



You as a Teacher

This chapter will:

- Encourage you to reflect on why you entered the teaching profession and to value the potential of this role
- Help you explore your personal values, attributes and qualities
- Help you prepare for the personal and interpersonal challenges you might face.



Introduction

Remember what the flight attendant says in the safety talk before your plane takes off: 'Put your own oxygen mask on first and then help others'. This chapter is about you and the personal resources you need to ensure that not only can you survive but you are able to thrive under pressure. The better you understand yourself and how you respond to the world around you, the more able you will be to reflect on the decisions you make and the actions you take. This chapter helps identify your values, perceptions, motivations, skills and strengths. You may find that you need to increase your personal resources in some way or perhaps think a little differently about your role or the students you teach.

The first section focuses on understanding the way you think and feel. We then look at what it means to become a teacher and some basic personal skills you need to fulfil the role well. This is not about knowledge of the job or your subject or even your students, but knowledge of how to present yourself so that you have maximum credibility and effectiveness. You are shown how to look calm, confident and in control even if you have to begin by faking it! There are also thoughts on avoiding some basic pitfalls.

Why did you become a teacher?

People become teachers for many reasons. Most new recruits are full of ideals; they want to make a difference (Manuel & Hughes, 2006; Wadsworth, 2001). They are often caring and concerned about social justice. One reason teachers leave is that they feel these values are just not given an airing. They become disillusioned and find themselves behaving in ways that are not congruent with their beliefs (Weinstein, 1998). Instead of being someone who cares they find themselves becoming someone who controls. Sometimes this is to do with the students, sometimes it is to do with the school and its ethos and sometimes with the 'system' – the organisation, bureaucracy and structures that permeate everyday life and dictate what is and is not possible. All of these interrelate and influence each other. What is addressed here is how to maintain the role of a caring teacher whilst promoting a learning environment that fosters a sense of order, purpose and behaviour appropriate for school: the two are not mutually exclusive.

The rationale behind your decision to enter the teaching profession will have an impact on how you see yourself in the role, how you think about your students, colleagues and parents, and how vulnerable you are to stress and/or disillusionment.



Activity

Which of the following statements relate to your motivation to teach? Go through this list and then discuss with a partner.

- Education is a way of making the world a better place
- I just love my subject
- Teaching is a job where I can make a difference
- I've always wanted to be a teacher
- Members of my family are teachers – it's what I know
- People admire and respect teachers
- I enjoy being with kids
- I'm a bit of a kid myself!
- I prefer working with children
- I am a good communicator
- I want an outlet for all my creativity
- I'm well organised and confident I will be good at it
- I love a challenge!
- The hours and holidays are good
- It will fit in with family commitments
- It's a regular job with a regular income

- You can teach anywhere
- Couldn't think of anything else to do
- Something else motivated you?

All of these motivations have a potentially positive and negative aspect. People who became teachers because they couldn't think of anything else to do might find it is their vocation after all. Having no expectations might result in less disappointment. Teachers who are just like kids themselves may relate brilliantly on one level but have a struggle when it comes to establishing high expectations. Those who are in teaching for the long holidays may be more balanced in their outlook on life, but will have to look carefully at their commitment during term time in order to do a good job. Good communicators may be great talkers but need to learn to listen. Think about why *you* went into teaching and how this understanding can work for you and what difficulties it might present.

There are, however, two motivations that are especially helpful in the classroom. Students are more likely to respond well to your teaching if you have a passion for what you do – especially if you are skilled in communicating your enthusiasm. The other important motivation is a genuine interest in the students – liking children and young people and wanting to make a difference. You need both of these to be an effective teacher for all students. Enthusiasm without caring about individuals can lead you to relate well only to those who share your passion; focusing on relationships without wanting to share your knowledge in meaningful ways can reduce your credibility.

Values: what is important to you?

Your values are part of your identity. Clarifying these will help you understand why you respond in certain ways to events. Sometimes we take on values without thinking much about them and their implications, and sometimes we impose our values on other people without realising what this might mean.

The education system in the West is an example of a clash of values. We live in a society that values individuality, autonomy and self-determination, but expects our citizens – especially our students – to do as they are told (Elliott, 2004). We want them to cooperate whilst at the same time being in competition with each other. Freedom is undoubtedly valuable, but one person's individual freedom may

disadvantage others. Laws impose limits on freedom and few would argue with that. There are shadows as well as ideals in the values we hold and we need to be aware of both. No one is value free. The following exercise is not intended to throw your central beliefs into doubt but to provide an opportunity for you to reflect upon them, how they came about and which may be helpful and congruent with your role as a teacher.



Activity

List five things that matter most to you.

List five things you would most like to change about the world.

List five things you hope to achieve in the next 10 years.

- What does this tell you about your values?
- Where do these values come from?
- What do they say about you as a new teacher?
- What will be helpful and less helpful to you in practice?
- Can you identify anything that might cause you conflict or challenge?
- Will you try to put these values into practice in the classroom?
- How might you do that while respecting that different things may be important to some of your students and others in the school?

Personal and professional integrity comes from being consistent in putting your values into operation. Sometimes expedience seems an easier option, but you will lose credibility if you say one thing and do another.



Reflection point

What positive values do you model to your pupils? How do you do this?

The Australian government has developed a National Framework for Values in Australian Schools (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). There are nine values that students are expected to live and learn in school. These are: Care and compassion; Doing your best; Fair go (treating all

people fairly); Freedom (which includes standing up for the freedoms of others); Honesty and trustworthiness; Integrity (acting in accordance with principles of moral conduct); Respect; Responsibility; and Understanding, tolerance and inclusion.



Case study

A key aspect of the educational programme in Glen Katherine primary school in Victoria is their values education program R.E.S.P.E.C.T. (Resilience, Excellence, Safety, Persistence, Encouragement, Creativity and Tolerance). All classes develop Codes of Co-operation at the beginning of each year and these codes form the basis of social competency skill building, classroom organisation and behaviour management in class-based and school-wide programmes for the remainder of the year. The school has found that a values-based education strengthens students' self-esteem, optimism and personal commitment and, at the same time, develops their sense of ethical judgement and social responsibility. The student attitudes to school survey conducted in-house in 2009 indicated that students generally felt a strong and positive connection to their school.

Points for discussion

What values would you choose as most relevant to school life?
How is values-based education relevant to behavioural issues?



Activity

In a small group share three or four values you have in common and then develop one action for each which would promote this value in the classroom setting.

Avoiding disillusionment

The Steer Report for England and Wales (DfES, 2005) comments that behaviour in schools is not only generally good but has improved in recent years. In the majority of cases difficult behaviour is mostly low-level disruption rather than major incidents. A report in the US (Cantor & Wright, 2002) determined that over 60 per cent of violent incidents

happen in 4 per cent of high schools. Most educators say it is constant niggles such as persistent talking that wear them down, rather than major incidents in the classroom. The behaviours that drain emotional resources are those that demonstrate a lack of empathy or are embedded in denial and dishonesty. The very values that make the most caring and conscientious teachers are therefore those that might lead to the greatest disillusionment. In high schools where patterns of behaviour have become ingrained it is often hard to see the needy individual under the bravado and the foul language.

Pupil behaviour does not occur in a vacuum. There are always reasons, even if these are not obvious. How you think about students and what you believe is happening will impact on your feelings, your actions and your resilience. Rather than seeing behaviour as a deliberate attack on you it is more helpful to view pupils as adjusting in the best way they know to situations in their lives. You may not have caused the difficulties but you can unwittingly exacerbate them. Construing behaviour as a way of making sense of the world may enable you to work more effectively with those young people who appear to hold none of the values that are important to you. Closer investigation may, however, uncover values that are not all anti-social. These may only apply to elements of a person's life but there may be foundations to build upon.



Case study

Craig had a reputation for being a 'hard case'. He was quick to throw his weight around and was verbally abusive to both teachers and other students. He had a very short fuse and had been suspended from school several times. Craig also had a little half-sister, 12 years his junior. In Craig's eyes, she could do no wrong. He allowed her to use his things, mess up his room and eat his chocolate. He taught her every swear word he knew and she kept him constantly delighted by repeating these forbidden phrases! She adored her big brother, was probably the one person in his world who ever did – and he repaid her in full with loyalty, kindness, generosity and affection.

Points for discussion

In the unlikely places and with the most unexpected people you may find values you share – but you might have to dig deep. What surprising discoveries have you made in this regard?

Emotional literacy – how well do you understand what you feel?

Emotional literacy comprises:

- awareness of and reflection on your own feelings
- skills relating to emotional regulation
- having a repertoire of appropriate emotional expression
- being able to tune effectively into others
- having situational awareness – knowing what to say when
- skills in emotionally charged situations
- maintaining a positive and optimistic outlook.

These skills can be learnt and practised (Weare, 2003). In the UK the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme is intended to support the development of personal and interpersonal skills for students across the age-range but curriculum material also needs to be modelled by teachers in a positive school environment to have maximum impact (Antidote, 2003; Deakin-Crick et al., 2007; Roffey, 2010).

Behavioural issues in schools are steeped in emotion. We talk about how students' feelings are expressed but less often, and certainly less overtly, about teachers'. How well adults understand and manage their own feelings has an impact on what they do and how they handle situations. The most appropriate and helpful ways of responding to distressed children are those of emotionally aware and skilled teachers. This does not mean ignoring feelings or being bland, but communicating in ways that are most effective. Emotionally literate teachers are also able to stay positive and resilient because they optimise their emotional resources.

Check out your own emotional literacy. Your values, thoughts and emotions are not separate but part of each other. If you come from a background where high achievement is valued you might feel you must do everything to the highest possible standard. If approval from your line managers is not forthcoming you may feel miserable. The emotions we experience are often socially constructed: we are embarrassed because we have broken social codes in some way and are similarly proud when we achieve something that our culture has determined is valuable. This doesn't mean that the feelings don't exist, but that they can change when we have new information or develop different beliefs. We may, for instance, believe that people with a certain appearance are more likely to be terrorists. This may cause us to feel less well disposed towards individuals in our community and make our behaviour less



Figure 2.1

friendly. Once we get to know such people as part of a hard-working family our beliefs about them change and we become less wary. If staffroom conversation leads you to believe that a student is 'nothing but trouble' your feelings and actions may be negative until you find out more about their circumstances.

Emotional awareness

Do you know what your emotional 'triggers' are: the things that easily make you embarrassed, angry, ashamed, anxious, defensive or otherwise upset? Some individuals may be sensitive to the way they look, others are more anxious about being seen as competent. Many teachers have strong responses to the way some pupils treat others. Students may tune into these triggers and see if they can wind you up. Be prepared (see Chapter 7).

Some of our emotional triggers are related to pre-verbal emotional memory about what happened to us as infants (Gerhardt, 2004). We may be taken by surprise by how strongly we feel about something. An

emotionally literate response does not allow this trigger to result in a destructive explosion.

Most teachers find it hard not to take things personally. In most cases a student will be bringing to the classroom emotions that have little to do with what is happening in your class but school might be the safer place to let them rip.



Case study

Fourteen-year-old Bryn started on the younger kids as soon as he came in the door, swearing and kicking the furniture. When the teacher approached he turned his attention to her, telling her what he thought of her in no uncertain terms. It would be understandable if the teacher reacted angrily, taking this verbal assault personally. She realised, however, that he could not be angry with her as he had only just come into school and she hadn't done anything to him – yet! He was allowed to calm down in the office where it transpired that his father, who now lived with a new family in another part of the country, had promised to phone that weekend. Bryn had waited at home for the call, which never came. He was beside himself with anger and hurt. It was easier to rage than to cry – though the tears did eventually come. A teacher who felt she had a right to respond with anger would have missed the reality for this student. As it was, Bryn's teacher was able to validate his feelings but also eventually talk to him about ways of expressing anger differently.

Points for discussion

Have you, or a teacher you have observed, taken a pupil's behaviour personally and/or gone on the defensive when a student has made accusations? Has this response led to a resolution or exacerbated the situation? What does the case study above tell you about alternative ways of responding to student anger? How can you let a pupil know that it is OK to be angry and upset but that it is not acceptable to express this in ways that hurt others?

Emotional regulation

This is about finding ways to feel better, calmer and more in control. Although easier said than done it can be learnt and practised. Some Buddhist monks are skilled in distancing themselves from negative emotions and reducing all the associated physical sensations by transforming their thinking (Goleman, 2003). Emotions are often generated by negative voices in our head telling us we are not good enough or no one

likes us. Some inner voices are more aggressive, such as, 'get one over on him', 'get your own back', 'she deserves what she's getting'. None of these are helpful and make you feel worse.



Reflection point

Emotional regulation is about ways of feeling calmer and constructive.
Do you know what is helpful to you?

Emotional expression

We are entitled to our feelings but need to take responsibility for the way these are expressed. Anger itself is not necessarily a problem and has been the motivator for many social advances. Sometimes anger comes at us from out of left field and many believe we have a right to take it out on the person who appears to have triggered it. This exacerbates situations. Labelling, finger pointing, sarcasm and shouting are all responses that undermine relationships and model inappropriate behaviour. Stating firmly but calmly that the triggering behaviour is unacceptable and has consequences is a strong response that is less likely to have unwanted repercussions. Use statements that acknowledge feelings related to behavioural triggers but do not start with 'you are ...' or 'you make me ...'. Always refer to behaviour, not to the student, for example: 'That behaviour is not acceptable in this class, I understand that you are unhappy with the decision, however it is now time to take out your books'. This is easier for students to hear and less damaging to relationships. Have some words and phrases that work for you and your students thought out and rehearsed before you need them. You will be less likely to revert to words that you might regret later.

Changing role

You are about to take on a role where there will be different expectations of you and you will develop new ways of seeing yourself. For many the transition is smooth but others find it harder to relinquish being a student.

The student role prescribes being a learner, to be directed, to have individual responsibility for your own work but not for anyone else. The role of the teacher is to have a responsibility for what others do – to be the director of proceedings. Many of the ideas given in Chapter 4 show how to stay in charge while giving students choice and freedom.

Part of your role as a new teacher may come as a surprise. You are the newcomer, the least experienced, and in some more hierarchical school

systems therefore on the lowest rung. As a student you may have been expected to question and initiate. This might not be valued in your school and you find yourself with little power in the system. Look for where it is acceptable to ask questions and be innovative. The energy and confidence of young teachers is often welcomed but there are older colleagues who may feel resentful and threatened by this (Behrstock-Sherratt & Cogshall, 2010).

Being friendly – not a friend

The chances are that you may not be much older than your students. You may share their tastes in music, clothes, films and sport. It is tempting to want to be seen as ‘one of the crowd’. This is not appropriate and will interfere with your personal credibility when it comes to any show-down. Think about boundaries and what would be considered a ‘mature’ response in any interaction. Talking about a film, gig or match is fine but sharing tales about your wild Saturday night or swearing about the opposing team gives an entirely different impression. Keeping a certain distance while still being friendly and approachable will be to your advantage – being over-familiar might rebound on you.

Personal qualities you need for survival

Self-respect

Think of the people for whom you have a high level of respect. You will find that those you admire behave as if they believe they are worthwhile without being brash. They are able to celebrate the success of others because they do not need to focus on themselves. They manifest self-respect. It is the same in the classroom. Students respond better to adults who behave with self-respect. They respond less well to those who present themselves as timid and self-deprecating and also give short shrift to those who are full of themselves without the accompanying competence.



Activity

What does self-respect look like in practice? Check out the following and discuss with a partner:

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(Continued)

- I believe that I am a capable person even though I might make mistakes sometimes
- I am ready to have a go at things
- I take the wellbeing of my students seriously
- I am able to laugh at myself
- I respect the views of others but do not depend on their approval
- I rarely curl up with embarrassment
- I can express emotion without losing control
- I know the difference between being friendly and being too familiar
- I am able to adjust to different situations but maintain my integrity
- I am clear about my values but do not impose them on others
- I accept myself as I am and acknowledge both my strengths and limitations
- I forgive myself for making mistakes but try to learn from them.

Confidence

Even people with self-respect may find new situations daunting. It is hard to behave with confidence when you are a bundle of nerves. How you present yourself to your new class, however, is a loud message about how you rate yourself. Creeping around with your head down does you no favours. It says you are a potential target or victim. Even if you do feel like shaking in your shoes – don't let the kids see! Behaving with confidence is one of the most important things you can do in your first few weeks, and then it becomes second nature. This is how you do it!

Body language

Practise confident body language. Keep yourself upright but not defensive or rigid. A relaxed posture works well but try to stay symmetrical. Leaning to one side can give an impression of lethargy rather than alert relaxation. People who take courses in giving presentations are told that 'four square' matters. This means having your feet in line with your shoulders and keeping your hands out of your pockets. Avoid pointing fingers (accusatory), crossing your arms over your chest (defensive), putting your hands on your hips (aggressive) or jangling keys or coins in your pocket (nervous and distracted).

Walk around the place as if you know what you are about. If you need to know something, approach people and ask questions, especially students. This shows respect for their knowledge and is better than making assumptions, jumping to conclusions and being too nervous to ask.

Voice

Teachers who are having a hard time often talk too fast. Slowing down your delivery pays dividends in several ways. It makes you seem more in control of the situation and should help with fluency. On the other hand, too many hesitations interrupt the flow of communication and interfere with the transfer of meaning. It is hard to concentrate on an erratic delivery.

Some teachers will tell you that you have to shout. Except in very exceptional circumstances there are better and more effective ways of getting attention (see Chapter 4). Drop the volume of your voice and keep the pitch low rather than high. Squeaky high tones sound more nervous and uncertain.

Facial expression

Our faces are the mirror to our minds. We deliver powerful messages by the expressions that are on them. If you are thinking: 'This child is the nastiest piece of work I have come across, get me out of here'; the chances are that your cheek muscles will tighten, your mouth turn down and your eyes go cold! The answer to having positive facial expressions is to keep some positive thoughts wherever possible. Try alternatives such as 'this child must have had a hard time to be like this', or if this is one step too far try 'if I get through the next half hour I deserve chocolate!' Your facial expression will therefore be one of hopefulness rather than condemnation.

Eye contact

Good eye contact communicates both interest in the other person and self-confidence. Avoiding eye contact can make you look shifty or nervous. With smaller children, get down to their level to interact with them. Do not demand that they look back directly at you. In some cultures this is not considered polite and for some shy children it's just excruciating. It is what *you* do that matters. Smiles generate warmth and are infectious. The simplest way to look confident and set a positive emotional tone in your classroom is to make good eye contact and smile as naturally as you can manage.

All of these things say 'I'm OK, how are you?' Positive body language will also make you feel better about yourself and the day you are having. You don't only smile when you feel good – you feel good when you smile. The same applies to walking tall. Emotional expressions have the power to cause feeling. Actors who make their bodies take up certain positions end up often experiencing the emotions they are pretending to have (Damasio, 1999).

Beware the obvious: avoid distractions

Even with the most emotionally literate approach, the greatest confidence in the world and the best-prepared lessons you can still come

unstuck on some basics. No one will mention these unmentionables to you but each one can undermine your personal authority. You have, of course, a right to be yourself and express your individuality. The choices you make, however, can impact in ways you may not want.

The first area is personal hygiene. You may be blissfully unaware of body odour, bad breath, stale cigarette smoke, alcohol fumes and pet animal smells on your clothes but your students will notice. It does not help your credibility if there is evidence that you cannot look after yourself properly.

The second point is bare flesh or outrageous fashion. You may think you have a great body and be proud of displaying your bare midriff. You may also believe it will help your relationship with students if you keep up with the latest fashion. The following outcomes, however, are not helpful to you as a teacher:

- it sets you up in potential competition with students
- it may stimulate powerful adolescent fantasies
- it may be disrespectful to the cultural norms of the community; you may offend families – and this means putting up barriers to working with them.

If everyone, staff and students, sports a nose ring you won't stand out by having one too – but if it is a minority fashion maybe you could put it in when you get home. Extreme statements in the classroom are not a good idea.

The third issue is awareness of touch. There are now guidelines in all education systems about not touching students. Make yourself aware of them. The occasional brief hand on the forearm in an empathic or congratulatory gesture is probably not going to be a problem but do not risk getting a reputation as someone who cannot keep their hands to themselves. At best students may consider it an intrusion on their privacy, at worst you could be up for harassment. If you are teaching small children they may sometimes come up to you for a reassuring hug. Do not turn them away if they are clearly in need but do this in full view of others and make it appropriately brief. For your own security avoid seeing children on their own in places where there is no visible access to a public thoroughfare. Keep doors open.



Reflection point

From what you have read above, is there anything you might need to change in the way you present yourself to your pupils?

Appropriate assertiveness

This combines issues of confidence, self-respect and emotional literacy.

There are three ways of responding in challenging or upsetting situations:

- the *flight position* in which you buckle under and stay silent, probably giving yourself an ulcer as well as a bad attack of low self-esteem; all your energy is put into ducking the issue and rationalising why you have opted out
- the *fight response*: usually a knee jerk reaction and attacking back; this can set a pattern in which the stakes simply get higher – it rarely has a positive outcome for anyone
- the *flow response*, otherwise known as appropriate assertiveness: the suggestions in Chapter 4 and Chapter 7 promote this mode.

Appropriate assertiveness is stating what has happened, your response and what you want or need – for example: ‘When you are shouting at me, I cannot hear what you want to say. I need you to calm down a bit’. The initial statement needs to be as objective as possible, without ‘loaded’ phrases: ‘when you don’t tidy up ...’ is better than ‘when you just walk off and leave this room like a pig-sty ...’. Avoid putting interpretations on someone’s behaviour and assuming motivation or intent. State what has happened as simply as possible.

Your response can be an action or feeling: ‘when you talk all through the lesson I’m not going to make the effort to make it interesting next time/I feel really angry and fed up’. Using ‘I’ statements reduces the placing of blame. This gives resolution a greater chance of working. The final statement is what you want to happen. It is useful to provide an element of choice rather than be didactic. Anything giving the message ‘you have got to’ is likely to be met with resistance. Keeping to ‘I’ statements also helps with reaching resolutions: ‘I would value some help here’.

You won’t always get what you need or want by being appropriately assertive but it has a much better chance than the other two options. You also feel better about yourself.

Putting ideas into practice

Think about your challenging pupil and list all the feelings you have about them.

What behaviours in particular do you find hard to deal with?

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(Continued)

What emotions do you experience when faced with these behaviours?

They probably include several of the following: anger, irritation, frustration, exhaustion, compassion, confusion, hatred, sorrow, despair, threat, anxiety, and feeling undermined, helpless and challenged.

In which ways do you express these feelings?

Is this helpful in resolving difficult situations or not? What might you do differently, if anything?

Write down three things you have read in this chapter that you will try in your interactions with this student?

In which ways are student values different from yours?

What positive values can you identify in your student?

Help the student tune into these positive values by saying:

I have noticed that you ...

I heard that ...

I like the way that ...

You seem to be really good at ...

Summary

This chapter has explored what it means to become a teacher, and the values, motivations and skills you bring with you. This helps in developing the values, attitudes and positive behaviours that underpin an effective professional role.