

Emotional preparation

Colin Foster argues that being properly prepared for a class involves more than just having a brilliant lesson plan...

Imagine a teacher who is facing a demanding lesson the following day. It might be Friday afternoon with an often challenging class, and there may be rainy and windy weather forecast – which, as every teacher knows, is the worst possible combination.

On top of that, the content is something students always find challenging and, to be completely honest, not even the teacher's favourite topic.

Chances are, this teacher will spend their Thursday evening doing lots and lots of preparation. Despite what some politicians may say, it's extremely rare to find a lazy teacher. Teachers will habitually expend vast quantities of their supposedly free time on getting ready for school the following day – and thus, our teacher will stay up into the early hours, scouring the internet for the best resources they can find, thinking about, re-thinking (and perhaps overthinking) what they'll be doing, minute to minute.

This teacher will plan, and then re-plan, and then tweak and improve until they eventually have an all-singing, all-dancing lesson ready to meet the next day's challenges. One that's sure to make the lesson go smoothly and facilitate a positive, rather than negative learning experience.

Running on empty

What transpires the following day is an order of events that many of us will have gone through ourselves.

The teacher wakes up tired

and grumpy from lack of sleep. Having spent their precious evening (and a hefty chunk of sleep time) hard at work on their preparation, they're simply not operating at their best come the following afternoon. Yes, the lesson is fully prepared. The teacher is not.

Oh, they know their stuff and they've done their homework, all right – but that's precisely the problem. An exhausted teacher is never best placed for handling a challenging lesson or class.

Our teacher finds it hard to think quickly. Their judgment calls aren't as good as they might be. They're slow to respond to difficulties, and the lesson ends up embodying all of the teacher's worst fears.

Teachers matter too

Teachers can be very selfless people. They know perfectly well that they could earn more money for less effort engaged in some other profession, but they care about young people and believe that education matters.

Teachers want students to get the best possible start in life, and are committed to giving something back by playing their part in that. Where the children are concerned, it can sometimes seem as though no sacrifice is too much. As we hear so often, children only get one chance at their education.

No teacher wants to be a hypocrite, challenging students during the day about the effort they're putting in and demanding

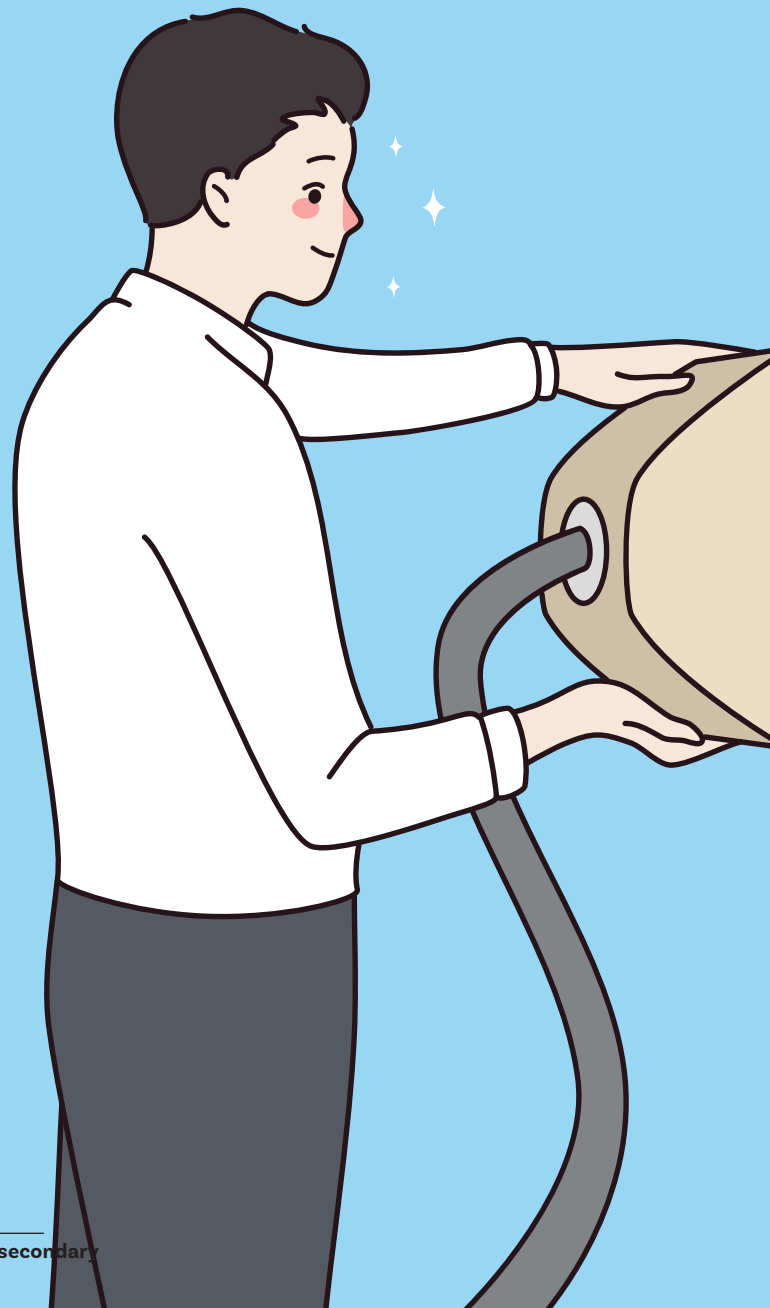
punctual returns of homework, only to then not do those same things themselves as part of their job. Schools exist for students, not for teachers – ergo, we must put students at the centre of everything.

Yet while some of those sentiments might be true, they can combine to create a toxic work environment for



teachers. Of course, schools should put students and their learning at the centre of all that they do – but teachers matter too.

Schools are more than just learning environments for students. They're also workplaces for both teaching and non-teaching staff, and their levels of wellbeing matter as well.



What’s unhelpful is seeing ‘teacher wellbeing’ presented as being in competition with students’ best interests. The question of ‘*Who matters more – the students or the teachers?*’ presents a false choice, since exhausted, demoralised teachers are never going to be in students’ best interests either.

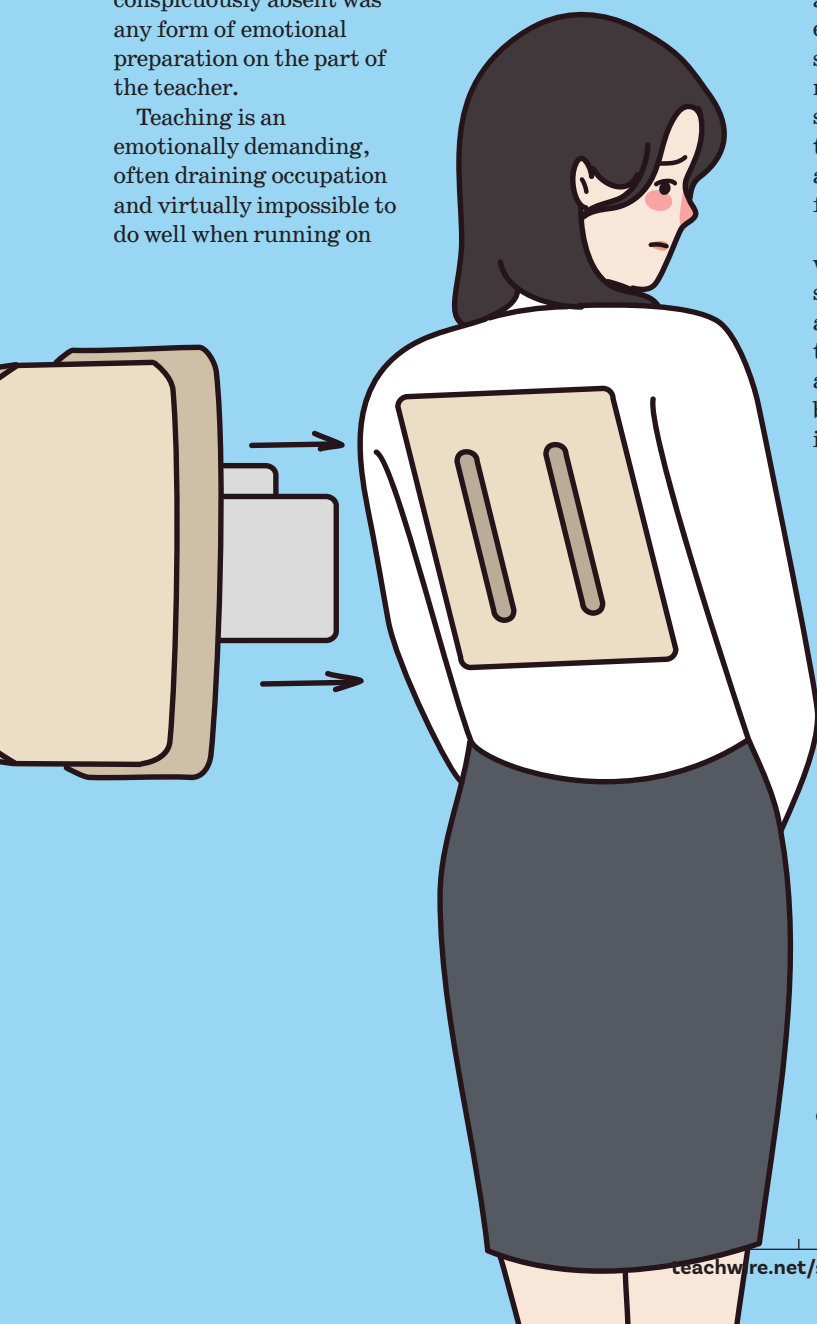
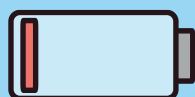
Preparation in the round

In a sense, there was very much a lack of preparation ahead of that difficult lesson. The paperwork may have all been in order, and the lesson’s technicalities expertly considered – but conspicuously absent was any form of emotional preparation on the part of the teacher.

Teaching is an emotionally demanding, often draining occupation and virtually impossible to do well when running on

empty. It’s not a selfish act for a teacher to prioritise their own wellbeing and sanity, but rather something that should be viewed as beneficial for everyone. Preparing ‘the teacher’ is just as important – perhaps even more so – than what we might traditionally view as preparing ‘the lesson’.

In practice, this ‘teacher preparation’ might involve visiting the gym, or relaxing with family and friends. Far from being trivial, spending time in this way contributes



to important emotional preparation for the demands of the day ahead.

In an ideal world, all teachers would be able to complete the entirety of their paperwork by the end of the day, before then heading home and enjoying an evening of entertainment and/or restful social downtime.

In reality, this can seem an unrealistic aspiration for many, calling for some hard choices. Is it wise to go in with a ‘good enough’ lesson plan, after an evening spent relaxing and an early night? Or better to produce a stellar lesson plan that’s then delivered by a stressed and worn-out teacher the following day?

There may be no right or wrong answers here – but seeing emotional preparation as being of equal importance to content preparation might at least start to redress a balance that’s tipped too far in one direction.

If we continue to prioritise short-term goals (the quality of the next day’s lesson) over long-term teacher wellbeing, then we shouldn’t be surprised if the rate of teachers leaving the profession continues to rise, to the point that it becomes no longer possible to provide ‘schooling’ in the sense we’ve become accustomed to.

Emotional preparedness

The process of teaching draws on a complex package of skills and requirements. Teachers are never just preparing for ‘a lesson’ or even several lessons; we’re

preparing to be around young people, with all the challenges and opportunities this presents.

Depending on our subject, some lesson content may also be emotionally charged and draining to teach. In some instances, we might need to work at being in an emotionally healthy place ourselves before being able to do a good job of that.

More broadly, however, we simply don’t know when a student will suddenly come to us with a personal question or problem they want to

talk about. We’ll often say that teachers should always be available to be approached about anything – but do we perform the requisite work/rest on ourselves in order to prepare us for that?

Being as well-rested and refreshed as possible (even if that means making hard compromises with respect to lesson preparedness) will stand us in good stead to be maximally useful.

Even if it’s just taking some common sense steps to look after our own emotional wellbeing, we’ll be better role models and more supportive and helpful adults when students approach us – for whatever reason that may be.

“It’s not a selfish act for a teacher to prioritise their own wellbeing”



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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