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Regulars

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Topic of the month

- Nerdish or nice – how schoolkids see their maths teachers
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Nerdish or nice?

What do you think mathematicians are like? If a novel you were reading started with the words "I am a mathematician" how would you imagine the protagonist? And would you continue reading the book?

Mathematicians commonly complain that they have a poor public image. And, at least as far as maths teachers are concerned, this complaint isn't paranoid, it's based on sound fact. Recently, researchers at Plymouth University's Centre for Teaching Mathematics talked to 12 and 13 year olds in various parts of Europe and the United States about their perceptions of maths teachers. The results were overwhelmingly negative, with some students describing maths teachers as bad-tempered, overweight, scruffy, friendless and balding, with bad haircuts, holes in their clothes and a bleak social life. One English student said that "mathematicians have no friends, except other mathematicians" and that they are "not married or seeing anyone".

According to one of the researchers involved in the survey, "The image of mathematicians was nerdish and one worrying aspect is that children may be put off studying maths if they think others will see them as being nerds."

Most adults seem to find it extraordinary that some people actually enjoy a subject that they fear and dread; they seem to believe that maths was invented solely to torture schoolchildren, and that one of the great things about having left school is that they never have to think about maths again. How wrong they are. Anyone who genuinely thinks that they will never need maths again after leaving school will either be sorely disappointed or regularly fleeced.

But one aspect of the image problem of maths is that few people realise how ubiquitous maths is – bizarrely, it is often thought of as the most useless of subjects. An ironic feature of this impression is that in fact people who have taken maths at higher than GCSE standard are more likely to earn more and have more interesting

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jobs than those who don't, according to recently published research into the labour market and A-level system. Surely this should go some way towards making up for premature hair loss and friendlessness!

Of course, the people earning these salaries are probably not in the teaching profession, which is one of the most poorly paid careers for someone with a maths degree. This is partly what has led to the dire shortage of maths teachers in recent years, and similar shortages in other sciences. However, there has been some good news for the government on this front in recent weeks, as universities have reported that the number of graduates applying for teacher training courses in England and Wales has risen 19%, compared with figures compiled for the same period last year. Applications for maths teaching qualifications also rose.

However, as one union leader said, it would have been disappointing if there had not been a dramatic increase in applications, since "training salaries have risen from zero to as much as £13,000 a year. But David Blunkett still hasn't tackled the two other points on the triangle of trouble, which are workload and bureaucracy and pupil indiscipline."

Teachers in many parts of the UK have already voted to "work to contract", meaning that they will no longer take on extra lessons to cover for long-term vacancies. And there are more ballots on the way. However, the unions and local government officials are now considering paying teachers overtime to cover for vacancies, and this may well break the deadlock.

About the author

Dr Helen Joyce is an assistant editor of Plus Magazine.



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