

Why I finally decided to prioritise my personal life over my teaching career

A serious illness led **Kate Mather** to turn her work-life balance on its head. She explains how to get your life back without compromising on standards

By redressing her work-life balance, teacher Kate Mather has found time for hobbies such as reading. Photograph: Chemistry/Getty Images/Digital Vision

Five years ago I had the misfortune to be diagnosed with a potentially life-threatening illness. In lots of ways, that experience turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

As a primary school deputy head with a full-time teaching commitment, I was completely exhausted. I loved teaching and had enjoyed a successful career for over twenty years, but the long hours and endless workload were beginning to take their toll on me – and, clearly, on my health.

Freed from the millstone of lesson preparation and marking that usually blighted my evenings, weekends and holidays, I was able to enjoy my time away from school as I recuperated. I caught up on reading the huge pile of books that had built up by my bedside and, to my great surprise, I also discovered that I had a talent for painting in water-colours.

How had I got to the point where I had actually felt relieved to have an illness which forced me to take time out? With a huge feeling of regret, I reflected on the number of hours each week that my work took me away from time with my own kids.

The very arrangement of the words '[work-life balance](#)' puts the emphasis firmly on work, inspiring us to try and fit our lives almost apologetically around our jobs. I wasn't prepared to apologise anymore.

I had enough faith in my teaching skills to know that I made a difference to my pupils' life chances, and I wasn't prepared to compromise my standards. But I needed to figure out how to continue to do my job well, but make sure that it didn't take precedence over my personal life. More importantly, I needed to develop work practices that preserved my health. It's taken a few years, but I now feel that I've just about got the life-work balance right. Here are my tips for tipping the balance back in favour of life:

Begin by changing your perspective on how you think about your job

If you let it, teaching can consume your every waking moment – but it doesn't have to. I now think of my job in terms of working flexi-time because, to some extent, I can choose when I work (outside of designated teaching time, of course). I make no apology to critics of my 'long' school holidays as I view this as pay-back time. Thinking flexibly about the time I have at my disposal helps me to feel that I have control over my working-hours, rather than my workload controlling me. The important thing is to shift your thinking to a consideration of how you are going to fit your work around your personal life, not vice versa.

Do you need to rethink your career plan?

Consider whether you are coping with your current role or whether you need to rethink your career plan. The first thing I did on returning to school after my illness was to step down from my deputy headship. Yes, drastic I know – but I found it extremely stressful balancing a full-time teaching commitment with my management responsibilities. The expectations to excel in both roles were unrealistic. I took quite a drop in salary, but it was worth every penny to be able to take back control of my life.

Make time for yourself and your own interests

Good teachers are lifelong learners, constantly seeking to improve their knowledge or develop their skills – so don't stop to think about whether or not you have time to pursue an activity you enjoy. You need a life outside of school for your own well-being, so get yourself booked on to that Zumba class or join that choir. You need to make teaching work round you and your interests – not the other way round.

Make a timetable

As teachers, we are used to following a timetable to organise our working day, but it can be useful to make a timetable for your non-teaching time, too. Begin by blocking out the teaching day and the weekly staff meeting. Then prioritise and block out time for personal or family commitments. Look at the remaining time and pencil in designated times that you are prepared to work. Make sure that you stick to your times ruthlessly! If you have said you will finish at 9pm, then do that.

You should also think about when you are going to set a piece of work that may require intensive marking. I personally try to avoid making extra work for myself on a Wednesday because that's when I attend an evening class. I would plan to do a long writing task on a Monday, because I can mark it during PPA time on Tuesday afternoon.

Don't let others hijack your precious time

At the end of the school day it is inevitable that your carefully laid plans to tackle that pile of marking are going to be disrupted at some point. A colleague may need to discuss an important issue, or an anxious parent may want reassurance. These things have to be attended to, so you need to develop strategies to make sure they don't intrude too much on your work time. Take control – be very clear about the amount of time you are willing to commit to a meeting with them and finish the meeting at the time you agreed.

Search any teaching forum, including the Guardian [Teacher Network](#), and you will find lots of great ideas and articles helping you to manage your time more effectively, plan purposeful tasks which don't require marking and improve your general classroom organisation. I have always been grateful for such tips and have incorporated many of them into my practice.

However, I think it's time now to take a fresh look at this notion of work-life balance and turn it right on its head. Life first, work second. You owe it to yourself – and the loved ones who have to live with you!

Kate Mather is a primary school teacher. She writes under a pseudonym. Taken from The Guardian Teacher Network.