

# Three things to remember when you forget everything else

It is true of most jobs that you don't really understand the difficulties and pressures unless you have actually done the job or have lived with someone who has. I occasionally have pipe dreams of owning a small café or possibly improving my fitness by becoming a postman. Yet these brief fantasies usually involve a steady stream of customers coming into the shop, never too many. It is always possible to serve them quickly, I've always got exactly what they want, and they're always happy. In my life as a postman it is always sunny and all packages are correctly addressed. There are no hailstorms, angry dogs or packages that don't fit into letter boxes.

This brings us to the outsiders' view of teaching. In this world there are 6- or 7-hour working days, and you get 13 weeks of vacation every year. The students are always attentive and appreciative – an idea gained from watching *Dead Poets Society* several times, or perhaps from soap operas in which teacher characters are rarely seen preparing lessons, manage to get to the pub each night and are usually able to meet up with another character for an affair in a free period.

However, in the interests of balance, it is equally true that some people within teaching are convinced that they suffer the greatest hardships known to man. The truth, as ever, lies between these extremes. Here are the three most important things to remember about teaching.

## **2 Three things to remember**

### **1. It could be worse**

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Often as teachers we lose perspective. Many of us have never really left education. We went to school, then to college and university, and apart from that brief summer job in the shop, our whole world has been the world of education. Some of us don't stop to think that there are some pretty unpleasant jobs out there, many of which are paid far less than we earn. On a bad day I remind myself that my father went down a mine every day for over 20 years and on more than one occasion saw colleagues carried out dead or seriously injured. He worked far harder in a physical sense than I will ever do, risked life and limb and earned less than the teachers of his day. Consider the paramedic attending a road traffic accident or the nurse working a Friday night in A & E. How about the people who repair motorways and are outside in all weather? If the point on danger and difficulty doesn't grab you, what about the mind numbing boredom generated by some jobs? Could you really be happy and fulfilled when you've just asked whether they want fries with that to the three hundredth person that day?

Teaching isn't that bad! Teaching is a job where we get paid a good wage to stand in a room and talk about things that interest us and attempt to impart our enthusiasm to others. We get to interact with people, we have some degree of autonomy and no two days are the same. Of course it is a little more complicated than that, and some positions are easier than others, but hopefully you get the point. Don't listen to the grumbling voices in the staffroom who try to convince you that the life of a teacher is the hardest life known to man. They don't really mean it – they are still in the job, after all!

### **2. It's not as easy as you think**

On the other hand, the lot of the teacher is not as easy as some people think, and there's good reason to think that it has become significantly harder in recent years. It's quite infuriating to read articles or listen to phone-ins on education. Everyone has an opinion on how teachers should teach, how often work should be marked, what exams people should sit etc. There is a lack of respect for teachers' professional expertise. Someone once used the analogy of air travel. When we go on our

holidays, we don't tell the pilot how to do his or her job; we respect the pilot's expertise. When we are having an operation, we don't give the surgeon advice on where to make the incision. Yet by and large the wider public don't always respect the expertise of the teacher. They went to school once, so of course they know how it should be done. However, for most right thinking adults, the experience of having a few children round to play or trying to organise games for a group of children full of food colouring at their son or daughter's birthday party brings the realisation that it might actually be quite difficult to be in charge of groups of children for several hours.

In addition the teacher's workload is unusual, and this is not always realised by those outside the profession. Yes, there are generous holidays, even if some of it is spent working, but evenings and weekends in term time are often filled in trying to make sure that everything gets done. Teachers don't necessarily work longer or shorter hours than anyone else, but the workload is compressed and intense. Surveys suggest a 55-60 hour working week for a teacher in term time is about the norm. If the job is that easy, why is it that half the people in Britain who are trained to teach no longer actually do so? We know that over 40% of newly qualified teachers do not make it to 5 years in the job. The amount of stress related illness and sick days in any school or college is often immense. What conclusions can we draw? Simply that the job is not easy, and not everyone can do it. Don't allow the uninformed outsider to put you down.

### **3. The struggle is mainly psychological**

So how do we as teachers navigate this minefield? In recent years I have become convinced that the main battle that we face is actually psychological. The pressure on a teacher's mind is immense. Teachers face the battle in the classroom, where groups of students, each with their own issues, turn up in varying states, ranging from keen to learn to keen to make your life a misery. To do the job well takes a high degree of skill and energy. The demands of increased paperwork, challenging students and microscopic scrutiny of results bring their own pressures. Add to that the criticism of students, parents, managers and the media. There are an awful lot of negative inputs and experiences each day and it is easy for a teacher to end up agreeing that he or she

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is not up to the job. Yet each day in the classroom we are required to go on as a beacon of positivity and encouragement. The mismatch between what goes into our mind and how we have to perform is draining and cannot be sustained unless we find ways of dealing with these stresses. How we think about ourselves and our role as teachers is crucial in determining whether we survive and succeed in the job. Once we have sorted the psychological, we can begin to deal with the more practical strategies; this we will do in the latter parts of the book.

#### ? Questions for reflection

- 1 If you weren't a teacher, what job would you do? Realistically would it match teaching for the daily variety, challenge and sense of fulfilment?
- 2 What things have you done as a teacher that you are proud of that you suspect some of your non-teacher friends would not have been able to do? Hold on to these thoughts.