

# Teachers earn and deserve their holidays

- [Gillian Bouras](#)
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It's that time again, when exhausted Australasian teachers are wondering whether they'll make the distance and finish the school year with their sanity more or less intact. It's also the time when they have to endure snide remarks about a *really cushy job* and *all those holidays*.



But it's not a cushy job, and teachers get the holidays only because the children get them: in any case, teachers often stay on after their students have left, and also return to school days before those same students are due back, while part of the summer break is usually spent on preparation for the next year.

My mother, a teacher given to gnomonic utterances, was occasionally heard to remark that teaching 'runs in the family like wooden legs'. This was her way of pointing out that my brother and I were third-generation teachers, having followed in our parents' and grandfather's footsteps. A great-uncle, an uncle and two aunts were also teachers, and so was a cousin.

In earlier times, of course, teaching ensured upward social mobility (some of our pioneering ancestors had been illiterate) and a means of getting a free education.

Teaching has never enjoyed much status. Generations have been haunted by George Bernard Shaw's scathing judgment that those who can, do, those who can't, teach. It is also often thought that anybody can teach, but experts are not necessarily guaranteed to be effective communicators.

And how many people could cope with teaching, say, in the old one-teacher rural schools? My parents and grandfather started their careers in such isolated schools, where a lone teacher might have ten or 12 pupils in the whole establishment, with those pupils usually spread over five or six classes. Classes were taught in rotation, with some working from the blackboard while others received direct instruction from the teacher. Organisational skills were of the essence.

Stamina and resourcefulness were also of prime importance, for the teachers, who were often very young, were responsible for every aspect of school life. In the 1970s, in two extremely bizarre and testing incidents involving the same miscreant, children and teachers were kidnapped from their schools in country Victoria. Both teachers were only 20 years old. In the Faraday school case, teacher Mary Gibbs managed to kick out a panel of the van in which she and her six charges were trapped: she then led the children through the bush to safety.

## "Teachers never know where their influence ends."

In my long-ago Australian career, my smallest class numbered 18, the largest 42. I worked hard, but not as hard as my mother did: she once had a combined grades one and two class of 52, many of whom were immigrant children living at the local caravan park. At home, chores and dinner over, she would invariably fall asleep in her armchair at about 8.30pm. My father, a secondary school teacher, would be at school at half-past seven in the morning, and spent long hours preparing and correcting work at home.

Teachers then were overworked and underpaid, and they still are. In the meantime the job has become harder; for one thing, students can email their teachers: I remember my brother tackling strings of emails at the end of the day. Students can also rate their teachers online: my old mind boggles, although of course students have always made their own informal evaluations.

Then there are the meetings, the writing of reports, and always the unremitting pressure to be prepared, to be in control and ahead of things. Add in the yard duty, the endless keeping of records, and the knowledge that a lesson can so easily fall apart. Problem students, the breaches of discipline: a seemingly endless list. No wonder some teachers burn out.

What, then, are the rewards? There are the breakthroughs: when a student declares *I really like that book* or *I see where I went wrong with that paragraph*, the hush in the room when things are going well, the thanks at the end of the year, the little notes when exam results are unexpectedly good. Clive James remembered the English teacher who made a difference, the one who 'made the hard work satisfactory, which is the beginning of good teaching'. Teachers never know where their influence ends. They earn and deserve their holidays.



[Gillian Bouras](#) is an expatriate Australian writer who has written several books, stories and articles, many of them dealing with her experiences as an Australian woman in Greece.

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