

Protecting yourself...

Your wellbeing as an NQT is vital and you should be learning now the habits that will sustain you through a long and successful teaching career. **Sophie Howells** advises

At this crucial stage in your first year, making your wellbeing a priority is essential. Every NQT should take steps to ensure this is the case. In doing so, you will be forming good career-lasting habits.

You will be well used to planning lessons now but planning your own personal work/life balance is essential too. Our most recent Teacher Wellbeing Index found that 74 per cent of education professionals consider the inability to switch off and relax to be a major contributing factor to a negative work/life balance. We also know from our research that trainee and early career teachers can be more likely to struggle with this, and are 25 per cent more likely to experience a mental health problem compared to colleagues (Education Support Partnership, 2018).

So, if you are struggling, lay down some basic rules for yourself in and out of school to help keep yourself mentally and physically healthy and robust.

Workload

Most NQTs are likely to say they feel overwhelmed at this stage. Friends and loved ones may find it hard to understand why you are giving so much time to the job. Moving towards winter this can be exacerbated by ill-health and the demands of the festive season. This can add more pressure when you are already feeling overloaded.

One NQT, Helen, told us that a key step for her was to make sure she has a night to herself each week. Breaks are an important aspect of both time management and wellbeing. Taking regular breaks can ensure we are able to deliver and perform at maximum capacity. Staying at school longer to do marking, and working through every break time is not the best use of your time if you are already exhausted. If the day has been stressful and you are anxious about something, set a boundary. Allow time to talk through your concerns outside school, but once that time has come to an end then stop. Do not continue to talk or worry about the situation for the rest of the evening. Try to switch off.

Using your mentor effectively

Do not be afraid to ask for help. Your mentor is there to support and guide you, so establishing a good relationship with them and enough contact time is crucial to a successful year. You should be able to expect scheduled time together and the more you are able to prepare for these meetings, the more control you will have to get what you need.

Behaviour

Feeling under-prepared and ill-equipped to manage disruptive behaviour can be a major frustration for new teachers and can easily threaten or have a negative impact on your wellbeing.

In our Teacher Wellbeing Index, 43 per cent of



education professionals who said they had experienced mental health symptoms said that student behaviour was the cause. It is important to talk through and seek advice and strategies from your mentor, peers and colleagues who have come up against similar scenarios and experiences.

A self-care plan

While you are planning, make sure you make time for a good sleep. A range of research shows that bad sleepers are more likely to have relationship problems, suffer daytime fatigue, and have poor concentration at work, among other problems. Tempting as it may be to get up and do a couple of hours work before school, work all day and start it all again the following day, it is unsustainable and far from healthy.

Instead, make sure you get time to relax before going to bed. Try not to use devices as they are proven to disrupt the body's natural sleep patterns (Haas, 2018). Instead, read a book, have a bath or listen to music. If you need to, write your worries down. Writing it down and letting it go really does help.

We have partnered with the BBC to support its new wellbeing and support space for teachers. There you can watch a range of films and find helpful and supportive content. One article on BBC Teach worth checking out offers tips for building resilience (BBC Teach, 2019) and has been written by Dr Emma Kell, teacher and author of *How to Survive in Teaching* (2018).

Talk to someone who understands

Run by trained and accredited counsellors, the Education Support Partnership's free and confidential helpline provides access to in-the-moment support, up to six sessions of structured telephone counselling, and assistance with referrals

for longer-term treatments. Our counsellors deal with almost 10,000 cases of education staff in crisis every year and demand for the service reached record levels in 2018. We are also hearing from more and more teachers who are already in crisis.

Furthermore, we have recently expanded the helpline service to include access for all trainee teachers. Last autumn, more than 33,000 people across the UK began initial teacher training and of those who used the service in the last year, 86 per cent said that the helpline had had a positive impact on their situation.

Any trainee teacher, NQT or indeed seasoned professional who is feeling overwhelmed, fearful, worried or anxious should call us, no matter how insignificant they think their problems are. **SecEd**

Sophie Howells is from the Education Support Partnership.

Further information & resources

- ▶ For help or advice on any issue facing those working in education, contact the Education Support Partnership's free 24-hour helpline on 08000 562 561 or visit www.educationsupportpartnership.org.uk
- ▶ *Teacher Wellbeing Index 2018*, Education Support Partnership, October 2018: <http://bit.ly/31KyRF6>
- ▶ *Six ways that night-time phone use destroys your sleep*, Haas, *Psychology Today*, April 2018: <http://bit.ly/2JrKWsj>
- ▶ *How to Survive in Teaching*, Kell, Bloomsbury, 2018: <http://bit.ly/2ABa4uF>
- ▶ BBC Teach: www.bbc.co.uk/teach/teacher-support
- ▶ *Lessons in resilience: Earning your stripes*, Kell, BBC Teach: <https://bbc.in/2MomYAN> (accessed October 2019)

How to get your work/life balance right as an NQT

Some simple approaches and techniques can help teachers, especially those new to the chalkface, to protect their wellbeing and work/life balance. **Kevin Lister** explains

Around this time of season, the shine starts to come off the academic year as evenings get darker, weather gets colder and any honeymoon period you have had with classes subsides to a more day-to-day familiarity.

It is easy to find yourself overwhelmed, tired and demoralised and that can take its toll on your overall wellbeing alongside shaping your longer-term attitudes to teaching as a career. So here is some advice to help brighten these dark months and improve your day-to-day experiences as a teacher.

Nobody is perfect

Even though you are surrounded by students, teaching can be a fairly solitary profession. Opportunities to see other people teaching is limited so it is easy to get yourself into the mindset that everyone else in the school is delivering flawless lessons, has perfect behaviour and has no problems. It is really important to realise that nobody is as perfect as you might assume.

Despite my having taught for 10 years and holding a senior leadership role in my school I still have days when things go wrong for me and my classes just do not respond in the way I want them to. Every single teacher in your school will have a mixture of great and not so great lessons. Even the "best" teachers will have lessons that simply fall flat, and everyone will encounter behaviour issues, or students who they really struggle to connect with. All of this is okay! In many ways it is what makes teaching so fascinating as just when you might think you have it all nailed down something comes along and tests you in a new way.

Look for the high points

To help you maintain a balance it is important to find time to step back and look for the positives. Even during the toughest day there will be positive aspects if you look for them, but often we forget and allow our feelings to be dominated by negatives. It can be useful to take time before you go home to recall the funniest, most heart-warming, or most successful parts of the day. Ideally find somewhere to make a note of these, so you can look back on them when you need a lift – it will help to restore some perspective on things.

Establish a balance with behaviour

Try to avoid logging negative behaviour events without also looking for and logging positives for another student. Forcing yourself to look for the good while dealing with the bad restores the balance. In any class there may well be a few

students who annoy you and make you feel bad. However, in my experience, there will be at least the same number of students who are not disruptive, who do as they are asked and who really value your guidance. Do not forget about the positive students – remind yourself that they are there and of the impact you are having on their lives.

Marking and feedback

Marking can be the bane of a teacher's life. There is always another book to mark, or a more detailed comment you could leave. Unfortunately the very best feedback can be completely pointless if the student does nothing different in response or, worse still, does not read it at all. Treat your teacher ink as a precious commodity, use it sparingly and deploy it in a way that it is going to have an impact; do not waste your time if it is not.

Teaching has a never-ending job list and you will never finish your work, regardless of how many hours you put in. Remember that

Taking the time to write in a book signifies an important learning point, and the student needs to take time to understand and respond to it. I am not talking about an "okay Miss" type response – they need to be given the opportunity to incorporate your feedback into their future work.

And do not forget that writing in a book is only one way to give feedback, verbal feedback is just as valid – and either approach only works if students respond to the feedback.

Consider as well how marking books might shape your practice – if a class has struggled with a topic then perhaps you need to reconsider how you deliver that topic rather than correcting every student's work individually.

Plan times to switch off from work

In recent years I have found it beneficial to deliberately think about something other than work on my journey home. By listening to a podcast or audiobook that requires my attention I force my mind to switch off and concentrate on something else. Music is too often just a soundtrack to thoughts for me, so the spoken word is a vital part of this.

Once home if I choose to switch back onto work then it is under my own terms. Having had a break from work I usually feel fresher and get more done.

When you stop, stop

When you stop work in the evening or at the weekend, really stop – do not keep dipping into it. Teaching has a never-ending job list and you will never finish your work, regardless of how many hours you put in. Remember that. While the work may never be finished, you are entitled to stop and have a life beyond the classroom.

When you stop work be present with your family and friends, do an activity that you enjoy – or perhaps do nothing at all, that is okay too sometimes. If you have access to school emails at home or are part of work-related social media groups then it is really useful to turn off the notifications so that you have to actively choose to log in to get updates and pick up messages.

You are not required to be available 24/7 – do not feel guilty about stopping and having a life, you are an adult and entitled to have one.

Prioritise – choose what not to do

Balancing the infinite workload with the need to have a life beyond work it becomes important to choose what does and does not get done. Spending a little time with your task list to consider the relative priorities will help you to decide what needs to be done first, what gets done later, and what you cannot do. It is okay to have things you cannot get round to, just make sure they are the least important. If you need help with prioritising talk to your line manager.

Help is out there

If you are struggling then do not be afraid to ask for help. Seek help from your mentors, line managers and colleagues – everyone needs help sometimes but they may not realise you need it unless you ask. Another source of support is the Education Support Partnership (see their article, opposite). **SecEd**

Kevin Lister is a senior assistant headteacher at a comprehensive secondary school in the Midlands.

Teach Like You Imagined It

▶ Kevin Lister's book *Teach Like You Imagined It* (Crown House Publishing, June 2019) offers tools for prioritisation and suggestions for lesson planning, behaviour management, leadership, CPD, and data. Visit <http://bit.ly/TeachLVI>

Some advice from year 2

Last year's NQT diarist for *SecEd* is now well into her second year at the chalkface. We asked her to offer some words of experience to this year's NQT cohort...



So far this term, NQTs will have experienced a range of emotions, both negative and positive. However, you must remember that you have so much to celebrate having come so far already. Below I offer some advice to consider as you prepare for the rest of your NQT year.

Honesty is the best policy

This is something I really struggled with throughout my training and NQT year. Looking back, I wish I could have admitted when things were not quite going to plan earlier than I did.

It is easy to shrug off certain situations, thinking to yourself that negative pupil behaviour or unrealistic workload is "the norm". It is not.

If you are working in a new school, one that you did not train in, this anxiety may be exacerbated while you find your way with a new set of standards and rules. It takes time to get yourself into a routine, but if there is an on-going struggle then these things need to be discussed as a matter of urgency with your mentor, manager or head of department.

Parents

Get in with parents and get them on board sooner rather than later. We should be aligned with them in the fact that we want the best for their child, and the more you emphasise this, the more likely it is that they will want to work with you. It then becomes a much more positive line of communication.

Establish the students who you need to monitor and address any issues with parents via email or phone calls. Also make sure you contact parents to report positive outcomes, too. I am always blown away at how little students actually voluntarily discuss school with their parents – good or bad!

Regular communication with parents will show your students that you mean business. Without this, it gets significantly harder to intervene later on.

Reflect and change

Consider three targets going forward. These targets may be something trivial such as introducing a stricter routine on entry to your classroom with a tricky class; it could be experimenting with a different form of feedback, such as marking codes; or it could just be a simple change in lesson-planning, such as allocating one lesson per fortnight to recapping key terms previously learned.

By this point, we know our classes fairly well and the dynamics should be established. If there are unfavourable elements, get some new routines in early to minimise your own stress levels. And do not forget to reflect on the positives too – these are to be celebrated!

Plan smart and simplify feedback

I use the term "feedback" rather than "marking" quite deliberately. More and more school leaders seem to be keen that their teachers explore a range of solutions to maximising progress through different forms of feedback. But this should not involve reinventing the wheel.

There is a wealth of feedback tips that are freely tried, tested and often shared by generous teachers on social media and in magazines such as *SecEd* (for example, see *SecEd's* feedback series from 2018). Marking codes, whole class feedback and verbal feedback are just the tip of the iceberg.

I remember at first feeling slightly uncomfortable not having a perfectly documented record of marking, but having the confidence to think outside of the box and knowing that this, actually, is a better use of my time overruled the need for me to write long-winded comments in hundreds of books every couple of weeks.

Now, when planning, I ask myself three key questions. What impact is this going to have? Am I working harder than my students? Is this something

that can be reused, recycled and implemented into other schemes/plans?

In terms of resources and lesson-planning, I try my best not to start from scratch. We are so lucky to have a range of resources at our fingertips. Stress and tension lead to tunnel vision, which does not lead to particularly effective resource-creation processes. Now, I actually spend more time reading and researching the pedagogy of my subject than I do planning lessons. The underpinning of these different approaches has a much wider impact on my teaching than spending hours on a particular idea for just one lesson.

Wellbeing

It is tempting to use weekends and half-term holidays to "get ahead" on planning. However, I have learned that no matter how far in advance you plan, something always comes along to ruin my perfectly organised routine, meaning you end up revisiting your plans and doubling your workload.

Try not to plan too far ahead, be adaptable and expect an element of change. And, at times, do not be afraid to make it up on the spot (or just before!) to suit the climate of your class in each lesson.

The world of teaching is draining and it is far too easy to let it take over your free time. When you do get breaks, it is more important to unwind and return to work fresh and more productive, otherwise it becomes a constant cycle of battling tiredness and an endless to-do list. You may cope with that this year and even next, but you will not be able to cope in the long-run. So set out your good habits now and protect your wellbeing.

If you do not take time to recharge or focus your energies on something that is not teaching-related, you will end up resenting the job.

So assert a couple of week nights as a "work-free zone" and do not be afraid to say no. It can be tempting to take on new things, but this should not be to the detriment of you or your teaching. Take the time to hone your craft and get comfortable before anything else.

And finally...

The best advice I was given is to remember to maintain a sense of yourself over the next year. Keep revisiting the reasons why you entered teaching and never forget the daily impact that you have on the young people you work with. SecEd

The author was SecEd's NQT diarist last year and is now in her second year of teaching English at a comprehensive school in the Midlands.

Further information & resources

► *Effective feedback*: a *SecEd* series focused on what works and how we can protect teacher workload (June 2018): <http://bit.ly/2VRP09d>

Working with other adults

Teachers must work effectively with a range of colleagues. *Matt Bromley* looks at the different professional relationships that will help you to become a better teacher

As an NQT, you are now likely to have a classroom of your own and, although that classroom is your castle, you must resist the temptation to raise the drawbridge – rather, you should warmly welcome your colleagues in.

Of course, not all advice you receive will be good and so you will need to be discerning. However, if you listen to your colleagues' experiences, you can achieve expertise beyond your years of service and learn from other people's mistakes without having to wear the scars. So, who might offer you advice and how should you respond to it?

The headteacher

It is natural to fear your headteacher because they are the boss, after all. But most heads are not fearful, they are supportive and kind and will be more than happy to offer their advice when needed.

The best advice I can give you is simply this: headteachers are human too and you treat them as such. Be polite, of course – but avoid deference or a tendency to "put on a show" whenever they walk by your room, and try to be yourself.

As I say above, your head is more likely to warm to you if you are modest and open to feedback, and project yourself as someone keen to improve as a teacher and fit in on the staff.

Having said this, your head may be wary of a new teacher who is desperate to take on extra responsibilities too soon. Do not run before you can walk. Focus on being an effective teacher first and foremost, get to the end of your NQT year, then pick up the pace a little if you feel ready.

Head of department

Your head of department or subject leader is likely to be your first line manager responsible for your performance management and CPD. They will probably make decisions about which classes you teach, too.

Most subject leaders still teach a significant timetable and are very knowledgeable about your subject specialism. You would do well, therefore, to mine this rich seam of knowledge, particularly with regards to curriculum design and long and medium-term planning.

They will be able to place your teaching within a wider context and help you understand how teaching in your subject progresses as pupils travel through your school. They will also know the pupils, including what they are targeted to achieve and what good progress will look like.

Your subject leader, if they are long-standing, will know what has been tried before and what worked – and what did not. So, if you have got any ideas about how to improve the way your subject is led or taught, cautiously run it by them first to see if it has been tried before. And try to be diplomatic – no-one likes the newbie know-it-all.



Mentor or coach

You are likely to be given a mentor or coach, someone from within your department who you will meet on a weekly basis to discuss your role. Take full advantage of this rare opportunity to have your thoughts and actions gently challenged. They may make you think through your ideas and look at them from a different angle.

No-one is perfect and everyone can benefit from an honest appraisal of their work. So, use this time to try new things. Invite your mentor into your lessons to get feedback so you can learn and develop. Although it may feel daunting at first, you have nothing to lose – so acknowledge your mistakes, act on feedback, and show a willingness to listen and learn.

Teaching assistants and support staff

An effective working relationship with any teaching assistants who support your lessons is essential to your pupils' success, but remember that it is a two-way process.

On the one hand, it is your classroom. You are the teacher and, as such, you are responsible for planning an ambitious curriculum, teaching an engaging lesson, and assessing pupil progress effectively. You are also responsible for setting the expectations and boundaries, and for issuing rewards and sanctions.

You must, therefore, make sure that your teaching assistant knows what you plan to do in every lesson, what pupils will be expected to achieve and what learning should result. Your teaching assistant needs to know what behaviours you will and will not accept and what the consequences of any poor behaviour might be.

Of course, you would do well to ask their advice on all the above and check that they agree with your intentions, but ultimately it is your room and your

rules. However, your teaching assistant is likely to be a font of knowledge. They will know more than you about how the school functions and about its systems and structures, policies and procedures. They will know who is who. And they will know about your pupils' capabilities, as well as any difficulties or disabilities they may have. You should therefore talk openly and often with them to prise from them as much intelligence as you can – and then act on it.

Your teaching assistant is also in the privileged position of being able to observe lots of different teachers toiling at the chalkface and will know what your pupils are capable of achieving – and how your pupils behave – for other teachers and in other lessons. Ask them what works for others and, conversely, what does not.

Administrative staff

You would do well to get to know your school's administrative staff – office, care-taking and site staff, catering and IT staff, and so on – because they are the grease that keeps the cogs turning. Ask their advice. Ask what you can do to help them be more effective at what they do. For example, what notice does the reprographics team need to be able to produce a class set of worksheets? What is the best way of seeking help with IT equipment? How does the cleaner like you to leave your classroom (chairs on floor or on tables) etc?

Do not fall into the trap of thinking that teachers are somehow superior. It takes a whole staff to run a school so treat all your colleagues as equals and ask for and accept their advice. SecEd

Matt Bromley is an education journalist and author with 20 years' experience in teaching and leadership. Visit www.bromleyeducation.co.uk and follow on Twitter @mj_bromley

Avoiding pupil disengagement

What does pupil ‘disengagement’ really mean? And what teaching behaviours do we need to avoid to prevent this in our classrooms? **Joel Wirth** offers some teaching ideas

To the gathered 13-year-olds, the PowerPoint slide was baffling. There were two pictures, a set of instructions, a text box containing key terminology, another with four suggested sentence starters and, naturally, success criteria – the old All, Most, Some – in three different colours.

The task? A piece of empathic writing based on the experiences of slum children, written from the point of view of a child born and raised on a Brazilian rubbish dump.

Up to this point, the lesson had rollicked along at a reasonable lick. Students had watched a moving video made by a charity which worked with such youngsters, showing the children leaving the dump to experience a day in school and, more affecting still, visiting the beach and stepping into the ocean for the first time.

While some of the class had essayed the kind of studied, nonchalant disregard which some year 9s see as the staple currency of cool, many had been genuinely touched: one asked whether they could do a bake sale to raise funds and there were assenting murmurings around the room. A state of almost zen-like empathy had been achieved...

Only to be undone by the insane contortions which that writing task demanded of them.

Ten minutes later, I walked the room. Some had made a game stab at doing something with the

sentence starters (the use of which only the bravest ever eschew). Most had written a concerningly small amount. All had seen whatever fellow-feeling they had previously held mangled in passage through the Heath-Robinson-esque “empathy” machine which the task represented. In short, the members of the class had become disengaged.

“Disengaged” is a term we have bandied about for years without ever really deciding what it means. We know it when we see it and we spend hours discussing what we might do about it. Leaders of teaching and learning the country over run training days and a panoply of expensive external speakers descend upon the hall to explain to the staff exactly what ought to be happening.

But it seems that we never really get anywhere near the truth about disengagement and what behaviours teachers need to change in order to bring about its demise. Culled from a quarter century of teaching and lesson observation, here are a few ideas.

Put the ‘up’ in ‘pupil’

If you want to see disengagement, choose a middle-ability, disadvantaged boy from your key stage 3 cohort and track him for the day. Look at his teachers, his lessons, in his books. Count the number of occasions on which he is compelled to

engage in public address (answering a question, etc). Count the number of questions he is asked. Count how many are closed. Spot when he drifts off (if you have not yourself already). Identify the number of times he is asked to think hard.

Put yourself in his shoes and develop your own informal scoring system for lessons (Challenging, Interesting, Alright, Boring): I can almost guarantee you will score most at the bottom end. Now, imagine you are that pupil arriving home at the end of the day: how would you respond if your parent asked you, “how was school today?”

Thirteen-year-olds are our customers. We should be experts in “13” (we see at least 30 of them every year and were even one ourselves, once). But we manage to serve them the thinnest of gruel as if we have forgotten what sustenance we required when we were that age.

I will contend that learning needs to be engaging before it is anything. That is very different from “fun”, although there is a place for that too.

It is not good enough to be going-through-the-next-eight-slides-on-the-scheme-of-work. It is not enough to be doing something because we are under the impression that SLT-expect-us-to-have-something-written-every-lesson. It is a dereliction of our professional duty if we clobber the love of learning – the natural inquisitiveness of every

learner – out of our classes because we-have-got-to-cover-the-syllabus.

You are an expert. You know why it is worth loving history, why RE is crucial, why you have given your professional life to teaching science. Whatever state that passion is in, dust it down and try to make the pupils catch it like a cold. It does not mean extra planning or death by hands-on-learning (please). It is in the words you use and the things you ask students to do in pursuit of learning.

Enthuse about things. Never give them anything you are not prepared to do yourself. Never make them do anything unless you have got a response ready to the smart Alecs who would ask: “What we doing this for?” (and your response cannot be “it is in the syllabus” or “you need it for your assessment”).

If you cannot answer for the point of your lesson, do not expect pupils to engage with it.

In terms of the lesson above, had the teacher confronted the “what’s the point?” question, they could not have answered “to develop empathy” – that had already been done effectively when watching the video. “Practise your creative writing” is a panacea no pupil will swallow. “Show you’ve understood today’s lesson” is similarly meagre. I suspect the honest answer would have been some less-than-ideal combination of “scheme of work says so”, “SLT work scrutiny”, “show (apparent) progress”.

Go high, not low

We excuse some disengagement because “they find

this topic really hard”. That is a lie. I have never seen students disengage because something is too hard. I have never seen a lesson fall apart because we asked pupils to think hard. We all know this.

How many times have you told year 7 that you are going to be doing GCSE-level work with them and watched them sit up that bit straighter and rise to the challenge?

You can present year 7 RE students with “Is there such a thing as evil?” and watch them explore that through debate for a good 45 minutes even though the entire history of human thought has no answer to the question. There is no unteachable content, there is only content that has been haphazardly taught.

Righting writing

Writing is the biggest cause of disengagement. Students will switch off if what they have been asked to write is any one of inauthentic, purposeless, unfocused or over-bearing – and I assure you that that encompasses at least 80 per cent of what we ask them to write.

Asking them to write down anything which might be (more) successfully accomplished through focused talk (paired, group or whole class) or private thought is toxic because students know that it is a means of control and not of learning.

They will do these tasks but rarely well. As a good measure, ask yourself whether the written task you have set will give them the opportunity to do the best piece of writing they have ever done. If it does not, why bother?

The writing task from the lesson above crossed all the boxes. In its totality, it was over-bearing; what was meant to guide and support actually presented students with multiple opportunities to “get it wrong” (wrong if you were thinking of starting your sentence any other way, wrong choice of vocabulary, wrong if you do not meet these criteria).

In addition, by enforcing a first-person narrative and compelling the use of some quite advanced key terminology, the teacher ensured the inauthenticity of the piece. Naturally, teenagers raised in first-world comfort wrote about how “sad” the child on the rubbish dump was; how “horrible” their life was; how “miserable” they were. This despite having watched the smiling faces and simple joys that very young will discover even in such surroundings.

The task promoted an easy and patronising sympathy where empathy had been within their grasp. And watching the students trying to crowbar in those key words – “poverty”, “settlement”, “overcrowded” – while maintaining the narrative voice of an unschooled six-year-old...

“You can present year 7 RE students with ‘Is there such a thing as evil?’ and watch them explore that through debate for a good 45 minutes even though the entire history of human thought has no answer to the question”

It was unfocused because there was no end to it – in time or intent. The teacher actually said “Right, we will do this for the last 20 minutes and carry on next lesson...” At the foot of such a sheer rock face of endless, inauthentic scribing, how could a student do anything other than throw down their mental crampons?

In my own classroom, students do not even take out a pen until we are ready to write. I know they are ready to write because they will be chomping at the bit to get on with it. They will have discussed and explored, considered alternatives and as writers made decisions that only writers – not teachers – can make.

As a school/department, we will have identified what effective writing looks like in history/design technology/drama. We will have discussed how they might achieve that brilliant writing through this task and they will have come up with some options (the advantages of a first/third person narrator, etc).

What they produce will be their own. Not their response to tasks which have been micro-managed and from which they have been excluded as agents.

Conclusions

Engage them: What makes this task worthwhile? How might a 13-year-old see this? How might it fit into (or challenge) their emerging world-view? What big question does this learning answer (or ask), even if they have not thought about that question yet? Root the learning in them and not vice-versa. Speak passionately about what you do and of the power of what you are learning. Let them ask questions before you start. If you are just a talking textbook, expect to gather dust.

Never patronise them: Do not steal their struggle. Make it challenging. Celebrate the challenge. Allow them to make suggestions, take decisions and weigh options. They will get some wrong: brilliant – there is real learning in those wrong choices.

Sort out your writing: Make it authentic. Make it vibrant and real. Make it challenging. Detoxify your classroom by taking the pledge never again to do writing that does not need to be done. **SecEd**

Joel Wirth is a former teacher and senior leader who now works as a consultant headteacher. You can read the previous articles for SecEd via <http://bit.ly/2FERRgR>



Surviving your PGCE year

This year's *SecEd* NQT diarist is well into his first term at the chalkface. He offers his advice to the current cohort of trainee teachers on surviving and thriving during your training year

My PGCE year was without doubt the most challenging, stressful, but ultimately rewarding year of my life. Never before has the term "like a rollercoaster" been more appropriate...

As a PGCE student you can have days when you feel completely broken, lessons have not gone to plan and when you are left thinking that, quite simply, you are not cut-out for teaching.

Then fast-forward 24 hours and you will have had the best teaching day of your life and you will be leaving school feeling on top of the world.

So, for those moments when you feel down in the dumps, here are my top five tips to surviving your PGCE year.

Do not try to reinvent the wheel

I cannot stress enough how long it took me to plan lessons when I first started teaching. It is natural to feel nervous about delivering your lessons and you will be tempted to over-prepare to make sure everything goes smoothly. However, spending hours preparing every single lesson you teach is not sustainable, especially when your teaching timetable begins to increase (and certainly not in the longer term).

When I first started teaching, I would spend ages accumulating resources for every lesson, as I was always fearful of running out of content before the lesson finished. In reality I ended up with two or three lessons' worth of content for every lesson I taught. In addition, I would try to create all of my own resources for everything.

However, as great as creating your own resources is, you do not need to do this for everything you teach. There are already some great resources out there. Do not be afraid to use them. For example,

Twitter is amazing for resources, with many teachers sharing great content that you can utilise in your lessons.

So, do not stay up all night making resources for lessons or over-preparing – you need your sleep. It is going to be no benefit to anybody if you turn up to teach when you can barely keep your eyes open.

Be consistent with consequences

Chances are that the school you are training in will have a consequence system that should be adhered to. Make sure you learn this, as your pupils will probably know it off by heart.

Learn the consequence system and stick to it, regardless of the pupil. There will be pupils with whom you need to use the consequence system more than others, naturally. However, if one of your "better behaved" pupils misbehaves, it is really important that you apply the consequence system in full with them just as you would for any other pupil.

It is vital that pupils do not feel targeted, so if you are consistent with the consequence system then there can be no complaints and the class will quickly become accustomed to your boundaries.

Print your seating plans...

...and keep them on your desk during lessons. The use of seating plans really helped me out in my PGCE year. You are going to be teaching a lot of pupils and you will not learn all of their names immediately.

Having a hard copy of a seating plan in front of you will really help in this regard. It also helps with targeted questioning and for boosting your confidence when addressing pupils in general.

There is nothing worse than trying to speak to a pupil and realising that you cannot remember their

name. A quick glance at your seating plan can resolve this. In addition, do not be afraid to change your seating plans if they are not working. As you progress throughout the year you will quickly establish who does and does not work well together. Just because you have already created a seating plan does not mean that you cannot make changes to this as part of a behaviour management strategy in your lessons.

Always back-up your work!

Be it making multiple save files, using more than one hard-drive, or emailing yourself the work you have done, it is critical that you back-up your work. You will have lesson plans, evidence for your folders and essays that you are completing throughout the year – the last thing you want is to lose those because of a hard-drive malfunction. Make backing up a part of your daily routine.

Do not be afraid to ask for help

It is okay not to be okay. You are new to this and your colleagues will have all been in the same position as you at some point. Whether it be asking for advice on how to deal with a tricky class, asking if they have any good resources for a particular topic, or simply asking for help with your work, do not feel embarrassed to do so.

Teaching training is tough and your colleagues are there to help you. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness – it simply shows that you are committed to improving your teaching practice. **SecEd**

Our NQT diarist in SecEd this year is a science teacher at a comprehensive school in the West of England. Read SecEd's Diary of an NQT via <http://bit.ly/31wU0md>

A discussion about student behaviour

Poor behaviour does not happen in isolation – something is driving it, and a one-size-fits-all approach to behaviour management will not work. **Sarah Long** advises

When I started thinking about behaviour, I was transported back to my time as an NQT – a long time ago! I started remembering the diametrically opposed advice I got off other teachers about how to manage children's behaviour:

- Don't smile 'til Christmas.
- Never say anything negative to any child you work with.
- It is like a war and you are the officer in charge.
- Display the behaviour that you want the children to mirror back to you.
- Do not let the little monsters grind you down and make sure you are a bigger bitch than them.
- If you treat a child with respect, they will remember you forever.
- Children are like dogs – they sense fear.

All these little gems of wisdom were very interesting, but they did nothing to help me decide, as an NQT, how on earth I was going to control the behaviour of 30 children.

Reject one-size-fits-all

As it turned out, all through my time at mainstream secondary school my behaviour management techniques did not change that much and they also continued in a similar vein when I began work at a special school.

All children – but SEN children in particular – need to be treated as individuals. Behaviour management does not work when you try and promote a one-size-fits-all approach to changing children's behaviour. Next, and equally important, is that every child you come into contact with needs to know that you like them – even if, sometimes, you do not like the behaviour they are displaying.

Lots of children, sadly, live in a reality where they think no-one likes them and feel that they are unlikeable. We sometimes forget that behaviour does not just happen in isolation, something has to be driving it: unmet special needs, a lack of boundaries and direction and sometimes, even more sadly, it is learned behaviour observed from the actions of people around them.

Just because you happen to let children know that you like them, that does not mean that you cannot still enforce firm boundaries and routines, in fact children of all ages feel safest when they know how they stand – even if they behave like "Kevin" and roll their eyes at you as you say it.

If there is one thing I have learned about behaviour, it is that once you have taken the time to get to know a child and let them know you like them, they will do their best to please you.

Some behaviour basics

I do not underestimate how difficult it is to manage behaviour with the ever-increasing complexity of the children in schools. However, sticking to some basics makes the job a lot easier:

- Get to know your children before they walk in your classroom door – know their levels, their SEN, any home circumstances that might affect their behaviour (this comes back to treating children's behaviour on an individual basis).
- Have very clear expectations and routines from the very first lesson and stick to them.
- Communicate frequently about behaviour (good and bad).
- Keep parents in the loop. They may not be happy that their children are misbehaving but they cannot do anything about it if they do not know what is going on.
- Stay calm and have a plan if things go wrong.
- Celebrate good behaviour, including with parents (it is easy to forget to do this and simply focus on the negative stuff).

A holistic approach

When you are thinking about a whole school approach to meeting the needs of vulnerable children with complex additional needs, schools that encourage the holistic development of children and their families help them to thrive.

“Once you have taken the time to get to know a child and let them know you like them, they will do their best to please you”

That holistic approach is vitally important when you are supporting children with a range of issues, particularly children who are in care of the local authority, have mental health difficulties, Attachment issues, or are subject to some level of social care support.

These children and their families are vulnerable and have a variety of complex needs that make them isolated, devoid of aspirations and prone to a lack of resilience to enable them to have good future life chances. We need to support them and give them the links to organisations that can improve their lives.

“Behaviour management does not work when you try and promote a one-size-fits-all approach to changing children's behaviour”

Access to the outdoors

In my work, I have also found that access to green spaces can have a profound effect on pupils' mental health and wellbeing, promoting the ability to nurture, be determined, tackle new challenges, be safe and take care of ourselves, develop self-esteem, feel positive and be resilient.

As many of these positive attributes are difficult for vulnerable children to achieve it is sometimes up to schools and teachers to give children access to these learning opportunities. Introducing outdoor learning opportunities to your curriculum can have a tremendous impact on your children's mental health and wellbeing.

Outdoor learning can take many forms and will, to an extent, be dictated by your immediate environment, but every school can do it – even if it is just having hanging baskets or a bird table, or taking students outside when possible.

Other examples include:

- Woodcraft (making bird boxes, bird tables, etc).
- Cooking over a fire pit (communication skills).
- Camp kitchen (promotes life-skills).
- Gardening skills (planting trees, growing vegetables, managing a pond).
- A bird-feeding area (perhaps with a bird hide to observe the visiting birds).
- Small animal petting area with rabbits and guinea pigs. Working with animals of any size has an enormous impact on developing empathy for others and improves social and communication skills.

Children benefit enormously from all kinds of outdoor learning and this type of learning opportunity allows them to develop the confidence to communicate with the wider school community. **SecEd**

Sarah Long is assistant headteacher and SENCO at Gilbrook School in Birkenhead, a maintained special school for pupils with social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

Teaching exam classes

Among the challenges of the NQT year will be taking on your first examination classes. **Matt Bromley** suggests approaches we might take to help students get good outcomes...

Perhaps understandably, most subject leaders are reluctant to let trainee teachers loose on exam classes. It is highly likely, therefore, that you reached the end of your training year without ever having taught GCSE or A level.

As such, many new teachers feel somewhat unprepared for teaching GCSEs and A levels when the time arises, often during the NQT year.

So, what do you need to know and do? First, and most importantly, you need to know that teaching exam classes is not significantly different to teaching non-exam classes. Good teaching is good teaching – so do not overthink it.

What you may find different, however, is working with awarding bodies – including using exam specifications, mark schemes, past papers, examiners' reports, and so on. You may also be unused to preparing students for the exam hall – and now that a majority of courses are linear with terminal exams, preparing students for these high-stakes assessments is more crucial than ever.

Working with awarding bodies Specifications, modules and topics

You may not yet have the authority to select an awarding body, but if and when you do, consider which exam board offers the most rounded programme of study, which board will allow you to teach the knowledge and cultural capital your students need, and which exam board offers the most rigorous curriculum that will challenge students to be the best they can be.

You may need to make decisions about which modules within that specification you teach. Consider which modules will be most relevant to

students' lives and experiences and which will teach the knowledge and skills that will build upon what has already been taught.

Awarding body documentation

Each awarding body and each subject will, of course, be different. Many, though, are moving away from paperwork towards online webinars and video tutorials. I would advise you to systematically work through all the planning, teaching and assessment materials that your exam board provides on its website. Do this before you begin writing your own plans as you will find it insightful.

The specification

All exam boards will have a specification and this is the oracle to which you should regularly return. Print it out and annotate it. Keep going back to it to ensure you are covering all the content specified – it is easy to miss something vital and thus find your students unprepared for a certain exam question.

As well as setting out the assessment arrangements and objectives, most specifications also list the subject content that students must acquire – these are helpful in focusing you on the “outcomes” of your teaching and can be used as threshold concepts or learning intentions. It may be helpful to make explicit which outcome is being assessed by each piece of work you set students in class and for homework, and then to split the marks you award accordingly to provide more useable feedback.

Past papers and mark schemes

Most exam boards will give you access to a range of

past exam papers and mark schemes. Naturally, these are handy to use as ready-made mock exams but do not limit their use to this. It is helpful to give students as many opportunities as possible to handle exam questions and plan out their answers and walk through the steps they would take in response to questions rather than answering the questions in full each time. The mark scheme can be used as a teaching tool for students, too, not just as an assessment tool for you. For example, students can use the mark scheme to help them plan their responses, and to self and peer-assess. Many mark schemes will have indicative content which can be used to provide model answers or as writing frames.

Examiners' reports

After each set of terminal exams, the awarding body will publish an examiners' report which provides a high-level overview of how students fared in each question. These valuable reports explain how students interpreted the questions and where they did well and – perhaps more usefully – where they did less well.

Teaching towards (not to) a test

I would advise you to be mindful at all times of how you are preparing students for the exams. This, I think, has two aspects to it: teaching coping strategies for the stress of the exam hall and teaching them how to revise.

Coping with stress

Sitting terminal exams is stressful. Students are under huge pressure to remember the content.

In classroom learning, students will be engaged

in what neuroscientists call “cold-cognition” – mediated by the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus, this allows students to remain calm and rational, to think and process information.

But in the exam hall and under intense pressure, students engage in “hot-cognition” – mediated by the hypothalamus, this is when norepinephrine is released, a hormone that mobilises the body for a “fight or flight” response. It also inhibits communication and rational thought.

Cortisol is also released, which impairs memory formation (encoding) as well as access to existing memories (retrieval). This explains why your mind goes blank when you are stressed.

So what can we do to help students cope? First, we can dial down the rhetoric about “make or break” exams. We can do more to contextualise exams, too, so that students perceive tests as less threatening and more useful as sources of information and feedback.

Second, we can “walk” students through the exam process as often as possible, not just by doing mock exams in class, but by literally walking them into the exam hall and talking them through the physical process and talking to them about the exam conditions they will have to know and obey.

Third, we can teach students coping strategies to help them handle stress and keep themselves calm. This might include mindfulness or meditation strategies to reduce the feeling of panic, and it might include moving onto another question and returning to the difficult one later.

It might also include teaching students how to make sense of an unfamiliar or confusing question, by focusing on key words and so on. It might involve teaching tactics such as using the marks available per question, the amount of space allocated to each answer, and so on, to help them make judgements about how much time to spend on each question.

Teaching revision strategies

Advances in our knowledge of cognitive load theory have helped us know more about effective revision strategies. For example, we now know that just reading through revision notes is not a very effective strategy, certainly not as effective as, say, retrieval practice (SecEd, 2017) activities such as self-quizzing. We know, too, that revision cannot be left until the last minute but must be spread out over a longer period and make use of spacing and interleaving (SecEd, 2019).

Start early

Distributed practice is far more effective than massed practice. Embedding retrieval practice and recall into your teaching from the start is more helpful than teaching the curriculum up until February in year 11 and using the final term for revision.

This can be done by embedding retrieval practice activities into every lesson, such as a multiple-choice quiz at the start which requires students to recall, process and apply their prior knowledge. This strategy can be combined with interleaving to ensure students are required to retrieve knowledge they learnt yesterday, last week and last month (albeit from the same or related topics).

Planning regular opportunities for students to take notes, quiz themselves or each other, and peer-teach is also time well spent. A free recall activity can also pay dividends and requires no planning or marking. It is simply a case of asking students to write down everything they can remember about the last lesson. That's it. Simple but effective. Of course, you could interrogate students' notes and unpack any misconceptions or misunderstandings, but it is not essential for the strategy to work.

The act of retrieval from long-term memory (thinking about, by bringing into working memory, what they learnt last lesson) and doing something with it (writing it down) is enough to strengthen the storage and retrieval strength of the information in long-term memory and make it easier to retrieve next time and, eventually, in an exam.

Explicitly teach study skills

A useful strategy is teaching students how to self-study. Often, we assume that students can do this innately. But to study well, students need to be given the tools. For example, we should teach students how to take notes, perhaps using Cornell's Model (see online). This makes note-taking an active process and also aids students' subsequent recall and quizzing of information.

Explicitly teach self-quizzing

If a student reads a chapter in a textbook and then wants to review the most important information in that chapter, she should cover up the answers and attempt to recall the information from memory. This method is much more effective than just copying notes because the student is boosting her long-term memory. Every correct retrieval improves the speed and ease of all subsequent attempts at retrieval.

Self-quizzing can also have an indirect effect on student learning because when a student fails to retrieve a correct answer, their failure informs them that they need to revisit and relearn this topic.

For self-quizzing to be most effective, students should be encouraged to leave spaces in their study notes where they can test themselves later. When they test themselves, they should be encouraged to write their answers down, not simply say them aloud or in their heads. The act of writing the answers boosts long-term retrieval and also uncovers false assumptions about what they know and do not know.

Also, we should encourage students to produce flashcards whereby they write a question or key term on one side and the correct answer on the other. They should then test themselves on all the questions and if they do not answer a question right the first time, they should continue testing themselves until they get it right.

Students should also be encouraged to “get it right” on more than one occasion. For example, they could return to the full deck of flashcards on another day and retest themselves.

Students can also benefit from using practice tests in class. For example, teachers could choose the most important ideas from recent lessons and dedicate a couple minutes at the beginning or end of each class to test students on them.

Revision timetables

Imagine you are studying for a spelling test. One method is to copy out each spelling several times before moving on to the next word. This is called massed practice because you practise each word several times at once before moving on to the next. Another method is to practise each word only once before moving on to the next one. After you have practised every word on the list once through, you then return to the first word and repeat the exercise. This is called distributed practice because you distribute your practice of each word over time.

So rather than cramming the night before an exam, we might study our notes during the course of several shorter sessions on two or three separate nights leading up to the exam, repeating the same “revision” exercise a number of times on different days. Opting for this approach, we would be able to retain the knowledge for a longer period of time even though, taken together, we dedicated the same amount of time.

Unfortunately, despite this fact, a majority of students still prefer to cram. One reason for this is that learning feels quicker this way. Distributed practice takes more effort, for sure, but it is essential for learning information in a way that will be retained (or more easily relearned) and retrievable over a longer period. In short, massed practice leads to ephemeral and facile learning whereas distributed practice bolsters a student's storage and retrieval strength, ensuring their learning is both deep and longer-lived.

So how can we help our exam classes to distribute their practice? First, we should help students to map out how many study sessions they will need before an exam, when those sessions should take place (which evenings of the week and between what times), and what they should practise during each session.

Two short study blocks per week should be sufficient to begin studying new material as well as to restudy previously learned material. Students should be able to retrieve previous material more easily after just a few study sessions which leaves more time for studying new material.

Second, and as I say above, we should use distributed practice in the classroom by repeatedly going back over the most important knowledge and concepts.

For example, we could use weekly quizzes that repeat content several times so that students relearn some concepts in a distributed manner. Repeating key points in several quizzes not only highlights the importance of that content but also affords students the opportunity to engage in distributed practice.

SecEd

Matt Bromley is an education journalist and author with 20 years' experience in teaching and leadership, including as headteacher. Visit www.bromleyeducation.co.uk and follow on Twitter @mj_bromley

Further information & resources

- ▶ *Revision techniques: Interleaving and spacing*, SecEd, April 2019: <http://bit.ly/2Vz0pyj>
- ▶ *Revision and study skills: Retrieval practice*, SecEd, October 2017: <http://bit.ly/2T6ENUL>