

Section 1

Psychological aspects

The first section of the book introduces a range of the most commonly occurring psychological aspects relating to performance in the classroom. Chapter 1 introduces applied psychology and encourages you to think of the issues you may have previously covered in your training and development, while also introducing you to the structure of the book. It develops by encouraging you to think of the strengths and challenges within your professional practice while also asking you to consider what the 'ideal' teacher is.

Chapter 2 explores concentration and attention. Keeping your mind focused on the task at hand is crucial within teaching, not only to maximize your time but also to minimize disruption from other sources. This chapter makes reference to other chapters within the book to equip you to ensure that the time you spend on your planning, preparation and assessment is of high quality yet limited in quantity.

Chapter 3 discusses motivation, a key aspect responsible for a teacher's performance in the classroom. Although motivation is a complex subject, we have identified some key areas demonstrating how motivation can be influenced negatively while providing strategies to develop motivation levels should they start to suffer.

Chapter 4 highlights the importance of confidence and self-esteem, two fundamental areas that teachers need to exhibit on a daily basis. Again we look at factors that may affect confidence and self-esteem, how to recognize if this is happening and how to resolve any issues through the strategies included.

Chapter 5 examines the way in which emotion, mood and stress influence performance, furthermore examining how they relate. Stress is a worrying trend that is increasing within education according to recent research, so being able to recognize where stress can come from, how stress can have an impact, and ways in which stress can be negated are discussed within this chapter.

The final chapter of this section, Chapter 6, deals with the one thing we can be sure of within education ... that of continual change. It is flipantly noted that 'there are no new ideas in education' or that 'education evolves on a 20-year cycle'. What was 'fashionable' a decade or so back may have become equally fashionable now. Furthermore, given

2 HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL TEACHER

that the National Curriculum appears to be changed every three years or so, and it appears a new government initiative needs introducing on a weekly basis, and so on, being able to adapt to change is a key component of a teacher's ability.

1

The Morning Bell: Another Day Begins! Introduction

Chapter Contents	Page
Introduction to psychology	3
Chapter objectives	4
Psychology of education	4
The carrot and the stick	5
How can psychology help <i>you</i> succeed in the classroom?	6
Acknowledging 'weaknesses'	6
Openness and honesty	7
Ethical principles	8
The 'ideal' teacher	9
One-minute summary	9
Short-term strategies for the here and now	10
Mentoring issues	10
Further reading	10

Introduction to psychology

Psychology impacts on every minute of everyday of our lives. The decisions we make are founded upon our thoughts, beliefs, principles and morals. Our decisions are influenced by a range of emotional states. If we feel frustrated, we are more likely to be frustrated with every minor annoyance which in turn is likely to be detrimental to our performance. Loss of concentration, fatigue or a lack of self-confidence can occur at the most inopportune times, resulting in a similar poor performance. There

4 HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL TEACHER

are days when we may lack passion, drive and motivation. Thankfully, for each of these states, there seems to be an opposite – where we have an unshakeable confidence, where we operate in a clear, focused and energized state. Yet day after day we are expected to perform to the best of our abilities where it counts ... in the classroom. Psychology thus informs (or misinforms) what we think and how we act or react in the various situations that arise in the classroom (and of course outside).

The key is to ensure we can maximize our psychological resources, to ensure that we are operating at our optimum level to enable ourselves, and in turn our students, to get the most from the wondrous experience of teaching and learning. Yet how can this be achieved?

In order to thrive within the classroom, the secret is to ensure consistency: to embrace all of your psychological resources (both positive and negative) which in turn will allow you to acknowledge the elements that you need to succeed as a teacher. Furthermore, it is necessary to develop the required skills to become psychologically strong when it matters. This is what the chapters in this book will help to facilitate.

Chapter objectives

- Consider how psychology is included in education.
- Reflect on how you reward and punish yourself professionally.
- Understand the basics of Psychological Skills Training.
- Identify professional ‘challenges’.
- Develop a picture of the ‘ideal’ teacher.

Psychology of education

For a number of years, there have been developing areas of research within the psychology of education. To the greater extent this research has focused on using psychology to ‘enable’ learners, for example through principles of effective teaching and learning, behaviour management, supporting individual needs, and so on. Yet in relation, little research exists specifically for the teacher in developing their personal ‘toolbox’. To some extent, this is expected to be ‘picked up’ during your lengthy apprenticeship to the classroom with little guidance provided by tutors, mentors or colleagues as to how to strive and survive the profession.

We do appreciate that in your training there are so many elements to cover that you may not have had much input into developing your personal skills and strategies, however you have got this far in your chosen career, so we would like to think you have a number of skills and strategies in place – indeed this book is written on the assumption that you have!

 Reflection

- Consider your time either training to be a teacher or your professional development since becoming a teacher.
- Draw a set of scales (or a see-saw). What 'weighting' would you give to the amount of psychology discussed in your course for:
 - theories and principles of teaching and learning;
 - personal skills and strategies development.
- Provide examples under each as to what you covered.

The carrot and the stick – do you have vision or do you 'beat yourself up'?

Teaching is a rewarding career. We make this statement from our personal experience and the experience we have heard time and time again from colleagues and students. Whatever age range you are working with, you will experience the joy of enabling others. Yet counter to this, teaching can cause worries, worries we can punish ourselves with continuously, whether it is a session that didn't quite fit together, to inspectors coming in, or not having enough hours in the day! It is hard to think of any other career where the rewards and punishments are meted out by our very selves, day in, day out. Yet this is what makes teaching the ultimate profession, one where we continue to challenge ourselves, to become the best we can, to continually question what we are doing, how we are doing it and why we are doing it.

This continual change certainly prevents stagnation, however it can also be a cause of duress where we are continually thinking what could go wrong, what has gone wrong, what has worked well, what could work better. ***It is the focusing on WHAT you are doing that is important – this is what is within your control and is far more likely to lead to a successful result.*** This is such an important message to keep in mind from this chapter onwards, a message we will return to through out this book.

Keep focused on the here and now. This is what is known as 'mindfulness' – the 'mind' being 'full' of the present moment. This will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

Keeping your mind focused on the present, what you are actually doing, helps limit the worry about tomorrow or the next lesson, or an

6 HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL TEACHER

incident that happened last week. Focusing on things other than the present can drain your resources and prevent you from engaging with the task at hand. For example, you could sit there worrying about the pile of marking you have to complete, or you could just make a start on it.



Activity 1.1

- Make a list of the 'rewards' you get from teaching. (Consider different domains: personal, professional, psychological, and so on).
- Make a list of how you 'punish' yourself if things go wrong. (This could be continually worrying about things that may go wrong, even if they do not!)
- Allocate a weighting to the rewards and punishments (for example, 80:20 or 70:30, and so on).
- Consider the implications of the weighting: can you affect the balance? How?

How can psychology help *you* succeed in the classroom?

The key perspective we have adopted throughout this book is a cognitive-behavioural approach. This means that, through the theme of this book, we aim to guide you in examining and changing *the way in which you think* about your teaching (the cognitive component). Sometimes, however, a 'quick fix' is required, where we will examine the way in which you might *react* in certain situations (the behavioural component). Behaviour that is cause for concern may then be modified or adapted appropriately to improve your performance in these situations.

The focus on the way you may react, the behavioural component, is an approach we call the 'elastoplast technique' because it does little more than solve the problem temporarily. It is not a definitive solution. By analogy, you may take a painkiller when you have a headache because it is a 'quick fix,' however it is always best to establish what caused it in the first place so that it can be prevented in the future. Similarly within the classroom, you may intervene when two students are arguing (the quick fix) but may then invite the students to discuss their perception of the reasons for their altercation when things are more settled.

Acknowledging 'weaknesses'

Humans generally don't like to admit that they have a weakness, let alone admit that they have a psychological weakness. Negative connotations are often associated with such psychological weakness, yet the stigma is

unhelpful. Perhaps it would be better to rephrase ‘weakness’ into ‘challenge’ as it provides more positive connotations, that with work we can overcome the challenge. Indeed as teachers, we acknowledge the areas for improvement while celebrating the areas for success: we don’t get too caught up on what a student is unable to do – we look at what they can do. The same is true for any of the themes within this book. If you lack knowledge or attributes about any aspect we discuss, it might simply mean that you have never thought it important, or even that you were never aware that it would help your teaching. Simply acknowledging the importance of psychology in your teaching is not enough. It is crucial that the psychological skills techniques that you will acquire through this book are practised until they become second nature, that you acknowledge your present ‘psychological starting point’.

One way in which to develop is through Psychological Skills Training (PST) which will help you develop your present psychological foundations. Psychological Skills Training is a systematic, educational programme designed to help you acquire and practise performance-enhancing psychological skills. It offers a positive approach, focusing on the acquisition of new skills to address the ‘challenge’ rather than focusing on what teachers should not be doing. ***As soon as you recognize that psychological skills can be used to improve your performance within the classroom, you have taken your first reflective step towards progress.*** As you progress through this book, you will learn how to develop these skills, practise them, and incorporate them into your ‘teaching brain’. By using PST successfully, the aim is to be able to be at the peak of optimal performance as the bell sounds for the first lesson.

Reflection

- Consider your current performance in the classroom in relation to your psychological skills. Take a typical working week and the various tasks you conduct.
 - Note down any aspects you excel at (for example, perhaps you always meet deadlines).
 - Note down any aspects you find challenging (for example, being motivated to complete marking).
- By noting down these aspects, you have started to identify potential areas for improvement.

Openness and honesty

In reading this book, it is imperative that you are open and honest with yourself in your thoughts about your ability and performance in the

8 HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL TEACHER

classroom. By this, try to consider the 'full picture' of your situation. Indeed, this may take time to develop and is not something to be completed in a few minutes. Often we can ignore the more pressing issues as we do not necessarily want to face them, or we may be completely unaware of them. Indeed, professionals who use psychology are trained to explore various 'avenues' in order to gain sufficient information to help resolve any emerging issues. Obviously this is not possible within a book. However, in order to gain maximum benefit, you should feel comfortable enough to think about the type of information you might need to be open and honest with in order to make progress. This book will help you to consider some of the possible difficulties you may be experiencing.

You will get the most from this book if you evaluate yourself at a personal level. This is the level at which you would not share your thoughts with anyone else at all. This is the level of complete honesty. If your performance as a teacher is suffering, this book should provide possible solutions as you become more honest with yourself. There may, however, be occasions when you do not wish to acknowledge that you may be at fault: few people like to accept this! Yet the successful teacher will be the one who accepts and evaluates their 'challenges', develops ways around these and moves on having learnt from them. ***Consequently, such 'faults' or 'challenges' are nothing more than a label for something that needs to be changed in order to make improvement.*** If teachers can accept this, there is no longer any need for negative feelings which, in turn can cause further psychological 'challenges'.

Ethical principles

Complementing openness and honesty, we should also mention the ethical principles contained within this book. In writing a book of this nature, our sole purpose is to enable self-empowerment through engaging with the various chapters, in turn facilitating your continued and future successes in the classroom. The methods and techniques within this book have been carefully considered in line with our professional and academic perspective, and as such, we acknowledge our responsibility for including these.

If you feel that there are areas you would like to explore further, in addition to the suggested readings, it may be necessary to seek professional support. Consultation with your general practitioner or a professional psychologist may be avenues to explore and we would make the point that this book may be used as a guide to overcoming challenges of a 'non-clinical' nature.

Although we discuss various 'cases' we have worked with in this book, at all times we have respected confidentiality in accordance with the ethical principles we operate under.

The 'ideal' teacher

We would like to raise a question as to why you are reading this book. You probably picked it up because you are interested in becoming the best teacher you can become ... but do you know what that looks like? Perhaps you have in mind a teacher from your own time as a pupil who you would like to model yourself on. Perhaps you have been inspired by a teacher you have met on your training? Perhaps it is a teacher from the media or literature, for example Robin Williams's portrayal of John Keating in *Dead Poets Society*. Perhaps it is an eclectic mix of a number of teachers where you would take their best elements. Perhaps it is an ideal picture of you and who you could become. Which is better?



Activity 1.2

- Draw a human outline. Illustrate it any way you would like. This is a picture of your 'ideal' teacher.
- Note down the attributes that make this 'ideal' teacher.
- Consider yourself as this 'ideal' teacher at some point in the future. Try to visualize how you are working within the classroom, or outside.
- Keep coming back to this picture from time to time, adding supplementary attributes, while acknowledging the attributes you have developed.
- We will return to mental imagery in Chapter 11.

One-minute summary

In this introductory chapter, we have set the scene by providing an idea of how the way in which you think can affect your performance. We have also shown how the role of psychology can be embraced in your day-to-day teaching. By applying subtle changes and through engaging in the various exercises, you are already applying psychology and in turn focusing on successful teaching.

Metaphorically speaking, you are standing on top of a diving board, ready to plunge into the complex world of applied psychology to improve and develop your skills. As previously noted, the following chapters appear in no particular order of importance and you should not see them as building on top of each other. Rather, we would like you to take each one as an 'ingredient' in a recipe. It does not matter which 'ingredient' you put into the mix. You can decide how little or how much after you have read each chapter. It might be relevant to you or it might not.

10 HOW TO BE A SUCCESSFUL TEACHER

The next chapter will deal with the theme of concentration. If you have experienced the feeling of suddenly 'losing focus' then Chapter 2 will help you deal with this issue.

Short-term strategies for the here and now

This chapter has introduced the area of psychology and how it may be applied to focus on refining your skills within the classroom. Whether you have studied psychology in depth or not, it underpins every aspect of every day and being aware of psychological strategies can help professionally. The key to achieving and maintaining such success consists of:

- Focusing on the here and now opposed to the when and then. This can keep you centred on what is important opposed to worrying about things that have happened or may yet happen.
- Considering what your 'ideal' teacher would look like and picturing yourself as this teacher. This can help you identify the attributes you already possess and the ones you would like to work on. Yet without picturing your future self, there is no goal to aim for.

In defining your 'ideal' teacher, it is necessary to be open and honest with yourself. By acknowledging your 'challenges,' you can then take steps to overcome them. This will also help you identify the specific chapters in this book on which you may want to focus.

Mentoring issues

You may want to discuss your reflections of this chapter with your mentor. They may be able to help you reflect on the aspects you excel at and the aspects you find challenging within your teaching, while suggesting strategies to develop.

You may also want to discuss what makes an 'ideal' teacher from their perspective: what attributes do they think are the most important for success. What challenges did they find within their teaching when they first started, and indeed, what challenges do they continue to face? By your mentor sharing these with you, you are able to acknowledge that nobody is infallible, yet by continuing to strive for perfection, you continue to improve.

Further reading

There are many books dealing with the psychology of teaching. These fundamentally look at using psychology to facilitate the learning process. Books

relating to developing personal psychological skills are more limited however. There are a couple of books available on the market specifically aimed at teachers in relation to surviving the day-to-day pressures. Both books address different issues, yet one lacks practical suggestions and the other lacks psychological underpinning.

Adams, M. (2006) *Work–Life Balance: A Practical Guide for Teachers*. London: David Fulton.

This book discusses in depth what actually impacts on the work–life balance from a theoretical perspective and provides some practical suggestions to deal with such pressures.

Allen, L. (2006) *Behind with the Marking and Plagued by Nits: Life Coaching Strategies for Busy Teachers*. Bancyfelin: Crown House.

This book provides a range of strategies for surviving teaching although the psychological underpinning behind the strategies is limited.