

The Best Teacher in You

*How to Accelerate Learning
and Change Lives*

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
San Francisco
a BK Life book

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Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

235 Montgomery Street, Suite 650

San Francisco, California 94104-2916

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www.bkconnection.com

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First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-62656-178-6

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-179-3

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-180-9

2014-1

Cover design by Cassandra Chu.

Interior design and composition by Gary Palmatier, Ideas to Images. Elizabeth von Radics, copyeditor; Mike Mollett, proofreader; Alexandra Nickerson, indexer.

INTRODUCTION

Learning from Highly Effective Teachers

The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
Essays: First Series

IN MOST SYSTEMS THERE ARE ONE OR MORE POSITIVE OUTLIERS—PEOPLE who are subject to the same constraints as others but who exceed expectations. This means that they, in some way, think and behave differently. Their thinking is somehow more complex than conventional thinking, their behavior is somehow more adaptive than conventional behaviors, and their outcomes are more generative than conventional outcomes. Some of these people work in our public schools. They are highly effective teachers who accelerate learning and change lives.

Exceeding Expectations

In recent years our education system has been under great pressure. There have been calls for expanded accountability, particularly through standardized testing and more-rigorous teacher evaluation processes. Attention has been turned to the use of value-added scores to assess how much student progress a given teacher stimulates. These scores have been at the center of much controversy. In this book we use them in a different way.

Over the past seven years, we have worked closely with teachers across Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas who consistently achieved high value-added scores. These are teachers who, by objective measures, produce more than expected learning year in and year out. In this book we do

not advance a position on value-added scores. We only use them to help identify the highly effective teachers (HETs) profiled in this book. (If you want to learn more, we provide some background on value-added scores in the research box below.)

We brought HETs into workshops to help them learn from each other so that they could become even more effective. At these workshops HETs spent a day interviewing one another, sharing their assumptions, and telling stories about their practice.

In addition to the workshops, which involved more than 350 HETs, we have also held intensive interviews with 30 of the highest-performing teachers in the state of Ohio. These teachers were at the very top of the value-added scale in three of the previous four years. In this book you will meet these teachers and read their stories. (In those stories all student names have been changed.)

Their accounts may sometimes surprise you and cause you to think about teaching and learning in a more complex and adaptive way. That is what their stories forced us to do. Throughout this book we reflect on their experiences and offer some tools to help you assess and grow your own practice. Our hope is that the tools will help you liberate the best teacher in you again and again.



RESEARCH FOUNDATIONS

Value-Added Scores

Value-added is a phrase that has become prominent in recent years. The term is associated with the effort to objectively measure teacher effectiveness. A classroom-level value-added score is a quantitative assessment of how much a teacher contributes to student learning in one academic year. It measures the change in the standardized test scores of students in a given class, or in multiple classes, taught by a given teacher. The scores are adjusted for differences in student characteristics and student scores on previous tests. The standard for academic growth in most states is the amount of academic growth students experience in a typical classroom.

Value-added scores at the top of the scale seem to be an indicator of powerful classroom dynamics. A large-scale study of the relationship between value-added scores and student outcomes examined the records of 1 million children who progressed from fourth grade to adulthood.¹ The results were impressive. The students of HETs are more likely to attend college, earn higher salaries, live in better neighborhoods, and save more, and they are less likely to experience teenage pregnancy. The three economists who published the study were initially skeptical of value-added scores, but they concluded that “great teachers create great value.” In the paper the authors make some policy suggestions that have stirred great controversy, but the findings appear to remain valid.

Value-added scores are not without controversy. Standardized test scores do not always reliably measure student achievement, and a single measure cannot fully capture everything teachers contribute to student learning. Initially, we had our own reservations about the validity of value-added data, but our interactions with HETs convinced us that high value-added scores are associated with more than just an increase in test scores. We also contacted a number of principals and asked them to tell us about teachers in their building who consistently had high value-added scores. Almost every response was some variation of the statement *He or she is one of the best teachers in my school.*

Who Should Read This Book?

This book is written for teachers at all levels and in any field who are hungry to learn and develop. Experienced teachers who currently excel may find companionship in this book. In our workshops and interviews, we found that most schools are uncomfortable with the “highly effective” distinction. We heard many stories of principals telling teachers to keep quiet about being invited to these workshops. But when we brought these teachers together, they were thrilled to hear from one another. This book

may provide companionship and learning for those who feel that their excellence goes unseen.

Experienced teachers who feel discouraged may find inspiration in this book. The stories of HETs are of developing teachers who learn to move to higher levels of performance. Their accounts may stimulate the courage to engage in new experiments and new learning.

Current students in teacher education programs and new teachers may find higher levels of aspiration in this book. The performance achieved by HETs illustrates excellence and suggests paths to get there. The accounts of the HETs may bring an expanded vision of what is possible.

Administrators and policy makers may find a new strategic perspective. The administrative world is dominated by a problem-solving perspective. Policies are shaped to fix what is wrong with the system. HETs illustrate what is most right with the system. The excellence of HETs invites a shift in focus from what should be fixed to what should be pursued. Seeking out, paying attention to, and learning from the best teachers may have a payoff. This book may instill a desire for such a shift in perspective.

People responsible for the professional development of educators may find a new approach to their work. When we present the material in this book, people often ask, "Can HETs be developed?" We respond that teachers are more likely to become HETs if they are challenged and supported in the same ways that HETs challenge and support their students. That is, if we were to teach teachers the way the best teachers teach students, teacher development might accelerate and lives might change.

There is a large group of people outside professional education who desire to become more effective. These people may find that teaching is simply a metaphor for leading and that great teaching is a metaphor for great leading. By reading about the work of HETs, it may be possible to gain insights into how to better accelerate learning and change lives in any setting.

While this book is intended to help practitioners reflect on their own experiences, scholars may find some insights worthy of attention.

In this work we do not make systematic comparisons between HETs and other teachers, so we can draw no generalizable conclusions about what differentiates them. We do however make comparisons. As students, each of the authors spent thousands of hours in classrooms. We then became professional educators. As a result, we made many observations about teaching and formed assumptions about what makes teaching more or less effective. As we listened to the HETs, we compared what they said with our own accumulated experiences. We particularly focused on the things that challenged and surprised us. Their statements may also surprise you.

In each chapter we offer a case study, and then we make sense of the processes being described. From our qualitative data, we provide insights and offer propositions about effective teaching. Until these are systematically tested, we will not know if they hold. We hope that the grounded observations made here might stimulate such work.

How to Read This Book

Over the course of this book, we embrace the metaphor of a growing tree. From the visual on the cover to the images that are interspersed throughout, you will find the unfolding tree—from seed to seedling to mature tree. We believe it to be an apt metaphor for the unfolding and the development of the very best teachers.

A tree begins its development by shedding the husk that surrounds the living seed. As the husk is shed, the tree begins to grow in two directions simultaneously: upward to produce a seedling and downward to produce a strong and widespread root system. Roots serve several important functions for the growth of the tree, including stabilizing and anchoring it to withstand weather of all kinds and nourishing it with water and other nutrients in the soil. It is also interesting that roots do not grow haphazardly; they constantly grow toward higher concentrations of the water and the nutrients that the tree needs to grow.

Above the ground the tree grows many branches that reach toward the sky. Branches support leaves that produce the energy the tree needs to survive. Each branch is autonomous: if it fails or breaks, other branches can still grow and thrive. Great teachers grow in similar ways. They

experiment, they extend themselves, and they find new ways to nourish themselves; realizing that not all ideas are viable but with many new ideas percolating, teachers can continue to develop themselves and their students in a dance of continuous learning.

Throughout the book we also include the following symbols that use the tree metaphor to highlight the different elements to which we want to draw your attention:



The sprouting acorn icon identifies an overview of the content of the current chapter.



The roots icon provides the research foundation behind the ideas being shared.



The leaf icon calls attention to practical teaching tips from the teacher who is profiled in each chapter.



The acorn icon indicates the idea of planting seeds. We offer questions to help you more deeply reflect on the key points in each chapter as it relates to your own teaching practice.



Finally, the tree icon indicates a call to action, where you can get ideas to grow your practice.

Each chapter is built around the story of one extraordinary teacher and how he or she has developed (through successes and failures) to have a positive impact on students. We identify powerful practices that serve to accelerate and deepen the learning of students as well as the teacher. Through the inspiration of these extraordinary models, we share a message that makes it possible for all teachers to start their own journey toward excellence.

The book is built around something we call the BFK•Connect Framework (see inside front cover for a color illustration), a model that establishes four core dimensions of educator effectiveness. Later chapters examine how powerful transformation comes from transcending the individual aspects of each of the four dimensions to build higher-level capacities, including co-creation with students, empowerment, and transformational leadership in the classroom.

Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 presents two views of education. The first is directive and is based on the assumption that education is a hierarchical process of knowledge transfer. Most of us are already familiar with the directive perspective because it is the model that many of us experienced as we grew up. The second view of education is based on an assumption of transformational growth through co-creation. It suggests that education is an organic, adaptive process of knowledge creation. The second perspective does not deny or negate the first. The need for the directive perspective never goes away. The co-creative perspective includes and enlarges the first, making it possible to both broaden and deepen learning.

Chapter 2 proposes that a person must transcend conventional assumptions and operate from an expanded set of beliefs to obtain extraordinary outcomes. Those beliefs may, by conventional standards, seem almost paradoxical. The chapter introduces the BFK•Connect Framework for thinking about how differences can be connected and become mutually reinforcing. It suggests that performance increases as we learn to adapt and that as we learn to adapt we become more complex, that is, more able to see differences and integrate them in generative ways.

Chapters 3 and 4 reflect on how to leverage our strengths without being limited by them. Building on our strengths while recognizing their limitations helps us leave our comfort zone, have new experiences that challenge our working assumptions, and move toward excellence. Each teacher's developmental path is unique, but the journey is facilitated by understanding the framework introduced in chapter 2 and elaborated on in chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 5 explores how teachers can empower themselves despite the challenges they face. HETs claim to experience the same barriers and feel the same frustrations as their peers, but they seem to respond with unusual resilience. Rather than focus on the barriers, they tend to focus on their higher purpose and they keep learning. That purpose is to liberate the potential that already exists in students. One aspect of this strategy is to model the change they wish to see in their students.

Chapter 6 examines the empowerment of students. In some classrooms students are assumed to be recipients of information. In others they

are expected to be creators of knowledge. In the latter case, the students are still recipients of information but they are more fully empowered and engaged. Engaged people tend to learn more than unengaged people. This chapter discusses the emergence of communities in which unity and individuality become mutually reinforcing.

Chapter 7 explores the structures and the processes we use in our approach to teacher professional development. We do this by sharing the stories of the teachers who have joined with us in these attempts to liberate potential and pursue excellence.

An Invitation

Growing up you spent thousands of hours sitting in classrooms, and in most of those classrooms you likely encountered directive approaches to teaching and learning. By the time you entered college, you were already filled with directive assumptions about how to teach. In your education classes and student-teaching experiences, you may have observed more directive practice and learned methods that tend to reinforce the notions of directive practice. After graduation you probably accepted a job at a school whose culture is based on those same directive assumptions. All of this was good. These experiences provided a foundation to get you started in a wonderful profession.

The danger is that you may now be trapped in the assumptions that once facilitated your growth. The beliefs that once served you well may now be holding you back, and you may be losing hope for what you aspired to be. We invite you to consider the stories of the HETs we profile. We invite you to transcend your assumptions and develop a more co-creative perspective of teaching and learning. In this book we share reflection questions, teaching tips from HETs, and other tools to support you in your journey to become the best teacher in you again and again.

Thank You For Reading

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