

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i Gwella Iechyd Emosiynol ac Iechyd Meddwl Plant a Phobl Ifanc | Inquiry into The Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People EMH 04

Ymateb gan: Unigolyn

Response from: Individual

I come to this submission following a twitter post by Samaritans Cymru and XXXXX response to it:

“XXXXX XXXXX XXXXX XXXX”

This made me flash back to my 4th year in Secondary school in XXXX; this was during the dark days of Thatcher, Section 28 of the Local Gov Act & the height of AIDS. During our English class we were set an essay entitled ‘The Missing Child’. Now you’d imagine this would result in the submission of multiple accounts of parents getting separated from their child in some location or other and very little variation on that. However, little did the teacher know that there was a boy in the class who was contemplating taking his own life. At 14/15 I had known I was gay for nearly 7/8 years. Or at least I knew I liked boys not girls until I eventually knew the word for it, or rather the words: [list of derogatory names included in original submission but redacted due to sensitive nature of language used]. I had lived in constant fear all that time as I instinctively knew I could let no-one know how I felt. Suddenly confronted with an essay title but no brief for its content, as well as a pile of pills in my bedroom, I wrote what was probably the biggest shock of an essay ever handed in at my school.

What followed was an essay about a gay teenage boy who, when discovered in bed with another boy by his ‘girlfriend’, runs away and commits suicide. To this day I still do not know what gave me the strength to write that essay. I knew I was in emotional turmoil, I knew that if things carried on as they were, I was going to take the pills I stared at nightly, trying to build up the courage to take them. I needed someone to tell me I was ok, that I wasn’t a

pervert or sick. Someone to support me passed the building self-hatred and depression. The story was me asking for someone to pull me aside and support me through all the fear and hate towards gay people at the time that was making the self-hatred and depression worse; to prevent me taking my own life.

I handed the essay in and waited, numb, for the reaction. Would someone help me? Would I be summoned to the head of year or head teachers' office to find my mother waiting there having been told the content of the story? The day arrived for the class we would get our books back, I was still numb. Nothing! The teacher didn't ask to see me outside the class, I wasn't told to report to one of the offices! The books were just handed out. I opened the book and saw the comment at the end of the essay [this is from memory so may not be verbatim]:

"A very interesting essay. Being gay is a very emotive subject for a lot of people. If you want to talk about it come to see me" Or words to that effect.

That response placed the onus on a scared child, who had already opened himself up to possibly of being beaten up if any of the students in the school found out about the essay, or being disowned by his family (which eventually did happen) to then approach the teacher! I was suicidal! Terrified! And my cry for help had been ignored! The numb shell cracked and the despair engulfed me. No-one was going to help me, I obviously wasn't worthy of any support as I was nothing but a sick perverted queer! That night, the pills called to me louder than they ever had before, but I was still not strong enough to take them... just.

I endured the rest of my time at the school and college depressed and terrified my secret would be discovered. I did pack a bag and attempt to run away but didn't get very far. It was another 10 years before I eventually came out, but even then it took years longer before I eventually accepted who I was and finally, for the most part, laid the despair of my entire childhood to rest.

As an adult, I look back at that moment in my life with utter disgust. That an obvious cry for help from a child expressing suicidal thoughts in a school essay was totally ignored and the child left unsupported. I was lucky in that I was too much of a coward to take the pills. Unfortunately the same cannot be said for a friend who did take his life a few years later, as well as at least 1 other student in my year that I am aware of. There have been too many children suffering with depression for one reason or another over recent years who have taken their lives in Wales. Due to the total lack of training/provision for mental health support in my school I could have been 1 of those statistics. I know that things have changed since I was in school, that there is more emphasis on pastoral care these days and that the evil Section 28 has been repealed. I am torn between blaming the teacher and school for leaving me unsupported and then not blaming them as I am able to look back at the attitudes of the time from the perspective of an adult and can see how they might have impacted on the teacher/schools' lack of response. I do not, and never will, forgive a government who, due to their own prejudice and dogma, left a vulnerable child to shoulder the burden of almost universal condemnation of who he was alone.

I have, in my career working with children, seen the utter lack of CAMHS provision to meet the needs of all the children who need it. I have referred children over the years for support to be told that even if they are lucky enough to meet the criteria, they have months to wait before they can see someone. I feel all schools should have access to trained mental health professionals to support the children directly or to support the teachers to support the children. I also feel teachers need to be trained in the use of counselling skills so that they are better able to support children in their schools in the event the child cannot access immediate specific mental health support, or if they feel more comfortable speaking to a specific teacher rather than a stranger. I also feel that school should not skirt speaking about prevailing issues that are affecting children; be that eating disorders, sexuality/gender identity, cyber bullying, sexting etc. etc.

The mental health of our children has never been more at risk due to the pressures being put on them through social media etc. It has never been more important, in my opinion, for there to be the support there for them to access to help them deal with any issues. So that another child who makes a cry for help isn't ignored and left to suffer, feeling worthless and unworthy of help. The next child might not make it through to add their voice to a future consultation.

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