

[Home](#) » [Education News](#) » Article

Classroom burnout triggers teacher opt-out



Overwork prompted Gabriel Baldwin to leave teaching for overseas travel after three years.

Photo: *Supplied*

February 26, 2007

Belinda Hogan finds out why so many young teachers leave the job, and Caroline Milburn looks at why others should, and don't.

GABRIEL BALDWIN, 25, is working as a waitress - and skiing - in Canada after travelling through Europe for a year. To do this she walked away from a career as a high-school teacher after just three years because she felt burnt out. Joanne O'Brien, 37, recently left just shy of a decade as a teacher because a new job opportunity was far more appealing. Kerryn Manifold, 28, gave it all up after five years because, he said, he wanted his life back. Alison Venning, 40, taught for six years and then started her own business. Angela Cullen, 31, left after seven years because she was sick of battling against what she considered an outdated curriculum.

Once upon a time, teaching was a vocation for life. You trained, you taught and you retired with a certificate of long service. Now, despite a teacher shortage, many young teachers are opting out. A recent Australian Education Union survey showed that 47 per cent of beginning teachers did not see themselves teaching in 10 years.

Why?

It is not only an Australian phenomenon. A 2003 Victorian Department of Education and Training report found that in the US a third of teachers leave the profession within three years and almost half within five years. In Britain, a 2003 survey by the University of Buckingham found that 30 per cent of teachers who left teaching that year had been in the profession less than five years.

There are many reasons for this. Younger teachers point to issues such as overwork, pay structures, being put on contract without assurance of permanency, community expectations, student

management and lack of social status. Others say it is a sign of the times - that generation X and Y have different approaches to work than their babyboomer colleagues.

Ms Baldwin is the daughter of a teacher. All her life she wanted to be a teacher and she graduated top of her class in 2003 from Melbourne University. "I had it in my mind to become a teacher for as long as I can remember," she says. "But after three years I had had enough." Overwork was the major issue for her. "It is a job you can never leave and I had enough of the really long hours I worked," she says. "It frustrated me to see my flatmates come home and switch off."

Mr Manifold, who first taught in the rural Queensland community of Bell, agrees. "I would get to work at 7am, finish at 10pm at home and found that, (when) living in a remote community, teaching becomes your life."

They, like others, resented that on top of all the meetings after school, paperwork and student management issues, lesson preparation had to occur in their own time. Ms O'Brien feels that curriculum planning becomes the least of a teacher's priorities. "By the time I had done everything that needed to be done, there wasn't enough time or I was too tired to then start planning dramatic, interesting and new lessons, which is a shame," she says.

According to a recent AEU beginning teacher survey, 64 per cent of new teachers feel that the immense workload is their major concern. Victorian AEU president Mary Bluett says young teachers are enthusiastic and want to do it all, but this comes at a price. She says governments need to give schools the time and resources to better enable new teachers to ease in. "We need to give a reduced teaching load to people, particularly in their first year of teaching," she says. But have things changed that much? Lorraine McLaren, a Melbourne-based teacher of 40 years, feels that although graduate teachers' workloads are ridiculous, teaching in the past was just as onerous. "Classes were huge and we didn't have photocopiers," she says.

Hays recruitment consultants, which recently surveyed what younger generations wanted in their work, found that they demanded a work-life balance. Working in education, according to some younger teachers, doesn't seem to deliver that.

Ms O'Brien, who now works for local government, says that not having the time to enjoy her weekends and holidays was a major reason she left teaching. She now has only four weeks' annual leave but says she is far happier. "I sleep well, I am less stressed, I have holidays without feeling I should be at home marking."

Dr Gordon Tait, senior lecturer at the Queensland University of Technology school of cultural and language studies, says it is not surprising to see young teachers walking out the classroom door. "I think schools are a dumping ground for every new idea, plan and new bit of social responsibility on how to govern the conduct of children," he says. Often young teachers are sent to the more difficult schools and find it tough.

According to the NSW Teachers Federation, scores of resignations over the past 12 months from new teachers are due to burnout. Ms Baldwin, who worked in a school that was labelled "tough", agrees that teachers wear many hats, adding to workloads. "We are the only stable person in some students' lives," Ms Baldwin says. "We teach students their social skills, their manners (and) not just the academic side. It's mentally exhausting."

Victorian Minister for Education Services, Jacinta Allan, acknowledges that some students pose a range of confronting issues. "There is no doubt that teaching is a challenging profession," she says, "which is why the Victorian Education Department provides around \$40 to \$50 million in funding through student support programs."

But does this solve the problems that young teachers face? Ms O'Brien thinks not. "Too much responsibility is placed on us to develop students socially," she says. "And I wasn't being paid enough for that."

Ms McLaren agrees this part of teaching has changed. "Teachers in the past ruled and the profession does not have the respect it used to," she says. "But perhaps younger teachers don't have as much backbone these days."

The teacher graduate salary, \$46,127 in Victoria, is one of the highest of all professions. But after graduating it takes a decade or more to reach the highest pay scale, and about 20 years to get into a management role. This can seem a long time to a young person.

Dr Tait agrees. "Young teachers (ask), 'How is it that a plumber who doesn't have my education, doesn't face the kinds of problems I face, (is) paid two to three times more than me?'" Ms Cullen says her decision to leave teaching had a lot do with having more opportunities to improve her work conditions. "I am more valued where I am now than when I was a teacher," she says. "And the pay is better."

Victoria's former shadow education spokesman, Victor Perton, believes more frequent career change is a sign of our times. "I think now it will be a rare thing for a 20-year-old to say, 'I want to be a teacher until I am 65'," he says. "They see it as a death sentence."

Jacinta Allan agrees. "I think we are seeing professionals in their 30s and 40s exercising the choice to move into different fields," she says. "The thing with teaching is that it gives you such a broad range of skills that are very transferable." Lenore Maus, 22, is a pre-service teacher about to enter the classroom. She sees teaching as her vocation, but agrees that a lot of young people won't necessarily stay in it. "It's all too easy for my generation to pack up and go, which is really sad for teaching," she says.

But where are these young teachers going? Ms O'Brien works in community development; Mr Manifold is studying journalism; Ms Cullen is a corporate communications officer; Ms Venning runs an events company with her husband; while Ms Baldwin is travelling.

Ms Baldwin says that three of the good friends she graduated with are also no longer teaching. "One is a public servant, one is becoming an accountant and the other is becoming a zoologist," she says. "All have vowed never to stand in a classroom again."

So what are governments going to do about the teacher shortage? One solution is recruiting people from other professions via career-exchange programs. Also, refresher programs are available for teachers who want to return to the profession after an absence.

Ms Bluett feels governments have to subsidise teaching degrees and fix up the contract systems so graduate teachers stay in Australia. "As many as 15,000 are in the UK alone," she says.

Dr Tait sees that people will stay in careers that are worth staying in. "If people are drifting out of teaching, the reasons are simple," he says. "It is down to the conditions and the fact that culturally teachers don't get the respect they deserve."

Ms Baldwin believes something needs to be done about the young teacher exodus quickly before the shortage gets to dire stages. "We need our good teachers to stay in the classroom," she says. "But governments have to realise that they need to fix the conditions and have incentives before they get out."

When you see news happening: SMS/MMS: 0406 THE AGE (0406 843 243), or [email us](#). **More**

[Subscribe to The Age and save up to 35%*](#)

Copyright © 2007. The Age Company Ltd.