



LEARNING TO SAY 'NO' WILL ENABLE YOU TO SAY 'YES' AND MEAN IT



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Teaching is an exciting profession. It is one of the most valuable of all human endeavours; you have the capacity to change lives for the better every day. However, it is also a complex and demanding profession. There are many opportunities in schools to make positive contributions, but you will need to find strategies to say 'no' to some opportunities, so that when you say 'yes', you will mean it and you will be more likely to succeed.

In this article I have set out some strategies that you can use to say 'no' to some opportunities in your school in a professional manner. Saying 'no' to some things allows you to establish boundaries around your workload, and to say 'yes' in a meaningful way to other opportunities.

Routine and agency

Schools are among the most routine of workplaces. As teachers we work in fixed workplaces at set times. Bells and clocks inform us when to go to class, when to break for a coffee, when to eat lunch and when the teaching for the day is finished. Giddens (1984) writes about 'routinised behaviours' as the basic element of 'day-to-day social activity'. In your school there will be accepted ways of doing things; routinised behaviours.

While many experienced teachers will have settled into the pattern of the school and may handle all of the teaching tasks with apparent ease, you may be feeling overwhelmed by the seemingly endless list of tasks and possibilities. You may be feeling stressed, overwrought or anxious, and wondering why it is that experienced teachers are not feeling the same. There are many reasons why this could be the case, but I want to suggest to you two things. Firstly, experienced teachers have become familiar with the routines of the school and understand how to manage the day-to-day activity of the workplace. Secondly, experienced teachers have generally developed their own agency, i.e. they have learned how to navigate the relationships at the school and to operate successfully within the school environment.

Experienced teachers have established control over their workload and established professional boundaries.

It is the second of these ideas that is the focus of this article; How do you develop your own agency to establish a manageable workload that ensures that you can succeed in your graduate year? This will mean saying 'no', so that you can say 'yes' and mean it.

In this article I have provided some suggestions, but it is my strong advice that you talk through these issues with your mentor, or a senior colleague in the school who you trust. Each school has its own culture and its own routines, and a full appreciation of that culture and those routines will enhance the likelihood that you will get a good outcome in any situation where you decide to say 'no'.

Workload – let's deal with the myths

Teaching is a relationship profession and, as in any relationship, you may feel that there is always something more that you could do to support your students and your colleagues. You will often feel like there is more time that you could commit to your own improvement and that of your students. However, you will need to develop boundaries around your work to ensure that you are the best teacher you can be.

To support you, guidelines have been put in place by the Department of Education and by schools to help you manage your workload.

Workload guidelines

The Victorian Government Schools Agreement (VGSA)

The VGSA provides for the terms and conditions of employment for staff in schools. It includes provisions relating to teacher work, such as, face-to-face teaching, the allocation of organisational duties, class sizes and the roles and responsibilities that can be required of teachers at their respective classification. You can get a copy of the agreement at <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/documents/vgsa-2017.pdf> or find the AEU representative in your school and have a conversation. One important clause for graduates in the agreement is that in the first 12 months of classroom teaching, a graduate workload should be reduced by 5%. This should be done 'within the resources available to the school'.

Health, Safety and Wellbeing

The Department of Education and Training Health, Safety and Wellbeing policy contains the following:

The Department recognises that employee health, safety and wellbeing is integral to achieving excellent educational and work performance outcomes and commits to enhance workplace culture:

- by actively demonstrating and promoting a positive, inclusive and supportive working environment
- by recognising the importance of flexible work arrangements and family friendly work practices in maintaining a diverse, adaptive and high performing workforce.

(<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/safetyhw/Pages/hswpolicy.aspx>)

School consultative arrangements

Schools have consultative arrangements in place which enable staff to have input into the decisions that affect their working life. Many aspects of teaching work are regulated by guidelines developed through a consultative committee at your school. There will be guidelines at your school about attending camps and excursions, out of hours events such as meetings and parent-teacher interviews. Your mentor is a good person to ask about these guidelines.

Developing your agency

In whatever school you work, and whomever is your principal, you have a shared interest. Your primary concern is the same as your principal, that you are doing an effective job in the classroom and maximising the learning for the students. If you always keep that in mind as your primary objective it is unlikely you will go wrong in any discussion with your principal or senior leaders. Having accepted that goal, it is a matter of your time, your interests and your priorities. You can say 'yes' to as many things as you are asked to do, whilst you are still being an effective teacher for the students in your classroom. When you are asked to do something that you believe might compromise your ability to teach well then you will need strategies to say 'no'. These strategies need to be respectful and professional.

I have provided strategies in the form of three scenarios that are set out below.

Scenario One

The principal asks for your help with a problem that has arisen, e.g. being a last-minute fill in for a school camp when another teacher becomes ill.

Take your time to respond – camps are a significant responsibility. Try, 'I need to think about that overnight and I will give you my answer tomorrow'. The next day you can then say 'yes' or 'no'. If 'no' give it a positive spin such as, 'I am sorry I would love to go to camp but I have some personal commitments that I cannot change. If another opportunity comes up, with more notice, I would be happy to be asked again'.

Scenario Two

The principal offers you an opportunity e.g. you are asked to take on a new project that has extra work

This is often enticing, and your response should focus on priorities. Try, 'That is a great opportunity and I would love to take on that responsibility – thank you for thinking of me. However, I am worried about my workload and the impact on the students. Is there something that I can stop doing to create the time to take on this role? Then I will be able to say 'yes' and still succeed in all of my areas of responsibility'.

Scenario Three

You are asked to accept extra work e.g. you are asked to teach some extra time each week, above the expectations for a graduate. It is explained as being 'just for a few weeks – it will help with our enrolment numbers'.

You can simply say 'No, I currently have a full workload. Taking on additional work may impact on my ability to fulfil my obligations'. If you find that approach difficult, you could try, 'I would like to help, but I am worried that if I do that work, my students will suffer and that will cause more difficulty. Is there something else I can do to help with enrolments?'

Or you could say 'yes', with conditions; 'I am willing to try that, but who do I speak to if I experience difficulties, and what is the strategy for me to exit the additional work if I experience difficulty with my class(es)?'

In each of these scenarios you are looking to frame the answer in either positive terms, or in a way that shows that you recognise the issue or opportunity. In each case where you decide to say 'no', you are also communicating the message that your priority is to become an effective classroom teacher.

Parents

(This section should be read in conjunction with an article by Belinda Webb on building relationships with parents. [Click here to go to the article](#)). In this edition there is also an article by Susan Visenjoux on handling difficult conversations [\(Click here to go to the article\)](#)

You will form healthy working relationships with most parents. However, some may be particularly challenging. Keep in mind that you have the care of that parent's child for 6-7 hours a day (in a primary school), and some parents find that difficult. Some parents also had a tough time at school, and they may not have a favourable impression of teachers.

Your school should have established protocols for dealing with parents and you should act in accordance with those protocols. Your mentor, and the school leadership team, will be able to provide support in responding to parents. However, you will still have to exercise judgement – there may be situations that require immediate attention, without the time to refer to someone with more experience.

The best strategy is prevention. Establish good routines for communication with parents early in the year. If you have not done so yet – it is not too late to start.

Before school conversations

This is a complex area in primary schools. Many parents of young children will want to see you before school to let you know about issues or concerns. Know the pattern in your school and then establish a routine for what contact you are prepared to have with parents in the morning. This should include a given time and location. e.g. Let parents know that you will be in the classroom and available between 8.15 and 8.30am. Having established that routine you can then say:

‘I am sorry I am unable to meet with you now. I have a duty of care to the students. I have to be in the classroom with them. If your matter is urgent, please go to the office and ask to speak to the Principal (or appropriate person)’.

After school conversations

Know the routine in your school. Many teachers will establish an afternoon when they are available to meet with parents, or when they make and receive phone calls. You can then say:

‘I am sorry I cannot meet with you now; I have other responsibilities. Please email me and we will make a time on x afternoon, (or make a specific time and day).

Written communication

Your school should have protocols for dealing with written communication from parents. Know the routine in your school for email and written communication with parents. Are you providing your email address to parents? If so, establish clear protocols e.g. ‘I am unable to respond to emails after x time in the afternoon’ or ‘I will respond to your email within 48 hours’. Set up an out of office message that carries that information and then respond at a time of your choosing.

Just in case

Never attend a meeting on your own if you feel threatened or are worried about its outcome. Always use the principal, or a colleague, as your safety net. Your school should have a protocol about this situation. You can always provide a response such as:

‘I am sorry I am not able to meet with you now. If your issue is urgent, please inform the principal. I will do my best to let him/her know that you want to raise this issue.’

Students

It is acceptable to say 'no' to students, but this can be difficult. You want the best for all of your students, but you will encounter some students who act as if you are their personal tutor. However, you have a responsibility to all of the students you teach and it is not your job to meet all of the needs of your students. You will have to develop the agency to say 'no'.

Once again it is about establishing expectations and keeping to the routines you have established. If you have not established routines, it is not too late to start. Some examples might include:

- Timelines for marking and returning work to students
- Timelines for you to read draft essays and practice exams
- Your availability for one on one feedback sessions on submitted work

When dealing with students, you carry a lot of power and influence, so it is important to take extra caution with your language. Think about the following phrasing:

'Mary, I know you're really keen for feedback, but I cannot mark the essay you have just given me before the end of the day.' (Restate the timeline you have set for return of the work and offer some options such as having one of Mary's peers read over the essay, or negotiate a time when you can read and provide direct feedback on her work).'

Social engagements

The school year is reasonably predictable ([Click here for articles on the Teaching Year by Belinda Webb](#)). You will always be busy with reports in June and November. This is when you need to let your partner, family and friends know that it may not be a good time for you to attend social functions, weekends away etc. Just as you cannot say 'yes' to every work commitment, you may not be able to 'yes' to every social one. However, it is important to maintain your relationships, friendships and a healthy, active lifestyle. Enjoying your downtime is key to maintaining a productive work life. You do not have to say 'no' to everything but saying 'no' to a few things in the really busy times will keep you healthy enough to really enjoy the social functions you do attend.

For discussion with your mentor

1. Dig deep into the culture of the school to understand why the workload is like it is. Talk with your mentor and that will help you use your agency to bring about a manageable workload for yourself.
2. Download the [Graduate Teacher Induction Guide](#) (if you have not already) and discuss the workload implications with your mentor.
3. How does your mentor say 'no'?

Takeaway message

It is important to establish boundaries for your work. There is a skill in saying 'no' in a professional manner, which will enable you to say 'yes' and mean it.

References

Giddens, Anthony (1984), *The Constitution of Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge.