

# The Work of The Teacher Support Network

Patrick Nash

## The experiences of young people today

As an organisation, we start with children and young people – not just in my country, but also in every country of the world. Lots is said about children being the future and many more eloquent and important people than I have said this better than I could do, so I assume that we can all agree that this is a fact. Today's children are our future.

Before I continue, I invite you to spend a few minutes addressing this question: if you ask young people throughout the world what they believe to be the routes to success or in some cases routes out of poverty and oppression, which routes would they identify?

I ask you to think not of your beliefs but those of young people. Many, too many, will say dealing drugs, being a sports star, being a rap artist, extremism. Of course, these are not the only ones, and for some education

will be high on the agenda. But there is a long way to go before all children are motivated by education to improve their own lives and that of their families, their communities, their nations and ultimately our small planet. So, the shared vision of all those involved in education must be to provide the best possible learning experience for young people. Not just in terms of content or curriculum but in terms of the educational process.

In other words, what is the experience of going to school each day? Is it inspiring, engaging or, in the words of my teenage daughter, cool to be at school? Or is it tedious, uninspiring, depressing and dangerous? I as a parent know what I want for my kids, and I am sure you do too. So how do we achieve this vision of an inspiring and engaging and, yes, cool, learning experience?

Patrick Nash became chief executive of the Teacher Support Network ([www.teachersupport.info](http://www.teachersupport.info)) in 1998. He has over twenty years' experience in developing and leading successful non-profit projects and organisations. Since his appointment, the charity has been transformed from a traditional benevolent fund offering grants and financial assistance into a national charity displaying a wide range of innovative and practical support for working and retired teachers. Last year, Patrick developed Worklife Support ([www.worklifesupport.com](http://www.worklifesupport.com)). These new set of support services ensure education staff are healthy, motivated and happy at work and assist employers to reduce absence costs, improve morale and performance and aid retention of teachers. This article is an abridged version of a speech he gave to the Club of Geneva, a global organisation focussing on change in the workplace.

## The Influence of the Teacher

While the achievement of this vision involves many people and agencies, ultimately the personal and professional effectiveness and energy of the teaching profession determines the quality of this learning experience. Surely it is the bottom line in education. Five years ago when I entered the education arena, what little I knew about teachers was confined to my own children's experience of school. My children's teachers were vital people in their lives. The girls would come home and tell me what the teacher had said, what their view of the world was. I would also hear about how the teacher was feeling, 'she was grumpy today', 'today she was lots of fun'. I got to hear that a teacher was getting married, was pregnant, had a new house. I got to know how they felt, what was important for them, how they viewed the world. And all of this before I had met the teacher.

As my eldest became a teenager, we were having meetings about her future, in terms of college and university choices, what she might be inspired to do in her adult life. We had long political, social and philosophical debates, and often arguments, over the kitchen table. We discussed important health and life issues – drugs and alcohol, boyfriends, sex and pregnancy, career and academic choices, etc. Guess whose opinions I kept hearing through these discussions? Yes, you've guessed it – her teacher's opinions.

Those of you fortunate to have children will I am sure agree that we come to know intimately, value highly, love and sometimes hate our children's teachers. They are, alongside us as parents, the dominant influencers in the lives of our children. So how their teachers feel about their own work, their own lives, their own health – these are not just important from a productivity perspective – these are vital to

the future of the next generation – this means your kids and mine. And don't we know about it when it all goes horribly wrong:

- ◆ the failing school
- ◆ falling standards
- ◆ teachers leaving
- ◆ classroom violence
- ◆ an endless stream of substitute teachers  
- sometimes a different one every day.

What happens to our children? They lose interest, they stop learning and they lose their enthusiasm for life. What do we do – we try to intervene; sometimes we will move house, town or job, so that we can try to solve the problem for our child and get them into another school. So often when I ask people why they want a new job, they say I am moving to get to a better school for my child.

## Teacher Stress

The popular notion that teaching is easy, with a short working day and long holidays belies reality. Many jobs are stressful but research shows clearly that few are more stressful than teaching.

The evidence is stark, teachers suffer greater stress than almost any other working group and this takes a toll on their long-term health and well being. In the UK, half of retirements due to ill health in the profession are because of mental health problems, significantly higher than for the rest of the working population.

The impact on the health and effectiveness of individual teachers can be catastrophic. The International Stress Management Association in a definitive analysis of the problem asserts that teaching is unique because of factors that are intrinsic to teaching such as pupil behaviour and factors that are systemic, including the way education is organised and managed. This

study goes on to suggest teachers are 'cognitively vulnerable to stress' because of their commitment and high personal expectations.

So I could have said teachers are important people, and often do just that. But, to be perfectly honest, if we cannot make the teaching profession a vibrant, engaging, healthy and well rewarded, we are in deep trouble not just now, but for the years to come – trouble in terms of the attitudes, enthusiasm, knowledge and inspiration of our children who will become our new citizens, workers, parents, managers, entrepreneurs and leaders very soon.

Surely this touches the lives of all children sitting in classrooms, whether in hi-tech computer suites or in the open air under a tree, being taught by a teacher who may be facing many of the same problems as his or her colleague elsewhere in the world. Each year, I meet teachers from all continents who share similar stories of what the challenges facing teachers are today.

When I started creating the Teacher Support Network of today, these were the headlines in the UK papers

- ◆ 'Teacher shortage worst in years'
- ◆ Term starts with 5000 vacancies'
- ◆ '40% of teachers leave after 3 years'
- ◆ 'London schools poaching teachers from Africa and Asia'
- ◆ 'Headteachers forced to hire bad teachers And so on... Teaching was going through its greatest crisis yet in the UK, and although we have made much progress, we have a very long way still to go. For example, a quarter of a million science and IT graduates are qualifying every year in India and as a result global communications companies are relocating there. And yet in Britain we

struggle to recruit science and IT teachers – there simply aren't any.

But don't just take this from me. I am talking about a global problem recognised by a recent report by UNESCO and OECD. This excellent report concludes that:

- Teachers are the key to future social order and economic growth.
- There is a looming shortage of teachers, a threat to the quality of teaching and a lack of understanding by the public and policy-makers of the impact this will have.
- We ignore the needs of teachers at our peril.
- The uniqueness of teaching must be recognised and action taken to secure sufficient teachers of the right calibre to ensure effective education that prepares young people and societies for the future.
- Teaching throughout the world is undergoing dramatic change.
- Insufficient imagination, thought and action is being applied to supporting teachers.
- Workload, remuneration and conditions of employment are essential elements in attracting; retaining and motivating teachers but their needs and well-being are not being met.

There are many important quotes from this report – here are some of them:

'Education and training play a crucial role in helping individuals and societies to adapt to profound social, economic and cultural change.

'Policy makers and society at large have high expectations of teachers as professionals, role models and community leaders. Teachers are asked to manage the far-reaching changes that are taking place in and outside of schools and to implement the complex reforms of education systems that are underway...'

'The demands placed on teachers are therefore considerable. The balance between what is required of teachers and what is offered to them has a significant impact on the composition of the teaching force and the quality of teaching. Attracting skilled individuals and retaining them in the teaching profession is an essential prerequisite for ensuring high quality education in the future.'

'Teachers are expected to respond to an increasing range of societal demands, how are they enabled to do so? Government policies are often contradictory – greater expectations are often accompanied by fewer resources. Because of this, some observers have warned that teachers are at risk of becoming casualties rather than catalysts of change. In order to meet the changing demands of the 21st century, policy makers need to foster a well qualified, well equipped and motivated workforce'

'Teachers are asked to be not only knowledgeable and innovative but also highly disciplined, strongly motivated and dedicated' (Malaysia)

The school as a workplace must therefore support and enhance the effectiveness and motivation of teachers - this is not a nice idea if we have funds available, it is an absolute necessity.

Here are some basic statistics on the UK situation three years ago:

Workplace stress occurs for teachers four times as often as for private sector employees

Only 35% of trainee teachers remain as teachers within three years of completing their training

Over 45% of teachers are experiencing some symptoms of work related stress

### **The Role of Teacher Support Network**

Teacher Support Network was established out of an old welfare fund. Just five years ago we looked at the problems I have been describing. We looked at the research (of which there was already plenty) and most importantly we spent a lot of time listening

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to teachers, touring round Britain, meeting teachers, headteachers, employers, school governors, trade unionists and others.

We have a simple vision – to ensure that every teacher (and I include all those working in education) gets the best possible

support – practical, emotional, developmental and organisational – so that they can be effective, inspirational and create the best possible learning experience for young people. What amazed me at the time was that despite all this research, despite all the headlines, despite all the experiences of teachers, there was no action being taken. No one had looked at the problems and was taking a strategic approach to solving them.

From that simple vision, we have developed strategic approaches to the education workplace. We are of course engaged in providing support to individuals, such as counselling, employee assistance programmes, financial support and health care – but this is not our main area of focus

anymore. We are now working to address the structural changes that are needed to make sure that our education system recognises that the teaching profession is at the heart of, and not the mercy of (as they often feel) the process. And we are having significant successes.

In the last four years, we have

**1.** Established the UK's largest workplace counselling service – Teacher Support Line. This provides vital counselling and support services to thousands of teachers every month, which is coaching teachers to identify their own unique teaching approach and challenges and become creative in ways that speak to their original inspiration for becoming teachers. Not only is this a vital service in and on itself, but we also inform the education policy arena with the largest data bank on what the experience of teaching is in the UK. I doubt that there is a bigger data set on teachers experience anywhere in the world.

**2.** Developed an innovative school based organisational development programme – called Well-Being – that facilitates radical (or gradual) change in the school workplace, based entirely on the experience and aspirations of the school workforce – teachers, principals, managers, support staff and others. The premise is simple – change is effective and sustainable when it is chosen and delivered by the staff of the school, which this programme facilitates. The Well-Being Programme has been adopted by nearly a quarter of the school authorities in the UK and we have just launched a major project in London schools funded by the UK Department of Education. Employers and government are sitting up and taking notice of a strategic programme that puts employees at the centre of a transformative process – and in the process is having significant on student learning outcomes and

the whole culture of schools as both workplaces and centres of dynamic learning.

**3.** Created support and development programmes for student and newly qualified teachers – ensuring that the next generation of teachers are empowered to make effective choices as teachers and maintain the inspiration that made them train as teachers, which frankly so often gets ground down into cynicism by policy interventions.

This ensures that our new teachers are teaching not just a curriculum, but a capacity for independent thought based on individual inspiration. So we can teach young people to think – not just deliver facts and stats.

**4.** Creating a network of Teacher Support organisations globally. We are learning that there are similarities in terms of the experience of teachers in almost every country of the world. The UNESCO report recognises this, but in the last two years we have created a framework in which we can apply what is common as well as address what is unique in terms of the vision of creating an engaged and inspirational teaching force worldwide. So, in the UK, we have established individual Teacher Support organisations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In the last two years, we have begun the enormous task of building Teacher Support Network in the USA, poised to launch a number of pilot programmes in cities and states of the USA as soon as we can secure funding (no mean task). We have been sounded out by the European Union to develop pilot programmes in all the member states. We have had approaches from as far afield as Australia and South Africa. Some would call this foolhardy – but our bottom up and yet strategic approach to creating a vibrant teaching force is an idea whose time has come – that if teachers aren't healthy and inspired, what hope is there for the children they teach?

## 5. Combining with Others

But we can't do this by ourselves. As a not-for-profit NGO, we have managed to pull together a wide constituency of the more traditional interests groups in the education sector – the trade unions, employers, national and local government, school governing boards, education think-tanks and agencies, parent groups, teacher training colleges and research bodies – alongside the practitioners themselves: teachers, principals and managers, support staff.

Our experience is that change grows out of relational dialogue rather than political strategy, which is the unique contribution that Teachers Support Network makes. This is not always easy – there are deeply entrenched positions in education, often dedicated to maintaining the status quo. But slowly, step by step, one school at a time, we are seeing significant and deep change.

### Making a Difference

You may ask are we making a difference? Yes we are. Teacher Support Network commissioned work from a research agency look at the changes in schools we have been working with over the last one to three years in England. The results are startling. In terms of human resource data, of all the participating schools

- 75% saw significant reductions in sickness and absence
- 57% found it easier to recruit new staff
- 70% saw significant improvements in staff retention – that means teachers staying in the job because they want to. This is a key issue in UK education, especially with a full employment economy.
- And 67% of schools saw significant improvements in retention of newly

qualified staff, which set against the fact of a 40% loss of new teachers in their first three years is a phenomenal achievement.

- In terms of staff performance, participating schools saw significant improvements in
- Staff performance – 88%
- Improved communication between staff – 80%
- Staff morale – 80%

In the UK, there is now recognition that the culture and ethos of a school are crucial factors in terms of the success and achievement of students. The survey showed that of all schools in our programmes

- 89% saw significant improvements in school culture and ethos
- 86% saw significant improvements in the effectiveness of the school
- 85% saw significant improvements in the overall sense of community within the school
- These are key drivers which provide a catalyst for cultural change in schools as communities, as centres of learning and excellence and crucially, as healthy and effective workplaces.

But the most stunning results have been where we look at the performance of the children and young people in the schools. As a direct result of a programme entirely focussed on the staff and the school as a workplace, we saw

- 93% of schools recording significant improvements in communication between teachers and students
- 85% showing such improvements in student behaviour – which is normally cited as one of the key stress factors for teachers

- 73% of schools recorded improvements in student results in examinations or testing.

I could rattle off statistics on sickness absence, staff retention, and lots more. But I won't. What these statistics demonstrate is that there is a 'fundamental need' for change – for change of policy and practice that focuses firmly on the basis of need. In other words, if you focus resources on teachers, the rest will take care of itself.

There is a huge task ahead if we are to create a teaching profession for the 21st century and beyond. We have a terrible legacy of neglect to reverse. For too long, teaching, which was once seen as the most noble of professions, has been allowed to become a marginalized occupation.

Governments, policy makers and funders have too long focussed on students but neglected teachers. In the UK, we have begun to help turn this tide.

-We have begun to help give teachers self-respect, a sense of purpose, support in tough times and optimism for good ones.

-We have facilitated school communities coming together to create change for good, change that lasts and change that inspires teacher and student alike.

-The results in terms of student achievement, behaviour and motivation are immediate.

-The point being that if you affect teachers, you stimulate the students that they teach.

This is a major opportunity – a change to ensure that the next generation of your students, employees, managers and captains of industry are of the highest calibre

to face the challenges that you know of now and the ones that you don't. We are inviting corporations, governments and other key stakeholders to partner with us in this venture. Not because it is a nice idea, or a piece of corporate social responsibility, but because it is a vital issue for you, now, tomorrow and for years to come. The reality is that far too often corporations, government and foundations fund student projects and ignore teachers. With the benefit of hindsight such projects largely fail to address the fact that teachers are at the core of the educational process.

There are three quarters of a million pages of research on the Internet telling us that teachers' stress is a worldwide problem. All of them are research papers. I haven't read every single one, but those I have read, from Australia to Austria, from India to Indiana are remarkably in their similarity. All of them will tell you the same thing; teachers are under pressure and losing inspiration.

Research usually focuses on teacher stress caused by student behaviour, long hours or workload: consequences are usually restricted to the health impact, rather than the impact on student achievement, which is all about teacher inspiration and motivation. While a small proportion of papers offer practical remedies, few if any explore the effect of this phenomenon on costs, recruitment and the educational experience of young people. None considers the wider, strategic impact. I could find only one reference to the global impact and that was from the UNESCO funded study into the decline in the status of teaching and teachers internationally. At Teacher Support Network we are reversing this process by putting the welfare of the teacher at the core of our work.

