Pro bono – a life enriching voyage of discovery!

My journey into pro bono began as a parent needing help with navigating the legal system for my disabled son. I turned to the legal charity IPSEA for support and in the process was transformed into a legal helper. I began volunteering with IPSEA on their free helpline, helping other parents with their own journeys, but by 2016 I questioned whether I had sufficient understanding of the law and the legal system which spurred me to begin my law degree. The Justice in Action module has provided the perfect vehicle for combining my academic learning with practical action with IPSEA, enabling me to contribute a greater depth of free legal service to the public.

Approximately 4% of children and young people in England have Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) prepared by Local Authorities (LAs). Parents and young people (clients) find themselves in dispute with LAs about EHCPs and need free legal help. Appeals against LA decisions to the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Tribunal (SENDIST) are covered by legal aid recognising the value of access to justice for children. Before beginning the Justice in Action module I had believed this meant that the neediest are provided for, however, my recent experience of providing helpline support identified a problem with supply as in Extract 1 of my portfolio "*she cannot find a legal aid solicitor who has capacity to take her case on*". What value is theoretical support?

In this context the value to the clients of the pro bono support I have provided is significant. The clients targeted for help are those without the mental and emotional means to manage alone or the financial means to pay a solicitor. I have begun providing case work for IPSEA's Tribunal Support Service for clients bringing an appeal, giving me an invaluable learning experience of interacting with the court system, analysing evidence, and identifying legal arguments in support of their case. My work in helping the clients to prepare and submit compelling arguments meant each case settled before the hearing benefiting the child as in Extract 2 from my portfolio *"… will now get her full assessment and no waiting for the hearing means that it will happen a bit faster. Such a great feeling!"*.

IPSEA's work supports social justice empowering clients to achieve fair and equal application of legal rules, helping with procedural issues and providing a distribution of legal knowledge. My experiences during this project have taught me that delivering social justice requires expert knowledge and focused analysis from legal advisors to achieve earlier help for disabled children. Looking forward this provides a wider benefit (or justice) to society improving children's long-term outcomes, reducing later burdens on the State.

Although SENDIST is designed for the litigant in person in recent months I have witnessed an inequality of arms for clients navigating it alone and often for the first time. Shockingly even in this unequal system, data from the Ministry of Justice (2021) shows 96% of cases decided by SENDIST were in favour of the appellant suggesting significant unlawful decision making by LAs. It feels unjust and unethical that some of the most vulnerable children and young people are faced with enormous barriers and delays to accessing the support they need, and this will motivate me to continue to try to help. Kreber (2016) notes that supporting others in pursuit of the common good (in this case improving outcomes for vulnerable children) "*is a constitutive and life-enriching feature of human identity*". My recent experience of tackling this imbalance for a small number of children has been truly life-enriching, expanding my understanding of the value of pro bono not only to the client but also to me.

Reference: Kreber, C. (2016) 'The 'Civic-minded' professional? An exploration through Hannah Arendt's "vita activa"', Educational Philosophy and Theory, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 123–137 https://web-s-ebscohost-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=a4cce4ed-cd80-4a1e-af51-7db1ebf1a04c%40redis