



**THIS MUCH I KNOW**  
about **LOVE OVER FEAR ...**

**CREATING A CULTURE FOR  
TRULY GREAT TEACHING**

**JOHN  
TOMSETT**

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In grateful memory of my dad  
Ernest Harry Tomsett  
(1927–1985)

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## Chapter 1

# Truly great teaching

## My first teacher

A garden is a grand teacher. It teaches patience and careful watchfulness; it teaches industry and thrift; above all it teaches entire trust.

Gertrude Jekyll

When I began my teaching career at Eastbourne Sixth Form College one of my biggest influences was Kate Darwin. We were appointed on the same day but she was nearly twenty years older than me. Kate is a truly great teacher and one of the wisest people I know.

We shared the driving from Brighton to Eastbourne and within the confines of our cars we swapped stories. Kate's dad had been to Cambridge and won a university prize which her husband-to-be, Chris, was awarded a generation later. Kate's dad was a head teacher. He died suddenly when Kate was only 18 years old. He had written with the same ink pen for the whole of his life; the story of her dad and his Waterman is best told in a sonnet I wrote for Kate:

### **Different Strokes**

His choice of pen remained the same  
From undergraduate Cambridge days  
To signing his headmaster's name –  
A Waterman in mottled beige.  
The cursive blacksmith's art had honed  
The ink-filled gold into a tool  
For use by him and him alone –  
His hand made them inseparable.  
  
Gold outlasts all. The pen was left  
A legacy, bequeathed to her

Whose writing pleased the family most:  
 But straining through the unknown curves  
 It snapped, to leave the nib's new host  
 Mourning afresh, doubly bereft.

And whilst not educated like Kate's father, my dad was a teacher in many ways too. Apart from learning how to play golf with him, he taught me a lot about the countryside. He'd grown up four miles from his school and had to walk there and back every day through the Sussex fields. He taught me how to strip a sapling for a bow and arrow, how to predict the weather, how to catch a fish. I can remember as a 6-year-old watching him stalk a trout in an eddied pool on a Sussex stream for nearly an hour before he caught it. He was a study in patient persistence.

I hadn't realised quite what a teacher he was until my eldest sister, Bev, who knew him that much longer than I did, wrote to me nearly thirty years after he'd died:

Dad was always there for each of us as we grew up. He took Dave [my eldest brother] and me for long walks in the country and knew everything about nature. He helped me with my stool-ball, helped me ice and decorate my Xmas cake, and even tried to teach me how to hit a golf ball!

Luckily for all of us his job did not interfere with home life. Once he clocked off he'd finished until the alarm went off the next morning. He was able to enjoy his post round out in the countryside, and was a valuable member of that community. He helped feed the lambs at the farm, took an old lady flowers and eggs, posted her letters and was the only human contact that she had.

Every March he would pick the first primroses of the year and send them to Auntie Nancy. He was out in the fresh air every day, observing all four seasons, not confined to four brick walls like the majority of us are.

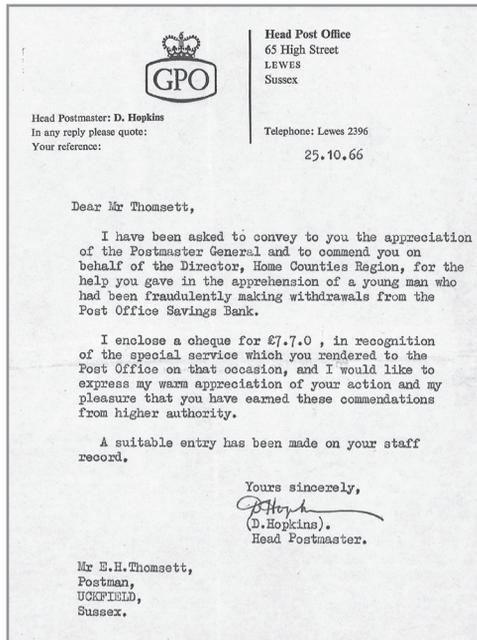
I see dad in his own way as a teacher. He was not well-educated – through no fault of his own – but he taught us right from wrong. He showed us how to respect the countryside, kindness,

honesty, stoicism, love and gratitude. Above all he was able to give each of us his time, a gift more precious than status or money. He was a very wise man.

After I'd wiped the tears away, one thing that struck me about Bev's words was the first three things she cites which dad showed us: *how to respect the countryside, kindness and honesty*. They are the exact same values of our school: respect, honesty and kindness.

Dad tended roses with pure artistry. He died three years from retirement and the chance to lie in his own bed of roses forever. And just as Kate was chosen to receive her dad's pen, I became the depository for all my dad's possessions. Mother still sends me odd artefacts she finds, like his National Service discharge documents – he was conscripted into the navy for two years.

His glasses were a shock when I opened the case; they are half-rimmed ones and the way he used to look over the top of them and grin seemed encased with them. Mother sent me this letter which is now framed on my office wall:



In the event of a fire this is the first thing I would grab. The letter captures perfectly dad's honesty which Bev had so sharply observed, and I love the way the class system – which pervaded mid-1960s Britain – is clearly evident in the letter's tone. Worth noting too that in 1966, £7.7.0 was a week's wages to a postie.

## Truly great teaching

The fundamental purpose of school is learning, not teaching.

Richard DuFour

Before we go any further, it's important to explore the core business of any school: teaching. And it's worth emphasising that we are trying to focus upon teaching not teachers. Professor Chris Husbands explained beautifully why it is worth making this subtle distinction in a blog post where he pointed out, 'We can all teach well and we can all teach badly ... more generally, we can all teach better: teaching changes and develops. Skills improve. Ideas change. Practice alters. It's teaching, not teachers.'<sup>1</sup> This is a helpful distinction because it depersonalises pedagogy so that we can at least begin to talk about improving teaching without being critical of the individual person who is doing the teaching – something which is generally so hard to achieve.

The more I read about teaching, the more difficult it is to define teaching, let alone truly great teaching. If you read Graham Nuthall's *The Hidden Lives of Learners*,<sup>2</sup> or Daniel Willingham's *Why Don't Students Like School?*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Husbands, Great Teachers or Great Teaching? Why McKinsey Got It Wrong, *IOE London Blog* (10 October 2013). Available at: <https://ioelondonblog.wordpress.com/2013/10/10/great-teachers-or-great-teaching-why-mckinsey-got-it-wrong/>.

<sup>2</sup> Graham Nuthall, *The Hidden Lives of Learners* (Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Willingham, *Why Don't Students Like School? A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

or Paul Hirst's 'What is Teaching?',<sup>4</sup> you'll understand why anyone could feel confused about what truly great teaching looks and sounds like.

Hirst says, 'Successful teaching would seem to be simply teaching which does in fact bring about the desired learning.'<sup>5</sup> Within that seemingly simple statement lies the complex relationship between teacher and student, something quite delicate but crucial to successful teaching and learning. And when Biesta writes, 'it is not within the power of the teacher to give this gift [of teaching], but depends on the fragile interplay between the teacher and the student. Teachers can at most try and hope, but they cannot force the gift [of teaching] upon their students,'<sup>6</sup> what he is hinting at is the primacy of teacher–student relationships. Because teaching is a human activity, the relationship between teacher and student is fundamental to whether the student learns from the teaching.

With Hirst and Biesta in mind, I think those best qualified to define the qualities of a successful teacher – and so give us a good idea of what constitutes successful teaching – are our students.

One of the most constructive organisations I have worked with as a head teacher is John Corrigan's Group 8 Education. John is an excellent coach and he articulated very clearly a way for us to talk about teaching with our students. One of the activities we undertook was based upon John Corrigan's work on what students look for in a successful teacher.<sup>7</sup> Our work with Group 8 centred on thirty descriptors about teachers and teaching which had been shaped by John and his team over several years.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul H. Hirst, 'What is Teaching?', in *Knowledge and the Curriculum: A Collection of Philosophical Papers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Hirst, 'What is Teaching?'

<sup>6</sup> Gert J. J. Biesta, 'Giving Teaching Back to Education: Responding to the Disappearance of the Teacher', *Phenomenology & Practice* 6(2) (2012): 35–49. Available at: <https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/pandpr/article/viewFile/19860/15386>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://gr8education.com> and John Corrigan, 'Improving Student Learning Outcomes in the 21st Century: White Paper (Group 8 Education)'. Available at: <http://gr8education.com/discussion-paper/>.

In rank order of importance to students, these are the common features of good teaching identified by our students from the bank of thirty descriptors:

- 1 Teachers respect me.
- 2 Teachers are knowledgeable in their subject.
- 3 Teachers are friendly, approachable and willing to listen.
- 4 Teachers are positive, enthusiastic and have a sense of humour.
- 5 Teachers encourage and help me to succeed.
- 6 In class I do work that is interesting and challenging for me.
- 7 Teachers celebrate my progress and achievements.
- 8 Teachers remind me that my success depends on my effort.
- 9 My classes have clear rules for how I should behave throughout the class.
- 10 Teachers provide me with useful feedback on my work.

It's a pretty good set of descriptors, one forged and selected by students – the only ones who have experienced the full range of teacher quality. This list of the characteristics of good teachers, as hierarchically selected by our own students, only confirmed my thinking about the best teachers I have known. I would suggest that any group of students, when asked for the five key features of a good teacher, will always give you essentially the same answer, namely that good teachers:

- 1 Respect us as adults.
- 2 Are enthusiastic.
- 3 Make lessons interesting.
- 4 Know their subject.
- 5 Explain things clearly and help if we don't understand.

So much of this feedback from students about teachers returns us to relationships. Number one for students in an idealised teacher is that

the teacher respects them. At Huntington we adopt the mantra, 'Always be the adult in the situation', based on the principle of unconditional positive regard as espoused by Carl Rogers.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, one of our three core values is respect, and we have always included in our school development plan the aspiration to work in a school where people acknowledge the fallibility of the human condition. We all get things wrong; we just have to try hard not to make the same mistake twice!

So, if we can get the relationship between teacher and student right, we might just be able to encourage the students to accept Biesta's gift of successful teaching. Veronica Weusten's *The Talented Teacher* is a little known gem of a publication in which the author outlines her view that successful teaching depends upon a teacher's character.<sup>9</sup> I would implore any teacher, youthful or experienced, to read and reflect upon it.

Weusten's book is about the importance of personal authenticity in teaching. She says, in an echo of Biesta, that whilst you may want to be a skilled teacher, it is your pupils who will determine whether or not you in fact are one because, ultimately, pupils prefer teachers they like. Her list of the characteristics a teacher should have, according to students, is remarkably similar to mine: '[a successful teacher] has humour, is pleasant, and maintains classroom order and structure ... is able to explain well, is patient and is just'.<sup>10</sup>

So, according to our own students and Weusten, good classroom relationships are key to effective teaching. However, an effective learning environment is not enough to determine or guarantee good teaching because, as Hirst so clearly points out, good teaching depends upon students learning what you think you've taught them. Every teacher in the land has taught a great lesson but discovered at some point, either

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<sup>8</sup> See Jerold Bozarth, *Rogers' Therapeutic Conditions: Evolution Theory and Practice. Vol. 3: Unconditional Positive Regard* (Monmouth: PCCS Books, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> Veronica Weusten, *The Talented Teacher* [Weusten en Hoornstra], 11th edn (2013). Available to purchase at: <http://www.degeliefdeleraar.nl/en/webwinkel/de-geliefde-leraar/>.

<sup>10</sup> Weusten, *The Talented Teacher*.

near the end of the lesson or at the beginning of the next one, that what she had thought she'd taught them had not been learnt by the students.

In my first year of teaching I spent hours and hours marking students' work. At the end of the year I sat down with each one of my students and reflected upon his or her progress. I must have written 'Do not paraphrase!' tens of times in the margins of Alison's essays over the year, yet she highlighted in one simple question the ineffectiveness of my teaching when she asked, 'What does "paraphrase" mean?'

This experience with Alison reminded me of the old joke: there were two small boys, John and Jim, who were friends. Jim had a dog. One day they were taking the dog for a walk and Jim said proudly: 'I've taught the dog to whistle.' 'What do you mean?' said John. 'He's not whistling.' 'I know,' said Jim. 'But I said I'd taught him; I didn't say he'd learnt.'<sup>11</sup>

One of the highlights of my career has been working with Professor Rob Coe from the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring at the University of Durham. In 2014 he co-authored a report for the Sutton Trust entitled, *What Makes Great Teaching?*<sup>12</sup> The report reviews over 200 pieces of research to identify the elements of teaching with the strongest evidence of improving attainment.

Coe and his co-authors conclude that great teaching is that which leads to improved student progress. They acknowledge the difficulty of pinning down exactly what constitutes great teaching, and their reflections on the matter are similar to Hirst's:

We define effective teaching as that which leads to improved student achievement using outcomes that matter to their future success. Defining effective teaching is not easy. The research

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Green-Armytage, *Colour Zones: Connecting Colour Order and Everyday Language*, in *9th Congress of the International Colour Association, Proceedings of SPIE*, Vol. 4421 (2002), pp. 976–979.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Coe, Cesare Aloisi, Steve Higgins and Lee Elliot Major, *What Makes Great Teaching?* (London: Sutton Trust, 2014).

keeps coming back to this critical point: student progress is the yardstick by which teacher quality should be assessed.<sup>13</sup>

It is hard to disagree with Coe and Hirst. In the end, what is the point of teaching if students do not make academic progress? What I like about the Sutton Trust report is the list of six common components suggested by research that teachers should consider when assessing teaching quality:

- 1 (Pedagogical) Content knowledge.
- 2 Quality of instruction.
- 3 Classroom climate.
- 4 Classroom management.
- 5 Teacher beliefs.
- 6 Professional behaviours.<sup>14</sup>

The authors explain that the third component, classroom climate, covers ‘quality of interactions between teachers and students, and teacher expectations: the need to create a classroom that is constantly demanding more, but still recognising students’ self-worth. It also involves attributing student success to effort rather than ability and valuing resilience to failure (grit).<sup>15</sup>

All six components are important in helping to define great teaching, but I think classroom climate is a welcome inclusion as it acknowledges the importance of relationships as well as the value of resilience to failure, something I come back to in Chapter 11 on the growth mindset.

Whilst I might have established how darned hard it is to pin down what teaching is, one of the activities a school’s teaching staff ought to undertake is to agree collaboratively on what it is they think constitutes

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<sup>13</sup> Coe et al., *What Makes Great Teaching?*

<sup>14</sup> Coe et al., *What Makes Great Teaching?*

<sup>15</sup> Coe et al., *What Makes Great Teaching?*

truly great teaching. Until they agree what they think truly great teaching looks like, how can they aspire to be truly great teachers?

It doesn't really matter what the Teachers' Standards say or what the Ofsted criteria claim good teaching might look like, or even how, according to Professor Rob Coe, the existing evidence identifies great teaching: colleagues within the same school will profit from engaging in a discussion about what they mean when they talk about truly great teaching. Such a discussion is, logically, fundamental to our profession.

At Huntington we subscribe to Professor Rob Coe's view that great teaching is that which leads to improved student progress, but we have also thought hard about what we think good teaching and learning might look like. As a team of 125 teachers and teaching assistants, we agreed our own 'Features of Truly Great Teaching' and have now adopted them above the ever-changing Ofsted criteria. It may be easy for us to do since we were recently inspected, but Sir Michael Wilshaw made it clear in his 2012 speech to the RSA that there is no prescribed way to teach.<sup>16</sup>

This poster on page 19 can be found inside our teacher planners, and it is what we use when we are observing lessons as a support for post-observation developmental discussions.

The very process of engaging in the discussion which led to this set of criteria for truly great teaching was highly valuable in itself; importantly, we undertake a review of the descriptors every two years so that we involve new staff in the process of owning the definition of truly great teaching.

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Wilshaw, What Is a Good Teacher? [video], *Royal Society of Arts* (3 April 2012). Available at: <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/archive/what-is-a-good-teacher>.

# Truly Great Teaching at Huntington School

Teachers have **high expectations** of students. Lessons are appropriately **challenging** and risk taking; they foster curiosity and inspire **creative thinking**.

Assessment is used to progress learning. A **range of feedback strategies** is used which students act upon to make or exceed expected progress. **DIRT** is built into lessons.

**Questioning is used to develop thinking.** Open questions are planned to deepen understanding. Thinking time and oral rehearsal are built in.

Teachers know the students in front of them. We are flexible, and **the needs of different groups of students are planned for** so that they can all achieve great outcomes.

Teaching and Learning strategies are used to ensure that **teaching is engaging, relevant and purposeful.** Time is managed expertly, and progress is effectively reviewed. Students are well prepared for the demands of the new curriculum and are given chances to develop **memory retention.**

**Behaviour for Learning** is well managed so that students can move from 'compliant' to 'active' learners.

Teachers have **excellent subject knowledge.** Research is key to the development of pedagogy. Time is invested in researching current thinking and good practice.

A **'Growth Mindset'** is encouraged in all students and staff. We aim to develop proficient and independent learners, who are intrinsically motivated by the reward of achievement. We are all part of a learning community.

Teachers **make a positive contribution to school life and live by the school's core values.** They demonstrate a range of personal qualities and skills: encouragement; humour; acute emotional intelligence; creativity; reflection; effective communication skills.

High standards in **Literacy and Numeracy** are promoted by all teachers, and underpin learning in all subject areas.

## Huntington School



## This much I know about truly great teaching

- Truly great teaching is hard to define but it has to do with your students making tremendous progress.
- To be a truly great teacher you have to like the students before they like you – as Rita Pierson says, ‘Kids don’t learn from people they don’t like.’<sup>17</sup>
- Truly great teaching requires a certain amount of gritty relentlessness.
- When students find it hard to learn, truly great teachers think of new ways of teaching to overcome the students’ barriers to learning.
- I’ve seen truly great teachers talk to students for an hour without break and hold them in the metaphorical palm of their hand.

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<sup>17</sup> Rita Pierson, Every Kid Needs a Champion [video], *TED* (May 2013). Available at: [http://www.ted.com/talks/rita\\_pierson\\_every\\_kid\\_needs\\_a\\_champion/transcript?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/rita_pierson_every_kid_needs_a_champion/transcript?language=en).

## Chapter 2

# You can always be that little bit better

## Choosing to be better

Don't bother just to be better than your contemporaries or predecessors. Try to be better than yourself.

William Faulkner

One of the best players I ever played golf with was Paul Way. He was the superstar of the Sussex team in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He was supremely self-assured. Way worked hard at his golf game and had the most perfect swing. He won tournament after tournament as an amateur, culminating in him being crowned the English Amateur Stroke Play Champion in 1981.

In 1982, his first year as a professional golfer, Way won the KLM Dutch Open. The next year he qualified for the Ryder Cup and was paired with Severiano Ballesteros; he won three matches out of five against the Americans. He was a member of the victorious Ryder Cup team in 1985. In 1986 he won the European PGA championship. In 1987 he won the European Open. Tony Jacklin, the Ryder Cup captain, once said that Way could be 'as good as he wants to be'.

Way and I were members of the eight-man under 23 Sussex team to play Hampshire in 1981. I stood on the sixteenth fairway that summer morning and watched Way up on the green attempting a twenty-foot putt to win the hole in front of hundreds of onlookers. He hit the putt and walked after the ball, which inevitably dropped into the hole; he scooped the ball out of the hole with his putter as he strode by and, all in one movement, knocked it off the green. Oh, the elan of it all! The next time I saw him do something similar was on BBC One against Ray Floyd on the ninth green at the Belfry in the 1985 Ryder Cup.

After the morning pairs against Hampshire we were winning 3-1. In the afternoon singles we fell apart, with Way the only Sussex player to win his game. The rest of us lost and Hampshire won easily. I stood in the bar afterwards supping a beer and talking about the game with the Sussex senior captain, Mike vans Agnew. Mike pointed out Way through the bar window. After two rounds of golf, each taking four hours and comprising an eight mile walk, the *only* Sussex player to win both his matches that day was on the practice ground hitting balls for another hour.

Mike and I concluded that it was all about making choices: I chose to have a beer, Way chose to be the best golfer he could possibly be. The lesson I learnt that day wasn't that you had to practise to improve; I already knew that. What Paul Way taught me all those years ago was that no matter how good you are, you can always choose to work to be that little bit better.

A year after we were Sussex teammates, Way was winning his first professional golf tournament and my stab at making a living playing golf was finished. By August 1982 I'd chosen to go back to school and was deciding which A levels to study.

## The case for all of us to improve our teaching

People assume that the marginal gains idea is all about technology ... It was more of a mindset and a philosophy that everybody in every little area of the team tries to improve what they are actually doing.

Dave Brailsford

What follows is, fundamentally, really simple but it has its complexities too: it is only right for all of us to improve our teaching so that our students learn what we teach. No matter how good we might be at teaching, we always face the perennial challenge of being better – a challenge derived from Charles Handy's observation that, 'The

paradox of success, that what got you where you are, won't keep you where you are, is a hard lesson to learn.<sup>1</sup>

I deliberately use the word 'great' rather than 'outstanding' throughout this book. In many ways it makes complete sense to use the Ofsted description of outstanding teaching when we talk about what outstanding teaching looks like. But I don't use that word, and nor do parents or students, when they talk about the best teachers; such teachers are described as great teachers.

It may be semantic hair-splitting, but a commentator on my blog seemed to get to the heart of the matter when he wrote, 'Teachers are both artisans and artists, and both sides need to be fostered, otherwise we will just become excellent, soulless technicians.'<sup>2</sup> I think one of the key things to improving teaching is putting the student at the centre; great teachers with soul do this. They know each student well and are interested in them as individuals; this means that they plan well, understand what motivates students and develop their teaching to meet their students' varying needs because they understand what grabs them.

Great teachers observe, reflect, learn and make subtle but powerful changes to meet the needs of their students – a good example is the way that a great teacher uses questions to understand barriers to learning and reshapes their teaching to help individuals make progress. So, let's use great teachers; not outstanding, excellent or soulless technicians, but great teachers who put the student at the centre of things.

'Every teacher needs to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better.' This line from Dylan Wiliam, in his keynote speech at the SSAT Conference in December 2012, has been important in shaping my argument about why all of us

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Handy, *The Empty Raincoat: Making Sense of the Future* (London: Arrow Books, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See comment at: John Tomsett, This Much I Know About ... Why All of Us Must Improve Our Teaching No Matter How Good Our School, *John Tomsett* (5 January 2013). Available at: <http://johntomsett.com/2013/01/05/this-much-i-know-about-why-all-of-us-must-improve-our-teaching-no-matter-how-good-our-school/comment-page-1/>.

must improve our teaching. Wiliam goes on to add: 'It has become a well-known mantra amongst school leaders, even if it elicits a sigh from many classroom teachers when uttered by school leaders who do not understand its implicit challenges for colleagues.'<sup>3</sup>

Wiliam built upon his argument for continuous improvement of teaching in his speech to the Northwest Evaluation Association's summer conference in 2013, when he said:

The only way that we can improve teacher quality is to create a culture of continuous improvement. That is given lip service in many districts, but nobody is really facing up to what it really means in practice. You see, I think that every teacher needs to get better. In many districts they target help at the teachers who 'need support', who need help, who are having difficulties.

Every teacher fails on a daily basis. If you are not failing you are just not paying attention. Because we fail all the time.

Many of you will walk out of this room absolutely convinced I said stuff I know I didn't say. As teachers we fail all the time. We teach these brilliant lessons. We take in the notebooks and look at what the kids have written and we wonder what planet they were on when we were teaching the stuff.

Our daily experience as a teacher is a failure. Which makes it the best job in the world. Because you never get any good at it. At one time, André Previn was the best paid film-score composer in Hollywood and one day he just walked out of his office and quit. People said 'Why did you quit this amazing job?' And he said – 'Because I wasn't scared any more.' Every day he was going into his office knowing his job held no challenge for him.

This is something you are never going to have to worry about. This job you're doing is so hard that one lifetime isn't enough to master it. So every single one of you needs to accept the

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<sup>3</sup> Dylan Wiliam, *How Do We Prepare Our Students for a World We Cannot Possibly Imagine?*, speech delivered at the SSAT National Conference, Liverpool, 4–5 December 2012.

commitment to carry on improving our practice until we retire or die. That is the deal.<sup>4</sup>

Wiliam delivers the speech with a certain amount of humour but his message is serious. Like Wiliam, I take it as a given that every single teacher wants to become a better teacher; indeed, to become a country of truly great schools we will all need to become better teachers, every single one of us.

I am not claiming that we have to work harder in terms of volume of work, but to work harder at becoming better at what we do in the classroom. I am saying that every single one of us has to be at least a good teacher and the majority of us truly great teachers. And that applies to all of us: I feel quite strongly that all members of school leadership teams should be respected practitioners who are at least consistently good and working towards becoming great teachers.

For some of us who have been teaching a long time, improving our practice will be difficult. According to Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain all teachers ‘slow their development, and most actually stop improving, after two or three years in the classroom.’<sup>5</sup> But CPD means that we have to reflect upon our practice regularly and systematically.

An Enote teacher-blogger has written, ‘Professionalism to me means always being willing to re-evaluate your practices when things don’t go well. It also means being willing to learn from others. Of all the excellent teachers that I’ve seen over the years, the best shared a common trait: they always thought they could do better, and they always thought their colleagues, even first year colleagues, could teach them something worthwhile.’<sup>6</sup> This encapsulates why continuing

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<sup>4</sup> Dylan Wiliam, Every Teacher Can Improve, speech delivered at the Northwest Evaluation Association Conference, Portland, OR, 26 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eqRcpA5rYTE>.

<sup>5</sup> Steven G. Rivkin, Eric A. Hanushek and John F. Kain, Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement, *Econometrica* 73(2) (2005): 417–458.

<sup>6</sup> Enotes, What Does/Should Professionalism Mean to a Teacher? (13 December 2011). Available at <http://www.enotes.com/eduphilo/discuss/what-does-should-professionalism-mean-teacher-115966>.

professional development has to be central to the job of teacher; we must commit to continuing professional development in the true sense of that phrase.

The flipside of Rivkin et al.'s observation is that there are many long-serving teachers in our school system who deliver no-frills good lessons, lesson after lesson, day after day. What they do is ingrained in their professional practice so deeply that they would struggle to explain why they are so effective. A challenge for school leaders is to engage with these seasoned practitioners so that they can surface what it is that is special about their pedagogy; if we can do this, then those teachers can contribute to developing younger colleagues. Chapter 14, in which I interview our longest serving teacher, Dave Lamb, is an attempt to make explicit the pedagogical practice which he does not realise he has mastered.

In order to stay focused on professional development we need to stop worrying about things we cannot control and focus upon what we can do something about – our own practice. The only way to develop truly great schools is through each one of us taking responsibility for improving the quality of our teaching. We need to break the glass ceiling which surrounds great teaching so that we all aspire to it and see it as achievable. We need to foster a growth culture which is founded upon the belief that all of us can improve.

For teachers to believe in a growth culture for themselves is difficult; however, it is difficult because teaching is seemingly inextricably linked with our personality. To accept that there is a flaw in our classroom practice can feel like admitting there is something wrong with us as a person. David Hopkins describes the debilitating link between personality and practice as 'the elephant in the classroom'. He bases his thinking around this on the ideas of Richard Elmore of Harvard University:

Confusing people and practice is deeply rooted in the culture of schools, and it is especially resilient because it resides in the beliefs and the language of school people. We speak of 'gifted' or 'natural' teachers, for example, without ever thinking about

the implications of that language for how people improve their practice. If practice is a gift that falls out of the sky onto people, then the likelihood that we will improve our practice at any scale is minimal. There are only so many sunbeams to go around, and there aren't enough for everyone.<sup>7</sup>

What we must do is be open to the observation of our practice in order to develop it, and to ensure we challenge the practice and not the individual teacher. We must recognise the difference between *practice* and *personality*. The challenge is to expand our repertoires and take on new skills. In other words, to support colleagues as they take risks to improve their own classroom practice. Thoughtful tweaks to our teaching can have significant positive impact on student learning, as exemplified by Alex Quigley who, inspired by Zoë Elder's Marginal Gains website,<sup>8</sup> explains how the aggregation of marginal gains concept has enabled our own students to make accelerated progress in their learning.<sup>9</sup>

The other barrier to colleagues opening themselves up to improving their practice is accountability; as professionals, accountability is something we have to accept. As long as we know what is expected then we can eradicate the fear inherent in any accountability system. I want to catch colleagues doing good things and praise them, not catch them out. There have to be formal judgements made about the quality of teaching; we need to accept that and begin to shape performance management processes into our broader CPD systems.

The best way to make coaching, mentoring and lesson observations developmental is to focus on the impact of specific elements of our

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<sup>7</sup> David Hopkins, Every School a Great School, speech delivered at Limestone Coast Region Leader's Conference, South Australia, 18–19 October 2010. Available at: <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/167430533/every-school--Department-for-Education-and-Child-Development>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://marginalllearninggains.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> See Alex Quigley, An Unexpected Olympic Legacy: How to Make Marginal Gains With Your Students, *The Guardian* (22 November 2012). Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2012/nov/22/olympic-legacy-marginal-gains-students>.

practice upon student learning rather than obsessing with any judgement grade. If we accept that we can all improve then a judgement grade becomes unnecessary and irrelevant; improving our practice becomes the main focus.

We can and must accept that there is no one formula for great teaching – a view endorsed by Michael Wilshaw when he said to the RSA, ‘We need to celebrate diversity, ingenuity and imagination in the way that we teach. Surely this is common sense when every child is different; every class is different, and every year group is different. One size rarely fits all. Surely this adage must apply to teaching as it does to most things in life.’<sup>10</sup> As long as we are teaching well, and that good teaching is resulting in students learning and making good academic progress, we will be doing a good job.

Finally, I think becoming a better teacher requires the individual teacher to have three key dispositions. First he needs an aptitude to teach. Second he needs to be open to learning – if he does not genuinely think he has more to learn about his practice then he will not move beyond having talent. Third he needs to have the will to be a great teacher – the determination to be the best he can be. If each one of us in the teaching profession has these three dispositions then we will create a nation of truly great schools; but we are not going to improve our teaching by wishing ourselves to be better. And it won’t happen if we just keep on doing what we have always done, hoping that by sheer effort we will improve.

Sheer effort doesn’t make you improve, as Alex Quigley so brilliantly described in another article where he grappled with his inadequacy as a footballer:

If I was to total my hours of practice it would surely be in the thousands. In fact, it would near the 10,000 hours total which has been associated with becoming an expert by people in the know. Only I am not an expert. I am little better than I was when I was a spotty teenager. A long time ago I stopped improving at football. I had reached my ‘ok plateau’.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Wilshaw, What Is a Good Teacher?

He concludes that we all need to work hard to improve our practice in a supportive culture:

I may be a bit past my dream of playing for Everton, but with the right type of practice and support I can improve to eventually become an expert teacher. When Dylan William popularises research that proves that students with the best teachers learn twice as fast as average then our pursuit of excellence, with effective coaching and deliberate practice, could just make a transformative difference for our students.<sup>11</sup>

It's important that Alex ends with the students. I've always believed that if you look after the school's culture, the examination results will look after themselves. Barth brilliantly highlights the connection between a thriving school culture, teacher development and student outcomes:

When we come to believe that our schools should be providing a culture that creates and sustains a community of student and adult learning – that this is the trellis of our profession – then we will organize our schools, classrooms, and learning experiences differently. Show me a school where instructional leaders constantly examine the school's culture and work to transform it into one hospitable to sustained human learning, and I'll show you students who do just fine on those standardized tests.<sup>12</sup>

For us all to become better teachers we need to work in a culture where that is possible. Indeed, as I outline in Chapter 10, the single most important factor to us all improving our practice is the school culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Alex Quigley, Overcoming the OK Plateau: How to Become an Expert Teacher, *The Guardian* (11 April 2013). Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/apr/11/expert-teachers-ok-plateau-professional-development>.

<sup>12</sup> Roland S. Barth, The Culture Builder, *Educational Leadership* 59(8) (2002): 6–11.

## This much I know about why you can always be that little bit better

- Assume that every teacher wants to improve their teaching – it's a powerful attitude which gains cultural currency over time.
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- Promote the notion that there is no one formula for great teaching.
- When it comes to colleagues trying to improve their teaching, celebrate risk-taking publicly.
- Stop awarding judgement grades for individual lesson observations.



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**John Tomsett** has been a teacher since 1988 and a head teacher since 2003. He is head teacher at Huntington School, York. Tomsett writes a blog called "This much I know ..." and is a regular contributor to the *TES*. He co-founded The Headteachers' Roundtable think tank and is a popular speaker on school leadership. He is determined to remain a classroom teacher, despite the demands of headship, and believes that developing truly great teaching is the main responsibility of all head teachers.

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