

## Mile in My Shoes: Beverley's story

*Estimated reading time: 5.5 minutes*

*[Playground noises]*

*'Hi Joey. Good afternoon, everyone. Hi Riley. Hi everyone.'*

I'm Beverley McCallion and I'm the deputy head teacher of a primary school in Gateshead.

The idea I think that people have when they come to the school is, because of where it is, there's going to be a lot of bad behaviour. We just don't have that. The children love coming to school and I think they feel safe here.

The area – we are probably highest in the list of all the things you wouldn't want to be highest for. So, in terms of crime or in terms of teenage pregnancy or we fall into the lowest category for bad oral hygiene. So, we're top of the list for all of those things. But actually, it is one of the loveliest places with the nicest people, big hearts. They don't have a lot in terms of finances, but they will give.

*'Hello! Hi Aya.'*

*[Child] 'Can I ask you a question?'*

*'Of course you can.'*

*[Child] 'You know the music... thing?'*

*'The iPod.'*

*[Child] 'Yeah, who has it?'*

*'Ooh, now do you know, I don't know what... Mr Riley would have left it with Mr Wright, I think. But you can all... Oh, this is for the dance tent. You can always check with Miss Gibson. Sorry, I don't...'*

*[Child] 'Miss Gibson.'*

*'Miss Gibson might have it.'*

*[Child] 'I'll go ask.'*

*'Okay, thank you.'*

*[Child] 'Bye.'*

*'Bye.'*

If you were wanting to... start from the beginning and build those building blocks up, I suppose, yes – good housing. A shelter. Somewhere that you feel safe in. Somewhere that you're not worried about... there being damp and mould and you know you're not going to be moved out of it quickly.

Having enough food and a lot of people, a lot of our families are going to food banks. We now work with an organisation called Feeding Families and they provide us with a week's worth of groceries. They're really brilliant, the box might be vegetarian, it might be halal. It's taken away the shame of having to go to a food bank. Because they trust us as professionals to give those boxes to the people who need them. There needs to be an acceptance that

these aren't bad people. It's not their fault that they're in these situations. That they deserve – they deserve a living wage. They deserve... enough to be able to live on... and not to be punished. Quite often you get into a cycle that you've, you know, you've missed a month's rent for whatever and then – then you're threatened with eviction and the cycle goes on and on.

So, our aim is always, what do we need to do in order to make this a safe and happy place where learning can take place. Because we believe very strongly that learning can't take place unless you're able to concentrate on it and your mind is able to concentrate. But you can't do your work if you're hungry. There will very often be children who come to school and by half past nine they'll come to my office and say, 'I'm hungry miss, I didn't have any breakfast this morning.' Now we do run a breakfast club but not everybody goes to it, it's free, so anybody can go. But it might well be that they got up early in the morning, that there wasn't someone to get them up, they've come to school on their own. So, they come to school feeling hungry, but they know they can come in and say that and we'll go and get some toast, we'll get them a drink. And then they're set to do their lessons.

So, my room... it's used sometimes for teaching. But it's used also as a relaxing room, a chillout room. A place to come if you need to talk to somebody. A place to come if you just need to be calm and quiet... Or if you want to be excited about something you've done and something you're proud of, they come in here to show me. So, it's kind of a bit of a... a room for everything, all things, all things good and all things to help you to regulate.

If they haven't slept through the night, I've had children come – you can see I've got a sofa in the room – I've had children lie on the sofa and put a blanket over them because they haven't slept for worrying about something the night before. And we allow that to happen. But sometimes it can be your nicest of families but because of the... pressure that they're under that does carry down to the children. So, we understand, and we do put that first in order for there to then be learning.

'We also have directly opposite this room here is our... Family Support Worker's room. And we've had a Family Support Worker full-time now... full-time for the last... eight or nine years. But we find that we're doing an awful lot of support... A lot of parents don't feel that they've got a voice for a lot of things. And I think that that's one of the... things that we've tried to work on with the children is giving them a voice. So, we do an awful lot of conversational work of oracy, or trying to get them to give their opinions, to express themselves well.

There was a family last year where there was a lot of racist bullying going on with the family. Not at school, outside, with adults that were nearby. And the family had tried and tried to get through to various agencies to help. And it wasn't until we started to help, and we got in touch with people, because they would listen to us because we were professionals, and we had the voice. And that took a lot of our time. But we knew it was necessary because for that child and the family they were scared to come to school because they were frightened of coming out of their house. Eventually they were rehoused, and it's got a very happy

ending. And I think in a lot of places they probably would have said, 'That's not our job.' Because it's not – *laughs*. However, we do think it's our job, so we advocate for our families. We listen to our children, and we give a lot of time to that.

*[Playground sounds]*

My motivation, where does it come from. I can't say it's completely selfless and altruistic... There's a part of it I think – I'm from Gateshead, I'm from a very working-class family. I actually was brought up just up the road, not far at all. But I passed the 11-plus many years ago and I went to a – a school with aspiration and a school that made me believe that it would just, 'Well of course you'd go to university, I mean, what else would you do?' And gave me a lot of life chances that I think I wouldn't ordinarily have had. So, I've got that in my mind of what education has done for me and especially I think going to a school where – it was over in Newcastle, it was over the water, it was posh... I know what it feels like to feel less. And I don't think it's a nice feeling, and I don't want other children to have it. And so, I did want to help children who didn't feel confident because I think I was that child. I was the child who never felt confident enough, never felt I was good enough.

*'Year One that's so good. Beautiful! Well done... Fantastic. Nice to see that smile too. Well done have a lovely afternoon everyone.'*

And when I was asked to provide shoes... I've brought you a pair of trainers but trainers with a very thick, bouncy sole. And... about four years ago, five years ago I had an operation on my leg that went wrong. And I lost the use of my leg for quite a long time. And I was really only able for a couple of years to wear trainers. So, trainers were my support. They were the thing that allowed me to walk again – or helped me, one of the things that helped me to walk again. And I think that what we do here is cushion our families, not just the children. But we cushion them to be able to walk a little bit more confidently and a little bit more securely. And with a little bit more of a feeling of comfort than they would do if we weren't here.

*'And then we're back up into Key Stage 2. The children have just gone for their lunch. But you see what I mean about the – the size of the – of the rooms are so much smaller. Savannah well done, your mum sent me the photographs, I am so impressed with you. Well done.'*

*[Child] 'Thank you.'*

I'm one of them. I want them to know now, not when they're in their forties or fifties, I want them to feel OK now. And my job is quite important to my life. So, for me, that's the difference I've made in the world.

*[Playground noises]*

*'Bye!'*