

Sustaining a career in teaching: a guide for those supporting new teachers

Who is this guide for?

This guide contains advice that is designed to help newly qualified and early career teachers, so it may be of interest to anyone involved in teacher training, mentoring, managing or generally supporting new teachers. It will also of course be useful for new teachers themselves, but it can be best used in discussion with someone in a supportive role.

Why is it needed?

Becoming a new teacher can be a time of great excitement, but it is also recognised as a time which can have significant stress. This guide is intended to prompt conversations and insight that might help more new teachers to be sustained both in the early parts of their careers and in their futures as teachers.

What is this guide is based on?

It is based on my doctoral research study, which investigated what sustains and challenges long-serving secondary school teachers. This research included an extensive review of the existing research literature, and an empirical in-depth study where long-serving teachers shared their career experiences through interviews and creating career timelines.

How can this guide be used?

This guide includes a series of 11 recommendations: most include things that schools can do to help new teachers, as well as things that new teachers can do in order to thrive even within challenging environments. These could be shared through individual or small group discussions or workshops, with teachers encouraged to consider how each point relates to their experiences to date.

Using the guide quickly? If short for time head straight to the yellow sections for practical tips.

Within each recommendation there are the following sections:

Recommendation:	<i>This is the headline summary.</i>
What this might mean in practice:	<i>This provides some specific examples of the kinds of topics to discuss and support to provide.</i>
How this was supported by my research:	<i>This helps by giving the points that teachers in my study made in relation to their own careers and the advice they would offer new teachers.</i>
Why this is important:	<i>This section identifies the significance of the recommendation, including how it relates to teacher research.</i>

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Summary of Recommendations

1	Identify how to reduce workload for new teachers
2	Focus on student relationships
3	Help teachers to focus on today
4	Recognise and value new teachers for their qualities, skills and achievements
5	Help teachers to take a pragmatic approach to wellbeing
6	Help new teachers to understand the contextual nature of teaching
7	To help new teachers understand that everyone is motivated and challenged by a combination of different things
8	Help teachers to understand how to make the environment work for them
9	Help teachers to recognise there is a balance between acceptance and agency
10	Help teachers to find opportunities for growth and challenge
11	Help teachers to understand that there may be ups and downs throughout their careers

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Recommendation 1	Identify how to reduce workload for new teachers
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping to identify easier marking strategies (eg peer marking in class, student self-marking against a template). • Explaining how to find and evaluate existing resources (rather than creating everything from new). • Being paired with a more experienced teacher for lesson planning. • Support with identifying how to differentiate resources for use in class. • Setting realistic expectations in terms of what is “good enough” in order to have a sustainable workload. • Providing support to help with practical challenges, such as how to book equipment or use the photocopier. • Ensuring that any non-teaching time is in long enough blocks to be useful.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Teachers identified that workload was a significant challenge throughout their careers.</p> <p>Whilst these experienced teachers had all found strategies that helped them to manage their workload these were helped significantly by the expectations set by the school, and the advice given by others.</p> <p>Support for the practical aspects of teaching, including access to resources, was also something where the school had significant levels of influence.</p>
Why this is important	<p>Workload has been identified as a significant cause of stress, both for new teachers and those with greater experience, and strategies learnt in the early stages of teaching will help teachers both now and in their futures.</p> <p>Practical support given will also help to reduce time wasted and frustration in trying to resolve problems.</p>

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Recommendation 2	Focus on student relationships
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helping teachers to identify what positive teacher-student relationships might look like, and how they might help them.• Helping teachers to understand the impact of challenges in students' personal lives.• Helping teachers with classroom management planning to support positive behaviour (eg considering student dynamics, seating plans, varying groups, collaborative working, planning lesson starts).• Prioritising relationships might mean creating a simpler lesson on those days where students or the teacher have other difficult challenges to deal with.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Teachers prioritised positive student relationships as a key element of teaching, both in terms of their own satisfaction and the way that it made their teaching easier.</p> <p>This was helped by developing an understanding of the circumstances and challenges that students were facing, which enabled them to depersonalise any behaviour issues.</p>
Why this is important	<p>Positive student relationships can support a positive classroom atmosphere, help learning to take place more effectively, and help students to be less judgmental about aspects that don't go to plan.</p> <p>As well as reducing any challenges that difficult behaviour can create, building positive relationships with students is also an aspect which is often reported as increasing role satisfaction.</p>

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Recommendation 3	Help teachers to focus on today
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identifying the steps needed to get through that particular day.• Recognising the small “wins” – eg the successes in a moment of the lesson, the improvements in behaviour or understanding for a particular student.• Postponing tasks to another day – eg where the day is particularly intense.• Recognising that there are times of peak workload where certain tasks might need to be prioritised and others postponed.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Teachers in this study used a range of strategies, both to get through difficult days, and to enhance their enjoyment on a daily basis.</p> <p>Some of this is reliant on the expectations within the school, and teachers may need help at first in working out which tasks are essential in that moment and which could be safely left for another time.</p>
Why this is important	<p>This skill can help teachers to tackle the essential tasks needed for that day in a pragmatic way, rather than setting unrealistic expectations, and can help them to gain feelings of satisfaction and accomplishment.</p>

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Recommendation 4	Recognise and value new teachers for their qualities, skills and achievements
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Getting to know new teachers' backgrounds and the skills, qualities and experiences they bring to the role.• Recognising and valuing their unique contribution to the role, the department and the school.• Supporting teachers to reflect on aspects of their work that have gone well.• Recognising efforts and achievements at a student, group or lesson level.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Teachers' satisfaction levels were much higher when they felt valued as individuals and noticed for their efforts as well as their achievements.</p> <p>The achievements regarded as most significant were not examination results, but were instead aspects such as building positive relationships, motivating a student who finds learning difficult, organising an extracurricular activity or demonstrating their specialist subject expertise.</p> <p>The long-serving teachers in my study reflected that they felt most job satisfaction as new teachers when their contribution was seen to be of value.</p>
Why this is important	<p>A sense of feeling valued and recognised is one of the factors identified as important in motivating teachers, as is a sense of accomplishment.</p> <p>Focussing on recognition for effort and achievements at a student, group or lesson level also helps to encourage teachers to do the same, supporting recommendation 3.</p>

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Recommendation 5	Help teachers to take a pragmatic approach to wellbeing
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping teachers to create boundaries, including start and finish times. • Discussing the emotional and cognitive work involved in the role as well as the volume of work. • Helping teachers to recognise the tension between the “perfect lesson” and their own wellbeing. • Encouraging teachers to leave on time. • Encouraging teachers to make a regular commitment outside of their working life.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Teachers in my study had recognised that to survive in the longer term that some level of compromise is needed: if they tried to do everything to perfection this would be at the expense of their own wellbeing and their ability to continue in teaching. Most of the practical strategies included some level of setting boundaries, even if this was only on certain days of the week where they had a regular commitment to a sport, or to time with friends or family.</p> <p>This can be particularly hard for new teachers to implement without support and encouragement from those in positions of responsibility at school, and needs to be considered alongside the strategies for reducing workload in recommendation 1.</p>
Why this is important	<p>Teaching is a profession recognised as being highly stressful and at risk of burnout, with implications for health, wellbeing and career longevity.</p> <p>Both the wider research and my study prioritises sustained actions to ensure that wellbeing is not being sacrificed in order to achieve perceived “ideal” teaching, and that this sustained balance is more important than one-off wellbeing interventions.</p>

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Recommendation 6	Helping new teachers to understand the contextual nature of teaching
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying differences between groups, lessons and departments in the school. • Helping teachers to understand that every school is organised differently and has a different culture. • Helping teachers to recognise that there is not a “one size fits all” approach to teaching. • Discussing the types of change which teachers might experience over their careers, and how this might change what a teacher needs to do in future.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Teachers in my study talked about the differences between different groups of students, and how different strategies might be needed to teach the same topic to different groups.</p> <p>They also discussed many important differences that they experienced in the different schools they worked in, and also the differences that happened as the result of changes within the school (such as a new headteacher or examining board) and at government policy level (such as curriculum or assessment changes).</p>
Why this is important	<p>This can help teachers to recognise the need to adapt their approach for different students/groups/subjects/situations.</p> <p>It can also help teachers not to generalise situations that have either gone badly or well, but to identify what they think might have helped or hindered and use this in future.</p> <p>It can also help teachers to be aware that life in a different school is likely to be different, which in turn might help them to work out what kind of school and school culture is the best fit for them.</p> <p>Knowing that schools are different might mean that an unhappy teacher can find a better fit for them, rather than leaving the profession altogether. Likewise it can help teachers to prepare for transitions and seek support within their new school or department.</p>

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<p>Recommendation 7</p>	<p>To help new teachers understand that everyone is motivated and challenged by a combination of different things</p>
<p>What this might mean in practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking new teachers to think about the aspects they find most motivating and challenging. • Noticing the topics/classes/teaching methods/activities that give them most satisfaction. • Asking teachers to be specific about aspects of a class/day/week that they found particularly hard. • Encouraging them to experiment with different teaching methods. • Encouraging teachers to get involved with a range of cross-school activities. • Helping teachers to develop self-awareness about their strengths, challenges, likes and dislikes.
<p>How this was supported by my research</p>	<p>The teachers in my study were each motivated and challenged by different aspects of the role, and this changed at different points in their career and in different schools. Most did not start their careers with a vocational drive to teach, but found job satisfaction in a range of different ways such as the enjoyment of a particular subtopic, working with young people, working in a particular team or developing their subject expertise.</p> <p>In some cases the differences were quite stark: for instance one teacher was really happy within her school because it was friendly and supportive, whilst another teacher at the same school was actively seeking a more challenging urban school.</p>
<p>Why this is important</p>	<p>Many generalisations are referred to within teaching circles, the media and in government and school policy which can lead to teachers feeling isolated, or that they should act or react in particular ways.</p> <p>There are often assumptions that teachers are motivated by a vocational longing yet teachers might not feel this, or might become worried if they start their careers with a sense of vocational purpose which then fades.</p> <p>It is important for teachers to know that they might still find enjoyment within the role, even if they had not had a lifetime ambition to be a teacher.</p>

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Recommendation 8	Help teachers to build staff relationships
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Raising awareness of the importance of building relationships with staff across the school.• Finding ways for new teachers to work jointly with others on curricular and extracurricular activities.• Ensuring teachers have a buddy (perhaps a teacher who is only slightly more experienced).• Creating opportunities to specifically work with other new teachers.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Support from other staff was seen as important for most of the teachers in my research, and positive relationships was also an important factor in making the work more enjoyable and the school to be a positive place to work.</p> <p>Some teachers particularly enjoyed working with others for a common purpose, and developing connections with other new teachers was felt to be particularly valuable in the early career stages.</p>
Why this is important	<p>Being in a positive and supportive environment is an important element of teacher resilience, and the priority should be to develop an environment that is supportive as possible.</p> <p>Teacher-teacher support can help teachers to learn from each other, share problems, reduce workload and prevent feelings of isolation. Collegiality is also an aspect that is often reported as being a positive feature in workplaces: not just to overcome challenges but as part of the enjoyment of work.</p>

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Recommendation 9	Help teachers to recognise there is a balance between acceptance and agency
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Openly discussing the differences between aspects that teachers may have more or less opportunity to influence.• Supporting new teachers to suggest changes that could be implemented.• Helping teachers to recognise the agency they have within the classroom.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Teachers in my study had managed to navigate a path between acceptance of the aspects that they could not change, and making changes where this was possible.</p> <p>In some cases their use of agency was in prioritising work to postpone until a later point, especially if they felt it was detrimental to students for them to implement it immediately.</p>
Why this is important	<p>It has been identified that a sense of agency or autonomy can help people to have greater levels of job satisfaction, yet it can be hard for new teachers to recognise where they can make changes and where they need to accept aspects that cannot be changed (for example government policy or the nature of the local community).</p> <p>Encouraging new teachers to develop their own teaching style within lessons can help to fulfil the need for agency over those things that they can control.</p>

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Recommendation 10	Help teachers to find opportunities for growth and challenge
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identifying areas of extra interest or responsibility that might be suitable (eg mentoring newer teachers, being involved in a school event or project, taking part in a particular CPD event).• Ensuring teachers are well supported in any new work, and that this doesn't create challenges for their workload.• Encouraging new teachers to reflect on the skills and learning they have gained from their experiences, including those which they have found challenging.
How this was supported by my research	<p>Whilst this might seem counterintuitive in trying to reduce workload, teachers reported gaining enjoyment from their involvement in different activities.</p> <p>Teachers in my study also felt a sense of value from being asked to take on additional responsibility.</p>
Why this is important	<p>An important part of thriving in teaching is what teachers gain from the role, as well as what they put into it.</p> <p>Teachers' own learning and growth is an important element which can contribute to their overall sense of job satisfaction and accomplishment.</p>

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Recommendation 11	Help teachers to understand that there may be ups and downs throughout their careers
What this might mean in practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discussing the fact that many things can contribute to the positive and challenging elements of teaching, and these can happen at any time.• Helping teachers to develop strategies for managing the lowpoints.• Helping teachers to understand the aspects they find particularly challenging.
How this was supported by my research	Teacher timelines showed individual trajectories, with high-and low-points happening throughout their careers, at different times and for very different durations.
Why this is important	<p>Previous research has identified that teaching follows a set pattern and that the challenges and satisfaction varies according to career phases. This can mean that teachers have expectations, eg that if they work hard in their early career then the work will lessen later.</p> <p>Understanding that their career may have multiple highs and lows might help teachers to develop a more sustainable pace and also help to develop strategies for how to manage these lows and highs.</p>

Finally

I hope that this guide helps in some way to help new teachers to navigate the early years of this amazing profession, and to find the things that give you joy 😊.

I wish you all the best of luck for a long and happy career.

Further reading

This guide was developed from my PhD research - *Teacher resilience: Long-serving teachers' perspectives on factors which have sustained them in their careers*.

The full thesis can be accessed here: <http://hdl.handle.net/10871/129661>

Follow up

I would love to hear if this has been useful, or any aspects that have been challenging to implement: likewise if you would like to be involved in future wellbeing-related research.

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