

VOICE OF THE ICONO CLASS ROOM

Lily-Marie, sixth on the register in my Y9 tutor group, wasn't in school for the third Friday of the first term of the 2012/13 school year. We got a phone call; on the Thursday evening her mother had simultaneously run out of alcohol and hope, and decided that her only option was to finish off the bottle of prescription painkillers on her bedside table. What with calling the ambulance, and waiting at the hospital, and dealing with all the stuff, it was way past registration when classroom issues even crossed Lily-Marie's mind.

She was back in on the Monday, though. Uniform clean and carefully ironed, as ever. Homework done. And just a touch more eyeliner than usual, painted on with a steady hand and the steely resolution that she was definitely done crying.

"Nice to have you back," I told her, truthfully.

"Yeah, well," she responded, with the eloquence of her generation and a small, tight smile. "I didn't fancy Alton Towers much, anyway."

Because that, you see, is where all the students who finish this academic year with a 100% attendance record will be going. There's a massive poster explaining this in the entrance hall. Lily-Marie will pass it every single day on her way in from now until the end of term – and she will be in every single day, I can pretty much guarantee that, unless she gets a bout of D&V like the one that knocked her out of the iPad draw when she was in Y8, or she ends up needing counselling for a while like she did in Y5 (it was a party she missed that year). She's a bright, eager kid and hungry to learn, even though a lot of the time she's also just plain hungry. She fend for herself on the whole; but she learnt a long time ago that no matter what the Facebook status updates say, you can't always 'choose to be lucky'.

I've been teaching for over a decade now, and as a rule, I tend to be pretty relaxed about most of the box ticking and hoop jumping that goes on. We do what we have to do to keep Ofsted happy, and at the

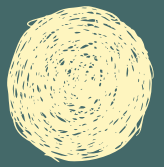
same time, we carry on the business of education to the best of our ability, as we've always done. I try not to waste energy fretting about every unnecessary piece of paperwork or well-meaning but flawed initiative – but the conspicuous rewarding of 100% attendance is so thoroughly illogical, ineffectual and frankly, downright cruel, that I just cannot get my head around it at all.

Why do we do it? Of course I understand that attendance figures are important. It's obvious that we can't give children the education they deserve unless we actually see them from time to time, after all. I can follow the argument for incentivising students to come to school – but that's very different from rewarding them with trips and electronic gadgets simply for having done so, not to mention effectively punishing them for falling victim to a statistical inevitability, especially when it's down to circumstances that are utterly beyond their control.

There are, broadly speaking, three main categories of reasons why a teenager might not be at school. The first is ill health (be that a temporary sickness or an ongoing condition); the second is to do with social deprivation and an absence of parental support; and the third comes down to a lack of motivation. Handing out treats for turning up might, possibly, improve attendance (but not necessarily engagement or achievement) for students in the last group – but in doing so, it just disenfranchises those who fall under the first and second headings even further.

Whereas – and here's a crazy notion – perhaps if we were to work at making school the kind of place young people actually want to be, as well as identifying and supporting those families struggling with issues that make consistency difficult, then we might just end up with an inclusive approach to improving attendance that would almost certainly cost considerably more than the parties and the prizes... but be a hell of a lot easier to explain to Lily-Marie.

No one can teach children who aren't there – but making a big deal out of 100% attendance is not helping anyone, argues one educator who's seen enough disappointment...



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