

HIDING IN PLAIN VIEW

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info@julieboyd.com.au

www.julieboyd.com.au

How many times does it need to be said? Young teachers need our protection!

Of course they absolutely need to learn to stand on their own two feet. Those who are game enough to take on our 'more challenging schools' need a bit of extra protection until they do find their feet and then some. Some 'danger money' wouldn't go astray either!

A young friend at the beginning of her teaching career hit the end of her rope last week. There were a handful of upper middle school boys who were 'doing her head in'. In an 'straw that broke her back' incident at school she had sent one of the boys to a co-ordinator, as having him continue in class was impossible and she had exhausted her available strategies. The co-ordinator chose to believe the kid's story, berated the young teacher in front of the students, then sent the kid back into her classroom in an appalling demonstration of everything that a coordinator should not do. In, I believe, a performance that should be a sackable offence, she undermined the young teacher, in front of students, she offered no support to a colleague who was struggling, and she clearly contributed to the already extreme stress levels of a beginning teacher. They breed them tough in that school!

I was trying to calm my anger at this situation during my daily walk on the beach when my dog spotted a very large crab sitting in the sand on the edge of the estuary under a piece of driftwood. Now- like some teenage boys who smell fresh meat with a beginning teacher, this is the highlight of his day. Someone to torment.

Jorge-dog began his dance and started trying to dig the crab out from under the wood. It wouldn't move and he couldn't reach it. Eventually he gave up and turned his back for a moment. The crab took the opportunity to slide into the crystal clear water and sit on the sand on the bottom about 30cm under the water. Jorge- dog could see it- but all the swimming in circles on top of the crab, or standing on the edge barking at it achieved, was a disdainful crab looking up as if to say 'you can look but you can't touch me'.

The next day, I'm sure it was the same crab, same place, but no wood to hide behind. The crab saw us coming so sat very still. Jorge-dog approached and sniffed but didn't touch. The crab slid into the water just out of reach again and, the game over, Jorge swam in circles over it a few times before admitting defeat and running off in search of new entertainment.

The young teacher kept her head down by (on advice) taking the next day away from school while some very fast talking went on around her. As became abundantly clear, she wasn't the only one this had happened to. The behaviour of the coordinator was equally

unprofessional with a number of other teachers- each of whom had kept quiet for fear of being seen incompetent. The leaders of the school were also struggling to deal with strategies for managing these 'super-difficult' kids, many of whom are using their ancestral (most are born here) backgrounds as an excuse for anti-Australian and anti-female behaviour.

When we are dealing with difficult kids what is required is not a 'thank goodness he's not in my class' attitude, but rather a 'what can I do to support the poor teacher who does have that kid?' We do have super-challenging kids in our schools these days and it's getting worse. Cultural and societal differences mean that we are facing problems we've never had to deal with before on such a scale.

A systemic approach is the only way to deal with these issues and everyone has a role to play

- Politicians must be made to appreciate the difficulties of managing these kids. It's one thing to sit on a \$200k salary and make 'policy decisions'. It's quite another to have to entertain a problem kid who has been delivered to your office so you can look after him for the day (believe me, that works)!
- Principals and school leaders must support young teachers by providing them with continual verbal and practical support.
- Principals must have a support network who can provide them with practical psychological advice not just 'mentoring'.
- All teachers in the school must accept that they have equal and visibly practical responsibility for these kids and not just breathe a sigh of relief at 'not having them in my class this year'.
- Schools must provide programs where kids who cannot be in class are productively occupied- outside the school wherever possible.
- Parents must be informed and held jointly accountable for improvements in their kids behaviour.
- Cultural groups which whom these kids associate themselves must be asked to take a moderate and inclusive approach, and involved in open discussions with the school in 'School Support Groups' in the same way we developed 'Student Support Groups' a few decades ago.
- Communities must be encouraged to seek ways in which to work together to achieve a 'whole of community' approach to raising kids.

My challenge to all schools is to not simply develop discipline policies, but a 'code of conduct' which clearly outlines responsibilities and expectations for all staff, students and parents in taking a role in dealing with these kids. Schools also need to take a lead role in determining what assistance and roles can be taken by the rest of the community in ensuring our young people grow up to be positively productive citizens.

What the young teacher needed was to be able to hide in full view- just like the crab.