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# Inspiring teachers: how teachers inspire learners





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## Welcome to Education Development Trust

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## About the authors

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## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

This report contains the findings from an enquiry that looked at 36 'inspiring' teachers nominated for the project by headteachers and principals of CfBT Schools Trust schools and academies.

The second strand (already in print): *Inspiring teachers: perspectives and practices* (Sammons et al., 2014), written by Pam Sammons, Alison Kington, Ariel Lindorff-Vajayendran and Lorena Ortega, further scrutinised a representative sample of approximately half of the inspiring teachers studied in the first phase, adding an academic evidence perspective and applying a mixed methods approach. Sammons and colleagues' approach included the use of two systematic observation schedules: the ISTOF (International System of Teacher Observation and Feedback) and the Lesson Observation Form for Evaluating the Quality of Teaching (QoT). Using these existing benchmarks of teacher effectiveness, the second strand of research pointed to six characteristics as being at the core of inspiring practice:

- positive relationships
- good classroom/behaviour management
- positive and supportive climate
- formative feedback
- high quality learning experiences
- enjoyment.

Thus, where the first strand (covered in this report) sought to use the type of observational skills school improvement practitioners in world-class external school review systems are trained in (see for a discussion, Churches and McBride, 2013), the second strand (Sammons et al., 2014) provided the evidence necessary to triangulate a sample of teachers against existing academic understanding and research.

In presenting the evidence, this report has deliberately adopted a style of writing that incorporates extended examples from the reviewer's contemporaneous notebooks. The authors have taken this approach in order to help the reader develop a richer picture of the classroom climate these teachers create. Together, the two reports contain a rich perspective on the behaviours and skills of such teachers.

Since the first strand of research began, another study into inspiring teaching, funded by the British Council, has also appeared. This looked into the characteristics of inspiring English teachers in the state school systems of Guangzhou, China and Jakarta, Indonesia (Lamb and Wedell, 2013). Like the evidence in the present study, Lamb and Wedell's report points to the distinction between effectiveness and inspirational teaching as being related to the perception of such teachers by learners as having:

*...a range of different qualities, with personal and professional virtues proving just as important as methodological competence or innovation.* (Lamb and Wedell, 2013: 6)

With regard to the inspiring teachers discussed in this current report below, this was also evident, not only in the way in which the teachers engaged with learners but also with other teachers and the teaching profession as a whole. Although driven to make a difference the teachers were never hostile to other teachers' ideas about what works. Rather they were outcome focused, accepting that there are many views about learning and many ways to get there. In this regard, the teachers were overwhelmingly open, caring and yet determined.

The team for the first strand of enquiry described in this report consisted of experienced school improvement practitioners with a background in external school review. These practitioner researchers carried out the review together with an Education Development Trust Principal Adviser who has worked in similar areas of school improvement and who has trained lesson observations skills in the Middle East, India and Pakistan for the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau, and the Ministries of Education in Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia. The team collected and synthesised a range of evidence from lesson observations and interviews with teachers, senior managers and children. However, they did not use any formal quality framework in their approach. Instead, they used their skills as an exploratory qualitative method, drawing on their extensive experience as practitioners observing well in excess of 1,000 lessons over the combined period of their careers. This is, as far as we are aware, the first use of such an approach outside of the frameworks in which these types of professionals usually operate. The next section gives a description of the approach used.





# Approach

## The origins of the methodology deployed by the external reviewers

Initially, the team of external reviewers met to identify an approach that could apply similar process level investigative skills adopted by external school review professionals in a wide range of external review and school inspection systems supported by Education Development Trust. In particular, the method focused on the use of the concept of explanatory judgement and reporting (Taylor, 2013). As Churches and McBride argue, it is important for review to be 'explanatory':

*'...focused on explaining the relationship between inputs such as teaching and the output of learning. At the same time there needs to be a clear relationship between the way in which explanation is achieved and the evidence base for what works...In the classroom, for example, effective review processes...in which the cause of a strength or weakness in learning is specifically related to the activity of the teachers (e.g. Learners made slow progress because the teacher did not explain the purpose of the learning well).'* (Churches and McBride, 2013: 15)

It is a common misconception that when observing lessons all external review systems have some type of checklist of characteristics they are looking for. Although true of some systems, this is not the case in all the approaches used globally. For example, the Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau (DSIB) lesson observation form is essentially a blank sheet. Within this, external reviewers record what they have seen taking place from the perspective of learning in the classroom and what aspects in the teaching appear to have caused this to be the case. Again, using the DSIB approach as an example, after conducting observations using this method, the observer makes a comparison to a framework document where definitions associated with terms such as 'Outstanding, Good, Adequate and Unsatisfactory', and current policy, in order to locate the lesson in the context of contemporary policy definitions.

In the case of the present study research, the practitioner researchers involved conducted the same bottom-up observational processes but without any framework or pre-emptive assumptions about lesson quality criteria being in place.

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Informally, however, the reviewers confirmed from their extensive experience collectively of hundreds of school inspections, that all the lessons observed were of a standard commensurate with international notions of 'outstanding' or 'exceptional' – validating the judgement of the headteachers and principals in nominating the 36 teachers for study.

Drawing on the approach outlined above, the enquiry included a range of activities aimed at identifying how inspiring teachers create feelings of inspiration in their learners and what they consistently do to achieve this. In other words, the reviewers sought to develop explanatory judgements about what was causing students to be inspired. These activities included:

- two lesson observations per teacher (at least one of which was a full lesson)
- interviews with the teachers' pupils
- interviews with teachers' colleagues and line managers.

In total there was, on average, 3.5 hours of focused reviewer activity around each of the 36 teachers (the exact amount of activity varying depending on the number of teachers that were in each school). This amounted to approximately 126 hours of direct observation and scrutiny of the teachers' practice across a wide array of subjects and in nursery, primary, secondary and sixth form classes. The reviewers recorded their observations and findings in a notebook and then met together to conduct joint writing to summarise what was found. This report is the result of that joint writing, further editing of which took place later. In summarising their findings, the reviewers generally discounted any observations that were not typical to the vast majority, if not all of the teachers. The authors took this approach in order to distil the essence of what appeared to be inspirational about the teachers, and to focus on teacher behaviours that appeared to be generate the feeling of having been inspired in the learners. In addition to these summaries of common practice among these inspiring classroom practitioners, the report also contains extracts from the reviewers' notes that were made during the observations, which it is hoped will bring to life the more general descriptions of the types of teachers that these people are.



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## Review questions

The focus of the observation and interview analysis centred on the following review questions:

- Can we define the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are associated with inspiring teaching and that are common across the group of identified teachers?
- Are there critical learning experiences in the development of these teachers that could be replicated with others?

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## Advantages and limitations of the method that was used

There are advantages and limitations in all forms of research. This external review based approach used a combination of formal observation in lessons and unstructured interviews with teachers, individual students, groups of students and school leaders within the teacher's school. The main advantage of observation is that it can provide direct access to the particular subject in question. Predominantly observational methods are, however, susceptible to observer biases in which the observer takes note of what they expect, or want to see, rather than what actually took place. In the light of the related project that was undertaken by Professor Pam Sammons it is clear that these type of teachers also score highly on two systematic teacher observation schedules (Sammons et al., 2014), as well as appearing to demonstrate the characteristics described below. Such triangulation of findings (headteacher views, academic opinion and the observations of experience school external reviewers) supports the notion that their fundamental skills were real and not just the result of biases which may have been implanted in the minds of the reviewers as a results of the teachers being initially labelled as 'inspirational' by their headteachers. In addition, we believe that use of highly experienced external reviewers adds further weight to the findings and their credibility. Nonetheless, it is the hoped that future researchers will seek to replicate and build on the findings, in order to validate further the observations made in this study.



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# The common characteristics of inspiring teachers' practice and the support that underpins it

**This section explains each of the three areas identified as common across the teachers observed:**

- Inspirational interaction through outcomes focused and agile pedagogy
- Relentless yet understated professionalism
- Support from leadership and management that nurtures the teacher's talents and innovation

The reviewers, in turn, identified nine common interrelated characteristics across these areas. Where these interrelationships were clearest they have sought to illustrate this by referring to the way in which some common characteristic appeared to be supporting or working together with another.

The observers themselves were frequently inspired to want to take part in the learning with the children

## Inspirational interaction through outcomes focused and agile pedagogy

**Common characteristic 1: Inspiring teaching fires the imagination through a combination of intellectual challenge, high expectations and mutual trust between teacher and learner that invites the learner to join the teacher on a journey of discovery.**

The external reviewers and the colleagues of the observed teachers considered that these teachers typically communicated a sense of their personal joy in learning and discovery. Indeed, the observers themselves were frequently inspired to want to take part in the learning with the children, something also said by colleagues of the teachers. The teachers appeared to achieve this by modelling inquisitiveness in their teaching and asking probing, deep and thoughtful questions that provided intellectual challenge. When they were modelling, they did this with infectious enthusiasm that showed that they enjoyed covering the topic too, at

whatever level they were teaching it, with no embarrassment. The learners then felt more secure because they know they can do it also.

The teachers in turn had the highest expectations in relation to learners' ability to engage with the subject content, correcting misconceptions with rigour but keeping the learning fun. At the same time, it was visible how the teachers often fostered curiosity because they exposed to the children that they were interesting people themselves, interested in learning and in things in their own lives.

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### The learning environment in a year 1 class

*The attractive, vibrant well-organised classroom creates an environment conducive to learning. Everything has its place and this means pupils can easily find any resources or equipment they might need for themselves. Behaviour management strategies are highly effective and clearly focus on enhancing learning. For example, the pupils all agree with the teacher that they do their 'best thinking' in their 'carpet spots' and then quickly change their places. The teacher listens very respectfully to pupils' comments and ideas and this helps create a climate where pupils work very well in groups together, listening respectfully to each other's contributions.*

*Expectations are high and timed challenges and very clear expectations help maintain a real sense of urgency throughout the whole lesson.*

*The teacher very skilfully builds on pupils' genuine thirst for learning so that learners endeavour to solve the mystery portrayed by the artist in a painting. The teacher gives pupils tantalisingly small part of a painting to discuss and describe. This really intrigues them and they cannot wait to join up their individual pieces with other groups to build up the picture.*

*The teacher interjects with probing questions, which extends pupils' thinking. The emphasis is on encouraging pupils to explain their ideas, rather than trying to come up with the 'right' answer. This means pupils are confident enough to discuss highly imaginative ideas. Pupils are continually encouraged to extend their vocabulary. For example, one group discusses alternative words they could use instead of the word 'happy'. Pupils then discuss the complete picture in groups and they are extremely keen to find out more about the painting. The teacher challenges some pupils to work as a group to write down questions about the painting, making sure they identify different types of question, that start with – what, who, why, where and when. Another group explores their ideas about the characters in the painting through a drama activity. This allows them to consider, such issues as:*

- *how a character in the painting might have been feeling*
- *whether the characters know each other, and*
- *what they might have been saying.*

*The whole lesson leaves the pupils with a genuine insight and fascination into the painting. It sets the scene for further learning very well, as the pupils clearly cannot wait to find out more.*

The quality of the relationships with students was exceptional in all the lessons observed. In particular, reviewers identified how the teachers frequently made a point of taking a deep interest in the children they taught outside of the lesson. So strong was the bond between teacher and learner that, colleagues noted how (on some occasions) when some of the teachers were absent the class would 'get on with it', no matter who was covering the lesson. On two occasions, different teachers, in different schools, demonstrated this depth of connection when, coincidentally, they had each lost their voice. In both cases, the teacher handed over the leadership of the lesson to learners giving quiet instructions as necessary. The lessons remained outstanding and inspiring.

### Inspiring activities as part of learning – an example from one teacher's lesson

*In final part of the lesson the teacher introduces a blindfolded walk through a magical Japanese forest. The magical forest is created by text on A3 sheets written by pupils. Teacher's example includes detail, personification and simile, for example:*

*'I can see proud tall mountains which guard the forest like careful watchmen.'*

*The sensory walk is preparation for writing in a follow up lesson. In a concluding plenary teacher describes the lesson as an experiment and gives pupils opportunities to reflect on the lesson (for example, what have they learnt and what would make it better? Suggestions include touch and sounds in this excellent review.*

It appeared that the teachers' ability to fire the imagination derives from constantly seeking and expecting high quality relationships. They did this by modelling open, honest and respectful dialogue, always doing what they say (or if they did not, they explaining why).

### The learning environment (trust, expectations and structure), a typical example from an inspiring teacher's classroom

*The teacher purposefully creates an excellent environment for learning which is based on:*

- *structures and routines*
- *expectations*
- *culture of trust and respect.*

*The teacher makes a very personal welcome to students ensuring students feel secure, respected and wanted.*

*After a very brief introduction, students quickly settle into the task. Carefully thought through routines are well established and expectations are high. Students work independently learning from each other because they are given strategies to help them. They ask good questions of each other and use the context to help them develop understanding. Students work very hard and independently*

The teachers' ability to fire the imagination derives from constantly seeking and expecting high quality relationships

*of the teacher for extended periods. The teacher is very relaxed, walking around encouraging, assessing, etc. Students working much harder than the teacher because of firmly established structures and routines and expectations.*

*The teacher uses a wide variety of structured learning activities. There are routines that are 'well established' so the students need little or no guidance on how to organise the activities because they do them routinely. The teacher has delegated much of the responsibility for learning to the students. Within groups, students are encouraged to discuss their work and explain their thoughts to each other. Students have no fear of saying they do not understand. Trust is paramount. Students feel secure enough to say when they do not understand. The teacher reorganises groups ensuring that students do not work with friends. This raises expectations because students will be a lot less comfortable in giving a satisfactory answer than they would have done to the friends, this works because students trust the teacher and there is no danger of embarrassment. Students learn quickly and gain confidence, because the teacher has:*

- *expert knowledge of what students find difficult*
- *expert knowledge what they securely know*
- *good subject knowledge*
- *an excellent understanding of how students learn.*

*Knowledge of individuals helps the teacher support the learning. The teacher knows very clearly, the next step in deepening students understanding.*

*This knowledge of individuals also helps motivates students. Relationships are trusting and there is a very positive learning culture where there is no fear of making mistakes. The teacher offers very positive encouragement, she is constantly assessing, reinforcing with some questions and challenging with others, only possible because of constantly assessing students' responses and reactions.*

**Common characteristic 2: Inspirational teachers are learning goal-focused although not route specific in terms of pedagogy. Learning goals are, however, never simplistic, rather they aim to take children to their next level of understanding**

In the observed lessons, the teachers consistently displayed a keen interest in the learning of individual children. The teachers' starting point was usually what the pupils already knew and had learned before. This said, although the teachers had a clear goal for the lesson, in their planning they were not entirely sure how they were going to get there. Instead, they built this journey of discovery through interaction. They were able to do this because they knew where to go at key learning moments, rather than just pressing on regardless. That the teachers appeared to have expert knowledge of what their learners found difficult underpinned this aspect of their practice. However, it was also noticeable that, from the student's perspective the teachers, in contrast, appeared 'super organised' to the children; and to have 'planned everything in advance'. This idea of perceived 'super organisation' is a particularly interesting aspect of inspiring

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teacher practice, bearing in mind the fact that the teachers were actually adapting their practice moment-by-moment – whilst maintaining a fixed goal (an aspect of the teachers' lessons we will discuss further below).

Challenge and risk taking was also an important and visible element in the teachers' classrooms. For example, the students and children interviewed described how the teachers were always challenging and pushing them in order to help them succeed. Alongside this, they described how the teachers were not worried about error making and allowing the learners to try new things. In fact, in the lessons seen by the reviewers, all the teachers (without exception) frequently used the children to help each other learn. Because of this aspect and the focus on student needs, the children saw the teachers as understanding how they learned and noted particularly how they use repetition, in different ways, to give what one learner described as 'aha' moments.

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*There is a sense of real purpose in this classroom with learning very well structured. Pupils work very hard with great interest and enthusiasm, producing a range of impressive artwork for their classroom gallery. Pupils start the lesson by discussing what it means to be inspiring. This sets the scene for the whole lesson as all pupils strive to do their best work.*

*Pupils' learning is set in a meaningful context. This motivates children to work hard as they are fully aware they are producing artwork for their own art gallery. Pupils will share the gallery with parents and celebrated it the next week, this outcome provides a real sense of purpose to the lesson. The teacher's focus links very clearly to their prior learning. Pupils visited an art gallery the previous day. They speak confidently about the work of a range of different artists they have been finding out about and proudly share the different artwork they themselves have already produced. By the time the children get started on their own individual portraits, they are keen to start and buzzing with ideas, confidently developing the theme further.*

*Excellent relationships and the continual reinforcement of positive learning habits helps create a relaxed yet hard-working environment in which pupils are happy and confident enough to explore new techniques and supportive of each other.*

*The teacher immediately captures the pupils' interests. Adults in the classroom are genuinely enthused and interested and this in turn spins off onto the children. Pupils clearly think the examples of portraits made out of different words are very impressive and are particularly interested in the example the teacher has produced using their own names! Pupils are enthralled as one exclaims 'wow that's awesome', another declares 'I am going to persevere and try my hardest!'*

*A range of activities ensures that pupils have the opportunity to extend their language and explore their ideas in depth with each other before they start their individual pieces of artwork. For example, one group thoroughly enjoys listening to different types of music to build up a 'word bank' of words and phrases to describe how the music makes them feel. All ideas come from the pupils themselves and adults continually support and question to develop pupils' ideas and suggestions further. Pupils are encouraged to discuss and share their most imaginative and creative ideas with each other. This helps all pupils develop their ideas further.*

There was often a meta-cognitive quality to the goals for each lesson, which aimed not just to develop the ability to know, do and understand but also to develop 'knowing about knowing', in which the learners are aware of the concepts and processes that they are using and so could adapt their new learning ability to the next challenging task. Teachers in observed lessons often supported this development in metacognition through excellent modelling skills in which they were able to explain clearly the process steps that need learning for any task, engaging the learners in their thinking as they did this. Further, when modelling they embodied the way in which a subject expert might think and act; and always did this in a way that was focused on helping the children to be like an expert at that level themselves and not just learn about what others do.

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### Working it out for themselves in a nursery class

*High quality support from adults fosters children's personal, social and emotional development and helps to enrich and extend their language. This nurturing setting helps children flourish and develop very positive attitudes to learning from an early age.*

*Learning gets off to a cracking start in the Nursery. There is a hard working buzz. A wide range of stimulating activities motivates children to explore. The setting provides a happy, settled environment, where children are keen to learn because support for their personal, social and emotional development is first rate. Children are very motivated by the effective use of praise from all staff. For example, one child is thrilled when they have their name written on the 'shooting star'. As a result, they develop very positive attitudes to learning from the outset. They are keen to do well, staying absorbed in their learning for extended periods from a very young age. The organisation of the setting enables children to be increasingly independent in their learning. Children readily select the resources they need to complete an activity and then tidy up on their own so that a working area is left ready for the next child. This enables adults in the setting to focus primarily on moving children's learning on, for example by extending children's vocabulary and encouraging them to explain their ideas and explain how they have completed a task in detail.*

*In this nurturing environment, children are very proud of their accomplishments and develop very good learning habits, such as perseverance and concentration. 'Look! We have sorted them all by ourselves. We never gave up and they all match now!' exclaimed a group of children sorting some items according to their own criteria.*

*Adults show high levels of respect for the children. They give children eye contact and listen very carefully to what they have to say. The children then in turn model this behaviour both back to the adults and with other children. As a result, children learn to work very well in groups together. However, if any issues do arise the adults help the children to consider sensitively the impact their actions may have on another child.*

**Common characteristic 3: Teachers' choice from a wide range of teaching strategies and approaches, sometimes moment-by-moment, is astute as they diagnose needs and fine-tune their responses in order to deepen understanding and promote independent thought. However, whatever strategy they select they remain subject achievement and attainment orientated with a seamless blending of content and pedagogy.**

The external reviewers identified how the teachers were particularly skilled at selecting suitable teaching techniques from a wide repertoire of possible approaches, in an almost improvisatory fashion. A good grasp of conceptual progression and knowledge acquisition in the relevant subject area underpinned the teachers' choices throughout the lesson. However, the teachers also often modified those choices mid-lesson (or even more frequently) - the teachers using classroom interaction to diagnose the journey that the children and child needed to take to get them to the next level of knowledge and understanding. It was clear, in every interaction that they knew what matters and what does not for an individual learner.

Supporting this was the use of empathy as a pedagogical tool. There was a consensus among the review team that these teachers were exceptional in being highly sensitised to multiple signals a student gives (consciously or unconsciously) then responding to it. Interviews with the teachers helped to explain what was happening - in particular, the way the teachers strove to see things through the eyes of the pupils appeared to be the main way that this dynamic emerged. Furthermore, in doing so the children appeared to reciprocate this dynamic, seeing things through the eyes of the teacher - a feature of the relationship that children themselves were often able to articulate in interviews. Thus, attention to the detail of classroom interaction and learning appears to be one of the key ways that inspirational teachers deepen understanding and promote independent thought.

Teachers were exceptional in being highly sensitised to multiple signals a student gives (consciously or unconsciously) then responding to it

#### The key features of practice as they were perceived by one inspiring teacher

*One teacher's view about inspiring teaching was as follows. She thought that relationships with students are critical to effective practice. As she put it, 'they need to like you'. A transparent love of teaching and enthusiasm to communicate that the teacher 'wants to be there' are essential as is a love of the subject and an interest in children considered essential. She aims to couple a 'love of learning' with rigorous exam preparation to avoid any dichotomy between an exam focus and learning. Encouraging questioning is central to this.*

#### The effect of inspirational teaching on learners and what underpins this

*From the start of the lesson students are eager to participate fully, they are very keen to please and all want to do well. This has nothing to do with anything the teacher has done today, but results from weeks of establishing high expectations, rewarding students and students knowing they will achieve well.*

*The teacher uses both gestures and remarks to encourage and reward students. She uses these in a measured way, so students value them. The teacher subtly*

*creates situations where, over the lesson, every student deserves a rewarding comment. Recognition of success is never exaggerated. Instead, they are always positive, proportionate and deserving. The teacher takes the work of her students seriously communicating the importance to her students through modelling of practice, high personal professional standards and demonstrating respect for the students' efforts.*

The reviewers highlighted question and answer technique as a further area where the observed teachers had particularly well developed classroom skills. Through highly effective question technique teachers routinely passed the responsibility for thinking onto the children. This, by extension, promoted higher order thinking through questioning and activities that were probing, challenging and precisely pitched to take the children to the next level.

*As a result, the students feel they and their work is valued, they recognise the progress they make. They buy into this and want further improvement.*

*The students trust the teacher. They believe if they cannot do something the teacher will help and encourage. They recognise the teacher will work with individuals because they are visible to the learners as individuals. The students feel inspired by the highly positive relationships that exist between them and the teacher; they feel valued as individuals. Students say 'she has fun when she teaches us'. The combination of trust, expressed value of learner contributions and fun results in the students having considerable respect for the teacher and an ambition to do well.*

*In a second lesson, the same principles, attitudes and strategies are evident, but adapted for a much older age group. Students feel valued and talk about mutual respect. They also acknowledge the variety of tasks that the teacher presents and the time the teacher give to them to ensure they understand. Learning routines are firmly established and this makes students feel secure in the tasks.*

Through highly effective question technique teachers routinely passed the responsibility for thinking onto the children

## Relentless yet understated professionalism

**Common characteristic 4: Underpinned by constantly striving to improve their knowledge of learners and subject knowledge they continuously reflect on and refine their practice.**

There was agreement by the reviewers that the group of observed teachers were different to many teachers because of their exceptionally high baseline expectations for student performance and their commitment to personal improvement to achieve this. Reflection and refinement of practice was continuous in relation to both their subject area and understanding of the learners that they teach. They were all also highly evaluative and self-critical with, in turn, with

personal targets that often constituted higher expectations than any formal framework could provide. They would 'not let anything stand in the way of the children they teach achieving' (as one colleague put it). These teachers were not seen by others, however (as we will discuss below) as pushy or arrogant. While generalisation is difficult the teachers were described by their peers as often having an air of quiet and understated professionalism.

The teachers were described by their peers as often having an air of quiet and understated professionalism

### Exceptionally rapid progress, high expectations and a calm learning environment – examples from classroom practice

*Both of the teachers are inspiring because they enable all pupils to make extremely rapid progress in their learning by constantly assessing, motivating and challenging them in a very supportive and calm learning environment. Both teachers use the interactive whiteboard as an effective tool promote learning through engaging and motivating pupils with learning tasks which are well matched to their interests and ability levels. Teachers have a very secure understanding of pupil's precise academic level of attainment and provide an exceptionally high level of challenge enabling pupils to excel in their learning.*

*Teaching supports pupils well, enabling them to feel secure in their learning. The learning environment, which has been skilfully created by the two teachers, is calm and purposeful where pupils confidently extend their learning because of exceptionally effective teaching. There is an ongoing dialogue between both teachers about the progress made by individual pupils during the lessons. This enables the teachers to judge when it is appropriate to challenge or support a pupil to a higher degree. Very effective target setting and exceptionally high quality marking ensure pupils are well informed about what they should do to improve their work further. When teaching small groups of pupils both teachers enter into supportive and challenging dialogue where they clearly identify for pupils what they can to 'improve' their work.*

*Resources to support learning were used exceptionally well by both teachers to support concepts being taught in mathematics, their use enables pupils to make exceptional progress in their learning. During all three lessons teachers gave pupils opportunities to work independently which enabled pupils to direct and extend their learning very effectively. When questioning pupils about their learning both teachers are exceptionally skilfully in eliciting responses which demonstrate levels of pupils understanding and then probe and challenge the pupils further, this is another powerful tool used by teachers to promote exceedingly effective learning.*

*It is very clear that both teachers have exceptionally high expectations of what pupils are capable of and provide a very high level of challenge for pupils to respond to during lessons. It is also very clear in this classroom that all input from pupils is highly valued by both teachers who respond to whatever pupils share with them as part of their learning journey. All pupils recognise they are partners with the teachers in learning. Everything that happens in the classroom is designed to exceedingly effectively promote and celebrate the success of pupils in everything they do.*

A further aspect of the way in which these teachers continually strived to improve through a self-deprecatory professionalism was the way in which teachers also regularly and seriously sought feedback from the children (evidenced both during and after lessons). For example, they would often ask the children 'what would make this lesson better?' and, according to the children, could be relied upon to respond to feedback.

**Common characteristic 5: However, they demonstrate their qualities subtly and sometimes almost imperceptibly through the way in which they interact in the classroom and with colleagues, often unaware that what they do is exceptional.**

While the teachers were typically highly reflective they often seemed unaware of how unusually good their practice was. They typically acted on the basis that their exceptionally high expectations were little more than common practice and commonsense. Many of them described in interviews how they had been surprised to discover that their practice was as good as others said it was.

#### A climate of dedication and care

*Students respond very positively to the teacher's dedication and care. Students see the differentiation between good teachers and great teachers as 'they really guide you'. They say that art teachers do not often demonstrate techniques, but this teacher does. They are also able to help the students easily understand the requirements of the exam in the context for the student's project.*

*The environment and culture is one where sharing of ideas is the norm. There are high levels of trust and respect between students. The teacher models these behaviours by trusting and respecting the students through what appears to be casual conversations. These conversations are not casual, however. In fact, the teacher is giving the students an opening into their life, trusting them with this insight and respecting them. It is a very precisely calculated risk that works very well. The teacher talks about emotions and feelings (in the context of art) and reinforces the culture of safety and security, 'it's OK, if it doesn't work, just put it in the bin'. Giving the students permission to take risks, and building an inner confidence, telling them that 'it is OK to make mistakes'.*

*Students gave a consistent message during the interview. They did not always think they were good at art, but they saw their teacher's belief in them. This gave them confidence and inspired them to see how good they could get. As one learner put it:*

- *confidence + belief = enjoyment and success*

*Others noted how 'you know where you are with miss, no 'mood swings' ... she'll be calm and will always help you, she never shouts', and how, 'she lets you get on, we can develop in different ways.'*



The environment and culture is one where sharing of ideas is the norm

The teachers also seemed to enhance their reputations with colleagues through the fact (as already also noted above) other professionals observing these teachers want to join in with the learning. Senior management colleagues, for example, often described how the teachers 'make you feel as an observer that you want to

engage and pursue the learning activity' yourself. One described this by saying that 'inspiring learning is inspiring to all'. The reviewers, as has already been noted, also felt this feeling of wanting to take part in many of the lessons they saw.

### The 'light bulb moments' that an inspiring teacher can provide for a school

*One teacher was the school's first Advanced Skills Teacher. She was selected for this research project as she consistently models good practice. Her teaching is characterised by careful planning, good questioning, pace, gentle prodding with transactional analysis skills used. Good at effective group-work. Elements of her teaching are considered outstanding although some missed opportunities for differentiation. Historically there has been a gap between outcomes and achievement with her classes but now her teaching is better translated into successful outcomes where her love of literature helps students to succeed. She is enthusiastic and committed to professional development. She was helped to produce better results through the involvement of the subject leader by focusing on the specific demands of examinations. Considered a 'light bulb moment' – resulting in greater depth and now exemplary results.*

Children too were able to talk about this aspect of the teachers' behaviour noting in some cases how it related to other aspects of the teachers' practice. For example, when spoken to individually, during learning and in focus groups, the children frequently described how they knew that they would learn in the teachers' lessons with utter confidence because the teacher would not let anything stand in their way. This made them want to take part, in combination with the belief that teachers' every communication would have an impact. Children valued consistency as a characteristic of these teachers. One pupil said that the teacher 'is always the same, welcoming and completely in control'. As one learner put it, 'they never snap or grump' and make learners feel good about themselves.

### Inspiring teaching example of typical student views from one school following an inspiring lesson

*Students are inspired because they walk into a classroom where they trust the teacher to:*

- *teach them well*
- *respect and value them.*

*These 3 lower ability set students, are working successfully at a high level (GCSE, Grade B) and work hard because:*

- *through thought, preparation and planning, the teacher has a carefully structured sequence of learning activities*
- *throughout lessons, the teacher is constantly assessing every students understanding and accelerating or 'applying the breaks'*
- *the teacher can do this because his prepared tasks are based on incremental development.*

Children frequently described how they knew that they would learn in the teachers' lessons with utter confidence because the teacher would not let anything stand in their way

*There are excellent relationships between the students and teacher, instilled by the teacher's open, personal interaction with the group and with individuals. There is humour and always respect. High levels of trust and respect ensure there is a highly positive culture for learning. The teacher has the belief the students can learn and communicates this. There are very clear expectations of acceptable behaviour, for example, a clear distinction between discussion time, thinking time, one speaker/rest listening.*

*Student behaviour is very good because they are fully engaged in the lesson. In turn, students are fully engaged in the lesson because they value what they are learning, and they know they will progress well. The teacher creates a very purposeful balance between listening, explaining and doing. The students accept that they have a responsibility to both learn and to teach their group. They know the teacher will not answer questions, and so they ask the group. This leads to high level thinking, explaining and embeds learning.*

*The teacher uses very subtle techniques to ensure the culture of the classroom is highly positive and respectful. He helps the students believe in themselves and passes the responsibility for learning to the students. They trust him explicitly and value highly the lessons because they know they will make progress. Highly sensitive to even the most subtle signals give by students and they respond subtly to the needs of the students. These signals illustrate both emotional needs and levels of understanding.*

The teachers skilfully combined flexibility about mean within a fixed framework of goals and high expectations. This aspect of their professionalism was commented upon by others. For example, in relation to their skills and knowledge as teachers, senior managers often said that the teachers in the study had a clear view of the key priorities but were flexible about the route required to get there. One described how their inspiring teachers were 'all routes acceptable but goal not negotiable'.

Teachers in the study had a clear view of the key priorities but were flexible about the route required to get there

### **Reflection, research engagement and inspiring teaching – a headteacher perspective**

*One headteacher described how inspiring teaching makes you, as an observer, want to engage with and pursue the learning/ activity. An inspiring teachers is also a 'reflective practitioner', critical of their own practice and resulting in continual development and improvement.*

*'Our inspiring teachers are also action researchers, looking beyond their own circumstances to develop practice from elsewhere'*

*Most of the other teachers in the school had been influenced the inspirational teacher whether they were students, subject leaders or a leading teacher. This seen as the result of a continuous drive for, and always believing that they can do, better and that their students can do better. This involved passion the headteachers suggested. Inspiring teachers 'enjoy what they do'.*

*'They show enthusiasm, love their subject and what they are doing. These teachers 'make the learning interesting'. First, they are 'teachers of children' and as such may be capable of teaching anything to anyone.'*

## Support from leadership and management that nurtures the teacher's talents and innovation

**Common characteristic 6: Leadership that enabled risk taking by these individuals enriched the work of these teachers. In addition, the teachers were all individuals who appeared to have worked hard to earn the right to innovate by demonstrating their effectiveness.**

The schools in which the teachers found themselves were all characterised by an institutional confidence and belief that a supportive environment, freedom for teachers that are above a basic baseline of competence (rather than over control), together with high expectations, was the right climate to allow effective teaching to flourish. It would appear that, the school environment that an inspirational teacher finds themselves in either amplifies or attenuates their potential. In other words, if the teachers had found themselves in a more restrictive environment they might not have emerged as inspiring.

The school environment that an inspirational teacher finds themselves in either amplifies or attenuates their potential

### Collaboration, high expectations and whole school improvement

*One school has developed a strong commitment to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning with clarity over what this means in practice. At weekly morning briefing sessions (Tuesday and Thursday, 8.30 am) teachers share elements of best practice. Through this collaborative process, the school has identified characteristics of excellence in outstanding teaching and learning as:*

- *high expectations*
- *a fully differentiated, well planned lesson, extending prior knowledge, securing excellent progress for all students*
- *literacy and communication are integrated into every lesson*
- *numeracy is embedded to practice, where appropriate*
- *motivated engaged independent students*
- *high quality challenging tasks, supporting pace and depth of lesson*
- *excellent developmental marking allowing students to take control of improvement*
- *good quality questioning, extending students*
- *differentiated homework used as a tool to develop student independence and resilience*
- *display reflecting excellent subject knowledge that is regularly updated*
- *excellent, planned use of additional support.*

**Common characteristic 7: To be inspiring it was necessary to work in a context where the school did not expect that everyone would teach the same way.**

Based on the present study, it seems that school leaders who create the right balance between autonomy and accountability appear to be the ones that are able to nurture a climate in which inspirational teaching can flourish. This climate is the result of the leadership style of the senior managers, led from the top by the headteacher or principal. A key feature appears to be the encouragement of risk-taking to enable innovation, high expectations in relation to progress and attainment but a mindset that accepts flexibility in relation to how the school gets there. Indeed, many of the teachers themselves spoke of how they valued working in a context where the school did not expect that everyone would teach the same way. This may be an important mediating factor because (although inspiring teachers appear to contain similar process level approaches, as is discussed above) inspiring teachers do not teach the same way, either between each other or in relation to their own practice day by day or moment-by-moment.

**Common characteristic 8: The teachers reciprocated the trust placed in them the inspirational teachers, in turn, grasping the opportunity to enhance their pedagogy.**

Evidence from the observations and interviews suggested that the presence of one inspirational teacher can act as a catalyst for change, if there is a spirit of enquiry and shared practice. However, it is important to note that in all cases the senior leaders were clear that the teachers had 'earned' their autonomy by demonstrating effectiveness and outcomes. The reviewers also found this trusting yet challenging environment in many of the teachers' lessons, where the teachers managed risk by the learners in an equally gentle yet focused way.

Many of the teachers themselves spoke of how they valued working in a context where the school did not expect that everyone would teach the same way

**Lessons that take risks in a 'gently' managed way**

*In this lesson, the teacher (and support teacher) inspired pupils through a well-judged balance of routine and experimentation/risk-taking that allowed children to make decisions in a safe, but exciting learning environment.*

*Lots of praise and encouragement from adults means that children are keen to 'have a go' at new things, and they do. The teacher plans collaborative activities that build on children's recent experience and involve lots of activity and actions. This creates a sense of productive teamwork that supports the development of positive relationships between children, and between children and adults. A consistent approach from all adults in the class is reinforced by some shared teaching. At times, the adults question each other in order to add interest and to reinforce messages for the children. All adults are calm, clear and cheerful.*

*Children are given plenty of chance to investigate and explore because the classroom environment is set up to support and encourage this. Co-operation with others means that children learn from each other, too. The teacher builds a sense of eager anticipation – inviting children (but in reality, gently guiding them) to try new things. Simple, but imaginative, multi-sensory tasks such as tracing out the letter shapes ('j', 'a' and 'm' in jam, for example), provide purposeful and fun*

*learning activities that can be easily adjusted and extended – often by the children themselves and so learning is not beyond anyone's reach or limited from going further.*

*The teacher trusts the children to make decisions by themselves, while adults focus on specific learning points with small groups. However, from time-to-time, children do report back and/or check things with adults. When this happens, the teacher always responds and engages in brief conversation, but does so in a way that does not distract her from her current focus and prompts the children seeking advice to make new decisions about what to do next. She prompts and guides, but does not interfere or lose focus on her current task. All children understand this and respond very well to the high expectation that they will use their own initiative and agree courses of action (within previously established expectations of classroom learning behaviour and with their peers). By operating and organising the class in this way, the teacher and other adults (the relationship and consistency of practice between all adults in the class is important) are helping children to become independent, co-operative, reflective and evaluative.*

**Common characteristic 9: Being given ongoing opportunities to reflect on actual classroom practice with others, gain insights and take action in the form of co-reflective practice together with the opportunity to lead such practice themselves.**

The teachers were able to speak about how the opportunities that they had had to work together and reflect on practice had enabled them to develop the features that the reviewers considered inspiring. The last section, *Reflections*, covers this area in more detail by drawing out those aspects of this that could be replicable in other contexts and with other teachers in order to enhance learning outcomes and pupil engagement.

The teachers were able to speak about how the opportunities that they had had to work together and reflect on practice had enabled them to develop the features that the reviewers considered inspiring

CATALOGUE OF PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS 43



primary study for flower (detail), Catalogue I, which indicates a close  
study of the structure which took place in 1860.  
No. 1871. Study of a flower. Plate 100.  
Black chalk drawing.  
Water, Gouache, Enamel.  
M. 1860. 100 x 100 mm.  
No. 1872. Study of flower's structure, in greenish-grey pencil. Being  
intended to be the 'Vergil' and 'Pallas' that it had to accompany  
and that it was done in the 'Vergil' and 'Pallas'.



CORRECTION TO THE PLATES

Plate 100. The paper on which these pictures are drawn is not blue but yellowish in color.

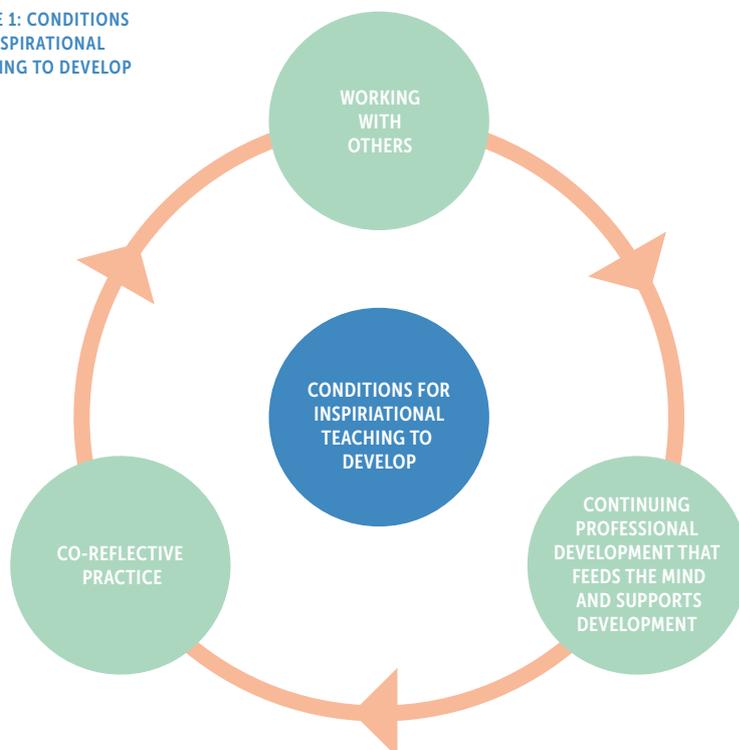
# Building the conditions for inspirational teaching to develop

One of the teachers used the phrase 'aspire to inspire' to describe how learning was central to their development as a teacher. The aspiration to be as good as possible was common; however, the 36 teachers entered the teaching profession for a wide range of reasons and were very different people with very different backgrounds.

Some felt that they had 'stumbled' into teaching, some that they had been born a teacher and had taught siblings in their family, whilst other had had both positive and negative experiences of teaching as a child which had inspired them to join the profession. Some had been recognised by others in another career as being a 'natural' teacher.

The 36 teachers entered the teaching profession for a wide range of reasons and were very different people with very different backgrounds

FIGURE 1: CONDITIONS FOR INSPIRATIONAL TEACHING TO DEVELOP



### Subject knowledge, liking children and constantly striving to be better – how one teachers' potential was spotted

*One teacher described how, after a long period of study and subsequently using his skills to generate an income, he was approached by a past university tutor who encouraged him to 'fill in' as a temporary A level teacher. From this, his career developed and he now leads a large and very successful art department.*

*The teacher saw his success as founded in two key areas:*

- *Firstly, subject knowledge and passion.*
- *Secondly, the intrinsic reward he gets when students succeed. This reward is stronger than the reward he feels when he himself achieves.*

*He is passionate about his subject and continues to learn. His expertise is wide ranging. His qualities of caring, being compassionate and sense of humour are essential in his success. He also feels his students benefit from his ability to filter out what is irrelevant, to focus on the important. This sometimes brings him into conflict with his leaders and managers. He constantly evaluates his impact and cycles through processes of improvement.*

*The teacher described how he believes some aspects of being an inspirational teacher are learnable (for example, practical organisation and methodical preparation). However, as he put it 'you cannot be inspirational if you do not enjoy being in the presence of kids'.*

Although the teachers came into teaching for a wide range of reasons and were in many ways different people, there were a number of critical learning experiences that the teachers described that had common features and could benefit other teachers.

Returning to Shulman's notions (Rowan et al., 2001; Shulman, 1986; 1987) discussed above, it appeared that a number of things were particularly important in helping to develop deep pedagogical subject knowledge. The reviewers grouped these into three categories, although again, there is some overlap between the areas and they appear to be interdependent:

- working with others
- co-reflecting practice (a phase used by one of the teachers during an interview)
- continuing professional development that feeds the mind and supports development

Senior colleagues also pointed out how it is noticeable that the teachers were always 'staying ahead of the game' and that it was observable how they worked to stay there – this was put down to a belief in self-reflection and constant refinement and improvement with the teachers astute at picking up good practice from others.

There were a number of critical learning experiences that the teachers described that had common features and could benefit other teachers

### Wide experience is critical to development – one inspiring teacher's typical experiences

*For one teacher, working in variety of different schools, particularly in her school improvement adviser role, 'opened her eyes' to the inequality of provision for pupils. She felt that working in a school, it is 'easy to become isolated or cocooned' from the wide range of experiences, both positive and negative and that pupils have in other schools. Seeing the variety in other's practice, and the situations that some teachers and pupils have to cope with, toughened her, sharpened her teaching and made her raise her expectations and ambitions for the pupils that she teaches. As identified on another teacher's critical learning report, this could be transferable to other teachers by making sure that all teachers have opportunity to work with, learn from, and evaluate the work of other teachers – with some accountability measure (e.g. to produce a brief action plan).*

### Working with others

A common theme that emerged in discussions with the teachers related to how they did not feel that they had developed their 'inspirational' characteristic in isolation. In nearly all cases, the teachers could point to specific times and examples of when working with others had had a transformational impact on their practice as teachers.

In particular, the teachers cited the following examples most frequently:

- Being involved in the evaluation of the work of others
- Observation of bad practice as well as good
- Sharing and evaluating practice
- Having a platform to take on more leadership responsibility related to teaching and learning
- Learning to listen to other members of staff and learning from their experience and expertise
- Having an inspirational role model to learn from
- Being part of an open culture where people wander in and out of classrooms
- Paired teaching of classes and shared planning and delivery of lessons with constantly ongoing working together to enhance the lesson.

**In nearly all cases, the teachers could point to specific times and examples of when working with others had had a transformational impact on their practice as teachers**

### Working with others – some examples of common themes in the discussions with the inspiring teachers

*One teacher felt that taking on whole school responsibility helped him to 'widen his view'. Working with other teachers and evaluating their teaching helped him to realise that the way teachers vary the content and activities within a lesson (to make sure that the atmosphere and content keeps pupils interested) is very important. Watching others also helped him to see that teachers need to maintain a clear focus on the task in hand but also communicate a longer term view about where learning could or will take them. If teachers have this longer term view about the purpose of learning, it also gives them the confidence to adapt their plans in response to the pupils' reactions and contributions.*

*Another teacher pointed to how in their current role they had been able to support trainees - most recently, a GTP (Graduate Teacher Programme) placement. This has made her more reflective about her own practice because, when offering advice, she has had to stop and think about aspects of her own practice; how and why she works in such a way. In addition, her experience of observing others has improved her ability to see, and evaluate, the effect of teachers' actions.*

### Co-reflective practice

The teachers often described how reflection was essential to their development. However, this type of reflect described as most effective involved reflecting and gaining insights from that reflection with others related directly to actual practice, either with colleagues or those in a position of seniority. For example, they talked in interview about:

- Challenging feedback with high expectations that make you rethink
- Having opportunities to discuss and reflect (informally and formally) in particular in relation to a lesson/lessons that have not gone well
- Observation of bad practice as well as good
- Finding teaching difficult and learning on the job as a result of that and the intervention of a mentor
- Rapid learning on the job from own mistakes and reflection with others about this
- Making time outside of just teaching to evaluate practice in a way which aims to feed into improvement and then evaluating those improvements with colleagues
- Having time to work with all the staff in the setting and regularly reflecting what is working well and what can be improved further.

The teachers often described how reflection was essential to their development

### How feedback was a the catalyst for change with one teacher

*One teacher acknowledged how critical feedback from a careers adviser when teacher was in Year 11 and a tough Ofsted inspection – made her doubt her own ability at the time but she overcame this and feels that it has made her a more objective and evaluative person and teacher.*

### Continuing professional development that feeds the mind and supports development

Continuing professional development directly related to classroom practice and that 'feeds the mind', as one teacher put it, is important particularly where that development activity relates to the creation of knowledge and the improvement of pedagogy.

- Early opportunities to be challenged by new ideas on a training course or at a conference
- Learning from lesson video examples and documentaries
- Continued small step improvements
- Being involved in a research project
- Lesson study type approaches (lesson study was developed in Japan and involves the co-design, delivery and evaluation of lessons by a small group of teacher the goal being the design of high impact pedagogy (see for a discussion, Burghes and Robinson, 2010).

Continuing professional development directly related to classroom practice

### Two teacher's development journeys, grounded in strong subject knowledge

*Teacher A - completed a Music degree which was followed by a PGCE. As a NQT this teacher worked in a middle school in another local authority and has worked at this school for 9 years. Since taking up the post in this school this teacher has worked in Year 6 in 2009. Since working with the other teacher she has worked very closely to coach and support her in developing what is clearly a shared passion for doing the best for all pupils.*

*Teacher B - following completion of an undergraduate degree course the teacher worked as a teaching assistant in the school and then went to do a PGCE locally. Following this the teacher took a post back at the school as a NQT in 2010 and has worked very successfully with her fellow teacher in school to enable pupils to make better than expected progress in many subjects.*

*Both teachers are very clear about the focus of their roles being 'learning' and using teaching to secure the very best opportunities for all pupils. They use their skills to rapidly move pupils to groups where there is additional challenge as soon as pupils are ready to move forward. The teachers both recognise what they do is*

*to raise the confidence of pupils to enable them to learn. They have created and manage an environment which appears relaxed and inspires confidence in the learners.*

*Everything the teachers do is based on the belief that the pupils can achieve whatever they attempt. 'Achieving the achievable is not hard' is at the heart of what the teachers believe. Pupils also recognise this and say they are never given anything they cannot do.*

*Both teachers learned early on working in this school that some pupils do not have belief in their teachers and so they always deliver what they promise to the pupils. This was learned because other teachers asked pupils to participate in activities previously and did not follow through with what they had suggested the outcome would be. This was very damaging to the relationships between teachers and pupils and did not have a very positive impact on what the pupils achieved as they saw no real purpose in undertaking the learning activities. This is at the heart of the mutual respect and trust that permeates the learning culture.*

*Both teachers are people who want pupils to learn. They are enthusiastic and they use their strong knowledge to provide challenge for all pupils. Ultimately both teachers inspire pupils to find talents they did not know they had. These are skills and attributes which other teachers have learned from within the school. As in any learning community, other teachers have selectively taken and adapted the skills and attributes to use as part of their everyday teaching so some elements are integrated into the daily routine of others.*





# Reflections

The researchers considered that the teachers who were part of the study consistently taught lessons with many features that would receive the highest classification using external review frameworks such as that used by Ofsted and other school quality review bodies (see Churches and McBride, 2013). However, simple classification of the quality of the teachers' teaching was not the purpose of the research. Rather the aim was to look at those features that appear to take the learning beyond effectiveness and into the realm of the inspirational.

While crossing a threshold of high effectiveness, well documented in the academic literature (see for example, Coe et al., 2014; Hay McBer, 2000; Ko and Sammons, 2014; Muijs and Reynolds, 2005) and in various quality assurance frameworks, it appeared that the teachers demonstrated additional common characteristics. It seemed to the researchers that several aspects of leadership and management within the schools were important in creating the conditions that are necessary for inspirational teaching to both emerge and thrive.

It seemed to the researchers that several aspects of leadership and management within the schools were important in creating the conditions that are necessary for inspirational teaching to both emerge and thrive

FIGURE 2: COMPONENTS IMPORTANT TO INSPIRING TEACHING



Rather like a highly trained, knowledge-enabled and experienced taxi driver in a city such as London, the teachers knew the possible 'routes' of teaching extensively. They went beyond this and were able to adapt to the conditions in their classrooms on the day, in the same way that a London cabbie is able to adapt a route instantly and automatically to avoid roadblocks and congestion. Indeed,

just like an experienced and knowledgeable taxi driver, the teachers remained goal focused, the destination clear in their mind and with an understanding of the need to drive with pace and efficiency. At the same time, learners (just like the customer in a well-driven taxi ride) had the perception that this was all pre-planned on the teacher's part. The exceptional teacher's extraordinary flexibility and moment-by-moment adaption of the lesson plan as unnoticed by the children as the change in route on a previously untravelled journey in a taxi.

Like an experienced and knowledgeable taxi driver, the teachers remained goal focused, the destination clear in their mind and with an understanding of the need to drive with pace and efficiency

## Teacher characteristics

The researchers considered the way that teaching skills, attitudes and flexibility within the teachers' classrooms commonly intersected to enable the conditions necessary to create feelings of inspiration among students can be summarised into two areas:

Our researchers concluded that inspirational interaction often arises through outcome focused and agile pedagogy:

- Inspiring teaching **fires the imagination** through a combination of **intellectual challenge, high expectations** and **mutual trust** between teacher and learner that invites the learner to join the teacher on a **journey of discovery**.
- Inspirational teachers are typically **learning goal-focused** although **not route specific** in terms of pedagogy. Learning goals are, however, never simplistic, rather they aim to take children to their next level of understanding.
- Exceptional teachers tend to choose from a **wide range of teaching strategies** and approaches, sometimes moment-by-moment; they are astute as they **diagnose needs and fine-tune their responses** in order to deepen understanding and promote independent thought. Whatever strategy they select they usually remain subject achievement and attainment orientated through a seamless blending of content knowledge and pedagogical expertise.

We considered that inspirational teaching was often underpinned by relentless ambition for students combined with an understated professionalism:

- Most of the teachers we encountered were **constantly striving to improve** their knowledge of learners and subject knowledge they continuously reflect on and refine their practice.
- However, they typically **demonstrated their qualities subtly** and sometimes almost imperceptibly through the way in which they interact in the classroom and with colleagues, often unaware themselves that what they do is exceptional.
- **These teachers tend to have highly developed skills in processing all available information in the classroom as feedback** and they display both immediate flexibility to feedback whilst modifying long-term views and approaches to pedagogy.

Based on our investigation it seemed that most inspirational teachers appear to be able to reconcile the apparent paradoxes between the need for both professional routine and professional creativity. They are experts in planning but there is also a spontaneous improvisatory quality to their work. Many of the teachers

we observed created classroom conditions where repetition builds automaticity in learning but the learning is far from humdrum because of they also generate joyful and engaging learning experiences, and are typically sensitive to individual learning needs. In this way, the teachers observed appeared to be models of the type of critical processes that Shulman (1986; 1987) (and others) have called 'deep pedagogical content knowledge', summarised by Rowan et al. (2001) as:

*...a form of practical knowledge that is used by teachers to guide their actions in highly contextualized classroom settings. In Shulman's view, this form of practical knowledge entails, among other things: (a) knowledge of how to structure and represent academic content for direct teaching to students; (b) knowledge of the common conceptions, misconceptions, and difficulties that students encounter when learning particular content; and (c) knowledge of the specific teaching strategies that can be used to address students' learning needs in particular classroom circumstances. In the view of Shulman (and others), pedagogical content knowledge builds on other forms of professional knowledge, and is therefore a critical—and perhaps even the paramount—constitutive element in the knowledge base of teaching.*  
(Rowan et al., 2001: 2-3)

The teachers in the present study appeared to demonstrate this form of practical professional knowledge, characterised by insight into the individual misconceptions that acted as barriers to student learning. We spoke to the teachers about the critical learning experiences that have helped them to make this step and the conditions that had nurtured and sustained their progression. Although this aspect of Shulman's work has had relatively little impact on thinking about teacher effectiveness in England, evidence in this report perhaps suggests that such ideas have substantial merit.

## Important features of the context in which the teachers worked

The work of the exceptional teachers rarely took place in isolation. In most of the schools we visited there was usually a school leadership team that was willing to allow these teachers the opportunity to take risks, innovate and work beyond existing assumptions.

Our reviewers noted how the inspiring teachers typically worked for school leaders who appeared to believe in the nurturing of trust and innovation in order to ensure pedagogical enhancement. Drawing the evidence together with regard to the interaction between the inspiring teachers and the school management it was apparent that this third aspect of the work of the inspirational teachers related to having:

- Support from leadership and management that nurtures the teacher's talents and innovation.
- **We came across leadership that enabled risk taking** and thereby enriched the work of these teachers. This was often a form of earned autonomy. The teachers were typically individuals who appeared to have worked hard to earn the right to innovate by demonstrating their consistent effectiveness.

Our reviewers noted how the inspiring teachers typically worked for school leaders who appeared to believe in the nurturing of trust and innovation

- The exceptional teachers often benefitted from **work in a context where the school did not expect that everyone would teach the same way**.
- The best school leaders enriched the work of these teachers by providing **opportunities for them to reflect on practice with others**; they gained insights through co-reflective practice and often led professional dialogue in their schools.

In what follows, as well as describing the areas above in detail, we provide illustrations of the findings in the form of representative examples of the classroom practice observed and summaries of some of the interviews with the exceptional teachers. We also identify a series of experiences that the teachers themselves believed had built the conditions in which their inspirational teaching had been able to develop and flourish. These cover three areas:

- working with others
- co-reflective practice
- continuing professional development that is intellectually stimulating and supports development



The best school  
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Robin And The  
Sherwood  
Hoodies  
James Kent  
by Greg Heaney

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