

Mile in My Shoes: Daniel's story

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My name's Daniel Hinnigan. I'm 21 years old and I, I'm a Family Support Worker and School Practitioner for School-Home Support.

We are based in 22 schools in the city. Our main aim is to improve children and young people's attendance or get them back into school, no matter what. That's kind of our motto. And we support the families for anything they need as well.

I thought there were only certain places in the UK where it was full of poverty and people really struggled. I didn't expect Liverpool to be one of them.

A lot of parents are quite scared of us going to their houses because they think that we're social services. So, I've had families that will cancel home visits when I'm at the door. There are some factors as well, that schools are that busy. If you're telling them to put certain recommendations and support in place, they can't always do that because they don't have the funds to do that. They don't have the time to actually sit down and plan it. So again, that comes back to me. And by the time I've planned everything out and told them what needs to happen basically, schools have moved on to, to do something else.

A lot of children are anxious to attend school, and I think because we talk about mental health a lot more now, it's a lot more accepted. But then, I'm also working with the family, and they live far away from school and mum doesn't drive and she can't afford to get the bus. So, they walk every day and it's an hour and a half walk there, and then hour and a half walk back. And by the time mum's got them up so early, they're late to school. And some days mum works, so it's really difficult for her to get her children to school.

A lot of families can't afford school uniform, and we have uniform funds, so we help families to, to get a school uniform for their, for their children. Parents can't afford to put a wash on. So, they will only get one set of shirts or one set of trousers because that's all they can afford. And when they get dirty, they can't afford them to put several washes on every week. Parents will keep them off school because they're embarrassed.

I grew up in Childwall in Liverpool. I lived with my mum and dad, my two older brothers and my younger sister. When I was about five or six, me mum and dad separated. So, we were brought up by our mum, who was a single mum. I loved going to nursery, so I was really excited to go to primary school and it was a few years that I started to notice I was a little bit different. I wouldn't always be interested in what the whole other class were wanting to do. At breaktime I was not playing footie or playing basketball or doing what everyone else was doing. I used to stand with the dinner lady.

People used to have parties for their birthday, and I was never invited. But then, they weren't invited to mine. It was kind of a strange one and I was very different to me two older brothers and me younger sister. I started going to see a doctor. Looking back now, it was the community paediatrician, with me mum. And that was to get my autism diagnosis, but I didn't know what was going on, I thought every kid went there. And me mum told me that because she didn't want me to panic.

So, I was diagnosed with Asperger's, I think I was in year 6, just before I left primary school.

In secondary school, I loved English. I had the same teacher all the way through secondary school, and he inspired me to write, he inspired me to, to do all different things. I used to keep diary entries. And it wasn't like, 'Dear Diary,' or anything I just used to write down how my day went so I could look, if I had a good day, I can look back and – just like memories really. I showed this specific teacher these diary entries and he was like, 'You write this like a story.' He was like, 'Why don't you extend that 500 words?' And that's what I did. And then it turned into a book.

The school bought it, they bought a few copies. A few was, were in a few classrooms, cos the English classroom used to have books of shelves of books anyway. And then it was in the school library and a few people used to read it. Every year, there's an event called Autism Awareness Week and that book was always read to new year 7 pupils. I wrote a second book, it was published a few months after the first book was published, in October 2017, so a while ago now. That... had more of an impact because I didn't really advertise the first book but the second book, the school advertised it, and then all of a sudden, these interviews were happening and people coming into the school and that kind of... It didn't blow up but it kind of did for me.

I've worked with a family this year, and a pupil he is 14 years old. He's also autistic. He was terrified to go into school, absolutely terrified. And it wasn't the fact that he was getting bullied, or he was getting picked on or getting called names. He was basically just so anxious to go into school because it was such a big place. Cos he was so used to being big fish in a little pond in primary school from going to a very small fish in a massive, massive pond. Actually, worked with him when he was in year 9, there hadn't been much support put in place for him for the first two years. And I just thought back to my time when I was in year 9, that was probably my worst year when I needed support the most. So, I was glad I was there to help him.

I'd say the first three months, I never got a word out of him. Just a shake of a, or a nod of a head, that was it. And by the end, we were having full-on conversations about World War I and World War II. And support actually ended now. But... he was put on a part-time timetable and his attendance improved by like, 12 per cent. And that was quite a big jump for him, cos he, he was going into school one day a week and then by the end of the academic year, he was in every day.

I picked these shoes because I was working with a pupil and sitting down with them and having a chat wasn't helping. So, I had the idea of, let's go to the school gym. So, every Friday we used to go to the school gym, and I used to wear them trainers, so that's why I've donated them. So that was probably the biggest highlight of, of this job already for me. As soon as we were going to that school gym of a Friday and we were playing a game of footie, I don't, I used to let every goal in. But as soon as I let him lead the session, he was in school a lot more. He was a lot happier. And it's really helped him. He's, he's now got a better relationship with food and exercise, and he really struggled with that, and that was one of the biggest issues of him not attending school. And he's loving it now. So that's why I've donated them shoes, because they were part of them sessions.

A lot of families it's, it's changed the way they will do things day-to-day. A lot of families I've worked with, I've changed their opinion on school. They always thought school were against them. But we know they are just there for their best interests.

Everyone deserves an education. Why, why take it for granted? Why waste it?