

Teachers: A Comprehensive Success Story

From the moment of deciding that I wanted to be a teacher, I've been fascinated and tantalised by who make outstanding and successful teachers. That it had a lot to do with their knowledge and expertise in enabling the pupil to access something of significance was obvious. That there was something - to me at the time and for many years afterwards - indefinable and elusive about the personal qualities, habits and dispositions, was also clear. I guessed, from my own unusual experience of secondary schooling as a pupil, that there was a 'school effect' on the likelihood of teachers being successful.¹

What this occasion affords me is the challenge to define the task of the successful teacher, illuminating the characteristics, qualities and skills and finally and, perhaps critically, lifting the veil on the classroom habits and thoughts of those teachers who achieve outstanding success with virtually all pupils who are lucky enough to encounter them. I shall also touch briefly on the 'in-school' and 'whole-school' factors that increase the likelihood of teachers being successful. I have become more confident about this task as a result of a few apparently unrelated events. Let me explain.

Three years ago I was asked to give the Brian Simon Caroline Benn Memorial lecture. Naturally I chose the issue of comprehensive schooling and argued somewhat controversially that comprehensive schools, at least in urban areas, had always been for the most part an illusion. I began by analysing the different views that inspired the early pioneers – the first, of course, in Anglesey. They marched under two slightly different banners. The first was that a comprehensive school was one that contained a pupil population which reflected the bell curve distribution of ability – in short, intelligence was seen in general as largely inherited and fixed, or at least predictable. In short, it was a view of ability which had justified the use of selection tests at the age of eleven in order to sort out the grammar 'wheat' from the secondary modern 'chaff'. The second banner was one

that saw the comprehensive school as one which took all pupils irrespective of abilities or background from the locality in which a school was based.

I argued – I thought perfectly reasonably – that in most large urban areas neither model had been delivered because the ready availability of alternative schools led to a pecking-order of schools whether selection at eleven was practised or not.

Both in the Caroline Benn/Brian Simon paper and in discussions that followed, I was invited to speculate about both what inspired the comprehensive ideal, however defined, and whether the ideal was still viable in some form.

I became convinced that so much change had happened that the comprehensive ideal (at least as it was originally construed) was in practice dead - at least in urban areas. Moreover, I argued that the idealists who tirelessly championed it, like Caroline Benn and Brian Simon, would now be arguing for something different. After all, most urban areas in their day were largely mono-cultural. Now they are multi-cultural. The world today is smaller and a much more immediately interconnected place. So I argued, for example, that the curriculum should be international and issues of sustainability should be a central part of it. I argued, therefore, for curriculum change. But I have also championed organisational change – not least to overcome the pernicious and inequitable effects of the pecking-order of schools.

Thanks to ICT, schools can be interdependent in many of their practices. So the fact that no school has ever been able to meet the needs of all their pupils can be largely overcome by groups of schools working together for a variety of pupils – professional development, curriculum enrichment, better use of the learning and communication technologies and, of course, pupil experience and access to shared expertise.

In short, therefore, I argued for a new ideal of collegiate schools committed to interdependence, internationalism and sustainability. I could see little or no connection between the original comprehensive ideal and the reality of present schooling, let alone its future.

But I now realise that I overlooked one strong unchanging and continuing thread.

That thread is the qualities, attitudes, purpose, beliefs and behaviours of the teachers who were attracted to teach in those comprehensive schools and who teach in urban schools now and who, I hope, will continue to devote their 'society-changing' work in the future. *They* have remained unchanged. *They* are the vein of continuity. *They* are the people who connect the past, the present and the future.

But my theory is that the best of these teachers are very special and that we can learn from their practice. In short, I am arguing that in addition to the usual competences, beliefs, attitudes, purpose and behaviour that we expect from all good teachers – and to whom we are indebted – they bring something more.

It's that 'something more' that is the purpose of my paper today. And it was in Wales that I first encountered the 'something more'. It was in the 1960s. I had been teaching myself in Grammar and Secondary Modern Schools and I had entered the world of educational administration. The teacher I remember I encountered was a Mrs Lewis; she taught in a primary school in Croesyceiliog in Cwmbran. As her headteacher said, "All the children in Mrs Lewis' class learn to read. I don't know what it is about her, but she gets the best out of the children – all the children". She was warm, cheerful, optimistic and energetic. But then most successful teachers are. She had learnt the skill of doing things simultaneously during a lesson and her classroom was smoothly organised and had the sort of display that firstly celebrated each child's progress; secondly asks questions; thirdly reinforces language and maths – "fundamental skills that lead to human rights" as she called them - and fourthly, as a whole was beautiful. But then all successful teachers do that.

Mrs Lewis also effortlessly practised what on the other side of Offa's Dyke government calls 'personalisation'. Of course, Mrs Lewis didn't call it that. She would probably have identified the word 'personalisation' with number plates or cufflinks and thought it represented a kind of insecure pretentiousness that offended good taste. But in the sense the government now intends for the word, she, like all good teachers, practised 'personalisation'. In other words, like all primary teachers, she was at pains to deploy all the behaviours which made her practice 'personal' rather than 'impersonal'. It was easier for Mrs Lewis than it was for her secondary colleagues. Often they teach 200- 300 difficult youngsters every week; they spend a lot of preparation time in the autumn – indeed, often before term starts – in putting names to faces so that they can use the names in greetings in the corridors at lunchtimes and in breaks – as well, of course, as in lessons. These secondary teachers determine seating plans – rather than leaving pupil free choice. They remember birthdays; they use pupils' past successes to provide implied praise in public: "Class 7, didn't Jane help us solve this problem last week? Jane, can you ...?" They share questions fairly and in a way that affirms the pupils' confidence in improving on their previous best.

They have a range of tasks which the pupils carry out - after applying for the various jobs of classroom managers – of attendance, of minding the computer, of organising resources, of the collection of work and so on. They deploy marking practice that makes students feel special, by providing extensive private written feedback to each student at least twice a year and in their normal practice they are masters of what we now call 'assessment for learning'. In other words, all of their youngsters understand the next stage of their learning and what they have to do to acquire the skill, understand the concept or acquire the knowledge because their teachers have explained it to them. And they've debated it with another paired pupil colleague (co-learner, co-teacher if you like) and they've begun to master the art of self-assessment of their work. When these teachers encounter a pupil with whom they cannot connect – whose minds and heart they do not meet - they go out of their way at the weekend to find an artefact or an

article that is related to the youngster's private interest and on the Monday they stop them in the corridor and say "Sean, I saw this and thought of you".

Of course, Mrs Lewis was a primary teacher – and she did all these things in a slightly different way, taking advantage of knowing her class of 30 really well.

She shared, too, with her successful secondary counterpart the unpredictability of teaching. Something worked 9 times out of 10 for Mrs Lewis and then unaccountably it didn't work. And that's where the first definable feature of the specialness of Mrs Lewis surfaced. She never despaired.

She saw the child's failure to learn not as their inability to learn but as her failure to teach – to find a way to overcome the pupil's learning blockage.

Mrs Lewis was a primary comprehensive teacher – her school took all children – and she was a successful one. In her belief, she mirrored the pioneer teachers in comprehensive schools and those attracted to schools in challenging urban schools now. What were those beliefs? Well we've identified one – a child's inability to learn is seen as a challenge to her capacity to improve her teaching. She is at one with the Victorian headteacher Thring who, reflecting on his early career teaching in the streets of Gloucester, said:

There I found the secret of St Augustine's golden key which though it be of gold is useless unless it fits the wards of the lock. And I found the wards I had to fit – the minds of those little street urchins – very queer and tortuous they were too. And I had to set about cutting and chipping myself into the shape of a wooden key which would have the one merit of a key – however common it might look - the merit of unlocking the minds and opening the shut chambers of the heart.

Mrs Lewis would have identified with that. But she like the brilliantly successful comprehensive schoolteacher had other beliefs too. Let me identify some.

Of course she believed that teaching and learning was connected with economic gain. But it also had a higher purpose – a moral one.

She saw education as the bedrock of social justice, political freedom and the individual's freedom as an adult to argue a case which is just.

She would have identified with William Temple who wrote in 1942

Until Education has done far more work than it has had an opportunity of doing, you cannot have society organised on the basis of justice; for this reason that there will always be a strain ... between what is due to a man in view of his humanity with all his powers and capabilities and what is due to him at the moment as a member of society, with all his faculties still undeveloped, with many of his tastes warped, with his powers largely crushed. Are you going to treat a man as what he is, or as what he might be? Morality requires, I think, that you should treat him as what he is: he might be – as what he has it in him to become. And business requires that you should treat him as what he is: you cannot get rid of that strain except by raising what he is to the level of what he might be. That is the whole work of education. Give him the full development of his powers; and there will no longer be that conflict between the claim of the man as he is and the claim of the man as he might become and so you can have no justice at the basis of your social life until education has done its full work and then again you can have no real freedom because until a whole man's personality has been developed he cannot be free in his own life. And you cannot have political freedom any more than you can have moral freedom until people's powers are developed, for the simple reason that over and over again we find that men with a cause which is ... just are unable to state it in the way which might enable it to prevail ... There exists a mental form of slavery which is as real

as any economic form. We are pledged to destroy it ... If you want human liberty you must have educated people.

Mrs Lewis believed - unusually in those days – that pupils’ showing great effort was not an indicator of their limited ability to learn, but of their character which would enable them ultimately to overcome obstacles to their learning.

She talked about “her” children, not “these” children. It never entered her head to put a limit on what children might achieve be their home circumstances as dire and challenging as they often are in areas of great social need. So “what more can you expect from children from backgrounds like this?” never crossed her mind.

In short, she believed in the transformability rather than the ability of children – and she believed, in a way that communicated itself to all her children, that she could effect that transformation.

I came across another such a teacher recently in a classroom in London. Saina Rana, she’s called – one of the many second-generation Asian teachers who are changing the life chances of so many of our urban children. In Ms Rana’s class she expects all her children to get a higher grade GCSE – even those with statements.

Not for her the differentiation of task for the pupil – but rather differentiation of approach for her teaching. It works.

Last year a book was published about teaching and learning that is arguably the most important to be written for 30 years. Certainly it gets closer to identifying the qualities, habits and beliefs of the teachers I am describing. It’s by Susan Hart and others and it’s called *Learning Without Limits*. Taking nine case studies of teachers whose practice is based on an approach based on the transformability rather than the ability of pupils, the authors seek to identify different mind-sets

which I've set out at Appendix 1. And when I cross-check this with my respective samples – Mrs Lewis then, Saima Rana now – I am impressed with the resonance it strikes in my mind's recollection of their practice.

These outstandingly successful teachers, however, have other characteristics. [cf Table One] In addition to the intellectual and cognitive domains, they are exceptionally strong in what we now call emotional intelligence. So they:

- Build confidence by thinking of the comfort of their pupils and asking questions with a subtle eye for the one that builds the pupil's hold on the value of their opinion and knowledge.
- Strengthen pupils' feeling of growing competence by remarks, by tasks subtly directed to be at the present and the next level of the pupil's learning
- Are optimistic about the future by talking of the past and future successes of their present and previous pupils: "Nobody in our class fails – everyone succeeds".
- Make children identify with learning and the fun of learning by their language and by the use of a wide variety of tasks – but also by their own example as a learner, by the shared co-operative group task where they and their pupils are learning together, by substituting the word 'learning' for 'work'.
- Ensure that learning is a group activity for example, by dividing their group into two equal teams which compete in terms of collective outcome for behaviour, for punctuality, for successful learning outcomes, for contributions to others. In both teams, each member has set tasks, peer tutoring has urgent meaning as everybody has a vested interest in their colleague's success. In short, there is an element of 'gang culture' at work here. For in urban areas, especially in secondary schools, the successful teachers are deeply conscious of peer-group pressure and the gang culture beyond the school gate.
- Make it plain to pupils that learning is a co-operative activity. So the teacher says, "Now Class 6, we are about to try this very tricky

algebraic problem. But if we all pull together we should be able to solve it". There is a kind of collective spirit, that includes the teacher, to extend the pupils' cognitive horizons to increase their likelihood of becoming confident autonomous learners.

The outcome of this can be seen by the following account of a visit to a North London comprehensive school where I was privileged to meet 25 pupils from Years 8 and 9: one of the questions I asked them was "Who is the best marker of work in your school?" The replies are instructive. One youngster said it was Mr Hodge the Geography teacher, "because he always writes on your work the ways in which you could improve it. And if you don't understand, he explains". This was followed by another saying, "No, it's Mrs Bains in English. She does the same thing, but if you only do what she tells you to do to improve your work, you'll only get 'Satisfactory'. To get 'Excellent', you need to think for yourself". This was capped by a third girl confidently declaring the best marker to be Mr Bailey the Music teacher: "I play the cello and sing. And every time I play or sing, he can tell me how to improve it. But now when I play or sing I can say for myself how to improve it ... Mr Bailey calls it 'metacognition'."

The story is instructive, as I'm sure you realise. 'Marking' is not an activity that commands much enthusiastic discussion in most schools. Simply getting work marked is the limit of ambition. Yet here in the North London school was evidence of high-level discussion of 'marking' and its impact on pupils as well as some evidence of faculty diversity. You might think, as I do, that Mr Bailey is a remarkable teacher – and in practice that Mrs Bains is pretty good too. Nor is Mr Hodge other than a very successful one. All children attending this school you might conclude, as I did, have a very high chance of accessing something of significance and of

emerging confident, supported and challenged to make the best of their learning.

- Are creative about the curriculum. Not necessarily for them the acceptance of 'prescribed-from-on-high' schemes of work. They are always tinkering and adjusting the curriculum to appeal to the different youngsters they encounter.
- Are learners themselves. They are among the 4% of teachers who at any one time are taking a Masters or engaging in action research based on their practice. They record their work and speculate about it.

Table One

Outstandingly successful teachers do all of the following. They:

- Build confidence
- Strengthen pupils' feelings of growing competence
- Are optimistic about the future
- Make children identify with learning and the fun of learning
- Ensure learning is a group activity
- Make it plain to pupils that learning is a co-operative activity
- Are creative about the curriculum
- Are learners themselves

Ms Rana has mastered skills about teaching and learning that Mrs Lewis would have given her eye-teeth to have done but which depend on developments in our knowledge that have happened since. For we now know so much more about how the brain develops and the mind works. So the modern teacher displays first-, second-, third- and fourth-order questioning.² And the modern teacher takes full advantage of the learning and communication technologies, whether as a tool which overcomes hitherto insurmountable barriers to learning, or as a supplementary teacher through the best computer-assisted learning programmes, or by deploying e-tutors or, via the internet, through access to the best library in the world or real-time access to other learning situations.

In short, there's so much more on Ms Rana's side than there was in that of Mrs Lewis. Both, however, would identify themselves with Robert Fried's definition of the passionate teacher:

Of some of our teachers, we remember their foibles and mannerisms, of others, their kindness and encouragement, or their fierce devotion to standards of work that we probably did not share at the time. And of those who inspired us most, we remember what they cared about, and that they cared about us, and the person we might become. It is the quality of caring about ideas and values, this fascination with the potential for growth within people, this depth and fervour about doing things well and striving for excellence, that comes closest to what I mean in describing a 'passionate teacher'.

Both Mrs Lewis and Ms Rana have that indefinable something that invites, perhaps instructs, the pupil to suspend their own disbelief because they are assured they will succeed. And of course they do.

But I said at the beginning of this paper that I would attempt to describe the 'within school' and 'whole-school' factors that ensure that Mrs Lewis and Ms Rana have wider influence and multiply in others' practice their own 'brooking no denial' certainty of pupil success. In Mrs Lewis' case, everybody who was lucky enough to be in her class did learn to read. And I don't mean decouple words or bark at print. I mean what we might describe as an established reader.³ In Ms Rana's case, almost all do pass their exams.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were suddenly a multiplication of Mrs Lewises and Ms Ranas? In short, wouldn't it be a good worthwhile goal, if 'good' teachers become 'great' and successful teachers proud to be part of an 'outstanding' team?

There are, of course, many 'in-school' and 'whole-school' factors that make that more likely. I want to pick out just three: the headteacher's beliefs, actions and

priorities; the circumstances of professional development; and the wise use of data.

It is no great surprise to pick out the headteacher's behaviour as the first point. How they take staff meetings, parents' evenings, awards ceremonies, assemblies clearly affects disproportionately the climate of the school and the way their teachers work. I've worked in Birmingham and in London where those schools which succeed against the (sometimes formidable) odds are led by people who like Mrs Lewis and Ms Rana believe in the unlimited educability of all their pupils. They have a clear value system which rings true in their actions. They are around when it matters. They are on the gate, in the street and ferry to school for revision those who don't get up in the morning. They inspire by example. They teach. They learn. They give credit to others and take the blame. They are optimistic, cheerful and without self-pity. They believe themselves lucky to be in the school at that time. They cherish staff through acts of unexpected kindness. They foster 'legacy' and promote good humour even, perhaps especially, in a crisis. They, like Ms Rana and Mrs Lewis, are expert story-tellers. They too ask more questions than provide answers. Whether they are 'up-front' or 'low key' people, they have integrity and command respect by their commitment. They too believe in the transformability of their pupils. They too make the whole educational process personal rather than impersonal.

Secondly, in the matter of professional development, teachers have moved on from Judith Little's famous advice about 'teachers talking about teaching' to involve all the staff and pupils.

So:

- staff talk about learning and teaching – in faculty and staff meetings which are not overwhelmed with business.
- staff observe each other's practice – through entitlements to use time to observe closely and in a focused way each other's practice whether in their own school or in others' schools.
- staff plan, organise and evaluate their work together in teams – through job descriptions which focus on prime and support

responsibilities rather than a set of managerial tasks, and through a staff handbook which is testament to a clearly thought-through differentiation of who are responsible for policy, who for the tasks to discharge that policy with a schedule for self-review – in teams.

- staff learn from and teach each other – through staff meetings rotated about the school, through the content and agenda of those meetings, through a programme of school-based and school-delivered professional development, through two or more staff members (never one) attending external professional meetings.

Thirdly and finally, the school uses data wisely. We live in such a data-rich age that it's so easy to be information-poor. So in outstanding schools, the bottom-up use of data about children, their background, their stage of development, assists their teachers' hopes for modest and ambitious progress that translates into targets which are the stock-in-trade of teachers who embrace formative assessment. These are complemented or overwhelmed by wider knowledge of other schools and other teachers' achievements either with the same or similar youngsters. And all nowadays can be available through the management technologies in a hassle-free, non-bureaucratic way.

So those are the circumstances in which Mrs Lewis and Ms Rana prosper – where their examples lead to other teachers having the courage to dare to evaluate their practice and in doing so change society.

It is these teachers that I salute and celebrate today. They are the architects of tomorrow.⁴

¹ At the age of eleven, I went to a prestigious grammar school in the Midlands. My memory is of the school being grey; of the autumn being wet; of 'form-order' every week; of all the teachers, not simply new teachers, clearly living by the precept that they shouldn't smile till Christmas. I became a school-phobic – sick every morning before being forced unwillingly to school. Then my father lost his job. We moved to Lowestoft - a sleepy east coast town where the local grammar school was co-ed, had the rising sun as its emblem and where the staff and pupils smiled a lot. My life changed in a day. From hating school I moved to loving every minute of it.

² I often tell a story – based on a school visit – of a Year 6 class in a central Birmingham primary school where the teacher divided the class into parallel groups using the seven question words ('Why', 'What', 'Who' etc). Then she involved them in examining a piece of writing to find as many first-order ('of fact') questions; second-order ('of inference'); question; third-order 'of surprise' questions and fourth-order ('of hypothesis') questions. It helped, she said, with group work.

³ In Birmingham in the 1990s, before the numeracy and literacy strategy, we introduced a scheme to celebrate progress in reading and numeracy. Certificates were awarded for 'Emerging', 'Apprentice', 'Fluent', 'Experienced' and 'Established' readers. Here at Appendix 2, I reproduce the description of 'Established Reader' to provide a flavour of when we were relaxed about our progress.

⁴ I am indebted to thousands of teachers whose practice I have glimpsed, principally in Derbyshire, Monmouthshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Staffordshire, Shropshire, London and especially Birmingham – and of course Margaret Lewis and Saina Rana. If I have failed to convey in this paper their astonishing flair and skill, it is my fault, not theirs.

MIND-SET

<p>Ability</p> <p>The differing potential of learners.</p>	<p>Transformability</p> <p>The potential for transforming learning capacity.</p>
<p>Present practice is adapted to a future seen as stable and predictable because present differences reflect stable underlying differences of potential.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<p>Present practice has a formative and transformative power over the future because the forces that constitute learning capacity are to an extent within the teacher's control.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>
<p>Concept of inherent ability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An inaccessible inner force that drives learning. • Resides in the individual. • Composed of cognitive-intellectual resources. • Subject to the internal limits of each individual learner. • The capacity to learn is fixed: the differences between individuals remain stable. <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<p>Concept of learning capacity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subject to external forces (tasks, opportunities, feedback; the whole experience of schooling) as well as internal resources and states of mind. • Resides in the individual and the collective. • Includes social and emotional as well as cognitive-intellectual resources and states of mind. • Cognitive elements are skills and understandings that can be and are learned. • The capacity to learn, for individuals and groups, is increased or reduced by the dynamics operating in a particular context. <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>

<p>Classroom diversity construed in terms of differences in ability; attainments are compared and explained in a way that predicts future potential.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<p>Classroom diversity construed in terms of learning capacity, the forces impinging on it and the potential for taking action to enhance and transform it.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>
<p>THE EFFECTS ON TEACHERS</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of powerlessness is induced. • Their capacity to apply knowledge and experience is limited. • They accept differences in achievement as inevitable, and that their task is to adapt their teaching accordingly. • They sense that whatever they do, they cannot lift the limits that reside in individual learners. <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are empowered to make transforming choices. • Their capacity to apply knowledge and experience is enhanced. • They are convinced that everybody can become a better learner. • They recognise that everything can make a difference. <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts of mind: compare, infer, differentiate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts of mind: notice, analyse, intervene.

Extracted from “Learning Without Limits” by Susan Hart, Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond and Donald McIntyre (Published by Open University Press).

Established Reader

To Parents/Carers

To achieve this certificate your child has demonstrated that she/he:

- is a keen voluntary reader of fiction and non-fiction, in and out of school
- likes to try new authors and many different types of books
- reads confidently, and takes time to be sure of understanding what is read
- is beginning to decide what makes a good read, and uses judgement about the quality of literature, TV, film, newspapers
- can obtain and use information from a variety of sources
- perseveres with something which is difficult to understand
- can present a summary of key points, and present spoken and written reasoned arguments about issues

To continue to help your child's progress in Literacy, try to give the opportunity to:

- continue to try new authors, books and different types of materials
- get the chance to find out information for themselves, using computers if possible
- talk to you about what they are reading, whether they find it enjoyable and why
- visit your local library, or the city centre's, Centre for the Child