

# INTO THE LION'S DEN

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‘And then I was hit on the head by a paper bomb that had been thrown at me... and one kid was so rude! Then she said I’d only told her off because she was black. I didn’t even notice her colour- just that she was the rudest young woman I’d ever met.’ My friend Sara has just gone back relief teaching at High Schools after 25 years in the teaching game and was relating her day. She had been told that she would be taking maths and social science classes so I had spent the evening before helping her prepare some ‘emergency’ activities for the kids in the event that their regular teachers had left nothing. When she arrived at school however she was told ‘you’re taking Mr Williams music classes instead.’

As it turns out Mr Williams is about to go on extended sick leave because of stress. The others teachers spoke to Sara about him with contempt. According to them he ‘couldn’t cut it’ when, in fact, he was a highly gifted musician and experienced teacher coming into this particular school for the first time. In the same breath they also talked about his Year 8 class as the ‘worst one in the school’ and were glad they didn’t have them.

Sixteen kids in one class should have been easy to manage according to the politicians and union groups who seem to believe that smaller class sizes are the answer to everything.

The school does have a discipline plan. ‘What is it?’ I asked Sara. If a teacher can’t explain the school discipline plan in a couple of sentences- then like most strategic plans- it’s not much use. ‘Well, you give the kids one warning and write their name on the board. Then if they play up again you send them out to ‘this other room’- presumably some form of internal detention. ‘Then what happens?’ I asked, thinking – this sounds very much like a recycled attempt at what used to be called ‘Assertive Discipline’ back in the 80’s. A plan that basically failed and was discarded back then. ‘Well nothing I don’t think’.

Mr Williams had also been up for supervising Year 11 exams so Sara dutifully trotted over to the hall where they were to be held. The hall was locked. One hundred kids skylarked around outside until another teacher rocked up bearing keys. Once inside Sara assumed that exam conditions were to be enforced and handed out papers with the admonition ‘don’t turn them over until you are told’. In the meantime the other teacher handed out his pile while laughing and joking with the kids as they began immediately- those who felt like it. After ten or so minutes Sara heard footsteps coming behind her as she moved up and down the aisles watching for kids who were not focused on their own papers. It was the other teacher who announced loudly that he had ‘something to do at the office’ and left, never to be seen again that session.

In yet a different class she was to show the kids a DVD. This should be easier, she thought. That was before she had to insist that all blinds weren't drawn, as before the kids finished blacking the room out, there were clothes being surreptitiously rearranged for easier access in the back corner. Then they tried to insist the door was closed. But being a mother of two daughters, Sara couldn't handle the powerful smell of teenage boys and testosterone and had to sit in the doorway herself.

As she was preparing to leave at the end of the day, Sara was cornered by the Principal. 'Thanks for coming in. I meant to catch up with you earlier as I had some work for a couple of your classes. Mr Williams is going to be on leave for a couple of weeks. Would you be prepared to come and fill in on a fulltime basis while he's away.' While she was polite to him, the thoughts she related to me are unprintable.

Being a relief teacher is a bugger of a job. That's been the case since I started teaching over 30 years ago. We all know that- so why do the professional games continue. Filling in at a school you may know, with staff you probably don't and trying to help the kids spend their time in meaningful work is most often soul-destroying for all concerned. You're not considered a 'real teacher' and as I explained to Sara, if those kids have already sent one teacher out on stress-leave, they have the taste for blood. Like lions in the jungle kids will stalk and taunt a teacher they see as 'fresh meat' until they figure out how to move in for the kill. Once they've perfected their strategy they'll try it again- just to see if it works. If it does- they become pretty unstoppable. For a teacher to say to me 'I'm so glad I don't have those kids' has pretty much the same impact on me.

I have worked with schools who have learned to utilise relief teachers highly effectively.

- some try to have the same people available as much as possible so that they become an integral part of the staff
- some have a bank of lesson plans that are readily available in the (usually unlikely) event that the absent teacher hasn't left enough work for the kids
- some schools even organise creatively with teachers who share the workload and manage to use the time highly effectively.
- and some go out of their way to make relief teachers feel so welcome that they actually want to go back.

The most effective schools I have ever seen are the ones who have the pervasive attitude that these are 'all our kids'. Where 'challenging' kids are seen as communal property and treated with their own personal discipline plan that is known and accepted by every staff member, where the broader school discipline plan doesn't fit the kid's needs. Where teachers are not allowed to breathe a sigh of relief that they 'didn't get Johnny or Ahmed this year' but who say on a daily basis to the poor buggers who did get them 'what can we do to help?'

Unfortunately they are still in the minority.

We are surrounded on a daily basis by reports of student bullying. Why is teacher bullying not given as much coverage. And I'm not just talking about the bullying by the

kids that may range from the 'I like your skirt miss- can I have it,' to 'you're a beetch miss, you're a f...ing ...t miss', to the more physical stuff of knives being pulled or cars deliberately damaged. I'm talking about what I consider to be professional bullying of other staff.

Kids these days are more difficult to deal with. I have no doubt about that whatsoever. They have grown up in era of 'you can't touch me or I'll sue ya' and Jim Carrey-like 'Somebody STOP me' attitudes.

So why are we not stopping them! I understand and appreciate all the rhetoric about nurturing learning and pedagogy and other big words that are sprinkled willy-nilly across our professional conversations. Teacher language these days has become so convoluted that after 30 + years of teaching and consulting even I feel alienated by it these days. The simple fact is that many of our kids are out of control and if that's the case- your chances of creating learning environments that are useful and productive are pretty slim.

My thoughts these days about life mostly revolve around simplifying. About trying to make things more understandable by more people. It worked for Steve Jobs with ipods after all! Everything is moving so fast now that schools and teachers are struggling to keep up. Why are we not focusing on what the real purpose of schools is?

It's not to 'control' kids but it is to teach them control

It's not to put up with abuse from them but it is to have them learn that we live in a democracy, not anarchy

It's not to entertain kids but it is to provide them with curriculum that is relevant

It's not to create sausage factory type production lines to churn them out into a world where they are assured of a job but it is to make them employable

It's not to do their thinking for them but it is to make them think

It's not to simply corral them but it is to create opportunities for them to experience things in the world that may be outside what they know

It's not to let them do as they like, it is to put boundaries around them so they will feel physically, emotionally and intellectually safe.

It is to let them be creative and to know how to channel the creativity of the 'bad' kids

It's not to babysit them and it's not to provide them with 'fresh meat' to tear to pieces at the earliest opportunity.

It's far from simple, but from where I sit we are failing not only our kids, we are failing ourselves and each other. Too many teachers, particularly in our secondary schools, have become so disillusioned they have effectively, and understandably given up. A lot of our curricula is irrelevant and both kids and teachers know it. Assessment is headed back to the 'sort and store' mentality rather than demonstrating learning progress. Discipline is a nightmare. Politicians continue to use education as a political football where they see control of curriculum and assessment (by which they mean syllabus and exams) as the issues. Teachers are retiring then looking to return as relief teachers only to find what a crap job it really can be. Parents are voting with their feet and moving kids to private schools where they are able to 'mix with the right people, as well as learn'!

It's not that we've lost the plot. But we are in danger of losing our sanity. I have always said that parenting and teaching are the two most difficult jobs in the world. Both are far too difficult, and far too important for anyone to do on their own.

CEO's of major corporations do not have to deal with what we have to put up with on a daily basis. Prison wardens at least have weapons so that they have some chance of defending themselves! There's something wrong in paradise and it has been my belief for some time that until we get to the really basic question of 'what on earth is the purpose of schools' then the professional resilience of teachers will continue to be tested, and pushed to its limits on a daily basis.

Instead of bleating about 'smaller class sizes' as the answer to everything (instead of being one issue in a plethora), why are we/unions not commanding professional respect by stating what the purpose of schools is so everyone 'gets it'. If we don't understand what it is- how on earth can we expect anyone else to.

Schools need to be places where both kids and teachers WANT to be. If yours isn't- what are you going to do about it? Might I humbly suggest that that might be a nice simple place to start!