

You are not an IMPOSTER

If you're not feeling up to the task of being a teacher, and perhaps even believe you've no right to wield such a huge responsibility, then you're not alone, says **Colin Foster**...

People frequently enter teaching with the highest of ideals. They want to make a difference. They recognise that young people have only one chance of getting a school education, and that doing well in school can considerably improve a young person's life chances.

If this is the lofty motivation for being a teacher, then it follows that teachers can find themselves labouring under a huge amount of pressure and expectations to transform lives. Given all that, who *wouldn't* harbour at least the occasional doubt about being equal to the demands of such a monumental task?

Understanding imposter syndrome

It's therefore hardly surprising that teachers will often experience some flavour of 'imposter syndrome' – a term referring to a collection of beliefs centred around issues of self-doubt. It's the voice inside a teacher's head, telling them, *'Who do you think you are? What business do you have being a teacher? Soon enough, everyone will discover that you're a fraud!'*

Similarly, it shouldn't be surprising to learn that there are some well-established links between imposter syndrome and depression, anxiety and burnout (see tiny.cc/ts144-IS1).

Imposter syndrome (or, to use the more neutral term, 'imposter phenomenon') tends to be associated with high-achieving people,

having first been observed among successful women and other marginalised groups. If your experiences of getting into teaching involved some degree of struggle, in which you had to fight to get people to take you seriously as a professional, the cumulative effects of that can be long-lasting doubts around whether your critics maybe had a point all along.

If you came to the profession from a background where few of

than anything about you). Regardless, you may respond by taking the situation personally, and seeing it as one more piece of evidence that you should *never have allowed yourself to believe that you could do this job...*

A common feature of imposter syndrome is over-generalising even tiny mistakes, by perceiving these as evidence of a general lack of ability – catastrophising that you never get things right and are always failing,

always attempting to work longer, harder and better than those around them. They're constantly trying to prove themselves to everyone – including themselves – while at the same time living in constant fear of

“Those with imposter syndrome strive to become professional superheroes, always attempting to work longer, harder and better”

your relatives and peers went to university, where the tendency was to view teachers as very much the 'other', rather than 'us', then becoming a teacher yourself may feel strange at times; almost as though you're 'someone else', rather than yourself.

The fear of being found out

Feelings of imposter syndrome are most likely to surface in already stressful situations – which, of course, teaching provides no shortage of. Perhaps you've made a mistake in the classroom, or during a meeting with colleagues. Maybe a student's challenged you (possibly for reasons more to do with their own life

even when that's manifestly not the case.

The perennial fear of imposter syndrome is the notion of 'being found out'. The person susceptible to imposter syndrome will live each day trying to hide their belief that they shouldn't be doing the job that they're doing, while constantly waiting for everyone else to discover this 'truth' for themselves.

This can in turn lead to unhealthy attempts at overcompensating, resulting in work martyrdom, where one's work-life balance is sacrificed on the altar of 'doing right by students and my colleagues'.

Those with imposter syndrome strive to become professional superheroes,

being exposed as a fraud, regardless of how successful they are, and how much those around them appreciate all that they do.

Even on good days, there's always that familiar feeling: *'I got away with it this time – but what about the next time?'*

Breaking the cycle

Not everyone with imposter syndrome will have exactly the same experience, but one common feature is the constant feeling of being judged and not measuring

up. This can lead to a cycle of over-preparation and perfectionism, fear of failure and discounting of successes, leading to yet more over-preparation to try to prove themselves even more thoroughly next time.

Breaking this vicious cycle involves rejecting the notion that a person's worth depends on what others think or say about them. Looking to others to determine our worth is destructive to our wellbeing – especially if we fail to recognise when others have very favourable views of us, and instead focus solely on the negatives.

Teachers come in all shapes and sizes. One teacher's strengths will be completely different from another's.

Having a diversity of class and background is particularly valuable within the teaching profession, so that young people get to see positive role models among their teachers who have things in common with them that they can identify with.

Negatives to positives

Telling young people that they can aspire to a range of different futures and professions is important, but actually seeing in reality teachers – and others – who have come from similar backgrounds to their own speaks far more powerfully. One teacher once told me how her

regional accent, which she had been made to feel uncomfortable about at university, became an important asset when she returned to the community she'd grown up in and started teaching at one of the local schools.

She spoke like the young people she taught, and they related to her accordingly. She quickly learned to see this as a positive, rather than a negative for her practice.

That's not to say that all teachers must be able to relate to their pupils in the same way – young people ultimately need to encounter a range of teachers from multiple different backgrounds – but there was certainly no reason for that particular teacher to feel she had anything less to offer than anyone else. Quite the opposite, in fact.

A corrosive perfectionism

The perfectionism of imposter syndrome is like any other form of perfectionism. As well as being corrosive for one's emotional health, it simultaneously prevents people from doing their best work. Letting go of some of that pressure will free us up to be the people that we actually are, with all our strengths – and, yes, our personal challenges too.

Young people can and will quickly see through pretence. They're much more likely to relate well to teachers who have learned to be relaxed with being their true selves.



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

