

Sewing up the wounds of exclusion; the trouble with Jane

Today we received the news that one of our Care Experienced Children Jane (not her real name) is being moved out of our Independent Special Day school by the placing Local Authority Special Needs Department.

This young lady has been with us for the past three years during which time she has moved Foster Carers 12 times. Each time that she moves Foster Carer it is because they cannot cope with her behaviour. Each time she pushes them away successfully she succeeds in reaffirming for herself that adults are not to be trusted and that any implicit or indeed occasional explicit promises of care and love that her Carers have given her are false promises.

Jane has developed a healthy attachment disorder as it is clearly healthy to reject the adults around you before they inevitably reject you. In Jane's case it is also very important to break down the relationship in the most difficult and provocative way possible so that Jane can maintain some semblance of control over her life prior to the adults dumping her.

These multiple moves and rejections from her foster homes are further exacerbated by the five changes of social worker in her short three years in our special day school.

For us today is a tragic day. We have been Jane's longest placement of her 15 year old life. We have withstood Jane's pushes and occasional punches and multiple other physical and emotional attempts to reject us first. We have shown her that even though she hurts us, abuses us and complains about us, that we will never give up on her.

And Jane has tried everything to make us give up on her. She has gone through several innovative phases to ensure we permanently excluded her; in the beginning she attacked and hurt our staff, then failing that she decided to disrupt all lessons in the school. When this too failed she made multiple allegations and complaints against staff. When we worked with the social worker and the Local Authority Designated Safeguarding Officer to undertake multiple allegation risk assessments but stuck with her she finally gave up and settled down. Then we properly saw the beautiful, ferocious, talented young person that she was. It is so true the quote from Ken Page that "Our deepest wounds surround our greatest gifts."

And what gifts she has. She can be brilliantly charming and show around distinguished guests (Presidents of countries) and get them to really like her. She can look after our tiny primary ankle biters and calm them down when they are distressed, often much better than we can. She can intuitively know when staff are upset and support them. She can succeed at whatever she tries, but she can equally be engaged in a constant battle for overwhelming continuous attention or maliciously target a child or member of staff in the most fixated way. When she breaks down another foster placement we all batten down the hatches as King Lear has nothing on Jane when she is in her own personal storm.

Jane is leaving us because the Local Authority ran out of local foster carers and they have had to move her to carers who are too far away from our day school. Potentially this placement will break down too but then she will have lost us, her one constant. Jane knew this day would come and it feels for us that she finally succeeded in dumping us by going through every set of foster carers in the whole Local Authority. We are devastated. We have invested blood (literally), sweat and tears and Jane had become for us our positive emblem of our ability to withstand anything and to 'never give up'. We have built our resilience, care, nurture and hope on her being a success and we have lost her.

I have had more requests from staff in our Head Office to go to her 'goodbye' than I have had about attending the leaving parties of staff who are leaving us after a decade. Clearly Jane symbolises something for us all. We have let Jane get inside of us. That is the trouble with Jane. She has regaled us all as school improvement team members over the years with her many charms; from squealing at the top of her voice, to shouting with joy, to shouting in anger, everyone who visits our school asks how is Jane.

Jane represents something about the system at its very best and worse for me. As we enter, in a couple of days time, into our 20th year as a Social Enterprise Jane fills me with hope and despair.

Hope because against all of the odds our Special Needs school showed Jane that there are people who can withstand her trauma, her anguish and her need to lash out. We have provided 'good enough parenting' to her and I know that these three years of care and love will help sustain her through some difficult times ahead. I know that like many Care Experienced People Jane's talent's will out and her amazing resilience, strength and sheer likability will see her through.

Despair because we take these children away from their parents for the finest of reasons but our care system is broken in places and often does a much worse job with these children than if they were left where they were. As a society we do not invest in the training and support of these foster carers, who inevitably cannot manage an unintegrated child such as Jane, whose horrendous history as a young child places her in a category where she frequents the top 5% of most challenging children and young people in the country.

We thought that we would hold on to Jane as two relatively local residential care homes were approached for a placement for her. We were astonished when they read her case notes and both said no they could not meet her needs.

This is when I realised what we had done and despite the sadness I was bursting with pride. We had not noticed that we had taken on a young person that no one else could foster and that no one else wanted or could manage and we stuck with her through thick and thin. If there are caring medals and empathy medals then I want to hand them out to the best staff team ever. These are the people who deserve the OBEs.

I will attend Jane's goodbye and I will stifle a tear and make a passionate plea that Jane comes back to see us and that we keep her within our North West London Independent School family. I will want her to return to us as an Alumni Peer Mentor when she finishes school and Jane will promise to do that.

But Jane will not come back, because Jane will take our nurture and our care and she will move on with her life. She will remember us fleetingly as she rallies against some other teacher or foster carer but Jane will have our love and our care all wrapped up inside like money in the bank and she will draw on these gifts when she needs them most. We have given her the resources and the independence skills and her moving on is the way it should be.

Months from now I will visit our North West London Independent School in my Schools' Proprietor role and perhaps all will be quiet in the classroom and I will be briefly sad but then smile and remember when the corridor was full of loud passionate squeals and wonder who our Jane is pushing now.