



Case Story

Missing my dad: What is the best approach?

Jane James, Creative Catalyst
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This is an account based on a recent experience of a Dissolving Barriers to Learning workshop I organised and facilitated in Bath in December 2008.

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It centres around Florence, a single mother of Afro-Caribbean origin who has three sons by three different fathers. (Check your prejudice as you read this). She was brought up by her grandparents in the Bath area but moved on her own to London when she was sixteen and had her children there. About eighteen months ago she decided to move back to Bath with her children – believing them to have a better chance of doing well there than in London.

The family were without a home for six months and lived in cramped bed and breakfast accommodation. They now have a house and the mother has secured a job as a care assistant in an elderly care home. She is a vibrant, intelligent and thoughtful woman who cares passionately about her children. The eldest boy – Varley – is fourteen and physically big for his age. He started at a boys' school in Bath and struggled with difficult behaviour. He joined Ralph Allen School through the appeals panel. His behaviour began to be problematic within the first few days: his size and physique made him intimidating to other students – both they and also, one senses, some staff – were afraid of him. A 'managed move' was decided upon – for Varley to start at yet another secondary school in Bath – for a fresh beginning as he was reaching the point of permanent exclusion. He did not want to go to another school.

During Varley's time at Ralph Allen one-to-one counselling support was offered to him, which he accepted. At these sessions what emerged was his love for his parents but also his confusion about his father who lives in London and how much he misses him. Varley shared his feelings of disappointment; his father had let him down so at this time that he had made a decision not to contact him at all. It was obvious that this choice was causing him pain and anguish. Florence was invited to school to talk about the difficulties Varley was talking about in the school one-to-one sessions. She began to tell her story. At this point it was suggested by the behaviour manager she attend a **Dissolving Barriers to Learning (dbl)** workshop. Florence attended a **dbl** workshop at the beginning of December. She arrived almost jauntily – she was not intimidated by the circle of strangers gathered for the constellation workshop. She had no difficulty entering the building or the room nor in introducing herself. She looked younger than she must be and carried a positive engaging energy. Florence presented her issue: Varley's behaviour and his unwillingness to move schools, her desire to do the very best for him. The constellation, held by Judith Hemming, revealed Varley's longing to be in contact with his father. It also showed clearly the love his parents had for each other when he was conceived and born. Florence explained that his father had always been supportive despite having been in prison for a spell for drug-dealing activities. She also said that recently Varley and his Dad had not been in contact. She also explained how much of a 'rock' Varley was for her – and had been during the move from London and the first difficult months in Bath. He 'looks after her' and the younger boys.

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During the course of the constellation it became clear how unhelpful this 'reverse relationship' was for Varley: he, the child, needed to be 'looked after' by his mother (and his father). He is little and they are big – not the other way round – despite physical appearances! As Varley's longing for contact with his father was so powerfully shown in the constellation, Florence began to see and to articulate her realisation of the part she was until now unwittingly playing in adding to Varley's confusion. Her fears about Varley visiting his father because of his less-than-perfect lifestyle started to subside and she began to understand that he is the right father for Varley and that their love for each other must be nourished and trusted. The constellation also showed that Varley's father may also be unhappy and in need of his son's love.

She also saw that her need for support and a 'strong man' in her life meant that she depended too easily on her eldest son's strength, loyal love and commitment. With disarming clarity and honesty, she stated after the constellation, 'I need to sort myself out don't I?' Judith agreed with Florence by saying that counselling or therapy probably would be very helpful and by suggesting ways of accessing help.

A few days after the workshop, I rang Florence to see how she was, and to explore ways of accessing therapeutic support. She reported that the evening of the constellation she had talked at length with Varley and told him specifically how he had been created out of love: she and Varley's father had wanted and loved him. After the good and long discussion, Varley asked if he could phone his Dad – he did so and they communicated for the first time for many months. Varley seemed happier after that. Despite this breakthrough at home, (or maybe because of it?) Varley's behaviour one week later at school caused him to be temporarily excluded. He then asked his Mum if he could go to London to see his father. Florence gave him the train fare and a couple of days later Varley phoned his Mum to say he was fine and to ask how she was. Six weeks later Varley is still in London with his Dad.

This story presents many aspects of the **dbi** work; both the potential benefits and the challenges. From one perspective, the **dbi** might be seen to have reunited a teenage boy with his father – whom he longed for and missed. The constellation also enabled a mother to see the need for and to seek the personal help she could do with to make sense of her own broken childhood. As a result of the workshop she began to acknowledge some of the pain and difficulty of her own early life and to express a desire to find ways of lessening their impact on her own children. On the other hand, there is an interpretation of the events of this story which would contend that as a result of the workshop a young vulnerable teenager has re-entered the dangerous inner-city world of his father closer to a culture of drugs and violence.

Which ever of these views we take, what seems clear is that normal school mechanisms to help this student settle in the face of deep family issues weren't adequate. The area panel, which seeks to find a different setting for students such as Varley, were literally moving the problem around different schools rather than solving it. A better model might be to use a **dbi** constellations before considering a school move to see what really would be the best support for the student, for the family and for the school.