

From Times On Line
January 22, 2008

Is teaching the right career for you?

Mark Doolan

John Bangs, Head of Education at the National Union of Teachers on the highs and lows of the profession and what it takes to be a teacher.



Every year thousands of graduates enrol for teacher training. But recent government statistics show more than 250,000 qualified teachers are not currently working in UK schools. Is this downturn a warning sign for those considering entering the profession?

It is important to thoroughly research any career before you invest time and money in training but the complex world of teaching warrants an unparalleled level of contemplation.

John Bangs is Head of Education at the National Union of Teachers (NUT). The NUT has its finger on the pulse of day-to-day teaching life and can offer a valuable insight. So get out your red marking pen as we take a look through the highs and lows of this unique profession.

Use your head

The current Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) recruitment campaign slogan is 'Use your head: Teach' but maybe not all graduates 'use their heads' when deciding whether or not to undertake a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Benefits like job security, geographical mobility and lengthily holidays can act as powerful incentives before potential teachers realise the demands of the profession.

Can the long hours of assessments, marking, class preparations and open evenings take some new recruits by surprise? Bangs doesn't think so: "I don't think that there's naivety amongst graduates now. People who want to make a positive difference to young people's lives take the workload factor into account and teach irrespectively of it."

There are also many extra curriculum activities; be warned fence sitters, new teachers are expected to readily partake. Teaching, as Bangs points out, "is not a 9-5 job, it's something that's a genuine vocation, and it's not about counting the hours."

To teach GCSE or A Level classes you must be academically proven in your curriculum subjects. That means these subjects must be relevant to your first degree. A spokesperson from the TDA said "Teaching is a creative, intellectually demanding and rewarding job, so the standards for joining the profession must be high too."

Become a guru

Unlike many jobs teaching is a lifestyle choice – just think about the responsibility factor. As a teacher you are partly responsible for the development of a young person's life. Being a teacher isn't just about passing on academic knowledge, teachers must also immerse themselves in the daily lives of their pupils.

Unless you have a thoroughly open mind, a good sense of humour and excellent people skills teaching probably isn't your calling. Bangs explained: "Every day you are engaged in intensive two-way conversations with children and young adults." This teacher-pupil interaction shapes much of our society, so strong communicational abilities are a pre-requisite for teaching.

If your influence holds sway you could leave a monumental impression on the lives of young people. In terms of becoming an inspirational life coach teaching is second to none. According to Bangs "Teaching, despite the workload, is a fantastic job because it involves enormous creativity. It is immensely fulfilling."

Bad behaviour

But this isn't Hollywood, so don't expect the good times without the bad. Media stories of violence towards teachers have plagued the education system for years. Do modern teachers need to assume the roles of police officer and social worker? In reality how frequent are such attacks and abuses?

Bangs explains that these horror stories are isolated: "Violence is still very rare. It is low level disruption over time that gets on teacher's nerves."

But he doesn't feel that ongoing misbehaviour causes the majority of teacher resignations: "Evidence from surveys and exit interviews suggests that pupil behaviour itself isn't the trigger for teachers leaving the profession."

Instead, disruptive pupils are normally the catalyst for a convergence of overall job stresses. For example when a lesson plan doesn't work, or a teacher feels underpaid or overworked. Bangs says that it is then that "a misbehaving pupil might cause you to call into question your continuing commitment to teaching."

Red Tape

Do constant assessments and appraisals put people off teaching? The modern public sector runs on performance-related targets and centralised strategies. Therefore as a teacher you might well encounter more red tape than you can shake a pair of scissors at.

There are regular inspections, school league tables and national targets to consider. With the reputation of schools dependent on these factors pressure is piled on teachers. "In the past experienced teachers have left because of the very great bureaucratic pressures on them" Bangs nods.

He also stresses that most teachers aren't against transparency and the principles of public accountability. It is the inefficient and contradictory evaluations that they resent: "What teachers don't want is to be constantly made accountable by a set of mechanisms for which there is no purpose."

Money matters

The TDA offers a training bursary of up to £9,000, although this amount varies from subject to subject. For some subjects a 'golden hello' of between £2,500 and £5,000 is awarded once the post Initial Teacher Training (ITT) induction period is completed.

Newly qualified teachers earn between £20,133 and £33,936 on the main salary scale. Once they have gained sufficient experience they can progress onto the upper pay scale which ranges from £31,878 to £41,004.

If you're materialistically driven then it is highly likely that teaching will frustrate you. Teaching is not a money-motivated occupation. Unlike many private sector roles a state teacher's wage increases incrementally, and promotions rank fewer in number than those in competition for them.

With UK house prices so high can people afford to live off a teacher's wage? "The biggest issue is housing. It is almost impossible for a young teacher in places like London to get a foot on the property ladder" agrees Bangs, "I think that housing costs have acted as a disincentive to going into teaching."

Try before you buy

So what about the quarter of a million UK teachers who are not currently teaching? Maybe this figure is misleading as it includes those who have opted for early retirement or a career change, irrespective of the actual teaching job. In addition, the TDA said "people choose to leave and return to teaching for a variety of reasons – they may take a career break, raise a family or travel."

Nevertheless, it is thoroughly recommended that graduates consider all the pros and cons of teaching before taking the plunge. Seek out as much advice as possible from your university careers advisor and any teachers that you might know.

Try to spend a couple of weeks observing classes, and ideally volunteer for some further work experience. "Classroom experience is absolutely vital" Bangs explains. He describes the PGCE course as classroom experience "married with theory, practise and knowledge."

After all, you won't know whether teaching is right for you until you actually try it. Teaching isn't necessarily the only career that you will ever have, but in terms of gaining transferrable skills it is an outstanding addition to any CV.

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