Improving the quality of teaching
Robin Attfield
Thinkpiece
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This paper sets out some of what we know about leading the improvement of teaching and learning. It draws on practical evidence and recent research on what makes a difference to improving standards in classrooms today. Focusing primarily on how school leaders can influence teachers and middle leaders to make such improvements, it explores some of the particular issues that they are likely to face. Research shows that teachers have the power to make the greatest difference to the quality of students’ learning, and that the second most influential factor over which schools have control is the quality of school leadership. So what school leaders do really matters. School leaders set expectations and can support and challenge staff to do their best.

Introduction

It may seem self evident that schools are primarily about teaching and learning but schools are busy places and the demands on senior leaders multi-faceted. There is a danger of taking teaching and learning for granted and not making it the central component of leadership activity. Effective leaders relish the opportunity of influencing the learning of students across the school rather than just those in a particular class, phase or department.

Research consistently tells us that, of the factors that schools can control, the quality of teaching is the foremost determinant of the quality of students’ learning. In their work around educational reform, McKinsey (see Barber and Mourshed, 2007) stressed that improvement at system level cannot take place quicker than change in teaching behaviour. The unifying characteristic of the top-performing countries covered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is their investment in and emphasis on the quality of teachers and teaching (see also Hopkins and Stern 1996). The best systems are of little value unless teachers deliver the sort of teaching that helps students learn more effectively.

Teachers really do make a difference. Within their classrooms, effective teachers create learning environments which foster pupil progress by deploying their teaching skills as well as a wide range of professional characteristics. Outstanding teachers create an excellent classroom climate and achieve superior pupil progress largely by displaying more professional characteristics at higher levels of sophistication within a very structured learning environment.

Hay McBer (2000, 1.1.9)

Research in Tennessee showed that a student who has an effective teacher is much more likely to make progress.
Studies that take into account all of the available evidence on teacher effectiveness suggest that students placed with high-performing teachers will progress three times as fast as those placed with low-performing teachers.


Similar findings were reported by Murphy for the Sutton Trust (2011) asserting that a student taught by an effective maths teacher, for example, gains 40 per cent more in their learning than a child who is taught by a poor teacher with insufficient skills. David Milliband (2003), then Schools Minister, referred to factors that affect success of life: poverty, family, neighbourhood and schooling. He indicated that when schooling is right, it can be 20 times more influential than the other three put together. It is well known that there is considerable variation between schools, including those with similar intakes of students. However, variation within schools can be at least as significant. Reynolds (2008) is among those who have described such effects. His findings stress the importance of the school learning from itself, its best people and its best practices to tackle within-school variation, rather than relying on central guidance, policy and advice. This has implications for senior leaders in terms of how they work with other leaders to improve quality of teaching, or work directly with teachers themselves.
The power of the school leader

In your role as a senior teacher who may have responsibility for leading teaching and learning you will, depending on your school context, not only be working with teachers to develop their own practice but also with middle leaders to help them develop the quality of practice in the areas where they hold direct responsibility. It is important that you can recognise accurately the quality of teaching and learning and have a clearly articulated policy describing the key features of effective teaching and learning that supports others to make accurate and consistent judgements. This is likely to be drawn from direct and formal observation of lessons, informal lesson observation, data analysis, feedback from students and parents, and from knowledge of individual staff. However, knowing the level at which a teacher is performing is only the starting point. Actions must follow that support celebration and sharing of good practice while challenging to improve ongoing practice.

Leadership can directly influence what teachers do and how they do it, and set expectations within a school. Hallinger and Heck (1996), for example, indicated that although the impact of teaching is the key factor in student learning, the second most critical factor is the quality of leadership. Robinson’s (2007 and 2011) research synthesis has revealed five leadership dimensions with moderate to large effects on outcomes for student learning:

- establishing goals and expectations
- strategic resourcing and planning
- coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum
- promoting and participating in teacher learning and development
- ensuring an orderly and supportive environment

Robinson (2007) stated at a conference: “The more leaders focus their professional relationships, their work and the learning on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes” and also suggests that leadership theory, research and practice need to be more closely linked to research on effective teaching, so that there is greater focus on what leaders need to know and do to support teachers in using the pedagogical practices that raise achievement and reduce disparity. Influence is critical and needs to arise from what Jones (2009, p.18) terms “circles of synchronicity with overlapping elements of beliefs and values, words and deeds”.

Schools are subject to considerable change and much has arisen from the keen interest of recent governments. The 2010 Department of Education White Paper is entitled *The Importance of Teaching*, for example. Jones, however, reminds us that “The core of quality schooling, I would argue, is not a government edict or a national policy document, but a crucial relationship between two human beings: the teacher and the student.” Hargreaves and Shirley (2009, p.27) describe what they see as three relatively recent paths in system organisation. In the first, the state played a supportive but withdrawn role, permitting innovation and accepting inconsistency. In the second, a climate of market competition was created, based on standardization and a reduction in professional autonomy. In the third, there was an attempt to navigate between the two previous paths and promote both professional autonomy and accountability. They conclude that none of these was successful and propose a fourth path built on sustainable and distributed leadership with a heavy foundation on moral purpose. The role of the school leader is critical in such an undertaking.

To improve the quality of teaching and learning requires the senior leader to work with, and through, others. Such a leader is likely to face a number of challenges that relate specifically to the school’s core purpose of improving the quality of teaching and learning:

- promoting and developing a school-based language and vision for teaching and learning
- developing effective feedback and dialogue through a culture of trust
- developing evidence-based and informed approaches to improving teaching and learning, drawing on and contributing to research
- providing meaningful support and challenge
- developing leadership that prioritises teaching and learning
Promoting and developing a school-based language and vision

Good schools have a vision for what they want to achieve and stakeholders have contributed to its development and buy into the process and the product. Many visions seek to promote excellence and improve opportunities for, and performance of, students. However, too few schools articulate clearly what they understand by high quality teaching and learning, their expectations of students and staff, the strategies that support such aims, or to revisit their vision regularly. Significant national frameworks can support schools but lack the detail that can only be supplied from dialogue about what constitutes effective teaching in a particular school. Recent years have seen heavy prescription through national strategies and these have led to improvements in many areas. Ofsted (2010, p.4) visited 54 primary and state schools that had tried to implement the national strategies and found “overall improvements in standards and progress... had been too slow”. At the heart of the criticism seems to be the fact that initiatives imposed on schools failed to take sufficient account of wider school improvement. There was too much monitoring and insufficient attention to evaluation of impact. Consequently, the relative value of specific interventions was unknown.

As a senior leader you may want to reflect on the quality of your own teaching. How do you invite feedback from peers and colleagues? How do you rate your own teaching? How good a role model are you?

Teaching is both a science and an art. In any one lesson there are likely to be hundreds of interactions. To be effective, a teacher needs to draw on a range of knowledge and skills. They must have recent and relevant subject knowledge and be able to plan and deliver content to students of differing interests, backgrounds and abilities. They need to be able to assess what the students are learning and modify their approach accordingly. Students learn best when they are motivated and an effective teacher creates a classroom climate that encourages interaction through their attitudes and skills and motivates students to want to learn. This is part of the art of teaching – of knowing your students and what is likely to work best for them at any stage. It is shown by how you speak to them, how you organise the classroom, how you give praise, the expectations you set and the enthusiasm and commitment you show. It is hard to develop and advance these skills without meaningful support. Technical knowledge is important but must be accompanied by sensitive interpretation of what is happening in any class. For you as a leader of teaching and learning, there needs to be school-wide recognition of what constitutes effective teaching. Middle leaders must play a critical role in giving constructive feedback to teachers about how they can promote more effective outcomes for students.

Effective leaders of teaching and learning ensure that there is a clear, understood, and regularly reviewed framework for developing teaching and learning that builds on national frameworks, makes clear expectations at the classroom level and forms the basis for evaluation and ongoing professional discussion. It is supported by specific policies and tools. For example, in lesson observations there may be checklists to support judgements and feedback and specific foci for learning walks.

What level of clarity exists in your school about what constitutes effective teaching and learning and how can this be developed further? What is your role in ensuring all staff understand what outstanding teaching looks like?
Developing effective feedback and dialogue through a culture of trust

If the quality of teaching and learning is to improve, then teachers need quality feedback about what is going well and what could be done to improve. This is best achieved when the school has a culture of constructive self assessment and where staff seek to improve as a matter of course.

Culture has been defined simply as “the way we do things round here” (Deal and Kennedy, 1983, p.14) and includes both organisational aspects and the social interactions that give each school its own unique look and feel. Schein (1985, p.6) described culture in terms of:

“the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken for granted’ fashion an organisation’s view of itself and its environment.”

Schön (1996) stresses the importance of trust in culture as an essential component to building the climate in which teachers can become reflective practitioners and become involved, not just in making responsive corrections, termed single-loop learning, but contribute to deeper thinking about what might be needed at a system level through double-loop learning. (See Argyris and Schön, 1978 for further information on single- and double-loop learning.) Where there is an open culture, staff are accustomed to colleagues and leaders coming into the classroom on a regular basis, whether for a few minutes or to carry out observations. Where a culture of comfort exists expectations are lowered. Addressing the teacher who is pleasant and hard working, but insufficiently effective, can be a particular issue.

As a senior leader you will be influential through your role in forming an open culture. As in all forms of leadership activity, modelling is important! If you walk the talk of openness you will not only be open to feedback from colleagues but actively seek it. In developing this culture it is helpful if there is:

- a clear vision for the school with teaching and learning at the heart
- recognition of the importance of varied staff development
- regular dialogue about all aspects of practice
- leadership willingness to take ideas from all staff
- sharing and not blame or defensiveness
- positivity about improvement
- open communication
- opportunity for teachers to visit each others’ classrooms and engage in professional dialogue about teaching and learning

As a senior leader you will visit classrooms yourself and support and challenge middle leaders to do the same, helping staff to reflect on and improve the quality of their own teaching. The language you use when visiting a classroom sets the tone and context. Asking the teacher and students what students have learned today is far more conducive to a constructive dialogue about teaching and learning than questions about what students have done or how well they have behaved (although this is clearly appropriate at times).
Teachers may still feel nervous about having a leader in ‘their’ classroom but this will be much reduced where there is a positive culture. Dialogue in a coaching style will create a more positive outcome, as the teacher is more likely to take ownership of the process. Actions or attitudes from the leader that might impair the effectiveness of the process include:

- failing to engage the teacher in the process
- starting with marking and scores rather than specifics observed
- telling or lecturing, especially where there are many areas covered in this way and the teacher feels powerless
- failing to observe, acknowledge or build on the positives observed
- rushing through a dialogue
- failure to summarise (or get the teacher to summarise) the key points
- lack of honesty and failure to address
- failing to distinguish between the teaching observed and the teacher
- failing to build on the evidence base of the lesson

In contrast, where there is open dialogue, teachers are likely to feel both valued and supported and make efforts to try further actions and make improvements. Of course, there may be lessons where it is clear that significant improvement is required and the teacher finds it hard to engage in constructive dialogue. In these cases, where senior leaders avoid problems, they not only fail to place students’ learning at the heart of the school and offer teachers opportunities to improve, but create a climate where teachers know that senior leaders are not fully committed to making improvements. This is likely to undermine the whole process.

Practical matters also impact on the quality of conversation and the importance that becomes attached to it. Amongst the factors that need to be considered are:

- the timing of feedback – generally, shortly after the lesson observed but after there has been time for reflection
- the place of feedback – in a place where there can be private dialogue
- importance – where the focus is on uninterrupted conversation
- formality – reflecting the required balance between the two participants

What is the culture in your school for improving the quality of teaching and learning? What are the key factors that have led to this? Are all your middle leaders on board or are there significant differences across the school? Does every teacher have an accurate, evidence-based view of his or her own teaching? To what extent are differences in standards within a school due to differences in the quality of teaching?
Developing evidence-based and informed approaches to improving teaching and learning, drawing on and contributing to research

For leaders to support colleagues to improve the quality of teaching and learning, they need requisite knowledge and skills. They must be able to make judgements about what constitutes effective teaching and learning and be able to capture the key elements in a lesson that impact on what students learn. As a senior teacher you will be familiar with what constitutes effective practice and will hopefully be demonstrating this in your own classes, even if on a less regular basis than previously. However, there is a world of difference between being an effective practitioner yourself and being able to analyse such practice and help others to develop the same skills. So, for example, how might you use Anderson’s (2010) modified version of Bloom’s taxonomy (see Figure 2) to analyse colleagues’ classroom practice? When thinking of research, there is a need to balance the practical demands that you face, while not forgetting the words of Kurt Lewin over 60 years ago (1951: 169) that “there is nothing more practical than a good theory”.

Figure 2: Revised edition of Bloom’s Taxonomy by Lorin Anderson (a student of Bloom)

There are plenty of guides on developing successful practice at the school level. Among the tools available are: the Ofsted framework (2011b), Standards for Teachers, Hattie’s (2003; 2009; 2012) syntheses of meta studies into what makes effective teaching, the Hay McBer group’s research on effective teaching and the Sutton study. These are very helpful documents but ultimately risk reduction to lists. School leaders need to ensure that they promote a consistent and school-wide interpretation of what is meant by effective teaching and learning which forms the basis for expectations, practice, support and challenge. Claxton (2002, p.43), for example, warns of the dangers of over-reliance on lists: “So beware of little flow diagrams and check-lists that purport to tell you the whole truth. They may be a very good place to start thinking about learning – but they are an awful place to stop”. There are many unanswered questions about teaching, but there is also a substantial and growing body of robust knowledge.
Hattie, in his ongoing meta study of what constitutes effective teaching (syntheses of research studies thought to be well designed and implemented by research reviewers) developed a method of showing the factors that were most influential. At, or close to, the top of the list each time is feedback – the provision of comments by the teacher to the student about how well they are performing and what they need to do to improve. Effective feedback will develop students’ capacity to become reflective learners in different ways. Below is Hattie’s original (2003) table of effect sizes. You can see the more recent version in the module text. (An effect size of 1.0 is defined as an increase of one standard deviation and is enormous.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
<th>Source of Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s prior cognitive ability</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional quality</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct instruction</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceleration</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remediation/feedback</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student’s disposition to learn</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class environment</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge of goals</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer tutoring</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mastery learning</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher style</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer effects</td>
<td>.38</td>
<td>Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advance organisers</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simulation &amp; games</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer-assisted instruction</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional media</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In England, pedagogy is a less familiar term than teaching, or teaching and learning. A number of commentators, such as Simon (1981) and Alexander (2004) have bemoaned its absence. Galton (2007), for example, commends the science of the art of teaching in which scientific pedagogic principles are applied “pedagogic principles are applied and in later research (Galton, 2008, pxi) stressed the challenge of altering established practice as “changing pedagogy involves challenging one’s personal values and belief”

Such principles can be used productively to support reflection and discussion linking to performance management. An example may serve to illustrate the issue. Hattie’s findings stress the importance of feedback from teachers as a technique to improve learning. Assessment for learning provides such a technique. However, if applied in a standardised and routine way, then its capacity to lead to sustained improvement is not fulfilled. Teachers need to understand the concepts, values and evidence behind the approach so that they can use it in a contextually sensitive way, using professional judgement to create optimum learning conditions.

Schools can also create their own evidence-based approaches by actively encouraging communities within and between schools that use research ideas and evidence to support professional learning and practice. There are still considerable barriers to achieving a system where research-informed practice is accepted, understood and embedded at classroom, school and system levels, not least because of the false division between theory and practice, and between student and staff learning. Such a system is needed for teachers and their leaders to show what Hagger (2009) has described as the confidence and humility to “question, interrogate, research and above all be wary of the snake-oil merchants who will, for example, sell you learning styles instead of encouraging you to engage with the research on learning strategies”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Effect Size</th>
<th>Source of Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective attributes of students</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attributes of students</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmed instruction</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio-visual aids</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualisation</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances/money</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural objectives</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team teaching</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical attributes (eg class size)</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing an evidence-based approach to teaching and learning and incorporating immediate and wider research can be introduced gently through many activities such as:

- school policy development around teaching and learning
- sharing of articles and thinkpieces
- discussion at staff meetings
- continuing professional development events
- guided visits to other classes and schools
- ongoing dialogue
- guided reflection
- case study writing
- coaching

Such activities promote reflection on practice in the classroom and allow teachers to critically examine the merits of educational interventions and solutions, and to draw their own conclusions regarding whether and how to implement them.

To what extent is there a basis for professional dialogue in your school that encourages effective teaching and learning? Does it lead to improvements in teaching? How can this be enhanced?

Providing meaningful support and challenge

Schools seek to achieve the best they can for the students they are responsible for. Senior leaders have a core responsibility to support and challenge all staff to contribute fully to this process. This means that leaders must have sufficient knowledge, skills and commitment to drive forward improvement in all classrooms. This is demanding. Sanford (1967) was amongst the first to develop a theory for student development based on a balance of challenge and support. The same applies to adult learning where too much support and too little challenge creates a comfortable environment where little development is possible. Too little support with too much challenge, however, makes development a negative experience and is unlikely to prove beneficial. The importance of culture has already been mentioned. For leaders to undertake support and challenge effectively they need first to show self understanding. They need to know if they are more comfortable with supporting than challenging and are likely to avoid ‘tough’ conversations, or prone to challenging without recognising the human or support needs of staff. The most effective leaders know their people intimately, not superficially.
When combined effectively:

**Growth = Challenge + Support**

For many individuals challenge can arise internally; for others this needs to be generated externally through whatever means are most appropriate to context and culture. At the heart of this approach, however, is the valuing and active support of each individual. Teachers are unlikely to perform well unless they feel good about themselves. In her work on nurse education, Reid (1993) addressed the issues of challenge and support diagrammatically.

![Diagram: Four quadrants representing different combinations of challenge and support](image)

In the top left quadrant there is sufficient confidence and prior understanding to achieve effectively. No new learning will be achieved but everyday tasks are likely to be accomplished effectively. In the bottom left quadrant there is little incentive to do other than repeat processes – leadership is not in evidence!

In the retreat quadrant there are high levels of challenge but little or insufficient support to help achieve the aims. This can be overwhelming and lead to burn-out or simply backing away. Where there is both high support and challenge, favourable conditions are established in which individuals and groups can try out ideas and improve their skills, knowledge, understanding and practice.

The senior leader’s task is to gauge the correct and ever-changing balance between challenge and support and to help other middle leaders understand this process. This is especially important where some newly appointed leaders may be very enthusiastic themselves but not know how to support and challenge their team to move forward. At the other end of the scale may be middle leaders who are most comfortable in the zone of no support and no challenge and may even stifle team members’ efforts to move forward. Balancing support and challenge is demanding. Leaders must put aside personal matters that can impair judgment and use evidence to get this balance right.

What is the climate for challenge and support? Where do you feel most comfortable as a leader and how can you move forward to move others forward?
Developing leadership that prioritises teaching and learning

Perhaps the most vital resource that we possess is the human resource and how it is used is critical. School leaders face conflicting demands on their time from hour to hour and day to day. In smaller schools, especially, senior leaders may have heavy teaching commitments that limit the time available for activity relating to leadership and management. If a school is to develop a culture of improving teaching and learning then leaders must prioritise time to support and challenge colleagues in related activity. Observing teaching and learning can only take place within the school day and time must be available for observing lessons and having meaningful conversations with staff about their quality. In addition, useful information and sources of feedback can be accrued through interviews with students, data analysis and work scrutiny for example. It is helpful to be hard-nosed about the use of time with the criterion being the impact on student learning (Stoll et al, 2003). What is the cost effectiveness of spending time on scrutinising lesson planning, data, lesson observations or brief drop-ins? None is likely to be of great value without follow-up and this, too, needs time.

In all schools, it can be most effective to share the load of observation and to facilitate middle leaders to undertake a significant element of such work. Harris and Lambert (2003, p.15) describe the importance of creating the conditions that provide capacity for improvement through distributed leadership where “effective leaders orchestrate rather than dictate improvement and create learning communities within their schools”. Such an approach is likely to lead to sustained improvement rather than observing teaching and learning becoming what Spillane (2006, p.64) refers to as a “dog and pony show” where attention is given to summative evaluation based on isolated observation rather than the dialogue developed over time that constitutes formative evaluation. A further potential advantage is that middle leaders are much closer to teaching and learning in particular areas of the school and so have more regular opportunities to engage in dialogue and influence practice. They are likely to be involved in the development of schemes of work, assessment, and planning as well as daily operational matters. A possible disadvantage is that proximity can dull the objectivity and focus that could be provided by someone a little further away from the action.

Where the senior leader can work both directly and indirectly, particularly through middle leaders, the best of both worlds can be achieved while coping with the demands of daily reality and time management. This can become a sustainable model built on quality but depends heavily on previous matters discussed: agreement about what constitutes effective teaching and learning, school vision, a climate of trust and requisite skills to both observe and lead conversations about teaching and learning that foster improvement. It also depends on supporting and challenging middle leaders in their role to improve teaching and learning.

How much time do you spend on matters related directly to teaching and learning? How are you building capacity and quality in school through the support and challenge you offer to middle leaders?
Thinkpiece 1: Improving the quality of teaching

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