

English teaching as a profession: To leave or not to leave

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Writing in response to a query about why so many young teachers leave the profession, *The Daily Telegraph's* Education Correspondent John Clare suggested that "the principal reason why trainee teachers pack it in is the day-to-day reality of life in school – the stress, the workload and the low morale" (*Telegraph Weekend*, August 23, 2003, p. 11). It has been evident to me, both during my experiences on the Secondary PGCE course at The University of Cambridge and when talking to beginning English teachers from both Britain and Australia at the IFTE conference in Melbourne over the summer, that initial experiences in schools do have huge potential to confirm or contradict a student teacher's ambition to teach. In particular, the attitude of staff in placement schools can be enormously influential.

Training undertaken prior to achieving Qualified Teacher Status is physically and mentally rigorous and demands long hours and disciplined organisation far in excess of that necessary for many of the subject specific degree courses from which the majority of graduates will have recently emerged. The changes experienced by those entering the teaching profession must be handled with great care by the trainee, faculty and placement schools. Having reflected upon my own training, I believe that beginning English teachers require a number of attributes, measures of support and assurances for the future if they are to feel confident of surviving and finding fulfilment in the profession. These are:

- The well organised and thoughtful allocation of school placements.
- A confident subject knowledge and enthusiasm
- A practical understanding of teaching English in today's schools, as well as opportunities to experiment with teaching styles and techniques
- Time and an appropriate environment in which to analyse and evaluate progress and possibilities
- The promise of NQT support as well as more independence, future professional fulfilment through managerial responsibility and research and decent remuneration.

If these foundations are not laid prior to and during the training year, there will be a greater temptation for a beginning teacher to leave the profession.

It is essential that the subject tutor, or whoever is charged with allocating trainees to schools, perform his/her duty with discernment. They may only have encountered a student for a few minutes at interview, but the trainee's experiences over the PGCE course will be shaped largely by the opportunities and personalities within the department to which they are assigned. Underpinning almost every aspect of the professional placement is the relationship with the mentor. A wise mentor can play many roles – teacher, motivator, comforter, admonisher, sounding board – and will learn and develop alongside the trainee. Lack of respect, antagonism, dominance or neglect by either the trainee or the mentor can mean an unprofitable and miserable time for both parties. It is therefore of immense importance that mentors are well

matched, well trained, clear about their responsibilities and content to be involved in the job. I was fortunate, and the relationships I established with my mentors fostered a great deal of the knowledge, confidence and enjoyment that I gained during the course. Without their help and support, I would have felt much more vulnerable.

Indeed, the PGCE year condemns trainees to an educational no man's land. Oscillating between being a "teacher" in school and a "student" in the faculty, they aren't often regarded as being a "real teacher" when they are in the classroom. The tag of "student teacher" can be a frustrating and disenchanting one. Simply by making the concession that all trainees will be referred to as teachers within earshot of pupils, members of staff at placement schools can enhance their charges' self-esteem and sense of security.

All the personnel with whom a trainee comes into contact must realise the need to show enthusiasm, encouragement and compassion whenever possible. During my PGCE year, I sought above all to find colleagues whose teaching styles and professional attitudes I could emulate. Many of the entries in the journal I kept during the course testify to how influential observing more experienced teachers can be:

The most useful experience so far has been watching Geoff, our Head of Department. For one thing, he's a man, (so many of the teachers I see are female), and his style would probably suit me. He speaks in almost a doctor's bedside manner to the pupils – really calming, encouraging and purposeful – and makes each lesson varied. He lulls them into knowledge and also uses ICT and audio books frequently – not as a novelty. He always has time for pupils.

Throughout my training year I realised the necessity of a secure subject knowledge, as well as a communicable enthusiasm for English. The assurance when I walked into a lesson that I was well prepared and knew what I was talking about meant that I could concentrate on sharpening up other aspects of my teaching. I also discovered the importance of taking every opportunity to share with colleagues and students alike my enjoyment of English. Teaching a text that was admirable and new, or recognising some fresh aspect of a familiar book, invigorated my teaching. Contrarily, teaching a class of Year 9s how to make their answers less sophisticated in order to pick up marks on the SATs reading paper was frustrating. It is important, therefore, that curricula are thoughtfully and imaginatively conceived if beginning teachers are to find stimulation and challenge in their work.

The PGCE course introduced me to a wide range of approaches to teaching English. Many of these I was eager to try out, whilst others did not appeal. All made me consider, and improve, my own practice. Although these experiences were consolidated by reading about English teaching, it was almost entirely through observing and experimenting with ideas teachers used successfully, day in day out in the classroom, that my lessons became more varied and effective. It wasn't only the activities and tips that these teachers (not all of them hugely experienced) passed on which was beneficial. Encountering their concern to do their best for their pupils and zest for their profession was just as valuable, as this extract from my journal suggests:

Another fantastic workshop, this time on Shakespeare. The session was so exhilarating and inspiring that I feel refreshed with enthusiasm for my subject and the job of teaching. It made me think and realise so much. I really respect the teacher

who took us as someone at the very top of her field who isn't selfish with her talent. I really want to try out her ideas – roll on *Macbeth*.

Of course, without opportunities to put newly discovered ideas into practice, such workshops would be worthless. I was always grateful to the staff at my placement school for being receptive when I asked to try things out. Indeed, they were often keen to observe and see whether they could employ a strategy themselves, particularly when it involved technology or drama. I know trainees who were not fortunate enough to experience such encouragement and who became dispirited. Giving beginning teachers the opportunities and independence to experiment seems of great importance if they are to develop and feel empowered.

Often, during the PGCE, it felt as though everyone I encountered – tutors, departmental staff, pupils and other trainees – was scrutinizing and assessing my every move. Keeping a journal throughout the year was thus a thoroughly useful exercise, since it provided a regular opportunity for personal reflection upon what was an extremely busy and chaotic period of learning. It is clear from the following extract that the process of writing helped me to unleash frustration:

I am learning how much life in a school can be affected by the moods, anxieties and schedules of other people. Trying to be positive and obliging, humble and purposeful in an environment when people are so stressed and frequently change moods is proving tough. The actual classroom teaching continues to go well, but I'm spending more time on disciplining classes and tracing homework. I am frequently feeling drained and losing imagination, and in one lesson today I started to feel intimidated and frightened at having one of the teachers observing me – simply because I'd had enough.

Without chances to evaluate my development and progress, I suspect I would have benefited less from my experiences. Periods of calm, such as the weekly mentor meetings and journal writing sessions, helped to put the daily toil and occasional disappointing lessons into perspective. Sharing difficulties with members of the department, and knowing that, however busy they were, I could seek advice also gave me great comfort and confidence.

Finally, throughout a year that was dominated by the need to survive countless challenges, humiliations, pressures and responsibilities never before experienced, I found the promise of becoming a fully-fledged teacher an immense motivation. Being able to look forward to a secure job, greater independence, one's own classroom, more influence within an English department and a decent wage is clearly important for trainees. So is academic stimulation. A number of newly qualified teachers I know have already decided to teach for just a couple of years before going back to study for doctorates and seek work in academia. They claim they will stagnate intellectually in a career that is dominated by classroom management, administration and a flawed, dictated curriculum. Many of the brightest university graduates train to be teachers, but unless there are suitable opportunities for academic research and thought-provoking professional development that can be conducted alongside work in the classroom they will head back to higher education.

The environment and personalities a trainee teacher encounters during their school placements, as well as the possibilities for independence and academic stimulation

after qualifying, clearly influence whether they will remain in the profession. I really enjoyed my PGCE course, particularly the portions spent on placement. Assigned to mentors and departments who were welcoming, knowledgeable, tolerant and enthusiastic, I was offered much practical advice, had opportunities to try out the ideas on offer and was encouraged to reflect upon and evaluate my practice in relaxed and compassionate surroundings. I was intellectually stretched and encouraged to teach good quality texts and language concepts using a range of teaching styles.

I am confident that similar support and many more exciting opportunities await me during my first year as a qualified teacher. If I wasn't, I'd be tempted to do what many newly qualified teachers do and seek a different career. Yes, the heavy workload, a considerable amount of stress and, all too frequently and understandably, low morale have been evident, but a well-organised course and kindness and consideration from colleagues have made my PGCE school experience less of a rude awakening than an enjoyable and fulfilling induction into what promises to be a wonderful profession – one which I relish pursuing.