

Teaching assistant (Gap year)

Catherine Williams, 19, spent a year working as a teaching assistant in the school she attended as a pupil.

What made you decide to spend a gap year close to home?

My aim was to be sure that I wanted to teach. I didn't want to travel. I wanted work experience.

How did you set it up?

I approached the headteacher. Once it was arranged, we agreed a programme together. One of the assistant headteachers was my line manager for the year.

How did it feel being a member of staff?

Strange, at first! A few months before, the staff had been my teachers, now they were my colleagues. Soon they were my friends too. Calling teachers by their first names seemed odd in the beginning. I also had to get used to going into the staff room.

What work did you do?

I provided learning support for Year 7 pupils - some on a one-to-one basis - and I redesigned the PSHE (personal social and health education) programme. I was able to support projects like 'The Big Read' and school trips. I also did some administrative tasks, such as paperwork or keeping noticeboards updated.

What about finances?

That's another advantage to staying close to home - it meant I could live at home, with my family supporting me. I was paid for my work in school and kept on the jobs I had in the sixth form - cleaning in the school in the evenings and in a clothes shop at weekends.

What were the advantages of being somewhere so familiar?

I was used to the place! So I didn't have to spend time finding my way around or meeting people. I could get straight to work.

Any disadvantages?

I was very close in age to the sixth form pupils. Many of them were my friends. There was a temptation, particularly at first, to sit and chat as though I had never left, but I tried to be as professional as possible.

What have you learnt?

How much preparation teachers have to do! And, how much administration is involved in running a school. A lot goes on behind the scenes that pupils don't realise. I had never had anything to do with learning support before. I have found it really satisfying helping a pupil achieve something they probably wouldn't have been able to do without my help.

How has it helped your career plans?

I know now that I want to be a teacher. After my degree I want to do a teaching qualification and then a Masters in Educational Psychology.

Has it changed you as a person?

I grew up a lot during the year. I feel much more ready now to leave home and go to university. I know where I want to be and how to get there.

