



A worthy finish despite the start: The trouble with Jane

Thomas Keaney
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Today we received the news that one of our Care Experienced Children Jane (not her real name) is being moved out of one of our Independent Special Day schools following another foster placement breakdown.

This young lady has been with us for the past three years during which time she has moved Foster Carers twelve times. Each time that she moves Foster Carer it is because they cannot cope with her behaviour but particularly her need for their constant attention. 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. A lot of them cared, just not enough. Sadly each time she also succeeds in confirming for herself that she is unlovable and not worth caring enough about and

I think that each time she loses a bit more of herself.

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 so that Jane can maintain some semblance of control over her life prior to the adults inevitably dumping her. These multiple moves and rejections from her foster homes are further exacerbated by the five changes of her 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. Ken Page's quote is a truism that "Our deepest wounds surround our greatest gifts."

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Ken Page

And what gifts she has. She can be brilliantly charming and show around our school very distinguished guests (Presidents of Countries) and get them to really like her. She can look after our tiny primary little 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.

I remember attending our group process one afternoon and introducing a newly qualified social worker who was there to see our unique whole school groupwork.

Jane saw the young social worker as a representation of every time she had been let down and she tore strips of her but in the most eloquent way. In describing the new social worker's profession as pointless and hypocritical with the constant changes of social worker demonstrating a lack of care she was reiterating Bruno Bettelheim's quote that "Children don't care how much you know until they know how much you care".

And each time Jane broke down yet another foster placement we all battered down the hatches as King Lear had nothing on Jane when she was 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 the positive

emblem of our ability to withstand anything and to 'never give up'. We have built our resilience, care, nurture and hope on her 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 internal and external staff 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 is asked how is Jane.

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Bruno Bettelheim

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 despite their very best endeavours 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 were further saddened because we thought that we had held onto Jane in a last minute reprieve 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 most extraordinary 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 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. A worthy finish perhaps despite her start.

Months from now I will visit our North West London 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.

Thomas Kearney