

“The environment for teachers to work in is unsustainable, I’m glad I’ve left”

Previous teacher speaks out about flawed education system and why she gets more satisfaction working with a youth charity

Written by Anna Walters, Programme Coordinator at Greater Manchester Youth Network

My previous job as a teacher was an experience I’m grateful for, but I’m glad I moved to a youth charity where I can really make a difference to our young people.

I absolutely loved being a maths teacher after completing my teacher training when I finished university. I had a very inspiring teacher when I was a student and I held her in such high regard that I wanted to be a role model like that for a young person.

I worked at the secondary school I was placed in for my training for 3 years, and I really did enjoy connecting with the students and supporting them with their learning.

I was well supported at the school with the Head of my department always being there to listen and to guide me, but that didn’t change the overwhelming workload that I always had looming over me.

I was offered a substantial pay rise to take on a more senior role at the school with more responsibility, as the school was desperate to fill this position. However, not even this incentive was enough to keep me in the teaching world. While a lot has been in the news recently around teacher’s pay and strikes, for me it wasn’t about that.

I had started thinking about leaving teaching before this, as the work-life balance had become weighted overwhelmingly towards work, with little free time outside of that, and the lack of freedom I had compared to other friends was strikingly apparent. Apart from never particularly being driven by money, enjoying my job has always been my priority, and I got to a point where I couldn’t honestly say that I was.

I had a break from teaching when I left my school, wanting to take time to work out what I valued in a job and what I wanted to achieve. I looked into working for charities because I knew the environments would be less intense, but still focused on making a difference to the young people of Greater Manchester.

Working in a school is so prescribed, there are always rigid assessments with limited creativity allowed. I was frustrated with the education system, there was so much I was required to do with the students that just wasn’t beneficial to them.

Since joining Greater Manchester Youth Network (GMYN), I’ve seen the young people really thrive by being able to have an influence over the programmes they attend.

I have been able to better support the young people I work with now as I have the space and time to listen to their needs and take the right steps to help them overcome barriers and achieve their goals.

As a classroom teacher you are limited in providing the additional support which particularly students with SEN or SEMH seriously require, I felt like I was letting these students down.

But my role at GMYN has much more of a pastoral element than before as a teacher, I have the time to listen and also work collaboratively with the other staff to support the young people.

In schools everything comes from the top, but at GMYN the staff working with the young people are making the decisions, which is exactly how it should be.

The curriculum can feel outdated in areas and more emphasis should be placed on learning practical lessons and skills relevant to the student's lives. Teachers must follow this curriculum and often don't have much creative control to allow lessons to be more tailored to student's interests.

At GMYN this is totally different, the young people lead the sessions – we are just there to support them with their ambitions.

I enjoy working in the charity sector, and specifically at GMYN, because of the supportive environment and the way that staff are valued. Our knowledge and experience are immensely appreciated.

I took a pay cut to move from teaching to the charity sector, but I stand by that being a very worthwhile decision because of the healthy work life balance I now have.

I was so conditioned to do hours of work in the evening outside of my contracted hours, and after three years of consistently working during what was meant to be my free time, I just knew I couldn't continue like that.

I still find it slightly crazy, even though it's coming up to two years since I left teaching, that I still have time to myself once I've finished work.

I have never ruled out that I might go back into teaching, but I won't go back until there is a change in the system. In the two years since I left, the noise around the education system has just got worse and worse and worse.

I feel for my friends who are still teaching, they put up with so much but see little change to support teachers. Nobody should be put under the amount of pressure they are at work, there needs to be a big culture shift before I'd think about going back.

I really did love teaching, I miss the classes that I taught and the students. It was a privilege to be responsible for the achievement of so many young people. But for me it wasn't worth pursuing teaching because of the toxic working environment that I had to suffer in, which

was nothing to do with the school but everything to do with the underlying issues the education system poses.

The solution is not throwing money at trainee teachers, who take a career in teaching because the pay is better than the average graduate salary.

Relieving the workload of teachers and improving the environment they work in is urgently needed.

So many teachers are leaving to work in other professions, there needs to be a focus on retaining teachers to have a chance of keeping them in the system.

I truly feel like I jumped from a sinking ship and I definitely got out of teaching at the right time. But when I left I never thought it would be forever so I really do want change to take place, for the environment to grow and be somewhere I might go back to one day.