

Embrace YOUR FLAWS

Every teacher has their weaknesses, concedes **Colin Foster** – but instead of letting ourselves be hindered by them, let's harness them...

Every teacher has weaknesses. We're all bound to be better at some things than others, and being aware of what they are is surely a good thing.

All of us will have some weaknesses in aspects of our subject knowledge. We'll lack experience in dealing with certain situations, or in leading certain kinds of classroom activities. Some of us may have emotional weaknesses or triggers of various kinds that can prevent us from doing the job in the way that we would wish to.

All this is inevitable, as long as teachers continue to be drawn from members of the human race. AI might be getting better, but hasn't taken over completely just yet...

Covering up

There are many ways in which we might try to work on these things, so that over time we 'improve' ourselves. But this is an exhausting, lifelong process, and often one with no quick, easy fixes. This means that we must often simply learn to live with some of our weaknesses – at least to some extent – and make peace with them. In these cases, then, what should we actually *do* with our weaknesses?

Every teacher must be a learner. We're all on a similar journey, though we also know that we'll never reach the destination of being a perfect, '*super teacher*', with a formidable set of superhero

skills and zero weaknesses. On the contrary, every teacher has to live day to day with being imperfect.

At which point, the question then becomes, '*How do we do that?*' Related to which is a follow-up question: '*Should we try to hide our weaknesses from the students we teach?*'

There can certainly be an incentive in some schools for teachers to try and conceal their weak spots. This may be especially the case for

teachers with any kind of leadership responsibility, or ECTs who feel – or are – 'on probation' in some sense. We want to make a positive impression on our colleagues and parents, and of course, win the confidence and respect of the students that we teach. Otherwise, our daily lives will be difficult, to say the least.

Covering up your weaker sides is a natural, human response to fear of other people's reactions. Advertising our vulnerabilities may not always be best advised, if we want to gain and retain people's respect – but what if people see our attempts at covering things up? Might this not turn the teacher into a less positive role model?

If students see us apparently ashamed of our weaknesses, and trying desperately to hide them,

will they start to assume that that is what they must also do with theirs?

Subject-specific anxiety

Let's take the specific example of subject-specific anxiety (though related issues will similarly apply across many other areas). According to a recent YouGov poll commissioned by the Maths Anxiety Trust, between 20% and 30% of secondary mathematics

teachers have reported sometimes suffering from maths anxiety during lessons.

Note that this specifically relates to mathematics teachers, rather than secondary teachers more generally. We might expect the percentage to be higher – perhaps considerably so – for teachers of other subjects. Among those mathematics teachers surveyed, 5 to 10% of them reported that maths anxiety occurs 'often' for them. There were similar percentages among primary teachers and TAs.

These statistics correspond to a lot of teachers and other professionals employed within schools, and yet this is still just one area. There are plenty of other subject-related anxieties that teachers might experience across other subject areas,

making this potentially just the tip of a much larger iceberg.

Misplaced confidence

We might well ask ourselves at this point, what are these teachers supposed to do? How would you advise them?

An emphasis on 'putting children first' might make us concerned that teachers' anxieties will be 'passed on' to the children, perpetuating the cycle, and that they therefore shouldn't be revealed. However, research seems to suggest that we should perhaps worry less about this than you'd think.

Adults I know with maths anxiety tend to have unfavourable memories of their school mathematics teachers. But among the people I've spoken to, at least, these are much more likely to be over-confident teachers harbouring barely any doubts about their own excellence in the subject, rather than the teacher who happens to have maths anxiety themselves.

The maths-anxious teacher might not be spreading their maths anxiety around as much as their more confident colleagues are.

“Every teacher has to live day to day with being imperfect”



Masking the issue

Putting a brave face on it, all day every day, is going to be extremely draining – and most likely, ultimately unsuccessful. Children have a knack for seeing through adults' attempts at concealing things. They may be able to detect that something's not quite right, even if they can't put their finger on what it is. Unless the teacher is a highly proficient actor, there's a good chance that they'll see through the well-meaning deception.

Where does this attempt to conceal come from, and what is it likely to lead to? It could be that teachers have internalised a view that the 'best teacher' is some flawless individual who effortlessly masters every skill and situation, but this is a fiction that's unhelpful to everyone.

Maintaining a conspiracy of silence and denial over conditions such as maths anxiety will only lead to stigma and shame, and is unrealistic and unhealthy for everyone – students and teachers alike. Do we wish to protect our students from ever knowing that such a thing as maths anxiety even exists? By doing so, don't we end up communicating that *'No one with maths anxiety should expect to succeed in becoming a teacher?'*

Honesty is the best policy

These are all deeply unhelpful messages. A more positive one might be, *'Some people get anxious about all sorts of things, and that can include maths. You don't need to be maths anxious, but we should all try to understand.'*

Perhaps schools should start viewing a maths anxious teacher as a great resource, rather than a problem. After all, here's someone with lived experience, who understands a condition that's very common in society and often found among students. Rather than attempting to hide or deny it, schools should instead *value* a maths-anxious teacher's perspective and seek to support them, while benefiting from their experience. Because they could well bring understanding and wisdom that other teachers would find it hard to provide.



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