



Michelle Gleeson gives some practical advice for teachers starting out in the profession...

There is no doubt that starting out as a teacher is an exciting, challenging, and at times overwhelming period. Whatever role and position you're in, it's important to develop and maintain a 'big-picture' perspective in your first few years of teaching. The routines, practices and behaviours that you instill in your professional life now can put you in good stead for the years ahead.

Be actively engaged and pro-active

Now, active doesn't mean volunteering to take on the dance group, soccer team and the debating club all at once. In that regard, be quite selective about additional roles that you take on and work to your strengths. Remember, your primary responsibilities are to the class or group of students whom you teach every day. Instead, engage in practices that will support and enhance what you do in the classroom. Ask questions, seek out teachers who you feel you can learn a lot from (chances are they might learn from you, too). Be willing to be open about your practice and share what you're doing, even if this isn't the custom or habit of those around you. Collegiality builds the strongest support in schools. Be reflective and willing to adapt and experiment. The most effective teachers are those who continuously review what they are doing, and evaluate it in light of current 'best-practice' and what is best for students.

Maintain your love of learning

There has to be something said about a person who spends 13+ years of their life in education to then take up a career in that very profession. Think about what got you into teaching in the first place. Was it a passion for ancient Rome? Being curious about physical phenomena? A fascination about how children learn to read and write? Whatever the impetus, we've all come from a place of being totally absorbed in our area of interest that drove us into becoming a teacher. Throughout your career, recognise areas where you can further your learning. Keep your teaching fresh, interesting and engaging by keeping up with content knowledge and current pedagogy. Your students will appreciate and value your teaching when you maintain your love of learning throughout your teaching practice.

Build professional networks

Connect with teachers and teaching beyond the school gate. Chances are there are teachers in the school down the road and in schools in the far west of the state who are facing similar experiences and can relate to you. There may be a wealth of experience in your workplace, and certainly a mentor is a great point of contact to debrief, but it is also important to get out of the 'bubble' and take an outside perspective. Read professional journals, join a professional association, attend a union association meeting, and interact with professional learning networks through social media. Involvement in these activities can also lead to fantastic professional opportunities that can further support your growth as an educator.



Develop your own professional plan

Whilst it's often the case that early in your career teachers are consumed by managing the day-to-day aspects of teaching, take time to think about factors that will affect your professional life over the longer term. Set yourself realistic goals and review them regularly. The end of each term is a helpful marker for reflection and review, especially when the busyness of the term sets in. If there are parts of your teaching that you want to improve or refine, focus on mastering one area of your teaching at a time and develop a set of aims and resources that can support you to get to where you want to be. Similarly, if you need to attain Proficient Teacher accreditation with BOSTES, use the given timeline wisely and work in a process of continual review and reflection. Leaving this process until 3 months out from the due date will only result in unnecessary stress for yourself and for others who are supporting you in this process.

Balance life and work

This seems like commonsense, but far too often early career teachers find themselves feeling overworked as they work through trying to prioritise the range of tasks that come with the job. Teaching can very easily become a 24/7 job. Creating the perfect resource, finding a strategy that might work with the student who finds a particular concept challenging – these are the things that keep our brains whirring when we should be resting. Establishing work and life routines by setting yourself boundaries around what work you take home can help curb burnout behaviours. And for the times when you do tire and get sick, take care of yourself by staying home because you'll be better for it in the long run.

Finally, the core of effective teaching is built on relationships. Positive relationships with students, parents and teacher colleagues, and also the relationships that exist between students, build trust for learning to occur. Modelling the teacher who you want to be from the start of your career will impact not only your students but also influence those who work with you and the community who observes you. Stay positive, be persistent and keep growing and developing your professional persona. And above all else, love the teaching.

Michelle Gleeson is a teacher at Castle Hill Public School. For the last five years she has run many workshops and conference presentations including for the NSW Institute of Teachers and the Centre for Professional Learning.