



# Purpose, Autonomy and Mastery

## Motivating for Retention

**Reuben Moore** of Teach First looks at how giving teachers autonomy, supporting their development and enabling them to fulfil their sense of purpose can go a long way toward bringing out the best in teachers and getting them to stay on.

**Y**ou need a great first line. This advice struck fear into me when I was given it by my history tutor before embarking on my first undergraduate essay. We all know the power and importance of a great first line in a novel or speech. It draws people in, captures interest and if it follows in the same vein as the first line, a reader's or listener's attention is retained.

We also know that if we are not hooked in the first few pages, it can be difficult to keep going. For me, the pressure of finding a great first line stifled my ability to put pen to paper at all. However, in seeing great, yet concrete, examples mixed with plenty of practice and feedback, I managed to write not just a good first line, but a whole essay. I don't think I ever managed a great first line but they certainly got better!

### **Getting teachers off to a great start**

In some ways, there is a similarity with recruitment and retention of teaching staff. People join the profession for many reasons, and increasingly, in the case of Teach First, from many different backgrounds or previous careers. One common theme they often share is to have a positive impact on children's lives. However, the first year of the job (or the first few) can guarantee a connection

with teaching that either has people hooked for the long term or can drive people away, all too early, never to return.

I welcomed the DfE's recent [Recruitment and Retention strategy](#). They looked at the key issues preventing people joining the profession and the challenges to staying in it. There is a genuine (and funded) attempt to solve complex issues facing education. These include getting the climate right for teachers to thrive, ensuring those early in their career have excellent and continued development, support for those to remain in the profession and succeed when their lives change, and finally, making it easier for people to become teachers in the first place.

### **Bringing value to the work**

I have been lucky enough to have spent a long time working in a number of schools. These schools faced significant challenges and it was certainly not an easy life, but I was always supported and challenged effectively. I felt a great sense of value in the work I was doing with pupils, and colleagues constantly supported me to improve rapidly.

Dan Pink, in his book on motivation called *Drive*, picks up many of these themes, looking at them far more scientifically than my anecdotal reflections. He suggests that people are motivated by purpose, mastery and autonomy. This goes against many views that money is a prime motivator. He notes that in fact, studies show money is only a motivator up to a certain point and no further. People need to be paid enough so that money can be taken off the table and after that, it has little impact on motivation. In teaching, Pink's suggestions can be easily applied with regards to mastery, autonomy and purpose.

### **Maintaining a sense of purpose**

All teachers are attracted by a sense of purpose. People are attracted to Teach First due to its vision that no child's educational success should be limited by their background. Our teachers tell us that they want others to have the opportunity they had to be successful at school and in life. It may surprise you to hear that nearly a third of our teachers attended a school with a level of deprivation that would make it eligible for support from Teach First. Their success, sometimes against the odds, brings with it a resilience that is well suited to the profession. Equally, last year nearly half of our teachers were the first in their family to go to university. In doing so they have experienced first-hand the great value that education can bring.

At Teach First, we talk about purpose or vision a great deal, both in attracting people to the profession but also sustaining them within it. It is important to remind colleagues of the reasons they joined in the first place and link their day-to-day work back to that. This can be done simply by gathering people together and sharing their successes or by sharing examples of pupil achievement supported by teachers and leaders (as well as parents and communities).

Teach First often ask incoming teachers to write postcards to themselves. They write them in their early week of pre-service training (we call this our Summer Institute) and then we send the postcards back to them in January of their first year of teaching. January can be a tough time for us all but especially new teachers. They have got through that first period, committed significant time to learning about their pupils, their school, planning and delivering lessons and gaining feedback.

Yet over the Christmas break, they meet up with friends for the first time in a while. Inevitably people compete, noting either that they are having the best social life possible or that they are working harder than anyone. Our teachers can feel they are certainly doing better at the latter than the former. Returning to school in dark mornings and marking well into the darker evenings in January can be difficult, but a personal reminder of why they set out to do the job can be the little boost that's needed.

### **Avoiding data overload**

All teachers come in with a very strong sense of why. Yet this can be eroded when they feel they're being distracted from their core purpose of helping pupils develop, especially through tasks or activities that seem not to add value to the mission. However, in education, this distraction can be particularly problematic. It can undermine the greatest asset of the of the profession—working with children and young people every day. The 'data drop' or accountability system is often labelled as the major distractor from the core purpose of teachers. However, as with many issues,

it's not quite as simple as all that. Teachers do need data. They need to know on a very regular basis whether what they are teaching is being learned by pupils. If the knowledge has not been retained, and more significantly, understood, in order to be applied subsequently, then the teacher's time has not been as effective as it could have been.

Data is of great use to teachers. School leaders need to know if the school is having success for the pupils it serves. The challenge with data comes in two ways: when the assessment systems are overly burdensome, detracting people from their core job, or where there is a lack of trust in the system, requiring more significant amounts of data to resolve the issue. Increasing amounts of data or evidence gathering can be unconscious, due to its incremental nature.

For example, Teach First have tried to reduce the amount our teachers need to provide in a portfolio to be able to recommend for Qualified Teacher Status. All these pieces of evidence in and of themselves are part of daily work of teachers, yet the collation, explanation, number of pieces and narrative around them can become more burdensome than it needs to be. We have worked with our university partners to reduce the workload for both new teachers and for those assessing. We have also relied more on the one-to-one interaction of Teach First staff and university tutors with teachers rather than the need to evidence each of these in written format.



### Room for improvement

Pink's second aspect is the issue of mastery. People are more motivated when they feel they are getting better at something. However, getting better at something challenging is hard work. This may seem like stating the blatantly obvious, yet it is of vital importance in how we support new teachers. This will not only support their work with pupils, but also their sense of wellbeing in a holistic sense. Many studies have shown that people who feel a sense of success in their work, also have a better view of their own wellbeing. Teachers seeing themselves improve not only helps their pupils but also helps their own wellbeing.

Discussions around mastery often begin by focusing on elite sports or music (or chess, where the original evidence came from). However, it is firmly ensconced in the education lexicon through maths mastery programmes and their implications for other curriculum areas. Many of those principles can be applied to novice teachers, as well as

pupils. Our focus at Teach First has always been around helping new teachers get better more quickly. Our QTS grades show that we have been successful in doing so. Given the unique nature of our programme, we have certain opportunities and constraints that other teaching programmes do not have. For example, our teachers have a two-year development programme. This means our curriculum for developing teachers can be sequenced across two years instead of being condensed into one. We also have a Summer Institute before our teachers start in school, to prepare them for the first term in particular.

### Laying the foundation for success

Our teachers lead classes from the start of September and they need to be well-prepared to do so. In our Summer Institute, we used to try to focus on a bit of everything that a teacher starting out might need. We soon realised that there was a limit to what people new to the profession can take in and apply even before the concept of cognitive load had been popularised. Therefore, we focus on what we call 'gatekeeper skills' before September.

Through internal research focusing on where teachers were making rapid progress, we know that a focus on planning, teaching, behaviour and assessment are essential building blocks. We also focused on these important areas in specific ways. We wanted to be as explicit as possible to help new teachers do these things well. We built upon Doug Lemov's work in *Teach Like a Champion* in our approach to behaviour. This involved looking at certain behaviour techniques, practising them, getting feedback, practising again.

The intention is that by focusing on a small number of techniques with concrete steps, habits emerge. This leaves teachers more time in class to focus on the best bits of being a teacher—pupil learning and development. For example, 'brightening the lines' is one technique that our teachers find useful. It breaks down what to do to make great transitions between activities in class. It is something expert teachers do automatically, and yet when a new or novice teacher watches an expert teacher, they will not notice any of the subtleties. When a novice tries it themselves, they quickly realise the challenges of moving successfully from one activity to the next. When you are new at something, you can't get it right first time, especially if you do not know what the concrete steps are.



I am not saying that learning technical steps is the magic bullet to quick progress, but we know from years of experience that it can certainly help in the early months and supports teachers through the difficult early periods to allow them to enter a medium term where they thrive.

### **Developing mastery**

Mastery also comes from receiving explicit and concrete feedback from an expert. Every Teach First teacher receives direct, bespoke and frequent support from a subject or phase tutor from a university, a mentor in their school and a Teach First employee trained to assist their development. These experts provide support and challenges to help progression. At its most effective, the feedback is linked to their own expertise and therefore not duplicative, yet it also comes with a clear framework to ensure coherence for the new teacher. Conflicting advice for a novice can be very difficult, as it makes it more challenging to identify the path to improvement.

There are many paths to improvement, however. We have participant development frameworks and programme principles that help that support partnership and we use a common language towards teacher development. As the teacher moves beyond the early novice stage, they have the space to look at literature, trial different approaches and see which methods work in their context. This is something that is central to our programme. Our 2015 Ofsted report made mention of this by saying, 'This common goal drives all partners and participants to strive for excellence. Nothing but the best will do.'

### **Reaching a state of autonomy**

This leads on to autonomy, which varies significantly from school to school. When people have ownership over their work, they tend to thrive, just as being micro-managed always feels uncomfortable and limiting. This is true for all work, not just in education. However, for those new to the profession, autonomy can sometimes be overwhelming. For example, some of our new English teachers were told to choose any text and focus on it for the term. For experienced or expert teachers, this can be liberating, but for new teachers, it can be difficult to know where to start. It can also add to an already burdensome planning schedule. There is a balance to be struck between supporting structure and autonomy.

Schools who find this balance also seem to be making great strides both in retaining staff and managing workload. Well-curated, shared resources can be a wonderful thing for all subject departments. The teacher still has plans, but can focus on the questions or aspects needed to support their class access the resource, rather than starting every lesson plan or individual learning programme from scratch.



## Networking and support

Purpose, mastery and autonomy are of great benefit to both attracting people to the profession and also retaining them. In addition, it is important that teachers know they are not alone. From our sixteen years of experience, the support of a network is also crucial. Nobody wants to feel they are alone in tackling a challenge. Having a network of other people within education and beyond can help teachers solve problems or find greater insights. The school where the staff have a shared focus on building a successful school and enjoying it in the process are always the best. Staff both give to the school network and gain from it. This is what we find with our Ambassador network (those who have successfully completed our programmes). We have successfully trained over 10,000 teachers to work in schools across England and Wales, and they are a great resource for finding solutions to problems.

## Freedom to grow

We also found that teachers will often stay if there is a clear path of progression. This may be linked to mastery, for example, the opportunity to deepen their classroom practice, or undertake further programmes. We have a voluntary offer in a teacher's third year in teaching and as an NPQ provider, that also is a route for some. Offering teachers concrete steps for development can reinforce both the progression of the teacher and the development of the school

through great retention and deepening expertise of the staff base. Nearly 2,000 Teach First teachers are in positions of leadership in schools.

Finally, if the school has a supportive culture where teachers thrive, they want to stay. Leaders who have an approach that reminds people of purpose, focuses on developing mastery in teachers and creating a culture of autonomy and structure will go a considerable way to retaining teachers, even in schools that face challenges.

## Making a positive contribution

We do not have all the answers to deep-rooted recruitment and retention problems. Indeed, many of these can't be solved by Teach First or any other training provider alone—including those relating to workload, accountability and pay. However, we want to contribute to policy positively and support the day-to-day work of our teachers.

Our mission to make education fair remains at the heart of what we do, and we continue to provide bespoke support for schools serving disadvantaged communities or where teacher recruitment and retention is even more challenging. We still have a few teachers left to place in schools, particularly across the early years and primary phase, for this September. If you would like to know more about getting a new teacher into your school who is well-supported for two years, informed by the latest research and focused on preparing your pupils for success in later life, then please do get in touch.

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More information on the Teach First school partnerships can be found at <https://www.teachfirst.org.uk/schools>

