CfBT Education Trust

To the next level: improving secondary school teaching to outstanding

Research report

Peter Daw
Carol Robinson

Providing education for public benefit worldwide

Welcome to CfBT Education Trust

CfBT Education Trust is a top 30* UK charity providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. Established over 40 years ago, CfBT Education Trust has an annual turnover exceeding £100 million and employs more than 2,000 staff worldwide. We aspire to be the world's leading provider of education services, with a particular interest in school effectiveness.

Our work involves school improvement through inspection, school workforce development, and curriculum design for the UK's Department for Education, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), local authorities and an increasing number of independent and state schools, free schools and academies. We provide services direct to learners in our schools, through projects for excluded pupils and in young offender institutions.

Internationally we have successfully implemented education programmes for governments in the Middle East, North Africa and South East Asia, and work on projects funded by donors such as the Department for International Development, the Australian Agency for International Development, the World Bank and the US Agency for International Development, in low- and middle-income countries.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in our educational research programme, Evidence for Education.

Visit www.cfbt.com for more information.

** CfBT is ranked 27 out of 3,000 charities in the UK based on income in Top 3,000 Charities 2010/11 published by Caritas Data*

Welcome to Owen Education

Owen Education is a consultancy led by Peter Dougill and Mike Raleigh. It specialises in evaluation and review in education and children's services.

Contents

About the authors

Dr Peter Daw is a former HMI and Divisional Manager at Ofsted and was a Senior Regional Director for the National Strategies.

Dr Carol Robinson is Principal Research Fellow in the Education Research Centre at the University of Brighton.

Acknowledgements

The research was led for Owen Education by Peter Daw. Carol Robinson conducted the review of UK research literature. Peter Daw conducted the interviews with university staff and made some of the visits to sample schools. Other school visits were carried out by Alan Howe and Helen Howard.

The team is very grateful to the headteachers, principals, other staff and students of the following schools which were visited in the review for their eager co-operation and openness:

Aldersley High School, Wolverhampton

Blatchington Mill School and Sixth Form College, Brighton & Hove

Oathall Community College, West Sussex

St Bede's Catholic College, Bristol

St Mary's Catholic High School, Wigan

Stoke Damerel Community College, Plymouth

The Bridge Learning Campus (secondary base), Bristol

The BRIT School for the Performing Arts & Technology, Croydon

Twynham School, Dorset

They also thank the following universities whose members of staff were interviewed for this enquiry:

Keele University (David Miller)

University of Exeter (Professor Debra Myhill)

University of Leeds (the late Professor Philip Scott)

University of Reading (Professor Andrew Goodwyn)

Thanks are also due to John Richmond, who edited the final report.

Ofsted's HMI were not interviewed during the research and interviewees' comments are entirely their perception.

Executive summary

This study complements and builds on a previous report, *To the next level: good schools becoming outstanding* (Dougill et al., 2011). It focuses on schools that either achieve and maintain high-quality teaching or succeed in rapidly improving the effectiveness of lessons.

The study is set in the changing context of school improvement, which is putting a renewed emphasis on the quality of teaching and especially subject-specific pedagogy.

A review of recent UK research covers teaching strategies which improve learning; professional development approaches which enable teachers to learn new skills and refine their practice; and factors which either enhance or impede such improvement. The review shows the importance of the active involvement of learners in their own learning. Teachers' skills of questioning and explanation, based on sound subject knowledge, are seen to be important to learners' progress. Teachers' professional development is found to be most effective when based on individual need and in context and when pursued collaboratively in schools. Coaching and mentoring are also useful when characterised by high-quality support.

Interviews were conducted with experts in university education departments to shed more light on the precise features of very effective subject pedagogy. These experts confirmed the complex interplay of skills, knowledge and personal qualities to be found in the practice of effective teachers. They especially emphasised the importance of these teachers' awareness of the needs of individual learners and of the way they develop students' conceptual understanding and skills within lessons and during longer units of work.

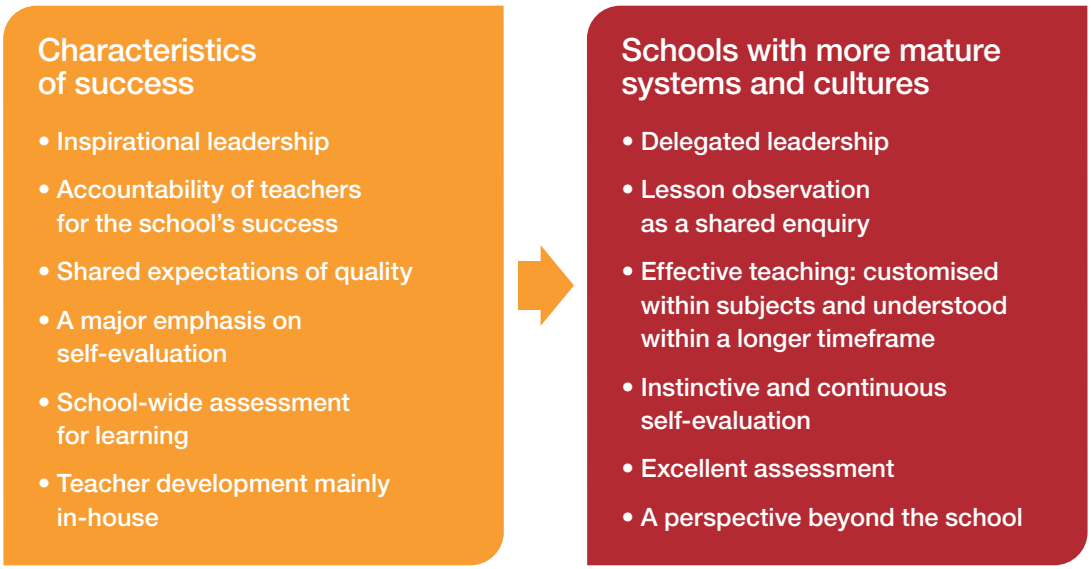
Nine secondary schools, selected for their success in improving teaching and learning, were visited for the study. Senior leaders, heads of subject departments, effective subject teachers and their students offered their views on why and how these teachers achieved their success. Sample lessons from each of the nine schools are briefly described, followed by more detailed case studies of five of the schools, tracing something of their improvement journey and philosophy.

The visits illustrate how schools with the most mature practice explore differences in pedagogy from subject to subject and advance the role of subject leaders. Lesson observation and study are a permanent part of a self-critical culture in these schools. The schools share two common characteristics: strong visionary leadership; and effective, integrated systems for regular quality review, performance management of teachers and associated continuous professional development.

The report draws together the findings from the literature, the interviews and the school visits to identify a number of key characteristics of success for improving teaching. Figure 1 summarises these key characteristics, and highlights how they are manifested in schools with more mature systems and cultures.

Such schools are those which have been performing well for some years, with established, stable senior leaders and staff at lower levels, and with mature systems for monitoring, evaluation and teacher development.

Figure 1: Key characteristics of success for improving teaching identified in schools at different stages of the improvement journey



The report makes recommendations for moving to the highest stage in teaching quality, based on the findings of this small-scale study. These recommendations focus on:

- developing subject leaders
- making time for subject teams to meet and plan
- being subject-specific about pedagogy
- establishing longer units of work as the standard currency of scrutiny
- making judicious use of student self-assessment
- seeing the school as a contributor to local networks.

1 Introduction

Changes to the educational landscape

This report appears at a time of very rapid change in the educational landscape in England. Increasing numbers (now over half) of secondary schools are moving from being maintained by local education authorities to academy status, sometimes individually and sometimes as part of a group or 'chain' of schools. Low-attaining schools are becoming academies under the control of a range of sponsors, often when they have been judged as inadequate in inspections, or have GCSE results below the designated 'floor standard' (in 2012, set at 40% of pupils gaining five or more grades A* to C, including in English and mathematics). School headteachers and their leadership teams are being encouraged to lead school improvement not only in their own schools but in others too, with school-to-school support seen as the basis for raising standards and the quality of provision. 'Teaching schools' are being expected to co-ordinate and lead this development and all school leaders are being encouraged to look for models, both in England and more widely, of 'what works' to improve schools.

Central to such improvement is the quality of teaching. This report aims to help school leaders and teachers in their efforts to increase the effectiveness of pedagogy in its impact on pupils' progress and standards.

Changes to the framework for inspection of schools

The Office for Standards in Education began to inspect schools in 1992 and since that time there have been many changes to the approach taken. Early inspections involved large teams of subject specialists who reported on each major subject individually as well as the team agreeing school-wide evaluations. In 2005 a major change took place, with inspection placing a greater reliance on school self-evaluation as a starting point, using smaller inspection teams and reducing the length of inspections, particularly in larger schools. The emphasis on pupils' progress in relation to starting points and context was given considerable salience alongside recent attainment data. Subject inspections of a survey nature, using augmented criteria specific to each subject, were separated from the whole-school inspection system and inspection reports no longer contained subject sections, as had often previously been the case.

In 2009, adaptations were made to increase the inspection time spent on first-hand evidence gathering and the follow-up monitoring inspection of a proportion of schools rated 'satisfactory' was added to the long-standing monitoring and re-inspection regime for schools judged 'inadequate'. A further change took place with the decision in 2010 that schools judged to be 'outstanding' would not be further inspected unless there was a clear decline in outcomes or complaints or concerns were raised by parents or other stakeholders.

A new framework for the inspection of schools in England (Ofsted, 2011) was introduced from January 2012 by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) which has already shifted the emphasis of inspection. 'The quality of teaching in the school' is one of only four main categories which contribute to inspectors' final judgement on a school. Evaluations of the quality of leadership in, and management of, the school, and of the achievement of pupils, are strongly interrelated with the observed quality of classroom teaching and learning and its impact on pupils' outcomes over time. Much of the time of an inspection team is spent observing lessons.

Following consultation, further changes to this recent framework have taken effect from September 2012. The notice period before inspections has been reduced and schools previously deemed 'satisfactory' will now be judged to be 'requiring improvement' and given a limited time to show such improvement. Most importantly for this study, no school in future will be able to obtain a judgement of 'outstanding' overall if the quality of teaching is not judged to be at this level.

Schools, therefore, need to look even more sharply at what constitutes 'outstanding' teaching and how to foster it. The current Ofsted criteria for 'good' teaching emphasise the learning and progress of all pupils through well-planned lessons characterised by high expectations and a positive climate for learning. The criteria for judging a school's teaching to be outstanding include the consistency of the quality experienced by pupils, the impact of teaching on the speed of progress, and the 'inspirational' strategies for engaging pupils as learners. It is timely, therefore, to study schools where there has been a sharp and sustained improvement in the quality of teaching or where a high proportion of very effective teaching has been maintained. Such schools are the focus of this report.

The case studies included in the report track the progress of the schools over a period of time. The above changes in Ofsted's inspection methodology mean that the schools have been inspected under different frameworks and in different ways over this period. Some of the schools covered in the report were inspected soon after 2005 and, being judged 'outstanding' then, have not been inspected since, so that more recent developments in their practice have not been validated through inspection but were explored through the visits described. Other case study schools have received several recent inspections of different kinds, including re-inspection and follow-up inspection after a 'satisfactory' judgement.

While there has been a broad consistency across different frameworks in the criteria for evaluating the quality of teaching, learning and progress, these have also evolved over time and the current Ofsted criteria for evaluating the quality of teaching were not in place at the time of the inspections of any of the case study schools.

2 The findings of recent UK research on teaching

This study began with a systematic review of the recent literature on improving teaching in UK secondary schools. This involved searching relevant databases including: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), British Education Index (BEI), IngentaConnect, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) and PsychINFO (database produced by the American Psychological Association) as well as the electronic sites of the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), Ofsted, The General Teaching Council for England (GTCE), Department for Education (DfE), CfBT Education Trust, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER). The majority of this research had been published during the past eight years.

Some of the studies referred to involved both primary and secondary schools; thus an assumption is made that the findings, unless otherwise stated, relate equally to the improvement of teaching within both sectors. The Ofsted publications referred to are largely based on the collation of findings from inspection, while other references are to peer-reviewed research studies. The findings were grouped under three broad areas: firstly, studies on teachers' motivation to improve; secondly, strategies to improve classroom practice; and, thirdly, effective continuing professional development.[1]

Teacher motivation

It was common for teachers, regardless of their length of service and position within the school, to be motivated to improve their teaching practice by an intrinsic desire to keep up to date with developments in their field, to do the best job they could, and to become better teachers in terms of being able to address the needs of individuals and specific groups of students. Thus, addressing students' needs was a strong motivator for teachers seeking opportunities to improve and develop their practice; teachers wanted students to achieve, and for their teaching and the learning activities they initiated to be appropriate to their students' needs (Poet, Rudd and Smith, 2010).

Strategies to improve classroom practice

Matching work to the needs of students

Schools which employed strategies to determine students' progress saw improved teaching because teachers' planning was more closely related to the needs of individual learners. Teaching improved in schools where the monitoring and tracking of students' progress and attainment had become more systematic (Menter et al., 2010). Efficient tracking of progress enabled teachers to identify common areas of weakness and to shape curriculum planning and approaches to teaching around these areas (Ofsted, 2008a).

Teaching also improved where high priority was given to formative assessment, as this supported the identification of students' needs and enabled the setting of differentiated targets for lessons (Boyle and Charles, 2010).

Setting clear expectations, objectives and learning outcomes for students

Improvements in teaching were seen where teachers, when planning lessons, set clear expectations and proposed learning outcomes, based on assessment information, for individuals and groups of students; and where students were regularly reminded of learning objectives during lessons (Ofsted, 2005). Teaching was improved through effective assessment for learning where, for example, students were made aware of what they had achieved in relation to the learning objectives and to

[1] The following paragraphs extract from the main findings of each publication as they have relevance to this report and are not quotations from the publication nor a definitive overall summary of it.

their individual targets, where they knew what they needed to do to improve further and how to do this, and where students took some responsibility for achieving their learning outcomes (Ofsted, 2008a).

Motivating and engaging all students

Teaching improved where teachers worked actively to engage all students through, for example, using resources and materials that enabled students to join in at a level of challenge appropriate to them, and through using a wide range of teaching strategies, in particular those with an emphasis on students thinking for themselves (Ofsted, 2008b; Ofsted, 2005).

Teaching also improved where teachers used teaching styles selected to suit the needs of their students. It improved in situations where students gave feedback in relation to: how they considered teaching could be improved; how they could learn more effectively; and what they liked about learning and teaching activities (Bubb and Earley, 2008). Generally, students considered that teaching improved in lessons in which they actively participated, as well as in lessons which were fun and included a significant amount of dialogue (Kennewell et al., 2007).

Applying assessment for learning strategies

Improvements in teaching were seen where teachers adopted assessment for learning strategies; in such cases, students better understood what they were learning, they were involved in setting their own learning targets and evaluating their work, and they understood whether, and how, they were making progress (Ofsted, 2008a).

Improving questioning skills

Where teachers developed their skills in asking probing questions, in targeting questions to prompt students to explain and justify their answers and to challenge students' understanding, this tended to improve teaching (Ofsted, 2008a). Research evidence also suggests that teaching improved where teachers used more open and higher-order questions (Kennewell et al., 2007).

Improving teachers' subject knowledge

Teaching improved where teachers increased their subject knowledge (Kennewell et al., 2007). Where teachers had been involved in continuing professional development designed to develop their competence in specific areas of knowledge and understanding, this was reflected in their teaching and in students' learning (Ofsted, 2006).

School strategies to develop skills, techniques and knowledge

Strong leadership and vision

Strong leadership and a clear whole-school vision of teaching, learning and assessment, where high expectations were placed on teachers, was seen as the most influential factor in enabling teachers to learn new skills, techniques and knowledge, which in turn led to improvements in teaching (Menter et al., 2010). For example, improvements in teaching were seen where effective assessment for learning strategies were implemented, driven by strong direction from senior leaders who ensured that teachers were supported effectively by relevant training, continuing coaching and well-focused advice (Ofsted, 2008a).

Teaching also improved where schools emphasised high-quality teaching and learning and where they worked to develop leadership skills at all levels: for example, where teachers were trained in how to conduct lesson observations and to give incisive, effective feedback (Ofsted, 2010a).

Effective continuing professional development

The most effective forms of staff development were those that were personalised to suit the needs of individuals, rather than those that were government driven (Bubb, Earley and Hempel-Jorgensen, 2008; Bubb and Earley, 2008).

Evidence in the literature suggests that features of effective continuing professional development (CPD) valued by teachers include: consultations with students; classroom-based work; teachers working together to carry out research, development and innovation into different aspects of their practice; and teachers involved in active forms of learning with a clear link to classroom teaching and learning (Poet, Rudd and Smith, 2010). Teachers were found to value CPD which involved experimenting with classroom practices and adapting approaches in the light of feedback from students and peers and of self-evaluation (Pedder, Storey and Dareen Opfer, 2008). Teachers also valued having time to reflect on their own practice, having performance management targets relating both to their individual development needs and to the school's aims, and having positive relationships with their line manager and other colleagues in the school (Poet, Rudd and Smith, 2010).

Schools which had successfully improved teaching had integrated systems so that staff development linked naturally with performance management. The need for clearly defined targets and goals was paramount (Kennewell et al., 2007). Teachers reported that the most helpful aspect of performance management was the process of setting and working towards objectives (Poet, Rudd and Smith, 2010). In an extensive study, teachers were found to be positive about how performance management processes helped to improve their teaching practice by identifying areas where they needed support (Poet, Rudd and Kelly, 2010).

Sustained site-based collaborative CPD was found to support teachers in experimenting with, evaluating and embedding new approaches proven to be effective in their school (Menter et al., 2010). CPD that takes place over at least one, and usually two or three, terms allows teachers time to embed new practices in their classroom and for reflection, observation and feedback (Curee, 2008).

Activities to improve teaching

A variety of activities were found to improve teaching, including: self-reflection; engaging with subject or specialist associations; participating in external courses, study weeks and residential events; collaborative learning with colleagues, working with Advanced Skills Teachers, external partnerships and networks; peer teaching; being assigned as a mentor/coach, or being mentored/coached; being observed and receiving feedback or observing and giving feedback on lessons; receiving feedback from students; conducting a research project; working towards performance management objectives; and looking for information and advice online, for example through consulting forums and websites related to teaching (Poet, Rudd and Kelly, 2010; Kennewell et al., 2007; (Menter et al., 2010).

Reflecting on practice and engaging in school-based research

Teachers who conducted research into their own practice, either individually or collaboratively with others, were seen to improve their teaching (Menter et al., 2010). The process of engaging in reflective activities around teaching and students' learning led teachers to develop a deeper understanding of their professional practice and to identify areas for improvement (Attard and Armour, 2006; Poet, Rudd and Smith, 2010).

Engaging in external courses or study

External courses, whether officially accredited or not, were found to impact positively on teachers' practice, mainly through increasing their subject knowledge and improving their professional competence and confidence (Davies and Preston, 2002).

Working with others

Working with experts

When working with experts or specialists, teachers gained new knowledge, skills and understanding about their subject, as well as learning new teaching techniques and strategies which brought about changes in their teaching practices (National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics, 2010).

Team teaching and lesson observations

Team-teaching and peer observations both within a teacher's own school and with colleagues in other schools were found to be effective modes of professional development. Teachers learnt a great deal from seeing different teaching strategies in practice (Bubb and Earley, 2008).

Teachers also reported benefits when lesson observations were used as a platform for discussing specific aspects of learning and teaching, and where the feedback was detailed, constructive and specific (Poet, Rudd and Smith, 2010).

Coaching and mentoring

One-to-one coaching of individual teachers and subject leaders was found to lead to improvements in teaching, providing the support was of a high quality (Ofsted, 2010b); coaching was found to be most effective where teachers had clearly identified needs and were paired with colleagues with expertise in the area (Ofsted, 2006).

Where schools were involved in a partnership with a provider of initial teacher training, this was of benefit in terms of staff development, as teachers learned useful mentoring skills and improved their teaching by reflecting on their practice with trainees (Ofsted, 2006; Lord, Atkinson and Mitchell, 2008).

Summary

- Teachers' motivation to improve is commonly driven by an intrinsic desire to keep up to date and do the best job they can.
- Systematic monitoring and tracking of students' progress can lead to improvements in teaching.
- Teaching can also improve in classrooms where teachers clearly communicate their expectations and where students work towards well-understood learning outcomes.
- Teaching and learning improve when lessons are active, full of dialogue and enjoyable.
- Teaching is more effective when teachers give clear explanations and know how to ask open questions which lead students' enquiries further. Their classroom skill is based on a sure foundation of knowledge of their subject.
- Strong leadership and a clear whole-school vision of teaching, learning and assessment can enable teachers to learn new skills, techniques and knowledge.
- The most effective professional development is linked to a school's or a teacher's needs, is conducted in-house, and takes the form of collaborative enquiry. However, some carefully planned connections beyond the school are useful to a school's development and self-awareness.
- Team-teaching, lesson observations and the use of coaches and mentors play a part in individual professional development and in the growth of a confident self-critical culture.

3 The view from teacher educators in universities

Following the research review, a further insight into the nature of very effective teaching and how it is currently fostered through initial and subsequent training was sought from experts in teacher education.

Interviews were held with four senior academics responsible for teacher education in universities. Of the four interviewees, three were heads of education departments or institutions, and so had a perspective across the curriculum and phases, while the fourth had, in the recent past, held overall responsibility for postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) courses across all secondary subjects in his university. Two of the interviewees were English specialists; one each was a specialist in mathematics and science.

Discussion focused primarily on secondary pedagogy, in anticipation of the school visits to follow. The sessions were informal and the views expressed were those of the individual academics, drawing on their extensive experience.

Recognising outstanding subject teaching

The four interviewees agreed that by the end of the PGCE training year most trainee teachers do not have a systematic grasp of what outstanding teaching looks like in their subject and how to describe or define it. Most course assessment systems make reference to the generic criteria used by Ofsted to grade teaching as outstanding in whole-school inspections, but little use is yet made in training of the more detailed subject-specific criteria used in the subject-survey inspections by HMI and additional inspectors.

There was agreement that trainees' sense of outstanding or very effective subject teaching derived from observations they had made of teachers and mentors in their placement school. These staff inevitably varied in their effectiveness, despite the quality assurance systems operated by the university within their partnership. It also stemmed from contact with skilled tutors on their courses, as well as from discussions of innovative and interesting teaching seen in schools, guided by tutors within training sessions.

The interviewees tended to feel that the concept 'outstanding', when applied to teaching, was often too much focused on individual lessons and that the criteria used were limiting if so confined. Outstanding teaching and learning were felt to be more properly evaluated over longer periods of contact than single lessons and needed to include clear evidence of progress by students. This progress was seen to result from teaching, assessment and intervention based on good relationships between teacher and taught. Such teaching was felt to produce genuine subject interest and enthusiasm as well as good subject knowledge in students, while some individual 'outstanding' lessons tend to produce a more short-lived enthusiasm for the teacher rather than the subject.

Several of the interviewees lead or teach on masters-level courses in teaching, with the course members often being recruited in their initial training year and continuing as part-time attendees in their early years of teaching. Predictably, this cohort of teachers was felt to be among the most reflective and questioning; these masters students were felt to develop a better notion of what were the characteristics of highly effective teaching. However, one interviewee commented that the notions of effectiveness held by such young teachers tended to be at a relatively generic level

(typically rooted in assessment for learning, targeted intervention and the use of tracking to secure 'sub-levels' of progress) and these teachers are not imbued with a concern for the core concepts of a particular subject discipline and how these concepts are gradually mastered and best promoted.

Overall, there was a shared view from interviewees that the sophisticated craft of subject teaching was being viewed by schools, teachers and Ofsted in a rather reductive way, and that there was still considerable scope for more research and discussion as to the nature of very effective or outstanding teaching in all curriculum subjects.

Teachers' motivation and the focus and impact of CPD

In discussing the motivation of teachers to develop their knowledge and practice, particularly by attending the longer award-bearing courses which each of these universities offered, the interviewees agreed with the findings of the literature review that teachers' reasons for attending these courses were overwhelmingly intrinsic. They were based on a desire to update or extend their knowledge of pedagogy, to share ideas with others (particularly from outside their own school) on how to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning, and often to extend the range of their expertise. Examples were given of teachers with engineering or social science backgrounds retraining in mathematics, and biologists taking courses in teaching physics.

In the relatively rare cases cited of teachers being sent on such longer courses by a school or local authority as a result of judgements made in their performance management or of the need for a school to improve, attendance and outcomes were usually poor. Hardly any examples of successful teacher development stemming from teachers sent on courses as a result of poor personal or school performance were cited.

One interviewee cogently articulated the difficulty of gaining funding or recognition for what he felt would be potentially the most useful and popular form of CPD that a university could offer secondary school subject teachers, but which scarcely exists at present. This would be a course where the university subject disciplines would offer input on recent developments and scholarship in the subject and where teachers would then engage in facilitated discussion as to what were the implications and potential uses for students, in the upper secondary years in particular, of these cutting-edge ideas. Such an approach would encourage teachers to see themselves as part of the intellectual community of their subject, while having their pedagogical expertise recognised and respected.

Interviewees shared useful examples of both trainee and serving teachers who have improved significantly in their subject teaching, whether during the PGCE training year, in the course of a masters degree or other certificated course of CPD, or over a much longer period. The best summary of the transformations so described mirrors in many ways the improvement journey of many schools: the change from locating problems in learning and standards in the students to locating them as challenges for teachers to overcome by exploring different methods, materials and approaches. Pedagogy, in other words, becomes an interestingly contested area founded on the essential belief that improvements can be made and that students *can* succeed. They all saw this change as a generic transformation, occurring across all subjects, and it was identified by interviewees as linked to the ability to reflect on practice, a willingness to innovate and experiment, and to regard pedagogy as open to change and debate.

Interviewees identified a number of crucial ingredients or prerequisites for such significant improvement over time, and they stressed that the teachers making such progress were by no means always those who seem at first sight to be the most natural, confident practitioners. The development of one English teacher over a number of years was described by an interviewee in terms typical of descriptions of several teachers given by others:

"She started as a teacher of very tightly planned and organised lessons where she was usually at the centre and maintained tight control of the learning, but moved, by degrees, to become an exceptionally good orchestrator of learning. She made small, targeted interventions (mostly unnoticed by learners) to keep students on task, to challenge, support, judiciously praise and cajole – all the time fluently anticipating the learning needs of different groups and individuals but placing attention and responsibility more and more on the learners rather than herself. She was able to take greater risks and, experiencing success, earned the trust of students, parents and colleagues so there was a virtuous cycle of improvement." [Reconstructed from notes, not verbatim quotation.]

In other examples, such as in science, it was stressed that a move to more interactive teaching, where students were encouraged to articulate their emerging understanding, and away from a mere 'telling, showing and practising' routine, was a *sine qua non* for such development in teachers; they had to learn to listen closely to students' voices and ideas.

The place of subject knowledge

The extent to which improvement of teaching was related to increasing subject knowledge was debated at length by the interviewees. There was a clear view that increased experience and knowledge of *what constituted progress in students*, as they grasped concepts or learned skills in a particular subject, was crucial to this development, since the interventions, assessments and advice to students thereby became sharper. Furthermore, one interviewee emphasised that a teacher needed to be concerned simultaneously with the subject content of the lesson, the students as individual learners and the challenge of how to put across the material in the best way for those individuals. The more fluent their own subject knowledge and the better their knowledge of the class, the more these became part of teachers' background awareness, releasing their attention to concentrate on pedagogy and pupils' progress. For this reason, good subject knowledge was seen as a necessary (though not a sufficient) condition for good or outstanding teaching.

In all core subjects, but particularly in mathematics and science, interviewees stressed the importance of detecting and understanding students' misconceptions. Many scientific concepts or mathematical notions (such as negative numbers or atomic structure) are counter-intuitive; teachers need to provide space for misconceptions or partially grasped concepts to be demonstrated and to notice them when they surface. The deeper the teacher's knowledge of the subject and the students, the more space there is to attend to small indicators of learning or misunderstanding.

The question of whether there are subject-specific features in effective or outstanding lessons was considered by all four interviewees. All felt that in many respects the main features distinguishing good teaching and learning were essentially generic and could be identified by an observer who was not a subject specialist. The evaluation of a particular lesson (or an episode within one) was essentially concerned with its purpose and how far it fulfilled this purpose for the learners. Outstanding teaching was seen by interviewees to relate to the orchestration of learning by often small and barely detectable interventions, based on a clear understanding and detection of pupils' progress in subject-specific concepts, skills and knowledge.

Such orchestration of learning was felt by interviewees to occur in all subjects but, as one interviewee put it, 'the tune' being played is often subtly different according to the subject. The skills needed to produce it, as well as those needed to detect it, were seen to have somewhat distinct features in each subject. Another interviewee felt that it is not so much the content complexity itself that is hard for a non-specialist to master, but the answers to the questions:

- Why is this topic or activity being done? (relating to knowledge of the subject's core concepts) and
- Why is it being done now? (relating to knowing the progression of learning in that subject).

The interviewees were therefore united in feeling that good subject knowledge was a necessary basis for effective subject teaching, but they felt that the way it is often conceived in initial teacher training, and especially in the inspection and regulatory regime used by Ofsted and the former Training and Development Agency, is faulty. It is too often seen as a checklist of static knowledge which can be simply 'audited', boosted or augmented where needed and, by the end of the training year, be essentially in place to support teaching. This approach was felt by this group of interviewees to suggest a bogus completeness in anyone's knowledge of a subject and to underestimate the task almost all trainees have in developing confidence in the particular knowledge needed for teaching.

A first degree, masters and PhD in English literature, as one interviewee explained, will not provide most prospective secondary teachers with the grasp of spelling patterns and regularities, the sensitivity to the distinctions between spoken and written English or the explicit knowledge of the link between grammar and punctuation that are so useful to the secondary English teacher. The audits will also not cover those crucial aspects of subject *pedagogical* knowledge which were felt by all those interviewed to be the necessary foundation for the orchestration of effective learning, involving knowing how to sequence teaching and to select resources and activities to match and then extend the developing concepts and knowledge of different students. These forms of subject knowledge were seen to need development in almost all prospective teachers but are not captured well by audits in the way that gaps in a teacher's knowledge of Jacobean drama or the laws of thermodynamics might be.

Examples of improvements in the quality of teaching across a subject department offered by the four interviewees revealed a number of common features. Firstly, they showed that it is quite possible to see such improvements in a subject without there being a parallel improvement in the rest of the school. It was felt often to be subject leaders and their teams, rather than senior leadership teams, who were responsible for the classroom excellence that really makes a difference to students' lives. They felt that sometimes only a few departments in 'outstanding' schools demonstrated the flair and excellence in the classroom that really inspires students. There was a clear sense from the interviews that what may be needed to achieve a step-change in standards is far more concentration in CPD on subject leadership and effective subject pedagogy.

In the examples offered by interviewees of highly effective subject leadership impacting strongly on outcomes for students, a common feature was the ability to provide a clear structure within which all staff worked, which guaranteed progression for students but which still valued teacher autonomy and choice. This approach devolved responsibility for course planning as widely (and as early in the teachers' careers) as possible, while maintaining effective quality assurance. Another common feature was the creation of a culture of reflection, self- and peer-evaluation, and constant questioning as to whether there were not better approaches, resources or tasks than those currently in use.

Often this development was seen by the interviewees to be linked to higher degree study and to the exchange of ideas with others, both within and across subject disciplines and within and between schools.

In their final comments on examples of whole-school transformations that had dramatically improved outcomes for students and had done so primarily by addressing the quality of teaching and learning, interviewees were clear that strategic vision and a 'can-do' attitude, believing in the capacity of students from any background to achieve success, were key factors. These came from the inspirational leadership of the headteacher, other senior leaders and sometimes key governors. They were translated into actions through the rigorous use of performance data, particularly on students' rates of progress, setting clear targets for staff and students and ensuring accountability for outcomes on the part of all concerned. These procedures were sometimes accompanied by significant staff change as expectations were raised and some staff chose to leave or were strongly encouraged or forced to do so, while new recruits were chosen for their willingness to share the increased aspirations.

Always crucial, in the view of interviewees, was the existence of subject leaders and gifted teachers (sometimes supported by local authority or other external consultants) who were able to creatively translate the school-wide aspirations and targets into subject-specific pedagogy and assessment that produced the desired progress. Interviewees suggested that this involved agreement as to outcomes, the stages of students' subject progress sought and the signs by which these would be recognised. It also involved the maximum autonomy for experienced teachers to choose classroom approaches and resources, provided they were compatible with external requirements and school or departmental policies.

Summary

The senior academics interviewed believed that:

- Teachers' motivation to improve their practice is intrinsic, though school expectations and support are important enablers.
- Effective teachers master crucial generic skills, such as framing clear objectives, encouraging student engagement and activity, open questioning and lucid explanation.
- Teaching which demonstrates the most developed artistry involves a deep understanding of individual students' progress in subject-specific terms too, which rests on good subject knowledge and an understanding of which interventions and methods best promote such progress.
- Knowledge of subject, of students and of pedagogy are interdependent and often largely tacit, allowing full concentration on monitoring and supporting each student's progress during lessons.
- The creation of a culture of reflection, self- and peer-evaluation, and a constant search for better approaches and teaching methods is a characteristic of outstanding subject leadership.
- Whole-school transformations are brought about primarily by addressing the quality of teaching and learning in a rigorous way across the institution, by setting clear targets for staff and students, and by ensuring accountability for outcomes on the part of all concerned.

These views correlate closely with the outcomes of the literature review in identifying key features involved in the craft of teaching and how to improve and excel in it. The intrinsic motivation of teachers to improve, the core of generic classroom skills and the strong role of assessment and self-evaluation are common features, as is the wider whole-school culture. However, the particular salience of subject and subject-specific pedagogical knowledge emerges more strongly from these discussions than from the literature review. So too does the importance of the 'artistry' involved in attending to knowledge of the subject, to knowledge of their pupils and to expectations of progress in a subject simultaneously and seamlessly.

4 The view from the schools

Following the literature survey and the discussions with teacher educators, visits were made to nine schools between June and October 2011, selected on the basis of either:

- the significant improvements they had made to the quality of teaching (confirmed by external inspection and/or improved outcomes) or
- the consistency shown over time in their provision, including strong praise from inspectors for the way such quality was maintained through leadership, CPD and quality-assurance processes.

An original list of 30 schools was derived from recommendations, data trawls and through examining Ofsted reports. Twelve schools were selected for visits and nine were subsequently chosen as examples useful for wider dissemination. Here we present the findings from these nine visits with regard to highly effective or outstanding teaching. (For a full list of the schools, see the Acknowledgements on page 2 of this report.)

The programme for each visit comprised lesson observation of teachers deemed very effective, interviews with these teachers, with senior staff and subject leaders, and discussions with students to explore the quality of learning as they experienced it. The interview and discussion schedules were devised to test the evolving consensus from research and teacher educators as to the most effective approaches to developing teaching and learning, the motivation of teachers and the particular importance of subject pedagogy.

The characteristics of the lessons described in this section correspond well with the findings of research and with the views of teacher educators on the qualities of outstanding teaching, as presented in the previous two sections. However, it is important to note that while some of these lessons had variety, pace and coherence, and produced the student progress that might earn them the 'outstanding' label, others were more dependent on longer-term qualities: the establishment of effective relationships, the steady building of knowledge and confidence over a unit of work or a whole course, and the gradual acquisition of the specialist vocabulary, methods, knowledge and skills of a subject discipline.

As the new Ofsted framework acknowledges, the real effectiveness of teaching is unlikely to be best judged by taking single snapshots of individual lessons (as has often been the practice of both external reviewers and school leaders) but needs to be looked at in a more holistic and longitudinal way. The descriptions of individual lessons given here exemplify broader characteristics of effective teaching.

This chapter presents the findings from the visits to the schools, divided into characteristics of the most effective teaching observed on the visits, followed by five detailed case studies. Student views are also presented, followed by a summary of the key traits of success, as identified from the school visits.

4.1 Observed characteristics of the most effective teaching

Five of the most effective characteristics were identified during lesson observations:

- Lessons respond to the direction suggested by learner reactions, with teachers making decisions in response to them while maintaining the focus on learning outcomes.
- Teachers use their subject expertise to enthuse students and give them access to specialist language and ways of thinking and working which typify the subject concerned.
- There is an appropriate balance between the challenge to work independently, the use of focused collaboration in pairs and groups and direct input from the teacher.
- Teachers enjoy the company of young people, know them well as individual learners and are thus able to make the learning feel relevant to their lives and concerns.
- Lessons have a clear direction and coherence for learners, focused on a shared objective, moving through a variety of well-planned and carefully resourced activities, taken at appropriate pace to maintain energy and involvement but also to allow for reflection.

Each of the characteristics are presented in more detail below and exemplified by reference to particular lessons, using the lesson observation notes taken by reviewers who observed the teaching.

Lessons respond to the direction suggested by learner reactions, with teachers making decisions in response to them while maintaining the focus on learning outcomes.

Responsiveness to learners was a crucial feature of both the A-level dance and BTec Theatre Studies teaching seen at **The BRIT School**. Here expert practitioners directed practical activities with professional rigour and the highest expectations, using the language and approaches of the performance arts, but they were flexible in allowing the individual or group performances or improvisations to be taken where the students' ideas or needs led. This allowed each student to deepen his or her understanding of the arts and to develop his or her already burgeoning skills. However, this negotiated learning was held within the discipline of knowing that there was to be a final performance or product which was non-negotiable and the quality of which could not be compromised.

This same sense of purposeful coaching characterised a Year 8 boys' physical education (PE) lesson observed at **Blatchington Mill**. There was the same mutually respectful atmosphere in the lesson, with the subject expertise of the teacher subtly adding to the skill level of students, but with the students also taking responsibility for supporting and evaluating each other as peer coaches and with the same drive to improve skill levels against well-understood criteria.

A clear example of the teacher's willingness to adjust her whole plan in the light of the wider class response was seen in a Year 9 English lesson at **The Bridge**. The lesson involved developing character and viewpoint in first-person narrative writing and, after a fascinating video clip of a snake taking a deer as prey, and the teacher modelling skilfully through interactive discussion how to narrate the experience from one viewpoint, students were asked to try in pairs to plan and write a short paragraph from the viewpoint of deer or snake. Despite the carefully arranged pairings it soon became apparent that they were not progressing well with this task and the teacher grasped that collaboration over planning was valuable but the writing of text needed to be done individually. The instruction was amended unobtrusively and after discussing the content and vocabulary in their

pairs each individual wrote his or her own piece in silence. Progress was then rapid and by the end of the lesson some excellent first drafts had been produced.

Teachers use their subject expertise to enthuse students and give them access to specialist language and ways of thinking and working which typify the subject concerned.

In a Year 7 music lesson at **Oathall**, a mixed-ability class was able to grasp key concepts of rhythm, tempo, pitch, melody and note value thanks to a highly skilled music teacher who orchestrated a series of clapping exercises, who used percussion in ensemble form and who encouraged critical listening to what had been produced. Throughout the observed lesson the students appeared to have enormous fun, developed confidence with the percussion instruments and seemed well motivated to learn the specialist terminology and concepts because of their engagement in making effective music themselves.

In a Year 12 AS-level psychology lesson at **Twynham**, the teacher skilfully modelled the discourse of the subject and expertly demonstrated the concept and value of peer review in a scientific discipline by using five separate newspaper accounts of a story, which he interspersed with humour and anecdote to make key points. Only at the end of the lesson did he reveal to the students the purpose of what they had been doing, but the sense of being let into the world and thinking of a scientist, when the students did realise this, was palpable.

There is an appropriate balance between the challenge to work independently, the use of focused collaboration in pairs and groups and direct input from the teacher.

This is a commonly noted criterion for effective teaching but the point here is that the 'appropriate balance' can lead to widely different lesson structures depending on the topic or objective of the lesson, the prior attainment of the class, and how learners' needs and responses are gauged by an expert teacher. Not all of the best lessons observed had a predictable shape. There were outliers that could be seen as risky or at least untypical pedagogy as teachers pushed to maximise students' learning.

At one end of a spectrum, in a high-achieving Year 10 GCSE English lesson at **St Bede's** on *Romeo and Juliet*, the teacher (aided by a trainee) had devised a lesson almost entirely built around group collaborative exploration of the relationships between key pairs of characters in the play. Groups were carefully chosen (as indicated by the planning) and moved from task to task, adding to the ideas recorded by previous groups, disagreeing and citing counter evidence to back up their views, with the teacher staying outside the room for much of this time to allow the students maximum responsibility for their learning. By the end of the lesson all groups had discussed most of the central characters in the play and teased out the intricacies of the relationships and tensions between them. In the last five minutes of the lesson the teacher led a plenary that used the activated knowledge of the class but introduced a new concept, the tragic flaw, which was to be explored in subsequent lessons on Shakespeare. The class discussed as a whole the flaws in the characters in *Romeo and Juliet*; so they did not simply repeat their earlier discussion but used their activated knowledge in tackling a new topic, with sophisticated points being made by many students. The balance of input and independence brought about the rapid progress the students made.

Teaching at the opposite end of the spectrum was seen in a Year 7 science lesson at **Aldersley** on the effects of light. This involved a class with a wide range of prior attainment in the subject when they were in Year 6, including significant numbers of students with special educational needs or with English as an additional language. An initial card-sort exercise, matching definitions to terms about light, was done in pairs and threes, to review Key Stage 2 and earlier Year 7 work. This was followed by a brief teacher-led plenary. Each student was then given an independent writing task (differentiated for difficulty according to their prior attainment level, as the teacher and plan made clear) – an old Key Stage 3 National Curriculum assessment question in each case – which required a short paragraph answer. They wrote in silence and in a set time. Example scripts were then read by the whole class, using a visualiser, alongside the criteria for level 4 and level 5 answers. Discussion – in pairs and then in the whole class – evaluated the pieces and suggested improvements. This was followed by students working in small groups on a practical investigation of angles of incidence and reflection. The teacher circulated the class supporting any groups who were struggling, as they noted their calculations and gave explanations for what they noticed. Each group knew it needed to have a table of results, as the students were told they would write up the investigation for homework ready for the next lesson. The subtle alternation of challenge and support, independent, pair and group work, was seamlessly managed, as was the provision for differentiation, which was explicitly documented in the detailed planning.

In both of these examples a great deal of planning had gone into producing a free-flowing experience for learners. The students' age and attainment range and the differences in subject matter led these teachers to make different decisions about the best balance of student activity, but both lessons were judged to maximise learning.

Teachers enjoy the company of young people, know them well as individual learners and are thus able to make the learning feel relevant to their lives and concerns.

These qualities were evident in both the Year 9 ICT lesson and the Year 12 AS-level chemistry lesson seen at **Stoke Damerel**. In both, a relaxed, good-humoured but purposeful relationship between teacher and taught was observed. Furthermore an expert use of assessment for learning was seen, including regular checking for understanding, dialogue, and targeted questioning based on knowledge of past learning. This led to ongoing modification of the teacher's guidance, and a clear communication of the reason why a particular piece of knowledge or skill – whether the use of an ICT application or the structure of polymers – matters in the world. The students expressed this as 'bringing the learning to our level'. The observer summed up the effectiveness of these lessons as related to 'confidence, control and connection'.

Lessons have a clear direction and coherence for learners, focused on a shared objective, moving through a variety of well-planned and carefully resourced activities, taken at appropriate pace to maintain energy and involvement but also to allow for reflection.

A Year 10 GCSE Spanish lesson at **St Mary's, Wigan**, conducted mainly in the target language, to students of quite wide-ranging attainment levels, took the topic of holidays and was directed towards how to perform well in the forthcoming oral controlled assessment. The starter whole-class activity involved recall of key vocabulary and grammar (to do with time phrases) for the forthcoming task, with a beanbag thrown to the selected student to whom each quick-fire question was directed. The teacher was able to target the questions to the linguistic competence of each student (confirmed by the assessment information provided for the observer). A card-matching exercise completed in

pairs followed, with well-prepared short cameos of different holidays taken by people of different nationalities which needed to be matched to the characters on the cards. This activated further relevant vocabulary and structures. Then a rapid reading comprehension activity involved students moving around the room to where texts were displayed to find the answers to questions posed. Further movement came with half of the class holding large word cards needed to complete a cloze[2] exercise on a passage about holidays displayed on the whiteboard. The other half of the class had to reach consensus as to the sequencing of these words to complete the passage. This was taken far more slowly, with reflection and discussion led by the teacher as to how choices were justified in terms of the meaning of the passage. Some reminders followed about preparation for the controlled assessment which the students would be undertaking as homework. The lesson then turned to how to evaluate an oral performance. Assessment criteria were shared and the class listened to samples of taped past orals. These were assessed by the students in groups and then in a plenary session.

4.2 Five case studies from schools

This section illustrates in more detail the way in which five of the schools visited have managed the improvement of teaching and learning. All of the schools visited had an individual story to tell but for reasons of space five were chosen as representing, between them, a range of contexts and approaches to which other schools might reasonably compare their practice.

The first three case studies show the different approaches taken by a stable senior team and an established leader (in each case a National Leader of Education (NLE)) over some years in schools deemed 'outstanding' for overall effectiveness under the 2005 inspection framework. The other two case studies show schools which have recently been in categories of concern and/or below the 'floor target' for the proportion of pupils attaining 5+ GCSE grades of A*-C including English and mathematics (used to select schools for the National Challenge programme, which ran from March 2009 to March 2011), but where determined new leadership and structures have led to very rapid improvement. Each of the five case studies ends with an indication of where the leaders of that school wish to take the school's improvement journey next. The case studies draw on the observations and interviews carried out during the visits. In each case indications of the inspection outcomes achieved by the schools are given. However, these should be read in the context of the changes to the inspection system and frameworks over time noted in the introduction to the report. The observations in the commentaries below reflected practice and conditions at the times of the visits. Personnel, standards and activities may now be different compared with what was encountered at the time of the visits.

[2] A 'cloze' test is a test consisting of a portion of text with certain words removed where the participants are asked to replace the missing words.

Case Study 1

Twynham School, Christchurch, Dorset

Mixed comprehensive (now an academy): age range 11–18: number on roll 1,250

Overview

This comprehensive upper school has built up a formidable reputation as a successful school under its current principal, who has been at the school for some years and has also been engaged in outreach work to support other schools as a National Leader of Education, a National Challenge Adviser and a School Improvement Partner. He works closely with the school's local authority, which has a strong record of school improvement. He considers that there are two really significant elements to the journey the school has taken to 'outstanding', (achieved in 2006, with 'good' teaching and learning) and in securing an increased proportion of high-quality lessons since then:

1. *Processes* that ensure high-quality teaching and learning, such as: careful appointments; induction; use of advanced skills teachers and lead teachers to support development work; a strong tradition of lesson observations as part of faculty reviews.

2. Positive and productive *relationships*: between students; between students and teachers; and between teachers. The principal sees relationships as 'how you do things' and 'how all people know they are valued'.

The principal explained that the school is 'good at organising things' so that teachers are freed up to teach and students to learn. A decision was taken a few years ago to create an 'operational management team' which deals with all the logistics, led by a vice principal. This allows the rest of the leadership team (the senior leadership team and an 'extended leadership team', made up of faculty heads) to 'concentrate on teaching and learning and debate what's important'.

The faculty review process is seen by the principal, and confirmed by the observations, as a lynchpin. The process involves an interview with the faculty head which looks at data and lesson observation feedback, followed by paired observations involving all the faculty's staff and the senior leadership team, which generates good dialogue about what works and why. The lesson observation schedule focuses on learning first: 'If you don't get a 1 for learning you don't get a 1 overall.' The review process has a three-year cycle, but this has recently been amended to allow for additional reviews as needed (for example, the transfer of GCSE design and technology from a core to an options subject led to a review to determine how best to ensure that its teaching stayed vigorous and challenging).

The visit confirmed that the school has a team of insightful and confident middle leaders which has emerged as a result of the dialogue about teaching and learning. This regularly takes place in extended leadership meetings and in the wider 'leadership development group', which includes all middle leaders. The purpose of these leadership groups is to enable all teachers to improve classroom practice. Performance management requires every teacher to have a teaching and learning target that is aligned to the whole-school focus for the year, personalised to his or her own context both in terms of subject and personal improvement needs. CPD over the past five years has been led by a vice-principal with responsibility for teaching and learning, who takes an overview of both whole-school CPD and of the needs of each teacher.

Case Study 1

The key ingredients of success

The principal considers that, as well as the clear systems and good relationships the school has established, the real key to success has been in tackling weaknesses in teachers and in recruiting the right staff. Focused interventions for teachers needing to improve from satisfactory have involved the extensive use of advanced skills teachers and lead teachers to observe and model effective practice. All heads of department are charged with leading teaching and learning in their teams in this way.

A rigorous appointment process has ensured that staff joining the school are likely to succeed and perform well. Applicants are always seen teaching on interview, feedback is sought from students and taken seriously, and the interview emphasises the priority of teaching and learning in the school's concerns. There is said by the principal to be 'a Twynham teacher/person – someone who shows passion that links with our passions'. Recruiting such people is regarded as fundamental to the continued success of the school.

Outside influences

The school has appreciated the good support from local authority consultants, and has felt able to control the agenda to ensure that the support fits its needs. Twynham supports other schools in a loose federation, and recognises that it learns as much from giving support as others learn from it. The principal stresses that he has learned much about other ways of achieving excellence from his role as a local authority School Improvement Partner and a National Challenge Adviser. In the introduction to the school's development plan, he writes:

"My work with a range of other schools has taught me one vitally important thing – that observing one another teach, in pairs, and entering into a real, professional dialogue about effective teaching and learning is the most powerful way to share good practice."

The visit found that the school accesses high-quality thinking and research and regularly debates research papers, so that there is a strong sense of a learning community at work, in touch with the best recent writing about school improvement. Papers are discussed in the leadership forums and passed on for discussion by departments so that all teachers are aware of recent ideas.

Staff attend relevant external CPD provided that it meets identified personal and departmental needs. Internal and external CPD are carefully evaluated and followed up in subject teams. Teachers say they feel accountable for the investment made in them. Crucially, the monitoring and evaluation of innovation is seen initially as the responsibility of department leaders, though these people are in turn accountable, through the review systems, for impact of innovation on outcomes for students.

Where next?

The principal aims to improve teaching further by rebalancing classroom practice so that preparation for examinations, and the teaching that this requires, is replaced by deeper learning first. His vision of and views about teaching and learning are well known by the staff and were quoted by them in discussions during the visit. Deepening learning and providing challenge are seen as the next stages of development. The 2011-2014 development plan has 'meaningful learning' at its heart. All other actions in the plan spring from that.

Case Study 1

There is currently a whole-school focus on 'What makes outstanding learning and how do we achieve this?' In the 2011-12 academic year a fresh approach to teaching in Year 7 was implemented. Action research is being led by the social science team, who will then coach others in transferable strategies and resources. In the future the action research will be customised to other subjects. This matches the school's whole approach to CPD, which requires departments *first* to take generic approaches to teaching and learning and *then* apply them to each curriculum subject.

Case Study 2

St Mary's Catholic High School, Wigan

Mixed comprehensive: age range 11–18: number on roll 1,600.

Overview

This school has benefited from a link through the Greater Manchester Challenge with Altrincham Grammar School for Girls; several staff at St Mary's have been trained as facilitators of improvement by staff at Altrincham. In turn, St Mary's is now a National Support School and the headteacher is a National Leader of Education. In this capacity the headteacher has supported a challenging school in Manchester (especially by coaching and mentoring its senior leadership team while the SLT from St Mary's mentored the school's middle managers) and a 'coasting' school in another town; he and his colleagues report having learned much from both experiences.

The main recent impetus to improve teaching at St Mary's came from an Ofsted inspection in February 2009 when the school was awarded a grade 2 (good) for teaching and learning while the whole school judgement was 'outstanding'. However, in terms of vision, the starting point came in 2007, when the then headteacher developed the school's 'learning vision'. This is linked to its faith dimension, and involving 'learning about myself', 'learning about others', 'learning with others and on my own', and 'applying my knowledge' – which are still represented on all lesson plans.

The Ofsted judgement was felt by the school to be correct; there was a sense that, as teaching and learning was the core purpose of a school, it was essential to be outstanding in this area too. Prior to the inspection the senior leadership team had conducted a programme of lesson observations, linked both to departmental development and to the performance management of individual teachers. These observations were confirmed by the subsequent Ofsted inspection. However, the whole process was top down; subject leaders and classroom teachers report that they felt somewhat alienated from the process – they felt 'done to', even when judgements were positive. The response of the school to the Ofsted judgement, as observed on the review visit and summarised below, has been impressive. It has revolutionised teaching and released the energy of the institution.

The main elements of the school's response to the inspection have been:

- CPD for the whole staff (including teaching assistants) on the characteristics of outstanding teaching and learning, provided by a respected consultant and trainer, with a particular focus on differentiation;
- the amendment of the lesson observation form to reflect these characteristics, with a clear distinction between 'differentiation to provide support' and 'differentiation to provide challenge', recognising that both are important and linking differentiation to assessment for learning, behaviour for learning, student engagement, and teachers' questioning;
- the refinement of the process of book and file scrutiny as an integral part of evaluating learning and progress. Such scrutiny has become rigorous and regular, and is an element of the partnership between a department and the senior leadership team;

Case Study 2

- the insistence on a departmental self-evaluation form (requirements for which are now being revised to match the four emphases of the most recent Ofsted inspection frameworks) containing information from heads of subject and their colleagues, drawn from both lesson observation and book scrutinies, moderated with varying degrees of rigour by the senior leadership team (depending on the past performance of the department), and used to set aspirational targets and identify improvement priorities in a development plan;
- the insistence that every subject department meeting includes some sharing of best classroom practice or the discussion of how to tackle the teaching of a difficult concept or particular part of the syllabus, which links to the priorities in the subject development plan;
- the drawing-up of a full annual timetable by every head of subject as to when lesson observations, book scrutinies and 'learning walks' will occur across the year. The timetables are coordinated at whole-school level by the deputy head responsible for teaching and learning;
- the establishment of a 2a and 2b subdivision of the 'good' category in lesson evaluations, since most lessons fall into category 2 and it was felt that necessary distinctions were being missed and development points not spotted without a finer distinction;
- the establishment of regular occasions when the senior leadership team and school governors receive the outcomes of departmental reviews and from them collate school-wide priorities in teaching and learning that will impact on school development plans and school-wide CPD;
- the establishment of the school as a deliverer of the Greater Manchester Challenge 'Improving Teacher' and 'Outstanding Teacher' programmes and their use with a significant proportion of the school's own staff (as well as those from other schools);
- the recent investment in a 'lesson observation suite', which is a sophisticated ICT-based approach to recording lessons in progress, offering support through earpieces to teachers during lessons and allowing detailed analysis by advanced skills teachers and others involved in the training of staff (the school is a 'training school' with several trainees a year). This, school leaders report, is proving invaluable support in the coaching and mentoring both of trainees and of those on the 'Improving Teacher' and 'Outstanding Teacher' programmes.

The visit confirmed that the overall result of all this activity has been a move from a top-down view of school improvement to one where all staff feel an investment in, and engagement with, the job of improving teaching and learning, and where subject specifics are pursued alongside whole-school priorities.

The key ingredients of success

The general view of the school's leaders was that it was the combination of the initiatives listed above, together with a strong central management and administration system (including the use of calendars, development plans, teacher performance management and self-evaluation), which now allows all staff to be engaged in the shared pursuit of excellence and devolves responsibility to them in a graduated way.

The fact that the 'learning vision', developed back in 2007, but refined by the recent work described above, is returned to every year in the induction process (there is an induction residential for all new staff) is also seen to be important. The school sees a link between its faith mission and its mission of learning.

Case Study 2

Outside influences

The use of outside help has been limited and targeted. The school has used the services of an external consultant on teaching and learning. It has benefited from the Greater Manchester Challenge (and its funding), from its School Improvement Partner, and from some externally provided subject expertise. However, the decision essentially to address school improvement internally, and not habitually to send people on outside courses (apart from briefings from examination groups on syllabus specifics) is seen as a crucial part of the success of school-wide engagement in improvement.

The school's role, noted above, as a deliverer of the Greater Manchester Challenge and of the 'Improving Teacher' and 'Outstanding Teacher' programmes to several cohorts of teachers from other schools, has also benefited a large number of its own staff (36 of them through the 'Improving Teacher' programme, for example).

The school is now working with colleagues in higher education, developing action research projects with Manchester University and funding staff on masters degree courses with Manchester Metropolitan University. In the context of this collaboration, five senior staff are to become 'Specialist Leaders of Education'.

School-to-school links are a major source of outside influence. Teachers say they are most impressed by other teachers doing a similar job to theirs, and want to earn their respect by being demonstrably effective. They are generally less impressed by a talk by an 'expert' about whose actual accomplishments they know little.

Where next?

There is a strong sense in the school that much can still be achieved. Current priorities in teaching and learning are differentiation, used both to support and to challenge students, and the achievement of even greater consistency in the quality of assessment for learning, marking and feedback. Increasing the proportion of students attaining grades A and A* at both GCSE and AS/A2 is a further priority, which has led to a 'Reach for the Stars' initiative, involving ways of informing both teachers and pupils as to what excellence in a subject comprises. This includes inputs from examining group chief examiners in targeted subjects and visits to Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Case Study 3

St Bede's Catholic College, Bristol

Mixed comprehensive (now an academy): age range 11–18: number on roll 900.

Overview

St Bede's was formerly an 11–16 school, but now has a small emergent sixth form whose students study for the International Baccalaureate in association with the Roman Catholic Sixth Form College in the city. Under its new academy status, the school is now seeking to open a full sixth form.

When the headteacher arrived at the school in 1995 she found the atmosphere among staff, management and parents to be somewhat complacent. Progress for students other than the ablest was poor, though headline figures suggested success. An inspection in the later 1990s gave the school a 'satisfactory' overall grade, which shocked the institution but which the headteacher considered accurate. She has been working since on improving teaching and learning, with significant success. The school was judged 'good with outstanding features' in a later inspection and became a 'beacon school'; in 2007 it was given an 'outstanding' judgement overall. However, 'teaching and learning' was only graded 2 (good) and this was a real spur to the latest stage of improvement. At this time Bristol local authority asked the headteacher to develop an 'Outstanding Teacher' programme, based at St Bede's, and another programme for 'Satisfactory to Good', based on the London Challenge model. A retired London school leader was brought in to lead the Outstanding Teacher programme, which was initially funded by the local authority, and it has run and grown since with nearly 400 teachers now having completed the programme from Bristol and the surrounding region. This has been a powerful engine of improvement in the school, with 24 staff (nearly half the total) already having completed the programme and others currently participating in it.

This work has been only one part of the gradual development of a culture of continuous improvement of teaching and learning, with a well structured performance management system, a process of twice-yearly reviews of all subject departments (with external leadership of these reviews in alternate years) and the moderation of internal reviews either by members of the senior leadership team or by another head of department working alongside the head of the department under review. Lesson observation is an integral part of the school's culture, with observations of St Bede's teachers conducted by all the participants on the two improvement programmes. Lesson observation is thus regular and expected. Conversations with staff confirmed that this change of culture has led to an 'open door' approach, with a sense that the school is now alive with dialogue about improving teaching and learning. The change has augmented and partly replaced the focus on increasing the numbers of high-quality individual lessons.

The key ingredients of success

The headteacher cites the most important ingredients in school improvement as the removal of weak teachers (by rigorous monitoring and counselling) and making the right appointments at all levels. The recruitment of subject teachers, unusually, does not involve the relevant head of department in the interview, though he or she does observe trial lessons and give a view. The headteacher is insistent that she carries the responsibility for appointments and that each appointment must be her decision. Other members of the senior leadership team link to specific departments but the headteacher does not have such a role; rather, she takes a direct interest in the performance of all departments and staff, accumulating records of all observed and graded lessons and suggesting CPD to staff as a result.

Case Study 3

The detailed process of subject reviews has been developed by the headteacher over seven years. This is seen by the school, and confirmed by the visit, to be the other key to success. The school is continually refining the process, for example the practice mentioned above, whereby two department heads work in tandem – one external and one the head of the department being reviewed – is the latest development. The head sees this innovation, together with the use of external subject specialists every other year, as a guard against the subject leader softening his or her own evaluation. For her, the necessity that the head of subject should 'call it right' in all evaluations is at the heart of improvement. The school has also begun to make greater use of the recommendations of each previous review as the starting point for the next one in that area, to ensure a dynamic approach to improvement, even in strong departments.

Outside influences

The headteacher is a National Leader in Education and the school is a National Support School. The school collaborates well with the local authority, especially in the organisation of CPD programmes. The head was, until recently, on the Children's Trust as secondary headteacher representative. The school supports other schools at departmental and senior leadership team level, but this work is not extensive and restricted mainly to Bristol schools as so much time and energy goes into running the teacher development work. It has been heavily involved in initial teacher training over many years – first in the Catholic school-centred initial teacher training based at the sixth-form college and now in partnership with the Bristol, Bath and Gloucestershire higher-education providers.

The headteacher monitors carefully the proportions of judgements from lesson observations in each Ofsted category and uses this as a measure of the school's own pedagogical health. The involvement of departments with other schools is linked to these findings. However, as in many other outstanding schools, there is a strong sense that the focus of improvement activity should be mainly internal, with teachers learning from each other, through mentoring and coaching relationships, rather than drawing heavily on external contacts or expertise (except for briefings by examination groups and involvement in some subject networks organised by the local authority). Nonetheless, current research and thinking about school improvement does exert a strong influence on the school, given its role in the leadership of training and its strong links with initial teacher training providers.

Where next?

The headteacher is clear about the importance of not losing momentum now that more teaching is good and outstanding. She wants to get beyond a rather predictable model of the outstanding individual lesson to release the individuality and creativity of great teachers and for them to feel that outstanding teaching does not work to a formula but stems from a passionate commitment. There will be more work on the 'borderline' students in core subjects too, with an aspiration to be the first fully comprehensive state school in the region to get 100% of students an A*-C in both English and science and 90-95% of students an A*-C in mathematics.

Case Study 4

Aldersley High School, Wolverhampton

Mixed comprehensive: age range 11–18: number on roll 700.

Overview

Aldersley High School serves a mixed catchment area on the edge of Wolverhampton. It has a joint sixth form with three other Wolverhampton schools. A significant proportion of the school's students are from minority ethnic backgrounds and have English as an additional language, while the proportions receiving free school meals and with special educational needs are above average. The school was supported through the Black Country Challenge programme. It was given a 'notice to improve' at its inspection in 2009 but came out of this category with a 'good' judgement in the 2010 re-inspection both for overall effectiveness and for teaching. Since 2009, there has been a very rapid improvement in outcomes for students on both progress measures and in the proportion attaining 5+ A*-C grades including mathematics and English. The school is scheduled for a major refurbishment starting in September 2012.

The headteacher was appointed in 2008 on the sudden departure of the previous incumbent. She had joined the school as a deputy head only a short time previously. Data in 2007 and 2008 showed students making very poor progress, so she expected a 'special measures' judgement in 2009, and considers the school fortunate to have been given a notice to improve. However the staff, governors and wider school community were shocked, which indicated to the headteacher the extent to which the school had been 'coasting'. Following the 2009 inspection a new director of teaching and learning was appointed. He had been the school's head of English. He and the headteacher led training for the whole staff, using DVDs of lessons used for inspection training, to familiarise staff with inspection expectations and the nature of skilled lesson observation. The tone of these sessions was reported by staff to have been positive, though an imminent re-inspection was also a pressure. Staff then chose pairs to do lesson study/observation work in a peer-support programme. At the same time the headteacher and her curriculum deputy head (a former head of science) together observed all the staff teaching, and drew up a database against the full set of elements listed in the Ofsted inspection criteria for evaluating the quality of teaching. They colour-coded each lesson according to these criteria using a red/amber/green rating, and used these judgements both to prioritise areas for whole-staff development and to identify those staff in need of intensive support or, in extreme cases, whose competence needed to be formally challenged. Staff are always allowed a second chance before a 'satisfactory' or 'unsatisfactory' grade was added to the database (a 'satisfactory' grade not being regarded as good enough).

All the information collected was made public in staff meetings. Praise and criticism were openly given. The whole programme, together with development work with middle leaders, has created a culture very different from that which staff report prevailed beforehand, with some competitiveness about which staff and departments get the best grades or the best results from the same cohort of students.

Closure days now focus entirely on CPD. There are frequent staff training evenings on teaching and learning. Most of the staff voluntarily attend 'best practice' dissemination sessions on Friday mornings. The visit confirmed that a tipping point has been passed; discussion of pedagogy and an 'open door' attitude to lesson observation are now commonplace.

Case Study 4

The biggest change has, however, been in expectations of student achievement. Results have soared. Early examination entries and accelerated groups have contributed to some of this improvement, but heads of subject now have quite different expectations about examination success for students of average and below-average attainment. A major change impacting on progress across the curriculum has been to discontinue the poorly delivered Year 7 'Opening Minds' programme and to replace it by well-planned subject lessons.

Alongside this work, the school has developed a planning cycle integrating departmental evaluation (including rigorous book scrutiny), the school's self-evaluation form, a school development plan focused on student achievement subject by subject, and staff performance management targets based on these documents. As in other schools visited, this is a tight circle of accountability, well managed by the school's leaders. The headteacher now wants to give more responsibility to departments and to encourage staff lower down in the school's structure to take more responsibility for driving change.

The school has changed its specialism recently, to visual and performing arts, in recognition of the quality of its work in this area. Improvements in technology, its previous specialism, continue.

The key ingredients of success

A whole-staff programme in which lessons are evaluated and understood in terms of progress and learning, and not of 'teaching tricks' has, for the senior leaders, been the key to success. The school is using the Ofsted subject criteria to help staff understand what outstanding provision looks like in subject terms.

The senior leadership team reported the need to balance the improvement of the staff's generic understanding of teaching and learning with improved knowledge of subject specifics. The general pattern of internal CPD sessions is to focus on a generic area (such as lesson starters or plenaries or teacher questioning) and then immediately to break into subject departments to consider how general understandings can best be realised in subject terms.

The improvement of students' behaviour for learning, and their behaviour generally, has also been a considerable contributor to success; it has allowed teachers to concentrate on pedagogy and not just control.

Outside influences

The Black Country Challenge Education Adviser gave useful help to the headteacher as she undertook the changes outlined above. For example, the headteacher did some joint lesson observations with the adviser that sharpened the evaluation skills of the senior leadership team at a crucial moment.

In general, recent developments at the school have come about independently, apart from consortium work on 14–19 (involving reviews and formal moderation at subject level) and, especially, the development of the joint sixth form. Staff at Wolverhampton High School for Girls have helped improve modern languages teaching at Aldersley (this has been a link made through the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust). The senior leadership team has visited an outstanding school in a neighbouring local authority; the visit was arranged by the person who was the school improvement partner in both schools. There are some links with Wolverhampton University concerning the Graduate Teacher Programme.

Case Study 4

Where next?

The headteacher is aware of the danger and limitations of insularity, especially at department and subject teacher levels, and arranged, as part of the CPD programme for the 2011-12 academic year, for all staff to visit a very effective subject department in another school so as to ensure they have experienced high-quality teaching and provision in the subject they teach. The headteacher regretted the absence of a reliable, quality-assured directory of the best subject departments regionally or nationally; she feels input to such a directory could come from higher education, 'teaching schools', local authorities and subject associations as well as from Ofsted's subject inspection programme.

Immediate priorities include: developing student independence; improving teachers' questioning skills; advancing assessment for learning through a whole-school marking policy (to include in particular a literacy dimension in all marking, supporting language across the curriculum); and the needs of more able students. In 2011-12 there was a focus on group work, which the school recognised is not yet well enough organised or sufficiently differentiated. Attention was also paid to the use of digital media, partly because of forward planning for a better resourced building; but also to ensure that staff made the best use of digital resources.

Case Study 5

The Bridge Learning Campus (Secondary), Bristol

Mixed comprehensive: age range 10–16: number on roll 650.

Overview

This is a medium-sized mixed comprehensive secondary school within a broader 3–19 learning campus (of secondary, primary and special schools), with an executive principal overseeing the whole. A trust (now seeking academy status), led by the University of the West of England (UWE), Bristol City College and the local authority, oversees this school and one other Bristol secondary school. This oversight has helped raise the school's aspirations. The school population is largely white, and few students have English as an additional language. Large numbers of its students are entitled to free school meals. The school serves an area of deprivation, situated as it is on one of the most disadvantaged estates in south Bristol. Levels of literacy and numeracy on entry to the secondary school remain low. The campus makes a break at the end of Year 5; students in Years 6 to 8 are taught in the secondary phase.

The secondary school's achievements in recent years have been considerable. It moved to a new, private finance initiative (PFI) funded site in 2009. This has had a big impact on students' behaviour and pride in their school. The current executive principal (who had been a highly successful headteacher and then interim head of a school he led out of special measures in a neighbouring local authority) has treated the quality of teaching and learning as a priority over the last few years. He ascribes the school's success in raising standards to this action. Student outcomes at GCSE level have risen dramatically, despite the continuing challenge presented by some students' literacy levels, and are now above the new 'floor standard' of 40% of pupils gaining five or more GCSEs at grade C and above, including English and mathematics.

The school's other focus has been on middle leadership. The intention is that subject departments should take responsibility for the use of data in tracking student achievement and for the programme of lesson observations by peers, so that a culture of improvement is self-sustaining. This is seen by the school as work in progress, but the responses of the English and mathematics subject leaders suggest it is well advanced in the core subjects at least.

The key ingredients of success

According to the executive principal, a key ingredient of success has been whole-school CPD delivered weekly in the 'Meeting about Learning' sessions. He and other senior staff used to lead these sessions, but now there is a range of contributors (for example, all teachers whose lessons were judged the most effective in the Ofsted inspection following the 'satisfactory' inspection outcome have described their practice to colleagues). The sessions are now differentiated, so that those seeking particular areas of development as a result of monitoring and evaluation or performance management observations are catered for in targeted groups. The executive principal believes that the tone of these sessions has shifted over time, so that staff now see them, and parallel sessions in subject departments, primarily as CPD and not as part of a monitoring and performance regime. This belief was confirmed on the visit in discussions with other staff. Occasionally outside speakers contribute to the sessions, but the focus generally is on the school improving itself. The school (indeed the whole campus) recently gained a 'gold' Investors in People award in recognition of the high priority given to staff development. Observations from the visit indicated that the school had improved the consistency of teaching and learning in lessons.

Case Study 5

Outside influences

The school has been supported through the National Challenge programme. The National Challenge Adviser has been very useful in helping the senior leadership team set up systems of review and evaluation (such as 'learning walks' – focused visits through learning areas, followed by feedback and reflection) and in training staff in the implementation of these systems. This, more than links with other schools, has been key to the school's improvement. The main effect of the link through the trust with another Bristol school has been to support the other school's leadership. Links through the trust on initial teacher training with UWE have been important – the school is used for placements, and this has helped recruitment. The local authority has provided support on English and mathematics teaching; through the authority, the school has participated in the 'Outstanding Teacher' scheme (the scheme based at St Bede's – see case study 3 above).

However, the headteacher feels that the creation of a dialogue on pedagogy is the factor which has changed the school's internal culture and led to real success. Evaluation of this success is done through the continuous monitoring of teaching as well as the detailed scrutiny of test and examination results. Appropriate and rapid intervention follows in both cases.

Where next?

The executive principal and secondary headteacher see the immediate priority as the gradual transfer of responsibility for the process of monitoring and evaluation to teachers and middle managers. Middle leaders will develop their own programmes of work suited to their subject and context, rather than following a prescribed timetable of activities.

The school's leaders expect to see:

- more teaching move from 'good' to 'outstanding', with the best teachers acting as coaches;
- departments and individual teachers deciding on the future direction and content of CPD, while continuing to benefit from that decided on by the school's leaders;
- the further development of middle leaders through a formal 'aspiring leaders' certificated programme.

There remains a need to improve boys' attainment. Girls have been a focus in the past, especially for science and mathematics, but they are now performing much better than previously and the gender difference has become a concern in relation to boys, especially in literacy-based subjects.

4.3 The view from the students

During the school visits, students' views about the quality of the teaching they received were collected, sometimes informally during lesson observations or lunchtime conversations, but also formally through discussions with groups of students selected by the school. These were very revealing and tend to confirm much of the research and other evidence. Most of the points made by students were common across the schools, but there were some differences of emphasis between the highest-attaining schools and those which have improved rapidly but often from a lower base of attainment.

Characteristics of the best teachers according to their students

On each of the nine school visits reviewers interviewed groups of students to ascertain their views about the qualities they most appreciated in their teachers. Their views are summarised below.

The best teachers have infectious energy

Students felt that the best teachers love their subject and show this through an enthusiastic, infectious and energetic classroom presence. This energy does not imply excessive teacher talk or classroom dominance, but refers to the orchestration of students' work (very well described by students at The BRIT School in relation to their teachers of dance, drama and music but also echoed in other schools and well matched to the 'artistry' described by teacher educators).

The best teachers have individuality

The best teachers have a distinct personality which they show to students, being approachable and 'down to earth', but also keeping suitable role distance to ensure that boundaries are always clear. They never patronise students.

The best teachers meet the needs of the full range of their students

They are always able to meet the needs of the range of students in a class, ensuring that a student does not move on until he or she has understood the knowledge or skill being taught. But the best teachers do not waste the time of those who have already grasped a concept by lots of repetition or easy work. Teachers who accept that you can 'get it wrong' and try hard to tackle misconceptions were valued highly by students, while those who think that everyone should be able to understand something just because they can were particularly criticised.

The best teachers know their subject – and their students

The best teachers are relaxed and confident because they know both the subject and the students very well. They do not keep stressing the importance of exam success or unnecessarily add to the pressure students are already under, but are careful to create a sense that 'together we can do this', adding to students' self-belief.

Characteristics of the best lessons according to students

Similarly, student groups gave their views about the lessons that they felt most promoted progress and interest for them. Their views are collated below.

Variety of structure

Students felt that they make the most progress in those lessons characterised by varieties of structure – the same pattern endlessly repeated is less engaging. For example: 'Only use a starter activity if the recap is important, not because every lesson has to have one.'

Interaction

Students almost always praised lessons where they were able to take an active part and where individual work, pair and group work and whole-class discussion were well balanced. Lessons involving physical activity (for example practical investigation in science or role play in English) were praised particularly often.

Choice and creativity

The best lessons offered the opportunity for students to choose the topic or the approach to solving a problem or provided challenges where they could be inventive and show their individuality or creativity.

Reference to students' own world and concerns

The best lessons were clear as to the relevance of their content to students' current lives and the issues they face. These lessons were not narrowly utilitarian, but students wanted to know why they needed a particular piece of knowledge and for what purpose it was used in the wider world.

Students' views in different schools

The differences between the views expressed by students in the highest-attaining schools and those expressed in the other schools were mainly in two areas.

First, in the highest-attaining schools the range of subjects mentioned in the examples was typically wider, usually including all the core subjects and modern languages as well as more practical and expressive areas of the curriculum. This suggests that the characteristics listed above are more consistently present across the full curriculum in these highest-attaining schools, indicating a maturity in the development of teaching and learning in these institutions and few weak departments or faculties, if any.

Secondly, in the schools making recent strides in standards from a lower base, there was a tendency for pupils to lay greater stress on tight planning and clarity of explanation by teachers and the importance of transparency over assessment criteria and targets.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 What do these schools tell us?

The lessons to be drawn from the visits to the nine schools, and from closer observation of the five schools which are the subjects of the case studies, are both clear and consistent. They are consistent with each other, and with the findings of research and the views of university teachers summarised in earlier sections. The key characteristics of success for improving teaching are outlined below:

Inspirational leadership

These schools have strong, inspirational leadership, with a principal or headteacher who sees improving teaching and learning as the key element in school improvement and who can communicate this idea to the whole school community (staff, students and parents). He or she is supported by a senior leadership team which can translate this vision into reality through systems of monitoring and evaluation, performance management and staff development that have real impact.

Accountability of teachers for the school's success

A culture has been established where staff accept the focus on improving teaching and learning, and agree that outcomes for students are closely linked to the quality of teaching, whatever other factors may be in play. The accountability of teachers for a school's success is thus acknowledged. It is seen to be routine that there will be regular visits into classrooms from others, for the purpose of monitoring and evaluation, performance management and to support improvement. Pedagogy is, as a result, often discussed with interest and commitment by all staff, informally as well as in staff meetings and on training days.

Shared expectations of quality

All staff (including teaching assistants and other support staff) have received whole-institution training related to pedagogy and so have a clear sense of what constitutes an effective lesson in the institution (often characterised as 'The _____ Lesson,' with the name of the school inserted). This means that there are shared expectations of quality and that a common vocabulary exists for describing lessons, including the language of evaluation. This evaluation is generally framed in terms of the generic criteria for 'grading' lessons in the Ofsted inspection framework, so there is a shared grasp of what some characteristics of 'good' or 'outstanding' teaching are. Staff are aware of the evaluations that have been made of their own teaching.

A major emphasis on self-evaluation

There is a distinct emphasis on self-evaluation at whole-school level, starting from a secure basis in data analysis and a secure student-tracking system and extending into detailed probing into the reasons for differential performance of all kinds (for example between groups of students, between subjects for the same students, between teachers in the same subject). Senior leaders, through their oversight of departments or faculties, use this analysis to challenge and support colleagues, often employing the information to bring about changes to student grouping or examination entry policy to improve consistency of outcomes and to drive up standards.

School-wide assessment for learning

The schools make considerable investment in introducing and developing school-wide assessment for learning. They recognise that accurate assessment, regular high-quality marking and feedback to students, and transparency for students as to the targets they are aiming for and what they need to do to achieve them, are all key to improving standards. Explicitness over National Curriculum level descriptors and examination grade criteria was a shared feature across the schools studied in this report, as was lesson time devoted to peer- and self-assessment.

Teacher development mainly in-house

These schools see teacher development as a mainly in-house responsibility. Most internal staff training is concentrated on enabling coaching and mentoring, peer observation and reflective practice. Even the delivery of externally certificated training (in 'good to outstanding' teaching or 'leading from the middle', for example) takes place in the school. There are exceptions, of course – notably training directly related to examinations. Several of the schools studied were participating extensively in the Graduate Teaching Programme, and a good proportion of staff in some schools had come through this route. They cited as a significant advantage the fact that they had been inducted from the start in the school's approach to pedagogy.

5.2 Key characteristics of success in schools with mature systems and cultures

Despite the consistency of the findings from the schools visited as outlined in Chapter 4, there were important differences between them. There was a developmental continuum related to the length of time the current leadership had been in place, the nature of the school context and its recent performance, and the length of time for which a major focus on improving teaching and learning had been present.

Schools which had been performing well for some years, with established, stable senior leaders and staff at lower levels, and with mature systems for monitoring, evaluation and teacher development, often reported that their current approaches had developed from those now evident in schools which have recently managed rapid improvement. Thus it is possible to identify refinements of each of the six characteristics listed in Section 5.1 which have developed in the schools with the most mature systems and cultures:

Delegated leadership

Leadership of school improvement is effectively delegated in large measure to subject leaders (though with strong monitoring from senior leaders and clear accountability systems) with confidence and trust shown in subject leaders' quality and their commitment to school-wide policies. Their task is to customise and mould school teaching and learning policies, without distorting them, to match the requirements of their subject.

Lesson observation as a shared enquiry

The culture of lesson observation is pervasive and has moved from being predominantly an instrument to ensure compliance or to line-manage performance to becoming a shared enquiry into how to improve outcomes for students through better teaching. Anxiety about failure is much reduced, staff relax during observations and in team-teaching situations, and the process comes to resemble action research. Students are often involved in this process in ways which are more than gestural: observing and commenting on lessons and their own learning in a mature way.

Effective teaching: customised within subjects and understood within a longer time-frame

The definition of 'effective teaching' is beginning to be refined at subject level so that school-wide policies and approaches are customised within a subject culture. The characteristics of an effective lesson are moulded to suit different subject-specific learning objectives or topics. The 'unit' of self-evaluation moves beyond the individual lesson to a sequence of lessons or to a section of a scheme of work. Individual lessons then sometimes diverge more from the usual structure as they become part of a longer-term evaluation framework. There is thus less pressure for each lesson to be an 'all-singing, all-dancing' display of the teacher's talents.

Instinctive and continuous self-evaluation

Self-evaluation is instinctive and continuous for all teachers, particularly for anyone with a subject, year group or key stage responsibility. Topics such as the best approach to student grouping; the best differentiation or intervention strategies; or the right policy on examination entries in a subject, are constantly discussed. Decisions are always provisional as new challenges arise with each new cohort of students. Staff feel empowered to initiate ideas and implement change, while always checking their ideas for change against the whole-school implications of what they decide.

Excellent assessment

Assessment is consistently of a very high standard. It is accurate and prompts a response from each student, contributing to his or her development. Teachers know their students very well as individual learners and they subtly signal in lessons and in written feedback what students need to do to improve. Student self- and peer-assessment are used with discrimination, with each strategy chosen to match the context or needs of students. They are seen as teaching approaches rather than as a substitute for the assessment and intervention of the teacher.

A perspective beyond the school

While teacher development in outstanding schools occurs mainly as a result of in-house, individualised CPD involving coaching and mentoring, these schools retain a wider perspective from their involvement in school-to-school support.

First, they are usually engaged in some form of support to other schools, for example through the National Leader in Education, National Support School or similar initiatives. In this way, subject as well as senior staff will work in other schools and see practice elsewhere, from which they invariably learn as well as giving advice and support.

Secondly, these schools recognise the importance of networks at subject and other levels and are active in seeking these out and maintaining them. Teachers have an enthusiasm to undertake award-bearing study externally, to attend subject conferences or to host meetings of subject associations and local-authority groups. Finally, some of these schools have opened their training activities (initially available only to their own staff) to staff from other schools in their region.

5.3 Recommendations for moving to the highest stage in teaching quality

From this small-scale study the evidence would suggest six broad recommendations for schools which are seeking to respond to the new Ofsted requirement for a school to have outstanding teaching and learning in order for it to be judged 'outstanding' overall:

Develop subject leaders

Put effort into the development of subject leaders as inspirers of others, as models and managers, and then increase the trust placed in them to lead their subjects (while retaining accountability and intervening rapidly if the trust proves misplaced).

Make time for subject teams to meet and plan

Increase the amount of time subject teams have to meet and plan, moderate, discuss pedagogy and report to each other on action research, so that a strong culture of self-evaluation develops (reviewing and revising schemes of work in response to moderated unit assessments, for example).

Be subject-specific about pedagogy

Encourage subject teams to identify the subject-specific features of pedagogy and, by doing so, customise the agreed teaching and learning policy to introduce appropriate flexibility over lesson structure (for example, When is a starter activity helpful in art? How are lesson objectives best communicated in mathematics?).

Make longer units of work the standard currency of scrutiny

Encourage the use of work scrutiny and student feedback to gain insight into the structuring and trajectory of learning over longer units of work. Study the impact of these longer units on progress, rather than relying too much on observation of single lessons when evaluating teaching and learning.

Make judicious use of student self-assessment

Continue to stress the importance of transparency of assessment for students and their involvement in monitoring their own progress, but be alert to the over-use of student self- and peer-assessment within assessment for learning, ensuring that detailed diagnostic assessment and response by teachers remains central and teaching time is not eroded by assessment for learning practices.

See the school as a contributor to local networks

Seize every opportunity to be involved in school-to-school support. Encourage staff in all subjects to make a contribution to subject and other local networks, or to support other schools in their improvement. See that staff have opportunities to take on new ideas in their subject through further study (including on externally accredited courses), through membership of subject associations, and by participation in internet-based professional communities.

References

Attard, K. and Armour, K. (2006) 'Reflecting on reflection: a case study of one teacher's early career professional learning'. *Physical education & sport pedagogy*, 11: 3, 209-229.

Boyle, W.F. and Charles, M. (2010) 'Leading learning through Assessment for Learning?' *School leadership & management*, 30: 3, 285-300.

Bubb, S. and Earley, P. (2008) *Intervention study, from self-evaluation to school improvement: the importance of effective staff development*. Reading: CfBT Education Trust.

Bubb, S., Earley, P. and Hempel-Jorgensen, A. (2008) *Staff development outcomes study report*. London: London Centre for Leadership in Learning.

Curee (2008) *Continuing professional development (CPD): the evidence base. Are you a leader or provider of CPD in school?* England: Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education.

Davies, R. and Preston, M. (2002) 'An evaluation of the impact of continuing professional development on personal and professional lives'. *Journal of in-service education*, 28, 231-254.

Dougill, P., Raleigh, M., Blatchford, R., Fryer, L., Robinson, C. and Richmond, J. (2011) To *the next level: good schools becoming outstanding*. Reading: CfBT Education Trust.

Kennewell, S., Beauchamp, G., Jones, S., Norman, N., Parkinson, J., Tanner, H., Thomas, D.G. and Morgan, A. (2007) *The use of ICT to improve learning and attainment through interactive teaching*. Swindon: ESRC.

Lord, P., Atkinson, M. and Mitchell, H. (2008) *Mentoring and coaching for professionals: a study of the research evidence*. Slough: NFER.

Menter, I., Elliot, D., Hall, S., Hulme, M., Lowden, K., McQueen, I., Payne, F., Coutts, N., Robson, D., Spratt, J. and Christie, D. (2010) *Research to support schools of ambition*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government Social Research.

National Centre for Excellence in the Teaching of Mathematics (2010) *Developing mathematics in secondary schools: headteachers talk about creating and sustaining excellent mathematics department*. Sheffield: NCETM.

Ofsted (2011) *The draft framework for school inspection: guidance and grade descriptors for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005, from January 2012*. London: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2010a) *Developing leadership: National Support Schools*. London: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2010b) *The National Strategies: a review of impact*. London: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2008a) *Assessment for learning: the impact of National Strategy support*. London: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2008b) *Evaluation of the Primary and Secondary National Strategies 2005-07*. London: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2006) *The logical chain: continuing professional development in effective schools*. London: Ofsted.

Ofsted (2005) *The Secondary National Strategy: An evaluation of the fifth year*. London: Ofsted.

Pedder, D., Storey, A. and Dareen Opfer, V. (2008) *Synthesis report: schools and continuing professional development (CPD) in England – State of the Nation research project (T34718)*. London: Training and Development Agency for Schools.

Poet, H., Rudd, P. and Kelly, J. (2010) *Survey of teachers 2010: support to improve teaching practice*. London: The General Teaching Council for England.

Poet, H., Rudd, P. and Smith, R. (2010) *How teachers approach practice improvement*. London: The General Teaching Council for England.

CfBT Education Trust
60 Queens Road
Reading
Berkshire
RG1 4BS

+44 (0)118 902 1000

www.cfbt.com

PMS: 6261 03/13 ISBN: 978-1-909437-08-1