

Learning Humility

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After making a commitment to try and do something preventative regarding mental health, several colleagues and I, with some liaison from the mental health promotion team, are put in touch with a local secondary school. We meet with the teachers and agree to scale down our rather grand plans. Instead, we plan to do a six-week pilot project with two classes of fifteen year-old children, a course entitled "What makes us stressed and under pressure". To the teachers' bewilderment and slight consternation, we are adamant that we do not want any teachers in the class with us, as we want to create a different atmosphere from a normal lesson....

First day

8.45a.m.

We arrive. Pat and Marilyn are teaming up to take one class, me another. Feeling a bit nervous, we put this down to triggered memories of our own experiences of being school children, and go off to our classrooms.

8.55a.m.

I wait for my class to arrive from assembly and listen with horror to the teacher in the room next door.

"Put that down! Get back in your chair! Leave her alone. I'm going to send you to Mr Jones if you do that again! Sit down, all of you!"

Five minutes of hollering, humiliating, belittling, and ordering. I stand by the door, ready to welcome my children into my class, and watch the neighbouring teacher leave. I'm half expecting her head to explode like in the film *Scanners*. Following her comes, not the 'Wild Bunch', but a neat line of fresh-faced little first years.

'Things are going to be very different in my class. I'll welcome each child and in respecting them I'll get their respect'

I mistake confidence for smugness, and smile as they pass-by. In my class I have arranged all the chairs in a circle. Thirty-two chairs have made a big circle; each chair is against the wall with all the tables stacked at the back.

9.05a.m.

The children sweep in, ignoring my "hello". There is initial quiet as they inspect the seating change, followed by chatter as the room fills. With everyone in I ask for a bit of quiet and announce that we are going to begin. They all get pens and paper out of their bags and satchels.

"You are not going to need pens and paper; things are going to be a bit different today"

Suddenly there is an incredible crash as, almost in unison, over thirty children fling their bags over their heads and into the walls and windows behind them. As the bags slither down, some spilling their insides, things start to seem surreal. It feels like I'm in a cartoon.

9.10a.m.

I try to introduce myself and give an outline of the session – interactive talking about what kinds of things pressure them and how they respond. But the noise level is rising.

“Things won’t work if more than one person talks at the same time.”

I’m determined not to shout, but cannot help thinking that only a few children could possibly have heard me, and they weren’t listening.

Something flies across the room. Conversations are going on everywhere. I desperately tell myself that everyone’s talking about the topic. Oh-oh, a fight is breaking out. I diffuse it and congratulate myself.

The problem is that I am corralled. In the middle of a circle it feels like I’m in a western, circled by Indians who want me dead. I vaguely remember a teacher telling me to never turn your back on the class. I start spinning like a dervish in a desperate attempt to keep an eye on everyone. The noise level is deafening.

9.25a.m.

A teacher comes into the room and says there have been complaints about the noise. She asks me if I’m alright. I lie. I take the opportunity of some quiet to blurt out:

“What makes you stressed”?

“TEACHERS!” shout the class. I realise they do not act as individuals but as a flock or shoal. Or mob.

“I’ll tell you what makes me stressed”, says the teacher. *“CHILDREN!”*

She leaves.

“You’ve got to help me with this or we are all going to get into trouble.”

I cringe, realise it is all over, look at the clock and am massively grateful that the teachers said we could only take one class of fifty-five minutes, not the whole morning as we had requested.

9.35a.m.

Flat pieces of plastic are skimming around the room like kung foo death stars.

“Someone could get blinded! Stop being so childish!”

I am morphing into my own idea of the naffest supply teacher ever. I’m spending all my time demanding that children hand over their bits of plastic but the more I collect the more seem to be thrown around the room. I keep swivelling around to try and catch the person who must be stealing them from the confiscated pile on the desk.

10.00a.m.

The bell rings and the children run off. I’ve achieved my aim of ensuring that no-one got seriously injured in the last half hour. Two children stay behind. One shows me that the plastic things are easily removed weights that hold the blinds down. She smiles but I’m too frazzled to know what her smile means. The other boy leans forward.

“This is what we have to put with. Every day”.

He looks lost. I nearly cry.

10.05a.m.

I see Pat and Marilyn in the play ground, hurrying towards their car. They look grey. Our eyes meet. *“Let’s get out of here”.*