

SATURDAY 3RD FEB 2024

With Lavinia Donling

VIEW FROM THE OTHER SIDE

This week Ellie and I kicked off the week talking to Steve Bladon, a retired Head Teacher due to long Covid. He retired around the same time his daughter's mental health was breaking down where she was triggered by her school uniform and unable to attend school. Up till then, Steve, like so many Teachers, believed it was far better for young people to attend school regardless of any difficulties. He was humble enough to acknowledge that his attitude has changed 360 degrees when his daughter's distress became personal to him. Ellie was quick to point out that personal lived experience gives far greater understanding and knowledge. Perhaps what is so sad is the volume of individuals, parents and grandparents, who have relayed their personal experiences of school challenges facing their loved child.



Parts 1 & 2 are now available on our YouTube

LIFE WITHIN GOVERNMENT

A parent conveyed to me yesterday their observations on life within Government - there are those that work in problems and those that work in solutions - yet do not appear to work in partnership. I remember advocating for another acquaintance in drama club - I was terrified - but my compassion for this other person's needs overtook my fear. I became another person watching me get up on stage and hearing my voice booming out asking for help. It was to become the making of me. Fighting for our loved ones makes sense - it is personal to us - we wish to protect the vulnerable side of our loved ones that we hold dear or are loyal to (I say this because some Autistic peeps do not associate love with anything but chocolate, whereas loyalty we get).



But why are we not listened to at school as parents, when an unqualified Advocate worker charging up to £100 per hour can say the same thing and be acknowledged? This happens daily up and down the country. Yet, we can always find readily published educational material, indeed even the NHS, spout their assertions they are working 'in partnership' with parents or clients. This is not only adding to the distress, but, forgive me, how does an Advocate show the lived experience, when the parents have the inside knowledge because of their lived experience with their child.

S O C I A L C E N T R E O F J U S T I C E

Ellie alerted me to a document from the Social Centre of Justice, a body within central Government with a Westminster address, that has recently been released hot off the press. [The missing link: Restoring the bond between schools and families - The Centre for Social Justice](#) It follows on from a previous document 'Lost and not found - How severe absence became endemic in England's schools' in March 2023, which found that SEND Children with SEN support and Education, Health, and Care Plans are more likely than their peers to be both persistently and severely absent. Overall, children with profound and multiple learning difficulties, physical disabilities, and social, emotional and mental health SEN primary needs have the highest rates of absence. This, in turn, followed on from 'Kids Can't Catch Up if They Don't Show Up', revealed that nearly 100,000 children were severely absent in Autumn 2020. So, you can see why Dame De Souza announced in August 2023 that there was to be a "100% attendance on the first day back at school", and reiterated again by another Labour MP. Some of the reasons given for children who had actually missed school in the past 12 months were

- The vast majority are for medical reasons but 8 per cent of parents said their child had missed school due to mental health reasons, while the same proportion (8 per cent) said their child missed school due to anxiety.
- 5 per cent said their child had missed school due to bullying or threat of violence.
- Low-income households (those earning less than £30,000 per annum) were significantly more likely than average to say their child had missed school due to a mental health reason or anxiety (12 per cent), as were those not in work (12 per cent)

The recommendations are

- Schools should be supported to develop a whole-school approach to mental health
- Outside hubs should be made available to support with mental health

The fines for School Attendance Orders (SAOs) and attendance prosecution should be made the same value to avoid creating perverse incentives which push children out of the education system.

Ellie then managed to attend another online talk where over 700 teaching staff across the UK attended. Yet, throughout all the talks and discussions, nobody could answer the same two questions that repeatedly cropped up - what about SEN and mental health? If the Government cannot afford the money to pay for staff in both education and healthcare, why do they suggest increased mental health care being rolled out in schools through pastoral care? If the schools do not listen to parents, who have the lived experiences of their child, how will things change? If educational departments such as the Social Centre for Justice insist that they need more clout, and that fines need to remain as a way of enforcing young people into school, it remains a parent problem rather than a joint problem, n'est pas? Unsurprisingly, I feel parents will see this as yet another document failing to understand, only looking at it with a selected lens, which in this report's case commissioned a poll of 1,206 parents of children who are aged between 5-16 and enrolled in primary or secondary school. Fieldwork took place between 15-19th December 2023. The overall sample was weighted to be nationally representative of the target UK population and filtered down to the target audience. How is this even possible? 1,206 parents, and what were they asked as questions? When I talk with parents and young people, what they tell me is their lived experience of how frightening schools are, how overwhelming the pace and demand of school work is, and, for some, how bad the bullying has been and dismissed or not sorted by school, and how demanding school is in relation to choice of subjects, where to be at what time, or face sanctions. If we would not tolerate this level of draconian measures as adults, why on earth is acceptable for our children? Clearly, as in Sarah Wilson's words, "we are going the wrong way".

REAL LOVE?

You can probably imagine we get a number of enquiries through social media, email and telephone. Sometimes the phonecalls John takes are very distressing to hear, and other times are just incredibly frustrating at the lack of knowledge, compassion and advocacy from schools and/or healthcare. Do you know what real love is? Given that the Welsh recently celebrated their Valentine's Day on the 25th of January and the rest of the UK celebrates it on the 14th of February, this seems an appropriate question.

Real love is not just about the good times, it is about the bad times that are really tough. Real love builds joined resilience from building our knowledge, our skills, and our empathy (understanding) by sharing the lived experience. It is about advocating when we have loved ones around us struggling, it is about taking time to pause and rest, but not give up in a desire to make things better for us all. That model template is then rolled out between families to make communities - school, work, play, adventures - and if we are not working in a co-productive model, we splinter the ethos of partnership and looking out for one another.

It is a lot to consider and think about - whilst there are amazing individuals out there fighting for change, TMW cic is fighting in a different way by providing a solution in being proactive about mental health, but also being a strong advocate as to what needs to change for a young person who has come to us in crisis. Whether it is general anxiety, psychosis, self harming and/or suicidal ideation - the common theme is supporting a young person with their mental health, often in and around their neurodiverse presentation. Please remember, you are not alone, and we are here to help in any way we can. Now that we have Ellie on board, I know we can provide an even better service of advice and support

Have a good weekend everyone!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lavinia". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large, sweeping initial 'L'.