

Mile in My Shoes: Rebekah's story

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I can really very vividly remember a conversation with my mum about what I wanted to do with my life. She had always told me I should be a teacher and like any good teenager, I told her that she was absolutely wrong, that I had hated school. And I sat down and told her what I wanted out of a job. And she sat back very smugly and showed me the list, which included making a difference in the world and having a job that did something different every day and all sorts of other things. And she didn't have to say anything, she just smugly looked at me while I said, 'Yes, I know!' *Laughs.*

So, my name is Rebekah Butler. I am a secondary school English teacher, and I teach in Barnstable in North Devon.

I grew up feeling like there was nothing for me in this little rural area and I couldn't wait to get away. So, I went off to the big city as soon as I could. And once I had done my university and a little bit of travelling, I realised that teaching was the career for me. And I realised how much I wanted to come back to my own community and give something back to that community. And this is where I've stayed.

I've been teaching now for 25 years in North Devon. And the whole of North Devon has areas of outstanding beauty. But what it's less well known for, are areas of extreme deprivation and poverty. There is also a price for the isolation that we have. We don't have the infrastructure and the resources that come with bigger areas, the less isolated areas have, to help to solve those problems.

I think the job I do now is unrecognisable almost from the job I started back in the late Nineties, with the exception that I still turn up at a school and there are still teenagers sitting in front of me. And I still try and get them to read a book and write some stuff. In the past, you used to have a teacher might keep perhaps a muesli bar in their drawer for the odd child who perhaps, they knew wouldn't have had breakfast at home. You know in schools now we run what basically amounts to a food bank, and we're not the only school that does that. We're sending home students with shopping bags full of pasta and basics. And these kids, these families rely on that. And that's not the odd child. There are groups of children. That is a huge change over the years that I've been teaching. These teenagers thinking about, 'I must take home bags of shopping for my family.'

And so, in terms of what I see for the students, the expectations on them are massively higher. The mental health of the students, I've never seen anything like it in my career. So, my job that I used to have, schools would fund places for students who were struggling in school, mostly due to things to do with their behaviour or their mental health needs. That funding dried up a long time ago. And all of these students now who are struggling are all having to be catered for in mainstream education. Which means there's an increased

pressure. And there's less and less resources to help, particularly in isolated areas because where you've got cities, there is more ability to share resources amongst different schools. I will deal with students who are self-harming as part of my daily job now and I feel that is not something that I experienced in first 10, 15 years of my teaching. In fact, my first year of teaching I think I had two students in my class who I really kept an eye on. They had some real needs, and I was on top of those. Now, we're talking about, a class of about 30, I would say I'm looking very carefully at least 18 at any one time. There are significant numbers in there who have mental health needs that need... constant monitoring. Now, I don't want to make it sound like there are 18 kids who are self-harming in extreme danger... There aren't. But that just wasn't a thing I had to monitor when I started teaching.

I have been in a situation where a student had talked to me about the fact that they had self-harmed recently. And that's a real mental health crisis, surely. How do I know that this child isn't going to go and do something more serious? I'd been trained to know what the procedures were for me, and I felt confident in that, but I felt that that wasn't adequate. And when I asked about this, I was told there was a two-year waiting list for child mental health services. She's currently in year nine, she'll be leaving us by then. Well, that's not helping that child. That's not adequate, is it? And I am not a mental health professional. I am not a trained counsellor. I'm not a medical professional. I am an English teacher.

My husband left teaching last year after 12 years of teaching. He was a great teacher, but he left teaching because he really just felt that the joy had gone from it, and it was all about pressure and what teachers had to do better. And he felt like he could never, maybe, do enough. And that's something that I've heard a lot of teachers say, that it never feels like they can do enough. I have seen the... more and more of my colleagues suffer with mental health and stress. And that is hard. And now we're a profession – we're under threat, I think. I feel we... in this area, struggles to recruit as well, even though we're a, such a beautiful area to live. You know, if you live in this area and you're a professional earning a good wage, this should be a really great, attractive place to do the job. And my worry is that if we can't recruit in our profession in this area, what does that mean for our children in this area. Because they're already disadvantaged by how isolated we are. If we can't get really great teachers standing in front of them, then that's going to be an increased disadvantage.

The kids who grow up here are not blind to the things that they have got, but I – I don't think aren't equal for them. In this area we see generation after generation coming through, stuck in a cycle of poverty. And that is a really common feature of North Devon. It doesn't come from laziness at all because I know these kids, it's not about that. It comes from a lack of self-esteem, and it comes from an inability to see themselves somewhere, in a role, in a job. And a fear of putting themselves out there, a fear of failure. When you've seen your parents and your grandparents unable to hold down long-term jobs, it's much easier, isn't it, to say, 'Yeah, well, that's what I'm gonna do.' And that is a real issue for us in this area.

We have a number of things in schools encouraging these students... and it's all about boosting their self-esteem and boosting their ability to speak in front of other people. And it's all about giving the skills that might encourage them.



I still love it, I love the interaction with the students, and I get enough from that to balance the pressure. 25 years ago, I absolutely wanted a job that gave me the opportunity to make a difference and I – still now believe that the job I do makes a difference. Even on the hardest days there are times when a smile in the right place, a comment in the right place, can alter the course of a child’s life. And if I didn’t believe that then I would change my career in a heartbeat.