

# IS IT WRONG TO WANT TO BE LIKED?

Seeking approval from students is only a problem if we go about it in the wrong way, maintains **Colin Foster**...

**T**o the experienced teacher, there's nothing is more cringeworthy than seeing a younger colleague trying to be 'mates' with their students. It might seem like a natural thing to try and do, but it's a trap that benefits neither teacher nor students, however well-intentioned it might be.

Attempts at forced humour and slang will likely come across as awkward and embarrassing to 'old hands', though it should be noted that the young teachers in question are still attempting to build bridges. The reason they're doing it is to try and be approachable and accessible to their students, and ultimately have a positive influence on their students' lives, which is difficult to argue with – but might there be a way of achieving these ends more effectively? Is it always wrong for teachers to want to be liked?

## **A natural impulse**

At some level, almost everybody wants to be liked. Only sociopaths have no interest at all in what other people think of them, nor any desire to please anyone else. Given that it's a caring profession, teaching isn't exactly replete with sociopaths. Indeed, one would hope that those entering the profession do so at least partly because they have some degree of liking for

young people, and wish to form positive, professional relationships with them.

While teaching involves interacting with all kinds of people – colleagues, senior managers, parents, etc. – teachers will typically spend the largest portion of their working day 'alone' in rooms full of students. In this sense, it would be surprising if teachers didn't, at least on some level, want to be liked.

But often, this very natural, human feature is portrayed as a problem – a professional character flaw, even. Teachers, particularly those at the start of their careers, will often be told that if they're at all concerned with being liked, they'll be less effective at their job.

The reasoning goes that 'wanting to be liked' makes a teacher more reluctant to push their students to excel academically, and less likely to challenge them when their behaviour falls short – neither of which are ultimately in the students' best interests. Moreover, worrying about being popular leads to low standards and expectations, so consequently, teachers are

advised to simply not concern themselves with whether their students like them or not.

Instead, they should be as indifferent to this as they can possibly be, because it risks placing entirely the wrong focus on the job they do. The teacher is a professional who, just like doctors, police officers, elected representatives, business leaders or any other professionals, may not

feel about you. The kind of advice outlined above will merely serve to make the most caring teachers feel guilty for caring, and perhaps push some of them out of the profession altogether.

I believe a much better solution can be had from applying the insights of Nobel-prizewinning psychologist, Daniel Kahneman\*, who draws contrasts between the two categories of

**“It's impossible to care for someone without any concern for how they might feel about you”**

always be popular among those affected by their decisions. They will often have to make choices that satisfy some higher, longer-term purpose, rather than merely pleasing the people around them in the moment.

## **Experiencing and remembering**

And yet, I see this line of reasoning as an unworkable, and ultimately counterproductive approach, since it demands that teachers suppress their emotions in a job that's often emotionally demanding. It's impossible to truly care for someone in a strictly unidirectional manner without any concern for how they might



experiencing self’ and ‘the remembering self’. The experiencing self is what you experience at the time, *in the moment*, whereas the remembering self is how you *think back on an experience*, from some unspecified point in the future. What’s important is that these two ‘selves’ frequently aren’t the same, and can often have quite different – perhaps even diametrically opposing – aims. Applying this to the problem of wanting to be liked, we

could try focusing on the students you teach now as they will be some time in the future – say, five or so years from now. When they think back on their school days, you as their teacher and the circumstances of today, this week or this year, *how will they feel about it then?* Will they like you then?

Sometimes, students who have left school will pop back in to say hello to their ‘old’ teachers. Imagine if such a student were to say, *‘I actually never liked you when you taught me, because you were always saying I could do better, and you were always pushing me to improve my work and picking me up on things when I wasn’t trying. And that was really annoying. But I’m really glad you did, because I learned a lot in the end.’*

### Future perspective

In this case, the former student’s experiencing self didn’t like the teacher, but the remembering self did. Students are like adults, perhaps even more so, in that they don’t always possess the maturity required to discern what’s in

their best interests – but that doesn’t have to mean we should actively not concern ourselves with what they think or want.

Instead, we can mentally fast forward to their future selves, and do our best to try and listen to what they might wish to say to us from the future.

Of course, this mustn’t become an excuse for ignoring everything that happens in the here and now, in the hope that it will be ‘worth it’ for some unspecified future life (*‘No pain, no gain’*). It matters that students get to feel safe and cared for at school, and enjoy their schooldays. It matters that their teachers feel able to present as human and approachable people who can be turned to in a crisis.

However, even when such situations present themselves, it still makes sense to sometimes think of the students we’re teaching now in terms of the people they will be as future adults, however hard that may seem at times. We should try and ask ourselves from time to time what we think they might have to say about us then, from that future perspective.

Perhaps wanting their future selves to think highly of us might help us to recalibrate what’s best for them in the here and now.

\*Kahneman, D., & Riis, J. (2005) ‘Living, and thinking about it: Two perspectives on life’ from F.A. Huppert, N. Baylis, & B. Keverne (eds.), *The science of well-being* Oxford University Press



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