

THE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE IS TEACHING AN ATTRACTIVE PROFESSION?

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Having worked in schools or educational charities for over 25 years I am often asked my opinion when conversations steer towards matters relating to teaching. The question may be how I rate the quality of a particular school, possibly its curriculum programme or even its headteacher. Sometimes the questions are more general, for example, is the teaching profession a good option for newly qualified graduates or what do I think about the state of educational funding.

Mostly I negotiate my way through the conversation diplomatically, as although I consider my opinion to be of value, I do not necessarily consider it to be a superior one or better informed than the next person. Recently however, when asked by a friend if as a fifty-year-old they should retrain to be a teacher, the significance and gravity of the question and potential consequence of any subsequent decision demanded a little more attention. Her attempts at trying to understand what teaching is like in 2019 had been difficult. She had found predominantly negative stories, unable to determine what was factually correct, what had been sensationalised or what was simply untrue.

It was clear why when a straightforward search engine question 'Is teaching an attractive profession in 2019?' results in less than encouraging reading. Articles focused on burnt out teachers (Guardian, 2018), having to pay teachers more to stay in the profession (Independent, 2019) and Department for Education strategies on how to manage the teacher retention issues (DFE, 2019). A long list of challenges quickly emerged. For example, concerns relating to student behaviour, assessment and accountability adding to what are already considered excessive workloads.

Much is focused on the health and wellbeing of both staff and students and underpinning many of the challenges is the lack of funding across the entire sector. As such, when reflecting on my response to her query, whilst recognising the importance of these challenges and the necessity to seek solutions, I was inclined to look away from the media and focus my attention on real life stories that colleagues had shared over the years. Stories that highlighted individuals overcoming the inherent challenges of working in schools funded by the public purse, which are full of often delightful but also unique and complex young people.

The first story that came to mind resulted from a perfect alignment of unfortunate circumstances that led to an assault on a member of staff and a subsequent broken arm. The situation was fodder for sensationalist tabloid headlines and held potentially damaging consequences for the school and its wider community. There were significant challenges in managing a complicated situation that could escalate quickly if allowed, where poorly thought through reactions would carry long term ramifications. However, what stood out as being at the heart of the story was not the drama that had evidently unfolded. It was in fact the opportunities that had emerged from the challenges faced and how these opportunities were recognised and then developed.

The serious issues involved had not been glossed over and the appropriate actions had been taken, but leading on from these arose examples of genuine collaboration and commitment to make significant change. The local community, police and support services involved had taken the opportunity to work with the school to strengthen processes, policies and perhaps most importantly, relationships. It was the positive human story that came to the fore, not the negativity of what was clearly a shocking incident.

The second example centres around personal responsibility and positivity. A middle leader was on the verge of leaving the profession. Feeling undervalued and overworked they were at a loss of how to manage an increasing number of ongoing challenges related to their role. Although aware of the professional bodies that could potentially offer support, these seemed inaccessible and they were reluctant to show what they considered vulnerability in asking for help. However, help was found following a school INSET day where the Art of Brilliance had run a workshop based on their publication 'The Art of Being a Brilliant Middle Leader', (Toward, Henley and Cope, 2016). The focus of the Brilliant books, many written for those in education, is to challenge the reader to find out what works for them and to do more of it.

Using a considerable amount of humour and easy language an important message is delivered, namely that oneself is the key player in making opportunities and taking positive action. Fundamentally, looking to be your best self in whatever situation you find yourself. Much of what is written may initially appear as fairly obvious, but it is the obvious that we most often miss. For our middle leader a focus on being their best self-enabled them to take advantage of a host of strategies that supported them in overcoming the challenges that at one point had appeared too overwhelming.

Returning to the question of retraining to become a teacher, my response did not consist of a list of positives and negatives aimed at providing an evidenced based answer. Instead, I used these stories to demonstrate that the reality of being a teacher is different for each of us. It can be influenced by the school you work in or your line manager but like most else in life we have a choice to adopt a lens that focuses on the challenges in front of us or the opportunities that they may bring.

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