

Look after *YOU*

Five ways to take charge of your professional life and improve your wellbeing

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We hear a lot about the importance of teacher agency and autonomy but they are two different things. Autonomy is about having the freedom to make decisions without having to constantly ask for permission, or having your work continuously scrutinised. Agency, on the other hand, is about having the capacity, or exerting the power, to make decisions and take positive action.

As teachers, we may work in an environment where we lack autonomy, but we can still exert our professional agency by doing what we think is right, regardless of what others may think. A prime example of teacher agency was the decisive action many teachers and school leaders took in the face of the coronavirus school closures, despite the lack of clear direction from the DfE.

Given that teachers in the UK largely operate in a system that does not give us the freedom to control most of the aspects of our work (think learning walks, observations, Ofsted inspections, league tables), it raises the importance of teacher agency.

It means we must do what we can to take control of the important aspects of our professional lives. Moreover, with the whole of the UK currently experiencing a national lockdown due to Covid 19, with the restrictions on our lives likely to last for a while, our agency becomes even more important for our wellbeing.

Just the act of doing something to take care of yourself, or the people around

you, can be extremely empowering. It means that small things add up to make a big difference to people's lives. If you feel you lack control over aspects of your professional life, don't despair. Below are five small but effective ways that you can start to take some action to increase your agency and self-efficacy while simultaneously improving your wellbeing.

Focus on what you can control

And let go of the rest. The serenity prayer is commonly quoted as; "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." It could be the mantra for effective teacher agency.

There is no point in wasting precious time and energy focusing on the things that are completely out of our control. To do so just creates tension and becomes demoralising as we are reminded how powerless we are. Instead, the most effective teachers spend their time focusing on what educator Steven Covey calls their 'circle of influence' – this is everything, big and small, that we can actually affect some change over. When we do this, Covey argues, our circle of influence actually grows as we become more adept and effective at knowing where to invest our energy and bringing about positive change.

Be guided by your sense of purpose

In his book *Man's Search For Meaning*, Auschwitz survivor Victor Frankl writes, "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms: to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances." It teaches us that we cannot control how people treat us, but we can certainly control how we respond.

And our response is largely determined by our sense of purpose – the reason we became teachers in the first place. Frankl believed that people are primarily driven by a "striving to find a meaning in one's life", and that it is this sense of meaning that enables people to overcome painful experiences.

So, it is really important for us to remain intimately connected to our reason for being in the classroom. For many, it is to make a difference to young people's lives. When we work in the service of others, guided by a strong moral compass, values and a clear sense of purpose, we find we are able to withstand difficult situations and reclaim our agency because it is for the good of others.

Take control of your CPD

If school budgets and restrictive timetables mean you don't feel like your school is prioritising your professional development, it's time to take it into your own hands. The growth of weekend CPD events run by teachers means

that it is possible to develop professionally in your own time (not ideal, but needs must).

Many educators and course providers are also delivering free webinars and lectures online during the pandemic. In addition there are many free courses on platforms such as Coursera and Edx, and so many great educational books being published every month, it means that improving your subject knowledge or pedagogy doesn't have to cost you the earth.

Physician, heal thyself

One thing that is definitely within our 'circle of influence' is the factors that contribute to our physical and mental wellbeing. Professor Laurie Santos, an academic at Yale University and an expert in wellbeing, claims that many people underestimate just how important diet, sleep hygiene and physical activity are for our physical and mental health. These three areas are all, largely, within our control and small tweaks (such as going for a 30-minute walk every day) can really start to improve the quality of our lives.

The key with personal wellbeing is to experiment and work out what works for you. So, try out mindfulness meditation, yoga, a vegan diet, morning PE with Joe Wicks, a warm bath before bed or whatever else takes your fancy. Find the healthy habits of body and mind that contribute to your wellbeing and make them part of your daily routine.

Start small

However you choose to exert your professional agency, a key is to start small. This is particularly important if you're feeling overwhelmed or lacking confidence. Start by choosing one small task to complete (it could be as simple as tidying your desk drawer). By completing small tasks, we gradually increase our sense of control, agency and mastery over time.

And bear in mind a novel experiment from 1976 that took place in an elderly care home. Researchers gave residents a plant for their room. One group was told to take care of the plant, be responsible for it and look after it. The other group of residents was told that their carers would take care of the plant for them. The first group of residents, whose

sense of control and agency increased as a result of simply taking care of something, reported higher levels of wellbeing and actually lived longer.

The global pandemic we find ourselves in has given us all a chance to step back, pause and reflect.

It provides us with an opportunity to reassess what really matters and maybe the opportunity to reshape the purpose of education and schools in the future.

To fully take advantage of this opportunity, we will need to exert our agency and start to take control of our profession. Doing so may be our best chance to improve our students' lives, and our own lives in the process. **TP**

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