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Changing the image of teaching

The profession mustn't let this opportunity go to waste

Harry Hudson

Education is in the spotlight in a way it hasn't been for decades, and much has been said about how teaching can 'build back better' after the pandemic. Yet step back from all the talk of 'catch up funding' and ways our classroom practice can be improved by having taught online, and there's an even bigger picture.

For all the misery it has brought, the coronavirus also offers the opportunity for a long-overdue shift in how society perceives teaching as a profession.

As a recent graduate, I can attest that prejudice against teaching as a career is still going strong. Teaching is not seen as worthy of those with top grades and aspiration, while the stereotype still persists that it is the route only for the feckless few who don't know what else to do.

Many potentially excellent teachers don't even consider it because of the silent stigma the profession faces. Nor is this attitude limited to the young: wider society continues to look down upon teaching as a merely passable fallback.

The problem is that everyone has had some experience of education, nearly everyone has gone to school, and everyone therefore thinks that they 'know' teaching. This means that private perceptions and public opinion are constantly shaped by decades-old memories of the classroom, and often not particularly positive memories at that. Many of those who make the news went to school in the 70s and 80s, and teaching has clearly moved on since then.

This persistent, negative perception of teaching is an act of societal self-harm. We have tolerated it for too long. Not only is it bizarre that we continue to denigrate a profession of enormous societal importance, but I don't need to spell out to fellow teachers, it is also simply inaccurate. The public service ethos runs deep among teachers in 2021.

I have often been told that the conversation about societal attitudes towards teaching has been had (has it?), and that nothing has ever come of it – a shrug of the shoulders, and a 'thus it ever was'. This is not good enough, and society now

has an unparalleled opportunity to right the wrongs that have been lazily perpetuated for so long.

I don't pretend to have all the answers to this. However, this conversation needs to be had now, before things just slide back to the *status quo ante*. Funding is always going to be an issue, and it's obviously important that governments of all stripes invest properly in education, but equally it's not enough for teaching simply to demand more money. Money matters, but we also need to think bigger thoughts.

First, teaching needs to develop more of a cutting edge. We should do more to emphasise the neuroscience increasingly informing modern practice, and dispel the wooliness that characterises many people's impression of teaching.

Now that the pandemic has brought many parents up close and personal with the reality of trying to teach, we should seize this opportunity to say more about the science of instruction. We are specialists in understanding how young people learn best, and we shouldn't be afraid to say so.

Second, teaching could also get an immediate shot in the arm by a concerted campaign of celebrities and respected public figures speaking positively about their experiences of school and teachers. Few could listen to the famous few minutes of Ian Wright on *Desert Island Discs* (compulsory listening on all ITT programmes) and not think of the profession in a new light. Such messages, coming from a range of people who society deems to have 'made it', might even form the basis of a new recruitment campaign.

A rapid-fire burst of well-publicised positivity could provide the impetus required for a longer-term shift in attitudes.

Finally, teaching should focus more on selling the personal and professional benefits of the job. Government adverts often focus on the altruistic reasons for joining the profession, and there is certainly a place for this: there is a large pool of idealistic graduates who want to change lives and improve society, and indeed having some sort of social conscience is important in a teacher.

Alongside this sort of messaging we also need to say more about the leadership opportunities and career progression inherent to the profession, the huge range of skills it develops, and the intellectual challenges it poses.

Teaching needs to be savvier about tapping into the different aspirations of young graduates, and recognise the risks of coming across as merely another branch of the third sector.

We all need to think about this – other thoughts are not only welcome, but urgently needed.

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