

When good is better THAN PERFECT

Colin Foster explains why perfectionists can fall short when it comes to pursuing a successful and sustainable teaching career...

What kind of person becomes a teacher?

Well, it takes all sorts, and I'm not about to stereotype the entire profession. People enter teaching from all kinds of backgrounds and for all kinds of reasons – and that's a good thing.

It's a great strength for a school to have a variety of different personalities and experiences among its staff. This gives students opportunities to interact with responsible adults who represent a range of different types, with personality traits and characteristics students will sometimes identify with and sometimes not.

'Responsible adults'

But having said that, I do think that many teachers display 'perfectionist' traits. They will have worked hard at school and university, enjoy studying things, be interested in 'knowledge for the sake of knowledge' and like to get things right. They will demonstrate great attention to detail and take deadlines seriously.

It's likely that they'll also consistently pay their bills on time, respond to emails and generally try to do everything to the highest

possible standard. They aspire to be a 'responsible adult' worthy of being entrusted with other people's children.

Now, for sure, this won't describe every teacher every day – but I'd venture that this kind of personality type is somewhat overrepresented in the profession.

Positives of perfectionism

The traits described above can all be very positive, of course. Indeed, they're very likely to be part of the reason why the teachers in question have made it into the profession and since succeeded.

They were the students who planned ahead, got their essays written and submitted them in good time (and remembered to put their name at the top)! They made revision timetables that they actually followed. They've done well, and will, to some extent, attribute the career success they've had to being well organised and focused on doing things properly.

Moreover, many of these traits are ones we try to encourage in our students. We want them to be well-organised and develop good time management. We want them to think, plan ahead

and always do their best – but in doing so, could we be unintentionally fostering a 'perfectionist' attitude in them that's ultimately not in their best long-term interests?

Challenges of perfectionism

Teaching is not always a friendly vocation for the perfectionist. We all know that teaching is a highly challenging job for many reasons. Young people get only one chance at being in school, and this places a weighty responsibility on the teachers who take care of them.

Young people's lives can be complicated and distressing, and this can be emotionally draining for the teachers who support them. The sheer number of contact hours every week and the relentlessness of administrative tasks, challenging students and difficult situations means that merely surviving as a teacher may be a huge achievement.

All of this will be very difficult for someone with a perfectionist way of thinking. They don't want to just manage, muddle through and make it to the

end of Friday; they want to get everything *right*. They want to be the best version of themselves that they can be.

Before they entered teaching, they may have been used to nailing tasks and acing their own exams. They will have believed that so long as you prepare thoroughly, and master the specified content and skills, you should have nothing to worry about. Everything will go smoothly, if only you put in the effort and follow the rules.

But real life – and teaching in particular – isn't always like this. Even with the best preparation in the world, a lesson can nosedive due to factors completely outside of the teacher's (or perhaps anyone's) control. Beyond that, there will always be many other good things that could, or should be getting done than the school will ever have capacity for, or which any one teacher will be able to do. In a school environment, perfectionism therefore almost inevitably leads to stress and unhappiness.

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Can 'good enough' be good enough?

It's hard to change who we are. Personalities go deep. But we can be kinder to ourselves if we recognise perfectionist tendencies in our approach to our jobs.

Psychologists talk about 'maximisers' versus 'satisficers'. At one extreme,

the maximiser will agonise over a decision, considering the pros and cons of every possibility and seeking to maximise the long-term benefits. At the other extreme, the satisficer makes a much faster, more intuitive decision. They don't aim for the absolute 'best' choice; they're fine with something that's good enough.

You might assume that the maximisers' choices would always be superior, but it isn't so straightforward. Maximisers might indeed surpass the satisficers, but still be less satisfied with the outcomes. Their high self-expectations and unwillingness to 'settle' can lead to feelings of failure when they fall short of their

unachievable goals – even if other people would be delighted with what they've achieved. Maximisers tend to be less happy and more vulnerable to depression.

When an absolutely critical decision needs to be taken, then it makes sense by all means to take the time to perform a thorough analysis. When it's worth it, going slow and carefully can pay dividends. But we can't treat every micro-decision as though it were a matter of life and death.

Very often in schools – as in life more generally – 'good enough' has to be good enough. In his book *Black Box Thinking*, Matthew Syed quotes a psychologist who states, "*If I want to be a great musician, I must first play a lot of bad music.*"

An alien attitude

This can feel like an alien attitude to adopt when working in a school. After all, students are consistently told that they should always try their best – but is that actually realistic? Can they *always* be expected to use their neatest handwriting?

What if this means that they only write half as much? Should they really always do everything to 110%?

I once knew a teacher who would always carry a fountain pen in his pocket. Everything he wrote in students' books, or anywhere at all for that matter, was written in an extremely

neat calligraphic style. People admired him for this – but was it a case of him taking pride in his work, or was he a victim of a one-size-fits-all mentality, manifesting as a failure to adapt appropriately to different situations?

It was very nice to see this fancy writing on certificates, but at other times it seemed to me to be just a waste of his time and effort. This isn't what it means to have high standards.

Scouring the internet for hours seeking that perfect online resource. Signing up for every CPD opportunity and conference you can possibly attend.

Determinedly reading every relevant edu-book that gets published (or maybe writing one?). Striving to stay on top of all of those podcasts. Completing a masters or a PhD.

The perfectionist wants to do the best for their students, but can end up sacrificing any sense of work-life balance in an endless contest to be the best they can be, while feeling constant guilt over all the things not done. In many cases, what we really need to learn is how to be comfortable doing a good enough job.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Foster (@colinfoster77) is a Reader in Mathematics Education in the Department of Mathematics Education at Loughborough University, and has written many books and articles for teachers; find out more at foster77.co.uk

