Career development for the Psychology Teacher: Strategy and Identity

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1. Introduction

Career planning is not easy for any teacher, as it relies on numerous factors that are out of your control – what jobs will come up, for example, and whether you will be successful at interviews. And it is especially hard in a niche subject like Psychology. While a great many people (pupils, especially!) are highly enthusiastic about the subject, schools and their headteachers do not always see the development of a large and successful psychology department as their top priority.

Despite these challenges, building a successful career as a psychology teacher is largely under your control. And the more steps you take now to plan and to account for future barriers, the more successful you will be.

This chapter will help you to think strategically about your own future development. Drawing on the psychology of identity as well as theories of motivation, we will walk you through a series of techniques for planning your career, and carrying out that plan. These include:

- Identifying your existing skills and considering routes for professional progression.

- Developing your existing skills through practitioner action research.

- Forming a long-term career plan that is both detailed and flexible.

You will face barriers along the way, and undoubtedly some things will crop up during your career that you were not expecting – both good and bad. Nevertheless, you can use your own psychological know-how and the techniques in this chapter to ensure that you overcome the barriers and build a highly successful career in psychology teaching, moving on to whatever aspiration and goals suit you best.

1.2 Objectives

At the end of this chapter you should:

- have an outline plan/career trajectory of your own psychology teaching career;

- be aware of the role of Masters study and other qualifications and their link to management and other promoted posts;

- have started to develop the skills involved in practitioner action research.

ACTIVITY 1: Check the requirements for your initial teacher education (ITE) programme to see which relate to this unit. If there are no specific requirements around career planning, then try to find out what national frameworks and regulations will be relevant if you apply for promoted posts.

2. The Scope of a Career Plan in Psychology

2.1 The skill set of the psychology specialist

Let's start with the positives. Although Psychology as a teaching subject is not always seen as core to the curriculum, you are a highly capable educator with a huge amount to offer. Think about what you have learned in your studies so far. You already know about (or at least have a strong foundation in) most or all of the following areas:

- Developmental psychology: how children grow, learn and change.

- Social behaviour, prejudice and discrimination.

- Working memory and intelligence, including cognitive load.

- The psychology of long-term memory.

- Research methods and educational evidence.

- Psychological differences relevant to the classroom, such as dyslexia and autism.

- Stress and its impact on performance

These are all things that schools are very keen for their staff to learn, and you already have the perfect background! Indeed, as a psychology teacher you will probably find that you have a head start on a great many things that are typically covered in school CPD courses (what's more, you are in a good position to critique the content of such courses!).

Psychology graduates that go into teaching tend to also be very personable, good at relating to teenagers, ethically aware, and to have both strong literacy and numeracy skills. In many ways, you are already ticking a great many boxes on a future headteacher's wish list.

Psychology is also a very flexible subject, and one that combines well with numerous other subject areas. You are in a teaching area that could easily link up with the natural sciences, but which has strong connections with social science, language, sport, business, wellbeing, and many more areas. This puts you in a good position to move into promoted

posts where you are responsible for more than one department, as well as pastoral posts if that is where your interests take you.

Case study 1: An example of career progression

Having completed a degree in Social Psychology and then a PGCE Social Science (PGCE Psychology did not exist then!), I (Min) went straight into teaching A Level Psychology at the age of 21. With students not that younger than I was, I found this daunting but soon realised that my firm yet fair nature gained me respect from my students. I became Teacher in Charge of Psychology a year after my successful NQT year and managed a department of 3 other members of staff (who were not Psychology specialists). After a short career break to travel, I returned as a classroom teacher, teaching Psychology alongside KS3 humanities (History, Geography, and RE). My relationships with students put me in a strong position to lead the Student Voice (the student council), which I did for several years. Wanting to further my career to middle management, I knew that staying in the same school I would not be able to become Head of Psychology, so I applied to another school and luckily got the first HOD position that I applied for. Having moved to a school with a very different ethos, I was encouraged to enhance my professional development and I completed the National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership (NPQSL). Before I had the chance to move into senior leadership, I was encouraged by a visiting student teacher's tutor to apply for a role in higher education and was subsequently appointed subject leader for the PGCE Psychology.

Comment on case study 1:

Min's case helps to demonstrate some of the strengths that a psychology teacher can bring to a school as a whole. Even a relatively new teacher may get the chance to move into a

position of responsibility as the leader of their subject, and psychology-based people skills lend themselves well to management roles.

It also shows that taking time out from a career need not be a barrier over the long term. While it is very useful to have a plan or at least an aspiration in terms of the kind of promoted role you might wish to move on to, every career has its twists and turns, and there will be times when unexpected opportunities arise. as was the case with Min's appointment to a higher education post. At such times, you may wish to reflect on your own priorities, and consider the broader impact you could have when working with other teachers versus the more direct impact of classroom teaching.

2.2 Broadening your skills

Despite all these advantages that you bring to the table, there will be areas where you could broaden your skills and qualifications in such a way that it would put you in a stronger position for the future. Consider two main strands:

- areas to strengthen that would make it easier for you to *apply* for more jobs or promoted posts.
- areas to strengthen that would make it easier to *get* those jobs and promoted posts.

Some of the other ways that you can broaden your CV and appear to be 'more than just the average psychology teacher' (if there is such a thing) include the following:

- Running a school club for example in psychology, media, games, creative writing.
- Organising school sessions focused on wellbeing, mental health, or study skills.

- Marking for the exam board. As well as getting to know your own subject better, you will also make contacts and gain a valuable insight into how the exam system works that could serve you well for promoted posts.

- Creating resources. Make sure your name goes on them – so that others in the teaching community start to learn who you are (and have a friend double-check your spelling and grammar, so that you don't get known for your mistakes!)

- Becoming an NQT mentor. After completing your own NQT year you are in the perfect position to offer advice and support based on your own experiences. Mentoring and coaching roles can enhance your pedagogical skills, as well as give you the confidence to approach and speak to other members of staff, and share good practice.

- Completing a Masters. Many Postgraduate Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses allow you to gain Masters' credits that can be transferred towards completing a full Master's degree. Furthering your professional development and subject knowledge at the same time as teaching gives headteachers a good indication of your time management and drive, as well as having many other benefits. There is more on this in Section 3 of this chapter.

- Publishing. A good place to start would be writing short articles for magazines such as the ATP journal or The Psychologist. Further down the line, why not think about co-authoring a textbook, or even writing one yourself.

TASK: Carry out a cost-benefit analysis for the above tasks. For each one, consider the time commitment that would be required alongside other costs, and consider the advantages that it might bring – not neglecting the benefits of contacts and reputation.

If you are already doing quite a lot of a particular activity (for example, you already run one school club), then doing more of the same might be quite limited in its benefits – it could even undermine what you already do. So, think broadly about how you could excel in new

areas.

2.2 Middle management and beyond

Exactly what kind of promoted posts might you consider for the future? The details will depend on the sector and country where you work, but some of the main options probably include:

- A head of department/head of faculty role.

- A head of year/promoted pastoral role.

- A 'lead' role in some other area, such as behaviour, learning technology, student voice, coaching/mentoring, or research.

- Deputy/Assistant headship.

- Headship.

- Becoming a teacher/parent governor at the same or different school

- Moving into a related education role, such as for a local authority or educational psychology service.

Fundamentally, what you will be motivated to strive for depends a lot on how you see yourself as a person and a professional (Van Knippenberg, 2000). As we know from the social psychology of identity, a person's social identity is composed of a number of different strands (Hogg, 2000; Tajfel, & Turner, 1986). Clearly you see yourself as a teacher and as an educator, but do you also see yourself as a leader? As a manager? As a researcher? As someone who inspires others?

Our aspirations are often less reflective of our abilities and more on this multi-faceted

social identity, and the resulting sense of whether social and professional roles are 'our kind of thing'.

We are also affected by limits on what we believe we are capable of. As Psychologists we are well aware that our childhood experiences shape our thoughts and beliefs as adults, and the core beliefs that we form as children can be very powerful in shaping how we deal with new situations and experiences. Whether we grew up in a dysfunctional or very loving environment, both experiences can lead to self-limiting beliefs. Similarly, multiple features of the family environment (e.g. relationship with parents, socio-economic conditions, family values etc) can impact the development of self-esteem (Krauss, Orth, and Robins, 2020).

Individuals from BAME backgrounds[1] in promoted posts are largely unrepresentative of the rest of the working population. According to Government statistics, in 2018, fewer than 3% of all headteachers and less than 5% of assistant headteachers and deputies were from a Black or Asian background, with White British making up 92.9 % of all Heads and 89.7% of deputy and assistant headteachers. Furthermore, of the 22,400 headteachers in 2018, over two-thirds (approx. 15,000) were women (Gov.uk, 2020). With the lack of role models in promoted positions, this can leave those from underrepresented BAME backgrounds experiencing self-limiting beliefs associated with *imposter syndrome*[2] and therefore missing out on opportunities for promotion.

If you identify with a BAME background or with another social group which is under-

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[1] We recognise that the reference to BAME backgrounds is contentious, as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals do not belong to a homogenous group, each having vastly different life experiences (in addition to intersectional experiences). BAME is used for the purpose of this chapter in referring to non-white individuals or people 'of colour', with regards to their marginalisation experienced within the working population.

[2] Imposter syndrome (or imposter phenomenon) refers to feelings of inadequacy and perceived lack of competency, despite being capable and competent in regards to professional and academic achievements. It can be experienced by anyone and whilst initially investigated in relation to high achieving women (Clance and Imes, 1978), it has since found to be highest amongst high achievers (Dickerson, 2019), ethnic minority women (Walton and Cohen, 2007), those from the LGBTQ community (Nance-Nash, 2020) and those from underrepresented BAME backgrounds (e.g. Fazackerley, 2019; Mullangi and Jagsi, 2019)

represented, you may be wondering what you can do to overcome these disadvantages. Some appropriate strategies could include:

- Identifying one or more role models who can act as mentors or coaches. Find out what is available by way of coaching programmes in your school or local authority.

- Tackle imposter syndrome by critically examining your own doubts, and writing lists that objectively compare your skills with the norms for your position.

- Seek advice and guidance from others about how career opportunities and promotions can be accessed, and the steps needed to be eligible to apply. It may also help to be open about your experiences to encourage allyship amongst work colleagues.

If even after critical reflection you feel that you fall short in terms of the skills needed for a promoted role, why not add to them via further study? The following section looks at the opportunities that can be associated with studying at Masters level.

2.3 Masters-level study

There are many reasons you may choose to continue in post-graduate education after completing your teacher training. You may want to deepen your knowledge and understanding, improve your teaching and professional skills or specialise further in Psychology or another field or subject (e.g. neuroscience). ITE programmes provide a foundation for professional development in teaching and learning. The number of Master's credits awarded on ITE courses vary between training programmes. Usually, Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) programmes award up to 60 credits, whilst Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) award up to 120 credits, which can contribute to the 180-

credit full Master's degree (to find out more details, spending some time looking at options on the relevant university website is usually a good place to start).

Some of the benefits of a Master's degree include:

- An increase in your knowledge and understanding of teaching and learning.

- Improvement in your teaching skills or specialism in a particular field or subject.

- Contribution to career progression by opening opportunities into senior management (and can also help you earn more money)

- Carrying out your own specialised research, data analysis and writing, can improve your skills in (and help you in teaching) Research Methods.

- Acting as a role model for students. By engaging in learning you can share your experiences of the learning process with your students, and better understand the challenges they are facing as they study something new.

- Teachers as life-long learners. Teachers respond to new contexts and challenges throughout their careers. Learning more about research evidence helps to ensure you do so effectively, continually improving your practice.

- Networking with other professionals, whether they are Psychology specialists or interested in the same field of work as you, gives you the opportunity to bounce ideas off (and make connections with) fellow classmates and academics.

Although people often talk of '*doing a Masters'*, there are many types of Masters degrees that you can do. Perhaps the most obvious option would be to complete a teaching-focused course such as Education Studies or Educational Neuroscience. Such qualifications will look very good on your CV when you apply for jobs or promoted posts. However, with your psychology background, you could also consider a more specialised course such as Applied Developmental Psychology, Autism Studies, or the Psychology of Education, helping to

boost your credentials as an expert in your particular area of interest.

Finally, there is an increasing trend for postgraduate courses related to school management or educational leadership. Specific Masters-level training is already mandatory for headteachers in Scotland (Seith, 2020), and it may well be that such courses are required before you can apply for other promoted roles in the future. If so, this should be worked into your long-term planning (see Section 3).

2.4 Using practitioner action research to extend your skills

Practitioner action research is an alternative (or additional) method of engaging in professional learning, whereby teachers research a particular area of practice (as opposed to academics that carry out research from an 'outsiders' perspective). Some teachers prefer this method of engaging with research without the rigorous structure of completing a Masters degree (as well as the added cost a Masters programme may bring!).

Practitioner action research is a way for individual (or groups of) practitioners to improve the teaching and learning experience within schools. This approach exemplifies the concept of teachers as life-long learners. There are many possible areas of focus for your own practitioner research – it depends on both your pupils' needs and your own interests. Some priorities of general relevance include how to:

- Increase motivation among pupils.

- Draw on theories of long-term memory to make teaching or independent study more effective (e.g. see Putnam, Sungkhasettee & Roediger, 2016).

- Improve pupils' metacognitive skills to help them self-regulate their learning (e.g. see Kornell & Bjork, 2007).

- Use social psychology principles to improve the ethos among a year group (e.g.

see Reynolds et al, 2015).

Your existing research skills from psychology can come to the fore in this endeavour. Consider some of the following issues:

- What research method should you use? A field experiment might seem an obvious choice, but consider other options such as focus groups and interviews. Pupils' classwork also provides a form of data which you could try to analyse.

- How can you ensure that research into your own pupils is conducted ethically? Perhaps, for example, you would use data from previous years as a baseline rather than having a control group in your research.

- What extraneous variables would you need to allow for, and how certain could you be that findings from one group of pupils would generalise to another group?

The benefits of carrying out practitioner action research include having your voice heard within school, which is empowering within itself. You also have the opportunity to pursue something you are passionate about and can potentially inform school policy in the process. Furthermore, you get to develop your research methods skills, which again links back to your teaching of Psychology,

There are many sources of information about action research. For instance, The Open University offers a free course on 'Learning to teach: an introduction to classroom research'. Another way to get started is to connect with others who are carrying out action research through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. See also the 'further reading' at the end of this chapter.

3. Planning

3.1 Biases and limitations

Progressing your career over the long term is going to involve careful and effective planning. Unfortunately, humans are not very good at planning, as psychologists know very well! We are all biased in our perception of situations, focusing overly on recent evidence and our current mood. Some example phenomena around the psychology of planning and judgements include:

- The *planning fallacy*: most people underestimate how long they will take to complete a complex task, even when they have tried it before or are given realistic examples of how long it took other people to do the same thing (Buehler et al, 1994).

- The *availability heuristic*: people tend to be biased by information or examples that are recent or come easily to mind, and this can affect our judgments of probability (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). For example, if you find it hard to think of an example of a psychology teacher who has been promoted, you may think it less likely to happen to you than it actually is.

- *Anchoring bias*: the tendency to place too much weight on information that is received early on, and finding it hard to later adjust one's thinking (Furnham & Boo, 2011). When you receive negative feedback early in your career, for example, you may be biased by this later, incorrectly assuming that you are not suited to promoted posts.

While psychology graduates are not immune to such errors, we can use our experience and competence in psychology to help navigate past them on the way to building a successful

career.

3.2 Taking up new roles

It is not necessary to get everything right straight away. Taking up a new leadership role is much like being a new classroom teacher – there will be a period of time where everything is very new and challenging, but before too long things will start to fall into place.

One pitfall to avoid is trying too hard to come across as a 'strong' leader – perhaps based on the stereotype of the leader as someone who wields authority through power and charisma. Social psychologists Alex Haslam, Stephen Reicher and Michael Platow (2011) note that in fact, most successful leaders are not people who stand out from the group through their unique characteristics but rather people who can represent the people that they lead in such a way that they are seen as a prototype of the group:

"*Overall...more prototypical leaders are not only seen as better leaders but are also more effective in getting us to do things and in making us feel good about doing those things.*"

As a future leader (if that is your aspiration), it is important then to ask not what makes you different from the people you wish to lead but what makes you similar and *representative* of them.

3.3 Flexible planning

You want to plan for the future, but at the same time, the future is uncertain. You don't know what people are going to do, because people are inherently unpredictable. But you do need to react to it when it happens.

If this situation sounds familiar, it's because you already do exactly this – in *lesson*

planning. A lesson plan is an outline of what should happen, and sets out key targets and objectives. At the same time, a good lesson plan is flexible enough to deal with problems that crop up along the way. You also plan for an entire course in a way that has to adapt and respond to events and circumstances throughout the year (e.g. Covid-19 presented a completely unprecedented situation for all schools!). Furthermore, students may be absent from lessons due to school trips, or you may find that the student rate of learning means you need to go back over material already covered. Whatever the circumstances, you need to be flexible in your planning to allow for the unexpected.

A popular time-management tool which can be applied here is the ABC technique. This involves categorising your objectives into groups. These groups are labelled as A, B and C (as the name of the technique would indicate), to signify the importance and urgency of each task. The varying activities on your to-do list are ranked using the following criteria:

A: Tasks that are most important and urgent

B: Tasks that are important, but not as urgent

C: Tasks that are neither important nor urgent.

Within each group, you can further rank your tasks by their relative importance. A key point to note here is that some things may appear to be urgent, but you should not be driven by this. Important tasks should take priority over less important tasks, even if they seem urgent (Covey, 2004).

TASK: Make a list of career targets using an 'ABC' ranking – A being important and urgent, B being important but not urgent, and C being things which are nice to have, but neither urgent nor especially important.

3.4 A five-year plan

Clearly, there is only so much that can be achieved in a single academic year. Careers progress slowly. The *five-year plan* is an approach used by a number of professionals, and it applies well to teaching, too. Such a plan can allow you to progress through the complex stages of your career development, even allowing for the periods of time when you may be too focused on day-to-day work to give much thought to progression.

It also makes it easier for you to set ambitious goals; a body of research has shown that goals which are more specific are less stressful, as it becomes easier to judge what is needed in order to achieve them, and success is more objective. To do this, consider breaking down larger goals into a series of sub-goals, each of which can be achieved via a set of actions that are under your control (Smith, 2020).

You may well find that your plans for the later years are less concrete, and that is perfectly fine. Much of what will happen in three, four or five years depends on things that will happen before that time that are currently uncertain. The degree of flexibility should increase, then, with broader timescales, and plans which focus less on specific targets (for example, "*read the rest of this book and take notes*") and more on general goals (for example, "*apply for a deputy headteacher role*") that could be achieved in multiple different ways.

TASK: Now it's time to write your own 5-year plan. There are various ways to do this, but you might want to start with a simple document or sheet of paper, structured with each year as a heading (probably academic years, but you could use calendar years if you prefer). Use the headings to brainstorm ideas of what you'd like to achieve. Once you have a lot of ideas down, you might want to transfer the information to a spreadsheet or to dedicated project management software, as these will make it easier to keep track of dependencies (one thing needing to be done before another) and requirements (such as time, or any costs

associated with training).

3.5 Maintaining motivation

It's easy to get excited about a plan at the beginning, but how do you maintain motivation over time, when teaching is tough, the winters are long, and you have dozens of other things to think about in both your home and work life?

One simple way is to allocate a regular time to career planning. This session may be as simple as saying, "ok, I am still on track". But it is important to value your career planning time as much as you value the other weekly or regular tasks that you have in your schedule. So why not take some time now to block out a session, at least once a month, to review your goals and progress.

Self-determination theory, a major theory of motivation which has been applied to education and to careers, suggests that motivation is linked to three main factors (Ryan & Deci, 2017):

- Our self-efficacy – how competent do we feel in our role?

- Our connection to others – do we feel like part of a community?

- Our autonomy – to what extent do we feel in control?

Although some of these things may be out of our control, there are some things that we can do about them. If we feel overwhelmed by the difficulty of a task, we can take specific courses to upskill (see Section 2 of this chapter). And if we feel isolated, we can make a goal more meaningful and motivating by developing a sense of community; networking with others who are in the same position, for example, with honest sharing of your worries and doubts.

On a more day-to-day basis, it may help to use simple, everyday strategies to motivate

ourselves to work towards long-term goals (such as completion of a Masters dissertation or action research project!). A simple 'nudge' in the form of a reminder or social cue can be more effective in motivating behaviour than a direct reward (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). In part, this is because rewards are slow and hard to perceive, and the nudge is much more immediate. For example, if you want to motivate yourself to go to the gym, an effective nudge would be to bring your sports clothes to work so that you could go straight there at the end of the day rather than going home first. Another good nudge would be to agree to meet a friend there, leading to social pressure not to pull out. Such strategies can be used multiple times, helping you stick to and carry out long-term plans.

TASK: Think of at least two 'nudges' that you could use to help you to advance a specific goal, and note these down alongside your other plans.

3.6 The challenges ahead

Let's now consider some of the challenges ahead, and how you might mentally prepare for them. Again, it is hard to know exactly what difficulties you might face, but the tools you can bring to bear when tackling them may be fairly similar across different situations.

Carol Dweck's (2007) research on mindset (how individuals view their abilities) has increasingly been recognised and applied in schools with regards to student motivation and achievement. Dweck argues that intelligence is not fixed and that students who have the determination to struggle with new concepts and ideas are students with a growth mindset, and through hard work they can master their difficulties in learning at any given time (Polirstok, 2017).

Such perseverance when facing challenges has been referred to as 'grit' (Duckworth et

al., 2007). Those who are successful, can sustain their effort and reach their targeted goals are considered 'gritty'. How gritty do you think you are? The same lessons on resilience and motivation that we give to our own students can be applied to our own efforts at achieving goals.

TASK: "A growth mindset isn't just about effort" (Dweck, 2015, p.20). What did Dweck mean by this? How could having a growth mindset help you achieve your career goals?

4. Overview

In this chapter, we have explored the many strengths that you bring as a psychology teacher, and considered some of the possible ways that you might draw upon these to advance your career. In doing so, you may choose to engage in practitioner action research, pursue Masters-level study, or both.

All the same, we recognise that career progression is daunting, particularly if you suffer from low confidence and/or identify with a group which is currently under-represented among the promoted posts in your school. We have explored a number of strategies for overcoming such challenges, from mentoring to planning. We have also looked at some of the psychological barriers to enacting a plan, and considered ways to overcome them.

There are multiple ways that you could build on your existing skills and knowledge to develop your career as a psychology teacher. We wish you luck with it, whatever you decide to prioritise.

You should now:

- have an outline 5-year plan of your own psychology teaching career;

- be aware of the role of Masters study and other qualifications and their link to management and other promoted posts;

- have started to develop the skills involved in practitioner action research.

Further reading

- Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., & Platow, M. J. (2011). *The new psychology of leadership: Identity, influence and power*. Psychology Press.

- Firth, J. (2019). *The teacher's guide to research: Engaging with, applying and conducting research in the classroom.* Routledge.

- The Open University free course – Learning to teach: an introduction to classroom research can be found at: https://www.open.edu/openlearn/education-development/learning-teach-introduction-classroom-research/content-section-0?active-tab=description-tab

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