

What more can I do?

'What the fuck are you looking at?'

I feel my hand grip like a vice around the table leg as I fight with all of my might not to break eye contact. Breaking eye contact shows weakness. I can't show weakness. My heart beats so hard that I'm worried it will puncture my ribcage and burst right through my uniform. I let out a manic laugh as I imagine my heart landing on Miss's desk and the look of sheer horror on her 'fresh out of Uni' teacher face. My mind focuses back on the task at hand. I stare, unblinkingly, into his deep blue eyes. Suddenly the room goes dark. It happens a lot. When I'm stressed or anxious the room goes black. When I come to, he's lying on the floor with blood pouring from his mouth. I stare down at my hands. They are straight ahead of me. Miss flies across the room. She doesn't know what to do. Part of me feels sorry for her. No one warned her about me.

Frightening, isn't it? A good piece of creative prose but it can't possibly be true. Unfortunately this scenario is playing out in many schools across the country daily.

I never wanted to be a teacher. I didn't like children so how could I possibly be a teacher. I grew up understanding that teaching was a calling and I can assure you I certainly wasn't going to answer the phone. Skip forward a few years and I found myself stuck in a life I was slowly starting to resent. The mundane was seeping into every fibre of my being. My creativity was being quelled. I had to act. As I looked around the open plan admin office there wasn't one person's life that I wanted. I weighed up my options, which appeared limited. It seemed to me, at the time, an MA in English and Film Studies had its limitations for career progression. I eventually decided to pursue teaching. If nothing else it allowed me a year of breathing space to figure out what I could do for the rest of my life.

I lucked out. Teaching is the best thing that ever happened to me. I love my job (for the most part). Sure it has its downsides; I'm not crazy about the bureaucracy and the daily abuse can be draining. But overall, I love my job. Now that I am four years into my career I feel like I am in a position to reflect on our current academic climate and my role in it. Recently I've found myself asking; what more can I do?

The anecdote at the beginning is factual. It's written from memory but it is practically verbatim (with a little artistic licence) to a conversation I had with a pupil I taught recently when she was put out of her class. We'll call her X for the purpose of this essay. X has a rough life. She is rude, cheeky, reckless, angry and dangerous. But she is also tough, resilient and ultimately a child who has to deal with things, that would buckle many adults, on a daily basis.

What did I do in the aforementioned situation? I spoke to X. It may not seem like a great problem solver but you would be amazed by what you can find out when you speak to children without judgement or criticism. In this situation she was angry. The boy she punched had said something about her father. A bit of background information; from what I've gathered from X her father seems like a bit of a loser who certainly won't win any parenting awards in the near future. He floats in and out of her life on a whim. He had promised her the

previous day that they would go to the cinema and out for tea. He didn't follow through on these plans, didn't answer texts or phone calls and didn't even wish the poor lassie, happy birthday. Yes, it was her birthday. Now, I'm certainly not advocating her behaviour. However, when you find out the root of the problem you can certainly see why, in an angry, disappointed and volatile child's mind, that was the best course of action.

In my opinion there's far too much blame put solely on the child for their behaviour. I'm not completely innocent in this either, I've certainly been on the receiving end of a barrage of abuse and violent threats and demanded exclusion as punishment. But I can feel myself starting to change. These troubled pupils, like X, are just that. Troubled. Of course there is a certain cohort of self-righteous, arrogant and spoiled children who behave similarly for reasons I have not yet figured out. But I am talking about the troubled child, with a chip on their shoulder who is angry at the world because they were dealt rubbish cards at birth. The troubled child whose parents are more concerned with drugs than their child or who perhaps doesn't have any parents at all. The troubled child who curses and swears and throws things at teachers because negative attention is better than no attention at all, right? Their behaviour should certainly be punished, they have to learn now that their actions have consequences, but perhaps instead of punishment followed by moving on to simply repeat the cycle we could start to find the root of the problem and this all begins with an honest conversation.

So, what more can I do? Right now I'm not sure. I'm going to continue to listen and continue to fight their corner, when it's warranted and when I can. But perhaps the question isn't what more can I do rather what more can we as a society do?