think it all went wrong? “When I first started year 7 it was all fine and I was shy, but then I got more confident. My cousin had been to that school and had a reputation because he likes to rap. So they started calling me ‘A-Junior’. I started to stick up for myself, so when someone got rude I got rude back — especially when the teacher got rude. In year 9 this kid hit me and I hit him back. Eventually they put me on a final warning for refusing to give teachers my phone and I just walked out because I’d had enough.

“I don’t want to be my cousin,” she continues. “I want to make a name for myself. The teachers here are nice because they actually listen and I understand the lessons more. I think I’d like to be a nurse because I like looking after people.”

There is something compelling about Alesha’s company, but after just two encounters she disappears from the PRU and I am left worrying where her story will end.

The real number of children falling out of mainstream education is likely to be higher than the official figures suggest. This ➤➤➤

is due to a procedure known as “off-rolling” or “back-door exclusion”, where disruptive pupils are removed from school without using permanent exclusions — usually after pressure is put on a parent.

Yet research by a cross-party parliamentary group published last year found only a third of councils were able to confirm they had space for newly excluded pupils in PRUs. Lack of provision means some kids end up wandering the streets while their peers are at school. Here they become vulnerable to gang members, who are known to befriend excluded pupils in fast food outlets by offering them free food.

“There are no safe places for children to go,” says Bradshaw. “McDonald’s is the new ungoverned youth centre of Britain. A *Lord of the Flies* scenario has emerged where kids are looking after kids.”

Persistent disruptive behaviour is the most common reason for pupils being

convinced was a symptom of still undiagnosed autism spectrum disorder (ASD). His mother, Natalie, breaks down in tears of exhaustion and shame as she describes what happened. “There was detention after detention after detention and a lot of school refusal. Eventually he was expelled,” she says. “Exclusion affects the whole family. You are judged by everyone, from other parents to social services, who make you feel as if it is your parenting that is on trial.”

Later I catch up with Sonny, who is rolling a tennis ball from side to side across a table. “I like it here. It’s good for me because the class sizes mean it’s pretty much one-to-one. One of my favourite things here is horse riding. Horses understand how you are feeling. If you are in an angry mood, they help you feel better.”

Head teachers believe funding cuts in children’s services, which have been

what he says about what brought him here: “It all started with my grandad. He was a really important person for me who I went to whenever things got tough. He died in December 2017, and after that my behaviour went downhill. He had something wrong with his lungs and it was horrible to watch him die. He used to take me up to the seaside every year to go on the pier and rides. I miss him a lot.

“In secondary school I coped by trying to be funny and mess about because I couldn’t focus. I can’t sit down for an hour straight and do work, so teachers just started putting me on report. I was getting ‘dets’ [detentions] every day and it made me feel even more angry, so I started fighting. In year 9 I pretended to snip a girl’s hair in a science lesson, and she leant forward and I accidentally cut it. In the end, it all led to permanent exclusion.”

He thinks PRUs have an unfair reputation. “Everyone thought this school was full of kids who muck around and fight all the time, but it’s not like that. The learning is much better and I can focus more. The teachers go through exam papers with me so I can understand. I’m able to stay calmer and I’m really focused on doing an apprenticeship and becoming an electrician.”

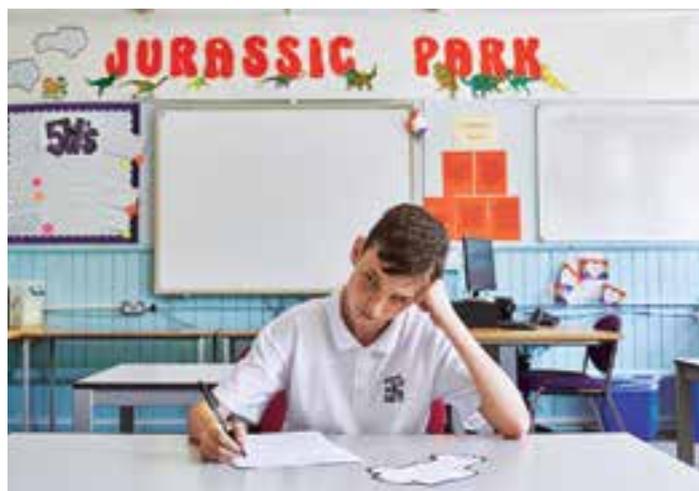
Jason particularly loves the outdoor education curriculum at Limes, citing dry-slope skiing and rock-climbing as particular favourites, alongside weekly coaching by RugbyWorks, the former England international Lawrence Dallaglio’s charity.

Bradshaw is passionate about giving her students experiences that teach them to take healthy risks and redefine their horizons. During my time at the school, several children are bussed from Surrey to Portsmouth, where they are taught to sail on a 72ft vessel as part of a Tall Ships Youth Trust sailing trip round the Solent.

Within minutes, one teenage girl has a tantrum, but the staff are unfazed, calmly ushering her to a safe space and giving her time to rebalance. Within hours, groups of interested children are quietly focused on tying knots and unleashing sails. With the wind in their hair and salt water on their faces, their troubles seem a world away.

Back on land, Bradshaw is waiting for them — as she always is. “Everyone has reasons for their behaviour,” she says, neatly summing up her educational philosophy. “What these children need is simple — unconditional love, healthy relationships and brilliant teaching. Only then can they achieve and move on.”

I couldn’t agree more. The kids I meet during my two weeks are not mad or bad — in fact quite the opposite. But when the birth dice rolled, the odds were stacked against them. Now the Limes is giving them a second chance. If only all kids excluded from schools could be so lucky ■
Some names have been changed



QUIETER NOW
Riding is helping Sonny to control his moods. “Horses understand how you are feeling,” he says

“EXCLUSION AFFECTS THE WHOLE FAMILY. YOU ARE JUDGED BY EVERYONE FROM OTHER PARENTS TO SOCIAL SERVICES”

expelled. But there has also been a rise in the number of schoolchildren being excluded for assaults against pupils and adults, racist abuse, sexual misconduct and drug- and alcohol-related incidents. Poorer pupils — children eligible for free school meals — are about four times more likely to be excluded, permanently or temporarily, than their richer classmates, while pupils with special educational needs account for almost half of permanent exclusions.

At the Limes I meet Sonny, a kind-hearted 13-year-old who was finally expelled from mainstream school in 2018 after years of low-level disruption that his family is

slashed by a third since 2010, are to blame for the hike in exclusions. The closure of youth clubs and children’s centres, plus fewer resources for social workers doing preventative work with families, have all contributed to an environment in which it is harder to prevent behavioural problems from escalating.

Bradshaw believes cuts in schools are also having a “massive impact”. “The mainstream heads I know really do care, but they simply don’t have the resources to support children who are impacted by trauma and special needs. They want them to access the specialised teaching we provide, but the only way they can do that is by permanently excluding them. It gives them a label for life and it should not be that way.”

During an art class, I find 15-year-old Jason staring out of the window. I have assisted him in several lessons, where he demonstrates exceptional aptitude — when he is able to concentrate, in between pacing the room and lifting chairs in the air. Teachers tell me that when Jason first arrived at the Limes he would punch plastic surfaces until his knuckles bled. This is