

Teacher wellbeing and workload: Why a work–life balance is essential for the teaching profession

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Teachers need to know how to look after themselves. This may seem a simple and easy task; however, when faced with a multitude of teaching tasks, one of the areas all teachers can miss, is taking care of themselves.’ (Turner and Braine, 2016, p. 3)

Teaching is a privilege! What other job enables you to transform lives? All the hard work put into preparation, planning and assessment is forgotten during those ‘lean forward’ moments in the classroom when your pupils are so engaged in learning that they physically move towards you, or their peers, to participate more. And once your pupils are engaged, they can develop and flourish, with a whole world of potential opportunities unfolding before them. This said, pupils can only blossom if the ground that is feeding them is well nourished and refreshed. Teaching is a challenging job that can impact negatively teacher wellbeing (Briner and



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Drewberry, 2007; Turner and Braine, 2016). Understanding and supporting teacher wellbeing in schools, and enabling teachers to support themselves, is essential for a sustained healthy learning environment.

Teacher wellbeing has been described as involving three core elements (Humes, 2011):

- mental and emotional
- physical
- social.

As teachers, we need to manage these elements. Taking care of our mental and emotional wellbeing can be hard in a busy school, where we experience the demands of others (pupils and other teachers/leaders) and respond to these on a personal level. The physical demands of moving and talking all day can take their toll – as can the social requirement to engage with other teachers, pupils and parents, while remaining professional at all times. These personal demands on wellbeing should not be underestimated for teachers, whether they are trainees, NQTs or experienced.

‘... happier, motivated teachers may make pupils feel happier, motivated and more confident. Happier teachers may also be able to concentrate better on the job of teaching.’ (Briner and Drewberry, 2007, p. 4)

So what can be done to support you as a new teacher in managing your workload as you enter this amazing profession? Here are just a few suggestions that demonstrate ways in which you can help yourself, as well as how you can work with your school leaders, mentor and initial teacher training (ITT) provider.

Speak up about different expectations in relation to workload

As a trainee teacher or NQT, you are required to be aware of your professional role and master a number of complex skills quickly, which can be stressful. Those supporting you in school, and in particular your mentor, should hopefully share realistic expectations in relation to your workload. Typically, the ITT provider of a trainee teacher will agree specific task requirements with the school, such as the requirements of lesson planning, and an NQT mentor will set out what is expected of the NQT. The challenge for you comes if these expectations are not clear between those overseeing your training or NQT year.

Examples of these mixed expectations can include:

- You are asked, as a trainee, to use a specific pro forma for lesson planning by your ITT provider and a different pro forma by your school placement mentor.
- Your department head asks you, as an NQT, to use the department scheme of work, but the NQT mentor expects you to write your own.

You may feel uneasy about addressing different expectations that impact on your workload, especially if they are being set by people that appear to have the ‘power’ to determine the outcome of your training or NQT year, but hopefully, knowing that this is not how it should be will give you the confidence to address the problem. Be professional; explain to your mentor in the first case that there are different expectations in relation to the same task.



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No mentor would ever intend to duplicate a task, and therefore your speaking up will highlight an issue that would not have been realised.

Know when to stop working

When do you stop working on developing teaching resources, lesson plans, etc.? As trainee teachers and NQTs, it can be hard to recognise when you need to stop working. It is great to have high expectations of yourself in your new role as a teacher, but sometimes this leads to unnecessary pressure and excessive workload. Learning that there are times when 'good is good enough' and that work has to stop is important to your wellbeing. Savage and Fautley (2013) suggest that establishing a balanced approach to work is one of the most important things for a teacher to recognise.

An example of how you might end up working excessively long hours is lesson planning. You may write your lesson plan and then spend hours refining and honing it, concerned that one element may result in your pupils not progressing. You need to remember that if the evidence base suggests that the tasks in your lesson plan will support student progress then that is good enough. Stop there. Bubb and Earley (2004) highlighted the negative impact on children, and on learning, when teacher workload becomes impossible to manage. Seek guidance from your school mentors if you feel that you are spending too long on particular tasks.

Seek support to manage school systems

School systems, processes and tools can all seem overwhelming when you first encounter them as a trainee or NQT. If you



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consider that many teachers commit an average of 33 hours a week to non-teaching tasks (DfE, 2016a), it is imperative that you understand how school systems work to enable you to manage your time more effectively.

So how do I manage my workload?

Ideally, you will be supported as a trainee teacher in understanding how to manage your workload, being shown practical and real ways to undertake the essential tasks required by our profession. This support should extend into your NQT year, with your mentor enabling you to discuss your wellbeing and workload. The Department for Education (DfE) recently produced a report, 'Reducing Teacher Workload' (2016a), which not only highlighted concerns across the profession for the long hours that teachers are working, but also suggested ways to improve the situation: 'Teachers should not be spending their time on bureaucracy that does not add value. Teachers' time should be protected and used to make a difference.' (DfE, 2016b, p. 3)

The DfE is working with schools through a variety of projects, such as those funded by the School Strategic Improvement Fund and the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Funding, to establish an

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Teacher wellbeing matters. There is a relationship between teacher wellbeing and student outcomes.**
- **Be aware of the indicators of poor wellbeing and act on them.**
- **Teacher workload has been identified by the government as needing reform, and guidance on reducing workload has been provided to support schools, teachers and teacher training providers.**

evidence base of best practice to support changes in working for teachers.

You can also do a great deal to help yourself as a teacher. Understanding what you need to do in your role to maintain a work-life balance that sustains your emotional, physical and social wellbeing is your responsibility, but there is plenty of support out there to help you reach this understanding. You are not on your own; teaching is a social profession and help is just a conversation away. Resilience does not mean struggling to meet unachievable workload expectations; it is about sustaining your effectiveness as a teacher.



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