

Reasons to be CHEERFUL

Colin Foster argues that assuming the worst of your students can become a self-fulfilling prophecy...

Young people are similar to adults in that they come in a wide variety of different forms. Some are friendly, some are polite, some are hard-working. Some have problems, some seem to get into lots of conflicts and some are challenging. Much like teachers, really...

But I think there's a worrying trend in schools to assume the worst of young people. It's easy to see how this can happen in an era of high-stakes accountability, data scrutiny and relentless pressure. Teachers and leaders who assume the worst will never risk appearing foolish for being naïve, and never be ridiculed for being 'out of touch' or 'living in a fantasy land' where everything is wholesome and nice.

But assuming the worst isn't the 'safe option' at all. In fact, it does young people a great disservice.

Systemic assumptions

I'm mainly thinking here of various routines and processes that may seem helpful, but which unintentionally ascribe negative attributes to young people. For example, in many schools teachers will be told that there's a 'right way' to do cold calling, whereby the student's name is always said at the end. This means you mustn't say, "Ben, what is a prime number?" but rather, "What is a prime number... [pause] Ben?"

The thinking behind this is that if names come first, then only 'Ben' will be incentivised to listen to and think about the question that immediately follows – everyone else is off the hook. By contrast, keeping names at the end means that everyone has to think about the question, because anyone could be called upon to answer. It's a question formulation that keeps everyone on their toes, effectively in a state of

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low-level anxiety.

This is widely accepted as common sense. Who could object to the assertion that the second question structure is plainly better than the first? Yet it's important to carefully consider the assumptions that lie behind this rationale – particularly the assumption that *students are reluctant to think*. After all, it's not as if they care about their own learning. They're lazy, and will only take the trouble to actively consider something if they fear being put on the spot in a public setting, and the potential embarrassment of not being ready with an answer.

We all want high participation in our

classrooms, of course, but our students' underlying motivations for taking part matter. Are we fostering a culture of genuine curiosity, or a culture of compliance driven by mild anxiety? When we rely on 'gotcha' tactics, we're sending out a subtle, yet clear message – *'I know you aren't interested. We are opponents in a battle and I'm determined to catch you out.'*

No doubt, there will be times when this approach is

effective for certain students – but as a general rule, it feels like a very damning assumption to apply to the class as a whole. What has to have gone wrong for that to be the situation we're having to address each day?

I've heard some teachers defend this approach with words to the effect of, 'Well, I was like that when I was at school,' or 'I can feel like that myself in PD sessions' – but doesn't that say more about the speaker than the students they're teaching?

It's akin to saying, "Well, I'd drive at 60mph in a 30mph zone if I could get away with it – wouldn't everyone?" It feels awkward to say, "No, that's just you; most people wouldn't."

The Golem effect

It's hard to object to people who assume the worst. If you expect nothing from your students then you'll never be disappointed. You'll seem grounded, and appear to be a realist who's worked in the toughest places and *knows how things really are*.

The trouble is, the more we assume the worst about the students we teach, the more that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Psychologists refer to this as the Golem effect – the evil twin of the Pygmalion effect – where low expectations lead to worse performance.

When we project suspicion, students will unconsciously internalise that and adjust their behaviour to meet our low baseline. We unwittingly work against the very values we wish to encourage, such as thoughtfulness, conscientiousness, curiosity and integrity.

Imagine a school where every student is assumed to be a potential thief. To avoid putting any temptation before them, all classrooms are locked at break times. A school with that kind of policy will most likely experience very few thefts – and that's a win, surely? There's less hassle, fewer fears around interactions with local police and everyone's happy.

Except that every student confronted by those locked doors will very quickly come to realise that they're being viewed as a potential criminal. What kind of

self-image are students likely to take away with them from a school like that?

It's unlikely that a new leader will commence their tenure by proposing "Let's try unlocking some of the doors for a change". They'd risk looking like a fool, with their subsequent downfall being just a matter of time. Similarly, anyone suggesting, "Let's maybe not try to trick students into thinking we're asking them a question when we aren't" is going to come across as having no idea just how workshy the average student really is.

But by holding such positions, what do we risk losing in the process?

How to pivot

I think that the act of assuming the worst is born out of fear. The teacher fears that if they believe in the students in front of them, those students may one day let them down. Believing in the students amounts to

taking a risk, making it safer to simply assume the worst and prepare accordingly.

So let's devise a bulletproof system designed around managing the laziest, most awkward and/or ingeniously workshy student we can imagine. At least that way, our hypothetical student won't be able to hack their way out of the supervision we've built for them and our teacher won't end up being too emotionally invested in their outcomes.

We can certainly do that – but what about the majority of students who come to school hoping to actually learn something? Those students who, if we treat them well, want to work with us, rather than oppose us; those who aspire to be responsible citizens in the future, and perhaps even

teachers themselves?

If we're not careful, these students will absorb the tacit assumption that *'No one puts any effort into anything unless they're trapped in a system that makes non-compliance harder than compliance'*. A system that effectively ensures no one reads a book unless checks are made to ensure that the reading has been completed. An environment in which no one would ever complete a piece of homework properly unless there's absolutely no way for them to cheat.

So how do we pivot? We can frame class questions in ways that invite collaboration, rather than spotlight inattention. We can create routines that assume students *want* to succeed and provide scaffolds in place of traps.

Let's stop planning for the worst, because doing so serves to inadvertently encourage it. Instead, let's muster up the courage to *plan for the best* – and then watch for how many of our students rise to meet those expectations.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Foster (@colinfoster77) is a Professor of Mathematics Education in the Department of Mathematics Education at Loughborough University; for more information, visit blog.foster77.co.uk and bigmathematicalideas.org