

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Psychology and the effective teacher**

**Lisa Marks Woolfson, James Boyle and Jeremy Monsen**

This volume has been underpinned by the overarching assumption that teachers can develop their competence and confidence by utilising their experiences in a reflective manner. Furthermore, operating as a reflective practitioner to improve practice is a process that we, the editors, view as continuing throughout a teacher's career. Our aim in these chapters therefore has been to support teachers through this ongoing formative learning process to help them understand the different facets and complexities of their role, and to enable them to communicate with their colleagues, students, and parents/carers, with insight, confidence and critical understanding. Another of our key assumptions was that the inherent challenges in doing this are simply part of the job, so we wanted to help teachers realise what barriers they could expect in this role, and to offer some insights and practical strategies.

The chapters in this book suggest several different ways that these important tasks can be achieved by utilising theory and evidence-led understandings from the field of psychology.

The book offers psychological frameworks and tools to enable teachers' critical reflection with the intention of leading to improved and more effective ways of thinking and acting in the classroom. The coaching model in Chapter One and the accessible dialogue framework in Chapter Five are helpful examples of psychological approaches to how teachers can manage real-world dilemmas in practice through active reflection on one's thinking and actions.

We have drawn on not only on theories and reported research findings from educational, developmental, social, and cognitive psychology, but also from health psychology and work psychology. Findings discussed here extend across the range of research designs and methodologies used by psychologists. These include questionnaire surveys and interviews, case studies, observational studies, longitudinal and follow-up studies, experimental/quasi-experimental studies and systematic reviews. They include quantitative data analysis, the analysis of numerical data, and qualitative data analysis, non-numerical data such as transcripts of interviews. We hope this reporting of research studies aids understanding of the role and value of psychology for teachers and indeed that it will be particularly useful to readers who are going on to carry out their own research projects in the classroom, when adopting the scientist-practitioner role as explained in Chapter One. We, the three editors of this volume, all psychologists and trained teachers, view psychology as having a central place for teachers developing their 'craft' and practitioner stance, and that it has had a positive influence over educational thinking and practice since its inception over two hundred years ago when it broke away from the disciplines of philosophy, physiology and physics.

### ***Some background on psychology in education***

When and how did psychology apply itself to education? It is generally agreed that psychology itself became a distinct academic discipline in 1879 when Wilhelm Wundt opened the first experimental psychology laboratory at the University of Leipzig. Psychology was certainly being taught in other universities at that time, for example, William James at Harvard University and John Dewey at the University of Chicago. It was not however taught as a separate discipline or taught by professors who were specifically psychologists. James' background, for example, was medicine and Dewey

was an educator and philosopher. Students from many countries, especially the United States of America, came to study psychology at Wundt's laboratory, and then went back home and set up their own departments. In this way, the new discipline of psychology spread. It had grown out of philosophy, physiology, and physics and was initially focused on measurement of mental and perceptual processes. But how did we get from measuring reaction times, which was a favourite scientific method of assessing psychological processes in Wundt's lab, to applying psychology to education?

William James was certainly one of the first to have an interest in extending the focus of interest of this new field of psychology to the problems of education. He gave lectures to teachers about applying psychology to teaching and then published the talks in his book *'Talks to teachers and to students on some of life's ideals'* in 1899. This book was regularly reprinted, demonstrating its popularity and its relevance to the theory of education.

At around the same time, John Dewey was undertaking cutting-edge work at the University of Chicago, founding the Laboratory School there. This was a pioneer experimental school, that began with one teacher and twelve pupils for the purpose of allowing Dewey to try out new teaching methods to change the curriculum. He was one of the first to utilise a one-way mirror system so he could see what was happening in semi-naturalistic settings like the classroom, without the participants being aware. In this way Dewey was able to apply and test his progressive ideas around how teachers teach and how pupils learn. This became known as the progressive education movement.

Although Wundt is usually viewed as the 'father of psychology', it is Edward Thorndike who is seen as the founder of educational psychology specifically.

Thorndike was a student of William James who wanted to extend the application of psychology to understand how children learn - the beginning of psychology's interest in learning and the beginnings of educational psychology. Thorndike studied learning behaviour in animals as well as in children. A famous study involved cats in a puzzle box where the cats learned to pull a lever to get themselves out of the box.

Thorndike published a book in 1906 on principles of teaching based upon psychology. His law of effect emphasised that behaviour and learning was a result of experiences rather than the result of instinct. This way of thinking put the onus firmly in the hands of teachers then to organise and structure classroom experiences that would result in learning. This was in contrast to it being viewed rather as the children's task to gather knowledge and information for themselves. Thorndike was highly prolific in carrying out his research and published widely. The application of psychology to educational practice was now under way.

At around this time in France, primary education had become compulsory, but it was recognised that regular education was not suitable for all children and that some children would require special education. But which children? To solve this problem, Alfred Binet became interested in the measurement of the cognitive abilities, 'intelligence', of children. He recognised that a psychology discipline focused upon experimental laboratory studies of perception and response times was not suitable for the task in hand. The problem was that these measurements did not distinguish between children of different levels of 'intelligence'. Working with a medical student, Theodore Simon, Binet developed a standardised questionnaire and tasks that typically developing children of different ages could be expected to succeed on. In 1907 this work resulted in the first validated intelligence test with norms reflecting the items that children of different ages could be expected to succeed at. In the twentieth

century cognitive psychologists such as George Miller and Ulric Neisser were interested in studying memory and the processing of information in adults. Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, studied cognitive development, how children develop important concepts and understandings through different ages and stages.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the principles of educational psychology became embedded in teacher education as well as in classroom practice and education policy. Teachers began to study educational and child psychology in their training as its influence on how best to provide learning experiences for children in the classroom was now recognised. Educational psychology provides theories and research findings that provide an understanding of the relevant processes which underlie the cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural functioning of pupils in the social contexts of schools and classrooms. You will have come across in your training, and since, the work of eminent educationalists and psychologists such as Maria Montessori, Benjamin Bloom, and Robert Gagné in the application of psychology to the practice of teaching; B.F. Skinner and Albert Bandura to theories of learning; and Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner to theories of social, moral and cognitive development in children.

The application of psychology to children's classroom experience is now a well-established part of the teachers' professional toolkit. But we three editors decided we wanted to go beyond the application of psychology as it is applied to teaching and learning. We recognised that teachers also need to know about, not only that psychology which can be applied to the children they teach, but also psychology that they can apply to themselves. We wanted to introduce to you the psychology that teachers need to help in the challenge of their role. Consequently, in this volume, we

considered key themes identified by theories and research from the wider range of psychologies which impact upon the experience of being a teacher.

### ***Reflection and reflexivity***

Reflection was considered in Chapters One and Two in regard to planning and self-evaluation and again in more detail in Chapter Six together with reflexivity. Different theories were considered to help you recognise cycles of reflection as well as different developmental levels of reflection, ranging from descriptive reflection of new teachers to the more critical stance of experienced teachers, linking theory and practice. You learned in Chapter Six to distinguish between reflection-in-action and reflection-for-action, of 'thinking while doing', which emphasises the importance of experiential learning and of the need to consider the perspectives of others. The importance of internal dialogue as the mechanism whereby reflection becomes reflexivity was also discussed, together with cases studies indicating a recursive relationship between reflection and reflexivity and links with change which is both transformative and sustainable. The importance of experiential learning together with the use of purposive internal dialogue to question values, beliefs and understandings and hence to support the transition from reflection to reflexivity was also considered.

Chapter One moreover highlighted the significance of quality feedback from a 'critical friend' to guide the reflective process for the development of teacher self-efficacy. The contribution of the coaching model with a peer, a parent/carer, or a more experienced practitioner to aid this reflection was examined. The importance of self-efficacy was discussed in Chapter Three. It is a key determinant of effective teaching, of job satisfaction and commitment, distinguishing between those who leave the

profession and those who stay. Furthermore, self-efficacy is related to resilience which is introduced in Chapter Three and discussed in greater depth in Chapter Six.

## **Professional identity**

Chapter Two and Chapter Three both addressed teacher professional identity and the importance of context and expectations with respect to the roles and responsibilities of a teacher. Chapter Two's thematic analysis of the sample of job descriptions helped to crystallise the 'what' of teaching and the associated expectations of an effective teacher. It emphasised the importance of context, particularly of the social world of the classroom, school and the influences of society. Chapter Three's focus was particularly on the developing role identity of beginning teachers as they become part of the professional group of teachers. Issues around social identity and belonging to groups are important for you to understand because of issues of agency, how the group that you see yourself belonging to, can influence our actions and behaviours. This chapter discussed the psychology of groups using social identity theory and explored the management of potential role ambiguities and conflicts and considered how to ensure professional boundaries are retained. Both Chapters Two and Three examined in complementary ways how a teacher's sense of professional identity is shaped by roles, responsibilities and relationships in the social world of schools and classrooms.

As well as social identity theory, insights from identity theory and 'figured worlds' theory supported a view of teacher professional identity as socially constructed through narratives and discourse and experience of teaching in the social world of schools. These chapters further highlighted the importance of personal history, beliefs

and values in shaping professional identity over the course of a teaching career. They indicated the importance of teachers understanding of child and adolescent cognitive, social, psychosexual and emotional development together with awareness of trans and LGBTQ issues for the effective delivery of teaching, and pastoral roles in particular.

### ***Wellbeing***

Chapter Three focused on psychological, personal, social and emotional aspects of teacher wellbeing. Psychological perspectives on autonomy, resilience and avoiding stress and burnout in the classroom were also explored in this chapter. It acknowledged that there is a worryingly high drop-out rate for teachers in their first few years in the job and recognised that it is necessary for teachers to engage in strategies to enhance their mental health and avoid stress and burnout in the complex setting of the school. You will have learned here that wellbeing can be about a hedonic perspective. That is to say, enjoying your job, where you experience job satisfaction, and you feel on balance more positive than negative emotions in your daily work. But wellbeing can encompass an eudaimonic perspective with a focus on more psychological dimensions. For this, the job provides opportunities for personal growth and fulfilment, a sense of purpose, or a context for the mastery of new skills, or achievement of professional goals. In Chapter Three different ways of measuring wellbeing in the workplace were also discussed, including antecedent factors that contribute to wellbeing at work and outcomes of interventions intended to improve wellbeing.

An important aspect of this is autonomy, the extent to which teachers feel they have personal control in the workplace, to what degree they feel they have



independence in the classroom. We recognised that teachers may feel they have limited control over the timing of their working hours and their daily schedule within those hours, but they may however feel some degree of control over the classroom activities they choose to deliver to promote prescribed learning and curricular objectives. This is likely to differ markedly across countries, local boards, and across individual schools. It may be useful to reflect on what the balance is for you personally in your current role, and how you feel about that as we know that autonomy is associated with motivation, job satisfaction and stress and burnout, and that these are all critical factors in the world of work.

### ***Social relationships***

The point was made in Chapter Three of the importance of building networks so that you have a community to support you in the challenges you face as a teacher. These networks can comprise colleagues, friends and family, peers, mentors and supervisors. Different relationships can provide encouragement and advice at different times and for different issues.

But of course, social relationships apply within the classroom itself and Chapter Four examined social contextual issues in the class setting, focusing on teacher-pupil relationships and interactions, as well as peer interactions. We examined what psychology has to say about the best ways to group pupils in the classroom and the extent to which ability groups were effective for educational outcomes, for behavioural outcomes and for social outcomes. The authors reported studies that found a relationship between ability grouping and grouping across socioeconomic and ethnic lines, drawing our attention to the issue that ability grouping can indeed further exacerbate groupings that already exist in society. Chapter Five

examined the social world of the classroom in regard to the nature of the classroom environment and the effects of its physical organisation and available resources upon pupils' interactions with the teacher and their peers, together with the roles of cooperative and collaborative group work. How you can use insights from humanistic psychology to help you to be more genuine in these pupil-teacher interactions was discussed in Chapter Three.

Attachment theory research considered in Chapter Six further highlighted the importance of relationships in the developing child. Studies indicate that it is important for teachers to be aware of the impact of pupil's adverse experiences and difficulties in their relationships with parents/carers on self-regulation of their emotions and behaviour. Current research in Chapter Six introduced the more recent application of attachment theory beyond the relationships between parent/carers and children to teacher-pupil relationships. Further, as teacher's own attachment history may have an impact upon their expectations of, and relationships with their pupils, awareness of this is important for the teacher in the interest of developing secure, positive relationships in the classroom.

### ***Communication***

When we consider the many interactions that a new teacher takes part in in the course of a day, the importance of effective communication for joint problem-solving cannot be overemphasised. Communication was a pervasive theme throughout this volume –communicating with pupils, with colleagues, with parents/carers, and with line managers. Chapter Five explored that we all often make faulty assumptions and attributions about others' intentions when we communicate with them and discussed how this can lead to problems. In this chapter we viewed communication as a core

skill to be mastered and to aid this we presented Accessible Dialogue, a framework to guide teachers towards improved communication with a focus on joint problem-solving. We wanted to help teachers raise difficult issues in ways that have the potential for positive outcomes. To do this we recommended that teachers use this, or a similar framework to clarify the thinking that underpins their verbal behaviour. This means that in a professional interaction you would make explicit what you are thinking and why you are thinking this. Important concepts here are 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-use'. You want to search for inconsistencies by analysing valid information. This allows any previously hidden agenda to be discussed openly and your views to be tested out. This is all a means to communicating more effectively with colleagues in order to generate better solutions to problems that have presented. The next suggested step for acquiring these skills is role-play with supervisor support.

In the present day, much communication takes place through social media, Facebook, Twitter, email, blogs. Technology can aid timely communication between teachers, professional networks, parents/carers and pupils as well as be a valuable teaching tool. Online homework planners, online assignments, newsletters, access to internet resources, email contact between school and home, are good examples of effective use of technology in education. Parents and carers are often members of class What's App groups which allows information about their child's class to be shared between them, although as with all closed groups there is a danger that these can operate as an echo chamber sharing misinformation that the teacher then has to address. In your professional role as a teacher, you may compose and send an email intended only for an individual pupil or parent/carer but bear in mind that the recipient can choose to share its contents with the wider school community. Teachers should therefore view electronic messages to pupils or parents/carers as potentially available

to a wider public and existing forever. Ensure that you are familiar with policies for social media communication in your school and school district and be very clear of the boundaries between the private and the professional.

### ***Resilience***

The importance of resilience for teacher wellbeing is another key theme of this volume and was considered in Chapters Three and Six. The concept was discussed in Chapter Six as one of the ‘new 3Rs’, with reference to understandings drawn from attachment theory, transactional coping theory, biosocial models such diathesis-stress model; developmental tasks, and positive psychology, together with research studies of the interplay between risk and protective factors. A key question posed in this chapter was, ‘is resilience a competence that can be developed, or is it a character strength, an aspect of personality, a core-, or domain-specific, capacity?’ The findings from research studies indicate that resilience is best conceptualised as a dynamic process involving factors at both individual and contextual levels. Individual protective factors include motivation, self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, instructional skills, coping skills and self-reflection. Contextual factors relate to support from colleagues, managers, and mentors, and positive relationships with pupils and students. Resilience is associated with a range of important outcomes such as teacher mental health and job satisfaction.

### ***Conclusions and next steps***

1. Construct for yourself a strong, well-thought-out teacher professional identity.  
At regular intervals, remind yourself why you decided to become a teacher and

what you value in teaching. Aim to keep in touch with these values, so you are clear about your purpose and the importance of the job you do.

2. Build yourself social networks for mentoring, collaboration and support to facilitate your ongoing personal and professional development.
3. Keep a constant eye on and actively monitor your work-life balance.
4. Continue to develop your pedagogical knowledge, subject expertise and classroom skills to build teacher self-efficacy. Make good use of professional development opportunities.
5. While subject knowledge, instructional skills, and well-planned delivery of the curriculum are central to effective teaching, understand that learning is more than the transmission of knowledge from teacher to pupil. In addition, think about how to develop the social context of the classroom and foster social relationships through which children learn from each other, and form attitudes and beliefs as they grow up.
6. Have high expectations for all the pupils in your classroom.
7. Think about how you might develop your interpersonal and listening skills to ensure you can communicate effectively with pupils, colleagues, parents, line managers.
8. Challenging interactions and difficult situations will occur from time to time in your work as a teacher. Be prepared by developing and practising a way of dealing with these that lead to positive problem-solving. We have suggested the accessible dialogue framework in this volume as an example that is applicable for use in the school setting.

9. Take care of your health and wellbeing. Think about diet, exercise, sleep, personal relationships, and how to manage and reduce stress. This will all help to build your resilience in the workplace.
10. Learn from your mistakes but draw a line and move on from them and instead make the main focus of your attention where a lesson, dealing with a challenging pupil, or a tricky meeting with a parent/carer, went well. You might even like to note these good examples down for future reference – it's easy to forget these with all that day-to-day.

***And finally....***

New teachers will often say that they just want to 'get through' their first year of teaching. They know this first year will be challenging, intellectually, emotionally, and physically. A key aim of this volume was to show how psychology can help teachers not just survive, but rather thrive, grow and then to continue to develop professionally as effective practitioners, with a high level of job satisfaction.

Our philosophy is that psychology can be a force for good in the life of the teacher. We hope that this book will serve as a starting point for your next steps of finding out more about the application of psychology to education and thinking how to take account of it in your day-to-day activities. We are sure that this will enrich your experience as a teacher and your pupils' experience as learners in your classroom.