

# ARE YOU STRONG ENOUGH?

By Julie Boyd 2006

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“Why are you crying miss?” Every teacher has low points in their professional life but when it comes in your first month I wonder if things really have changed in the past thirty years.

A young friend has just started in her first teaching position. It's in a secondary school that has a reputation for having 'challenging students'. She was only accepted into the position three days before school started but she was there for the first day.

She's not straight from the school-university-school model. She's well travelled, a strong young woman, sporty, very intelligent, experienced with handling teenagers- particularly bitchy girls, and a highly creative problem solver. She has held very responsible positions previously.

So why the tears? Try this...

She was given a 'homeroom' class because none of the other teachers would take the kids.

The rest of her teaching load is made up of 'left over classes' that the other teachers didn't want.

The only time she sees these kids is for a few minutes of homeroom each week.

Two of them have been diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome and another 3 with ADHD.

She wasn't given any policies or guidance about what to do in terms of discipline in the school. (But she does have an aide for one class per week who she is expected to train).

Her introduction to the school was to be told after an initial day of staff meetings, at 3pm, that she would have her homeroom for the entire day the following day- her first day with the kids. She was given three suggestions of activities which, in her words 'would have worked with kids who weren't off their faces at just coming back from holidays.'

In addition she was given not one, but two lots of yard duty on her first day.

Her first day was spent being told constantly by two girls 'you a beeetch miss. Yo a reeetard.'

She's tried every behaviour management she can think of, plus a few that have been fed to her.

She's asked other teachers what they do and the best 'advice' she was given was 'well I just mother them.' As she says 'well I'm not old enough to do that so that won't work for me.'

She's tried shadowing other teachers by asking if she can come into their classes and watch them with these kids.

She's been told if she can survive first term she'll be fine. That the kids are just trying her out!

She knows that. What she needs are not trite words but pragmatic support.

And she's on the point of giving up!

She tells me that the other teachers are lovely. I'm sure they are but there is a significant difference between congeniality and collegiality.

Many of our schools are congenial places. To walk into the staffroom is to feel comfortable, be met by nice people who will chat quite happily.

Collegiality on the other hand means that people support each other in a range of ways. That they feel sufficiently comfortable to step outside their comfort zones to engage in deep professional dialogue about issues that really matter.

Young teachers cannot achieve collegiality unless they experience it. To move beyond survival requires a concerted effort on the part of all staff to nurture new teachers- not throw them to the wolves and watch them struggle. It appears that there are several major issues that are getting in the way here

1. All students must be seen as the responsibility of all teachers. To breathe a sigh of relief that 'I didn't get Jason this year' is absolutely unacceptable. Individual management plans need to be put in place for these 'incredibly difficult to manage' children which involve everyone in the school helping. In all of my years of consultancy I've come across a handful of schools who do this well.
2. Policies must be living. To hand someone who is struggling to stay afloat a document that is effectively a tablet of stone will drown them, not help them
3. Unwritten policies are often more important than written ones. If these young teachers have to flounder around to find out 'how things are done around here' it doubles, or sometimes trebles their already overwrought minds.
4. Professional life-rafts must be available in schools to give these young teachers some respite, or a chocolate biscuit, or a primal screaming room, or whatever they need to help them. Nurturing is not a pat on the head with a 'there there you'll be right' attitude. It is pragmatic, practical and immediate.

My young friend will survive. She will move through the different levels of professional maturation. She is a terrific teacher and needs to be assisted to practice her craft.

Surviving your first year of teaching should not be a gladiator sport.