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My 'Best' Teacher

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My 'Best' Teacher

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Abstract

This article reports the analysis of 59 articles entitled 'my best teacher' printed in the UK Times Educational Supplement January 2000 - August 2003. The research identifies the common qualities/characteristics of 'best' teachers, compares the field of endeavour of the interviewee with the discipline of their 'best teacher' and examines 'light-bulb' moments; times when teachers especially inspired their students. A qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews in the articles has been utilised. The most frequently identified personal qualities contributing to a 'best teacher' are also reported. Finally, a model to illustrate dimensions of a 'best' teacher is presented.

Keywords: Best teacher; good teacher.

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Introduction

Teachers and teacher educators will probably be familiar with The Times Educational Supplement (TES) newspaper and its reporting on educational issues in primary, secondary and further education (post secondary excluding higher education) sectors. Each week in the magazine, entitled Friday, a personality is interviewed about their best teacher. Arguably, the item, due to its longevity, seems to have an enduring appeal and resonance for readers. Do teachers one day hope to find their name in print and to have been identified as someone's 'best teacher'? Is the item read in order to affirm one's own practice in the light of what individuals identify as 'best' in their teachers? Is it read seeking an aspect of best practice that can be implemented? Books with similar titles and presumably appeal have been written (see Bain, 2004, Hare 1993 and Michalos, 2003). Regardless, the column provides a ready source of data about what it means to be a 'best teacher'.

This article reports a mixed methods analysis of 59 'best teacher' articles and seeks to identify any common aspects of 'best teachers'. The work is applied in the sense of it investigating a specific issue: 'best teacher'. It explores what a particular group of individuals have to say about the concept and it adopts a mixed methods approach. The analysis uses quantitative methods to test the data against stated hypotheses followed by a qualitative analysis (Thomas's (2006) general inductive approach) to provide further insight. The broad research question addressed is 'what makes an individual someone's best teacher?' The aim, using a review of the TES data, is to provoke thought and discussion around this topic.

My best teacher

Before considering academic literature about 'best teachers' it is worth describing the nature of the item in the TES. In each weekly article the writer invites the interviewee to recall and describe their 'best teacher'. In addition, the item provides a brief timeline of the individual's life and their achievements including what, for this research, is termed their field of endeavour.

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The first research consideration is what does 'best teacher' mean? In all cases the definition is left to the interviewee and in most cases this results in a two-fold descriptive and analytic answer. Firstly, an individual's 'best teacher' is identified, including the description of the aspects of the teacher's character, their personality and their teaching. This is then followed by some provided by the interviewee as to why the teacher was their 'best'; "because they cared" is offered as a common reason.

Clearly, there are some issues with bias in the sample, which stems from the selection process of the interviewees. The editors of the TES interview select subjects for the 'Best Teacher' article in the magazine on their noteworthiness, and perhaps accessibility. For example, Peter Ustinov was interviewed a month after the publication of his biography and Kelly Holmes after her return home from winning a gold medal at the Commonwealth Games. However, the educational experiences of any individuals should be of interest to other teachers and it is not unreasonable to suggest that it is the desire to be someone's 'best teacher', or more generally the best teacher you can be that makes the item such interesting reading. In addition, the interviewees' experiences may mirror our own and it is this resonance aspect of the feature that could also account for its endurance.

Literature review

Literature about 'best' teachers exists in an aggregated form as the characteristics of 'good' teachers, for which there is a wealth of published material. Perhaps if the 59 interviewees all identified one common feature in their 'best' teachers this could be something that all 'good' teachers should aspire to. Much has been written about good teachers and the features of such individuals tend to change in line with the dominant teaching conception or paradigm of the time. A teacher who meets many of the characteristics of a 'good' teacher, as explained and defined by the literature, is arguably likely to be someone's 'best' teacher. The following literature illustrates how, through time, that there are common elements to the ideas of 'good' and 'best' teacher.

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It is worth noting that the idea itself is probably related to the context and time in which it is constructed.

In 1931, Cattell, from the views of teachers and pupils (n=22) refined and presented the most important characteristics of a good teacher. The top six, in rank order were: personality and will; intelligence; sympathy and tact; open-mindedness; a sense of humour and idealism. 'Will', as a concept, is elucidated, by Cattell, to mean leadership qualities and 'idealism', explained as a belief in the value of the teaching role (ibid).

Compare Cattell's list with Engelhart and Tucker's (1936). They researched high school pupils' (n=224) views on good and poor teachers' traits. In this work, the pupils selected traits from lists drawn up by leading education academics. The top ten good traits identified were; good judgement, clarity of explanation, respecting others' opinions, sincerity, impartiality, fairness, being appreciative, having an interest in pupils, being broad minded and having a knowledge of the subject taught.

There is obvious commonality between these two early pieces of research. Open-mindedness (from Cattell's work) could be considered to include as respect for other's opinion, impartiality and also perhaps fairness (from Engelhart and Tucker's). Such aspects of a teacher might also be contained within Hamachek's idea that 'Effective teachers appear to be those who are, shall we say, 'human' in the fullest sense of the word' (Hamachek,1969, p.341). Hamachek also notes that teacher effectiveness has four dimensions; personal characteristics, instructional procedures and interactional styles, perception of self and perception of others. 'Personal characteristics' was used as a broad theme within the qualitative analysis conducted (see table six).

In the 1980's Dobson's (1985) list, derived by questionnaire from the views of teachers, various students and teacher trainers (n=71), about the most important qualities of a good teacher contained items that could be categorised within Hamachek's four dimensions. The top ten items on Dobson's list of 22

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features of a good teacher is as outlined here. The good teacher has patience, respect for pupils / students, gains the confidence of pupils / students, has a flexible approach, has good organisational ability, has a sense of humour, inspires pupils / students with enthusiasm, has a thorough knowledge of subject matter, has firm classroom discipline and is interested in pupils / students as individuals. Again, continuity from and overlap with earlier lists can be seen.

Having a 'best' clearly allows for the inverse and Strickland (1998 cited in Foote *et al* 2000) identified seven attributes that lead, he proposes, to the description 'bad teacher'. These are a lack of subject knowledge, poor classroom control, acting unprofessionally, an inability to diagnose learning problems, being obsessive about method (written in the context of language teaching and the different teaching methodologies), and a focus on the wrong goals or having no goals at all. Strickland wrote his list as an aid for parents, in the words of Foote *et al* (2000, p.129) 'to deal with lousy teachers' Foote (2000) also carefully notes that best/good and worst/bad are not antonyms in this context and point out that new teachers, whilst not 'good' are also not 'bad' and additionally that they often aspire to 'great'.

Michalos (2003, p.14) notes that the most frequently mentioned attribute of best teachers are a 'genuine concern' for students. These students were 'regarded and treated [by the teachers] as equals in the pursuit of truth'. The 'genuine concern' was also manifest in a deep attachment to the relevant subject area and an ability to share "the vastness, coherence and wonder" (Michalos, 2003, p.38) of the discipline to energise and motivate future scholars. Subject knowledge appears in most of the lists considered, but is expressed in Michalos's work with an associated personal characteristic. This 'deep attachment' characteristic serves to illustrate the potential overlap between the various aspects of a 'best' teacher. In Michalos's research the personal characteristic of a 'deep attachment to the relevant subject area' is more objectively presented within other lists, for example as the teacher having a 'thorough knowledge of the subject matter' (Dobson) and 'knowledge of the subject taught' (Cattell).

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In New Zealand, Kane and Mallon (2006) report a top five qualities of teachers from the views of 790 teachers and 182 school board members. The first four qualities being personal characteristics; an ability to establish caring relationships with students, a demonstrable love of their work, being trusted, and respected by pupils and their parents, having high personal integrity with the fifth being a demonstrable expertise in the process of facilitating learning.

Dewar (2002, p.63) in a paper comparing 'good' teacher research from 1931 and 1987 lists the characteristics from three studies and considers others to draw two clear conclusions. Firstly, that there is no easy answer to what good teacher characteristics are and secondly, that the ability to be empathetic and accessible are consistently recorded as "major elements" in the research into good teaching. In support of Dewar's second point Korthagen (2003) notes that researchers consistently find good teacher traits to be a caring approach, flexibility and enthusiasm.

There are many other studies and many other theoretical and empirically derived lists of the qualities, skills and abilities of a 'good' teacher and of good teaching (see, for example, (Thompson, Green, & Geer, 2004), (Bain,2004), (Porter & Brophy,1988), (Chickering & Gamson,1991), (HERDSA, 2006), (Ronkowski,1993), (LeBlanc,1998), (Azer, 2005), (Loughran, 2010) and (Upton and Bernstein, 2011).

Azer's list (see Table 1.) provides some addition clarification to the categories he proposes. The first quality of a good teacher is that they are 'committed to the work' with focusing on the education needs of students, working with passion, keen to uphold employer's values and enthusiastic about work and about teaching all offered as factors contained within the commitment (Azer, 2005, p.68). Clearly, there are sectoral as well as temporal variations, yet a least one common theme emerges, the requirement for a good teacher to be caring. Loughran sums this up by stating 'It is hard to imagine how any teacher

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could not have the best interests of their students at heart' (Azer, 2005, p.123). However, I feel that he might have inserted 'good' in front of teacher.

Characteristic	Additional explanation
Committed to their work	<i>works with passion</i>
Encourages and appreciates diversity	<i>does not stereotype</i>
Interacts and communicates respect	<i>listens deeply credits contributions</i>
Motivates students (and co-workers)	<i>encourages students to achieve goals</i>
Brings a wide range of skills and talents to teaching	<i>stimulates high order thinking skills</i>
Demonstrates leadership in teaching	<i>demonstrates creativity in teaching</i>
Encourages an open and trusting learning environment	<i>creates climate of trust</i>
Fosters critical thinking	<i>teaches students how to think</i>
Encourages creative work	<i>fosters innovation</i>
Emphasises teamwork	<i>encourages collaborative working</i>
Seeks continually to improve teaching skills	<i>seeks feedback and criticism</i>
Provides positive feedback	<i>discovers student needs and provides constructive feedback</i>

Table 1. Azer's (2005) list of the 12 qualities of a good teacher.

Cruickshank and Haefele (2001, p.29) review ten visions of good teachers noting that different notions of 'good' apply for different educational stakeholders. They conclude their review by posing several questions, including 'How can we prepare teachers and help them become 'good' by some criteria?' and 'To what extent can good teacher be distinguished from bad' It is

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possible to argue that searching for commonality between conceptions of 'good' might provide some answers to both questions. Arguably, for a teacher to be 'best' they must be 'good'. The identification of 'best' for one particular sample of (former) pupil stakeholders is now presented.

Method

For this study thirty-two months of the TES feature 'My Best Teacher', starting in January 2000 and ending in August 2003, were reviewed giving a sample of 87 interviewees (for some weeks the feature was not published). Of these 15 were excluded from the analysis because they identified 'teachers' from outside normal schooling environments (e.g. a coach). 8 identified a parent as their best teacher, 2 a member of their universities teaching staff and 5 some other individual. This left a sample size of 59 interviewees.

From the information provided in each article several factual pieces of data were identified. For the interviewees; their sex and field of endeavour, and for the identified best teacher; their sex, the subject they taught the interviewee and the education sector in which they worked. The complete items published in the TES (via its online archive) were transferred into a suitable format and uploaded into Nvivo to facilitate qualitative analysis of the data. These data were then analysed using Thomas's (2006) general inductive approach for quantitative analysis. This analysis generated thematic categories, and sub-categories, into which associated text extracts, were placed. In addition links between hierarchical categories were noted, for example within personal qualities 13 sub-categories were identified and created. The categories were developed from a close reading of each article, in particular the paragraphs and sentences interviewees used to describe the features that made the teacher the 'best'.

Results

The results presented below are from both the factual data analysis and the general inductive analysis. The first set of tabular presentation relates to the factual data. Table two shows the cross tabulation of the sex of the interviewee (respondent) against the sex of their indentified 'best' teacher. There is a clear

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relationship between the two, female respondents identified female teachers and vice-versa.

	Sex of best teacher = Male	Sex of best teacher = Female	Totals
Sex of respondent = Male	26	9	35
Sex of respondent = Female	4	20	24
Totals	30	29	59

Table 2. Sex of best teacher tabulated against sex of respondent (interviewee).

Using a chi-squared as a test for the interdependence of the data in the above table the null hypotheses of no interdependence can be rejected with 99.9% confidence ($18.91 > 10.83$ at two degrees of freedom). It is possible to speculate that some of the interviewees went to single sex schools which would limit their choice of sex for their 'best' teacher. However, the large percentages of each sex who select same sex 'best' teachers (males 74% and females 83%) suggests that there is more to this than a limiting of choice due to school attendance.

The next tabulation (Table 3.) shows the sex of the interviewee and their 'best' teacher against the sector in which the 'best' teacher worked. Here the results show the dominance of the secondary (K7 - K12) sector with 74% of male and 75% of female interviewees selecting their 'best' teacher from that sector. Again it is possible to speculate about the reasons for this. One possible reason is that the late secondary years (ages 16+) for students are amongst the most formative in their lives and finding a teacher who 'cares' at this stage is something that stayed with the respondents.

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	Sector of best teacher				Totals
	Primary	Secondary	Further education	Higher education	
Sex of best teacher = Male	6	24	0	0	30
Sex of respondent = Male	8	26	1	0	35
Sex of best teacher = Female	8	20	1	0	29
Sex of respondent = Female	6	18	0	0	24
Totals	28	88	2	0	118

Table 3. Sex of respondent (interviewee) and best teacher against sector of best teacher.

The final factual tabulation (Table 4.) reports the degree of match between the field of endeavour of the interviewee and of their 'best' teacher. Here the spread between 'exact', 'some' and 'no' match is 24, 39 and 37 per cent respectively. Using a chi-squared as a test for the interdependence of the data in the below table the null hypotheses of no interdependence has to be accepted ($13.86 < 15.51$ at eight degrees of freedom).

Degree of Match	Field of endeavour of respondent					Totals
	Science	Arts	Sport	Popular entertainment/ TV	Others (Religion, Law, Journalism, etc)	
Exact	2	7	3	1	1	14
Some	0	11	1	8	3	23
None	0	7	3	7	5	22
Totals	2	25	7	16	9	59

Table 4. Match between respondent field of endeavour and best teacher's subject.

Whilst the idea that the field of endeavour of the interviewee is related to the discipline of the interviewee's 'best teacher' might have a certain resonance the chi-squared test does not support this. A counter idea can be proposed; that a

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teacher from any discipline has the potential to become someone's best teacher, regardless of the apparent aptitude of the student for that discipline. The following section considers one particular aspect of the qualitative data.

Qualitative data: 'moments' and 'teacher as teacher' and 'teacher as person'

'Moments' were identified and coded when the interviewee's recalled a specific time that held particular significance. In the four selected examples below the fields of endeavour and the discipline of the teacher were relatively closely, or in one case exactly related. The first example is the actress Alison Steadman, talking about a 'moment' during an English lesson.

The rest of the class thought this was hysterical, but for once Miss Davies did not encourage the laughing. She said, '*What are you all laughing at? There is nothing funny here. We need to applaud and not laugh. She has understood that this is the most tragic moment of the play*'. I loved Miss Davies from that moment on. Had she reacted differently I might have had a different view of acting.

This 'moment' illustrates one of Azer's (2005) aspects of a 'best' teacher, the interaction between teacher and student, and the communication of respect by the teacher for the student's contributions and themselves as individuals.

In the next example Evelyn Glenie (classical virtuoso percussionist) recalls a time when she was challenged by her music teacher to think about what she was trying to create with an instrument (in this case a snare drum). Azer might argue that as an example of the teacher fostering the student's creative work. I started tapping it and pinching it and scraping it, and the next week he asked how I had got on. I said '*I did not know*'. He said, '*now create the sound of a storm. Now create the sound of a whisper*'. Suddenly I had this picture I had to put into sound. This opened up my world. It was the best lesson I ever had. After that, it was just constant exploration.

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This example, like Alison Steadman's 'moment' is from an English lesson, in this case one remembered by author Ian Rankin. This 'moment' illustrates Azur's 'best' teacher requirement of being committed to teaching and working with passion. He knew Greek and Latin; he could quote T.S. Eliot, but was also interested in popular music, so we studied Bob Dylan's lyrics as well as classic texts. Suddenly, English was not just about dead authors anymore. He would talk to us about the music we were interested in and would happily deconstruct Sex Pistols' lyrics for us if we wanted.

The final example is another English lesson; here Trish Goddard (a United Kingdom television chat show host) recalls the power of positive feedback. She set us the task of writing a book. I called mine *The Sign of the Cyclamen*, a flower that grows where there is very little snow. When someone is lost in the mountains, if they see it, they know they can safely put their feet there. We wrote a weekly chapter and I will never forget she put at the end of mine: 'I can't wait for the next chapter'. I was so encouraged.

With each of these extracts it is possible to allocate them to 'best teacher' categories identified by Azer (2005). If these categories are used the four recollections fit with and illustrate; interaction & communication of respect, fostering of critical thinking, commitment & working with passion and providing positive feedback. For all the 'moments' identified, there were 21 from the 59 interviews, it is possible to allocate them to Azer's categories. Some 'moments' may overlap two or more categories and are allocated accordingly. Evelyn Glenie's 'moment' above, for example, is allocated to both 'motivates student' and 'encourages creative work'. When all 21 'moments' were allocated to one or more categories, the category with the highest frequency was 'encourages creative work' followed by 'motivates students'.

Within the interview transcriptions two large categories of coded data emerged, those statements and recollections that spoke about the teacher in terms of them as a teacher ('teacher as teacher') and those that spoke of the teacher in terms of them as an individual ('innate personal characteristics'). Table 5.

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overleaf, presents the allocation of 'teacher as a teacher' statements into Azer's categories.

Quality	f	Example (from TES) – 'about teacher as teacher'
Committed to their work	37	It was amazing that out of such a neat, contained, quiet person came this explosion of thought and imagination. Mrs Welding absolutely loved her own subject and simply shared it with us, holding nothing back.
Encourages and appreciates diversity	5	On top of this, he valued whatever anyone else contributed. Nobody's opinion was invalid and even if it was dumb or cliché ridden, he would find a way of honouring it.
Interacts and communicates respect	21	He was the first teacher to treat us as young adults, and that earned him so much respect from all of us.
Motivates students	16	We were unleashed on to the literature and allowed to find what interested us.
Brings a wide range of skills and talents to teaching	5	"Sorry Fred, I didn't follow that very well" - but he had the patience and intelligence to slow down. Having a good teacher in this regard was crucial and the information I was taught has stayed with me ever since.
Demonstrates leadership in teaching	2	Any kind of leader has to have two qualities: love and boundaries.
Encourages an open and trusting learning environment	5	Frank was admired by all pupils because his teaching style was warm and interesting.
Fosters critical thinking	7	I saw Mr Wellock in the corridor next day and decided to tell him about it. He could have brushed me off or humoured me but instead he knelt down to my eye level and asked me what I'd loved about James Dean's performance.
Encourages creative work	11	He has had an impact on what I'm doing now in terms of creativity and he also taught me to look under the surface and realise that everything's not always as it seems.
Emphasises teamwork	0	na
Seeks continually to improve teaching skills	5	He said, straight as a die: "It's sex, isn't it?" He was not searching for titillation. It was just a great way of introducing a central theme of the play - primitive love and the awakening of sexual desire.
Provides positive feedback	33	She had such a gentle encouraging way of communicating it, with straightforwardness and generosity.

Table 5. Frequency of 'teacher as teacher' allocated to Azer (2005) categories.

With these statements compared with the recalled 'moments' the category with the highest frequency is 'committed to their work' (37 statements) closely followed by 'provides positive feedback' (33 statements).

The teacher as teacher statements can be contrasted with the innate personal characteristics.

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'innate personal characteristics'	f	Example
Respectful	1	What I liked so much was the fact that he was the first teacher to really speak to me as if I was on the same level as him.
Supportive	4	Mr Way was incredibly nice to me at that time, really supportive and helpful and fatherly
Encouraging	14	With her encouragement I went on to Queen Mary's College in Basingstoke, which had a fantastic drama course.
Gave time	3	It would always be Duncan who would find the time to come and sort out whatever panic I had got myself in.
Caring	4	But Mr Edmunds would always check that I was OK.
Nice	7	Mr Johnson was nice, quite young and nervy.
Talked	3	It was always a pleasure because he'd chat to me.
Inspirational	10	He was inspiring and the one who said to me: "You're a smart lad, you should go to Cambridge."
Kind	4	She had a reputation for being strict, but I found her kind.
Funny / humour	6	I was lucky to have such a good teacher with a fantastic sense of humour.
Interested	3	She took an interest in my welfare and probably saved me from being one of the naughtiest children in the school by persuading me that there was no point in being difficult.
Understanding	3	She understood what I was about without prying.
Intelligent	1	Mr Gillespie had something of a working class manner about him, but he was very intelligent.

Table 6. A categorisation of statements about the innate personal characteristics of the 'best' teachers.

In Table 6. the innate personal characteristic of being encouraging has the highest frequency of statements coded to it, followed closed by the characteristic of being inspirational. In both of the above tables direct quotes from the interviewees are included for illustrative purposes. In some cases the quotes indicate that the statements made by interviewees could (and are) coded to more than one category (see the example 'supportive' in Table 6.).

Discussion

What emerges from the data is a picture of the complexity involved in the concept of a 'best' teacher. A problem with such identification is the reductionism that takes place with categorisation. In this case some of the nuance originally identified in each study can easily be lost. In the 'moments' identified by the interviewees something unique and memorable has taken place due to the intervention in their schooling of their 'best' teacher. These

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'moments' still resonate in their lives and encapsulate some or several aspects of 'best' teaching. In the teacher's comment about Trish Goddard's story 'I can't wait for the next chapter' there is something personal, human, encouraging, positive, appreciative, motivational and creative, all in seven words. It reveals something both about the teacher as a teacher and as an individual.

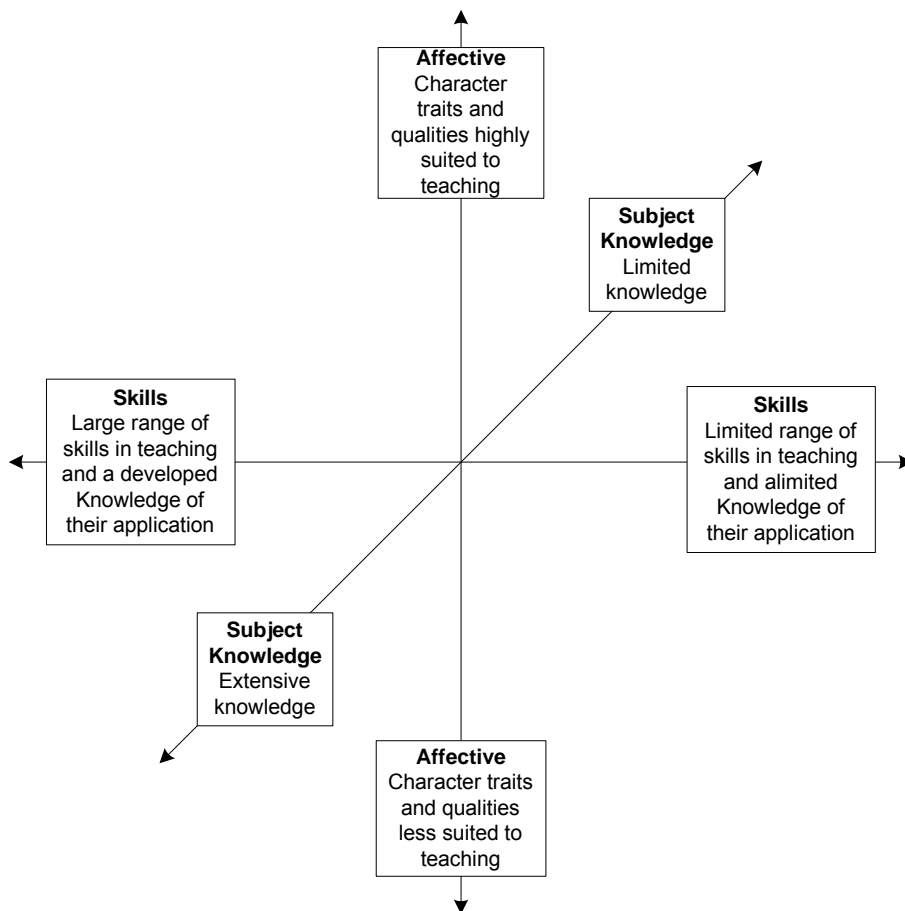
In addition, the category frequency reporting tends to suggest that inter-subjective agreement identifies 'best' something that is a subjective concept, 'best' for one student is less 'best' or 'worst' for another. In addition, 'best' includes an implicit comparison with other teachers. Regardless of this the analysis suggests that identification of 'best' gives information with regard to 'good'. The data shows that there are two clusters of material and information about 'best'; the 'teacher as a teacher' including the range and depth of such skills a teacher may have, and the 'teacher as an individual' including the character traits that lend themselves to teaching such as being encouraging, motivational and positive. Also a teacher cannot teach without some subject knowledge. These three dimensions are summarised in Figure 1. overleaf.

Figure 1. Hypothesised three dimensions of a 'best' teacher.

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This diagram attempts to illustrate the intersection of qualities that make for good or 'best' teachers. It serves to show how 'best' teaching is a complex combination of factors, each dimension involves a high degree of complexity, for example developing a range of teaching skills. Whilst teaching skills/abilities are on one axis, is not totally separate from skills in teaching a subject (pedagogical content knowledge), which stem from an immersion and expertise in both the discipline taught and the discipline of education/teaching. The knowledge of the discipline taught extends out of and into the page, the skills of teaching extend left-right across the page and the aspects of character (teacher as individual) extend up and down the page. The 'best' quadrant is therefore the upper left out of the page with the worst bottom left into the page (limited discipline knowledge, limited teaching skills and personal characteristics least suited to teaching).

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This article and Figure 1. inevitably lead towards more questions, both research and more philosophical in nature. Some obvious ones are:

- Is 'best' teacher a useful concept for teachers to consider?
- How do 'good' and 'best' teachers fit with each other?
- Can a teacher be taught to be 'good' but 'best' is innate?
- Is there an illusive component that takes a teacher from 'good' to 'best'?
- Is it possible to teach a teacher 'passion for subject' and 'inspirational'?

These questions can be addressed by individuals that Loughran (2010, p.184) calls teacher researchers people who are both 'practitioners and theoreticians' and he argues that 'what teachers know, need to know and are able to do is understood very differently when examined from a teacher's perspective' (Loughran (2010, p.185). In the conclusion to his book Loughran (2010, p.218) also emphasises the complexity of teaching and notes that 'the quality of teaching is evident in the teacher's sensitivity to student's learning' . Clearly the motivated teacher-researcher seeks to improve their practice and become better at what they do in order for student to learn. In researching and examining teaching practice in the three dimensions proposed and the in areas of intersection between them a new context specific 'best' pedagogy may emerge.

Conclusion

This article has reported on research into 'best' teacher by using an existing set of source material. From the existing literature about 'good' teachers and the data generated a picture of a 'best' teacher emerges. There are clearly limitations to this work, notably the selection of the interviewee, however, the intention has been to promote debate about 'good/best' teachers. A 'best' teacher is likely to be same sex as the student, is likely to be working in the secondary phase of schooling, and is likely to not teach a discipline that the student will seek a career in.

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The 'best' teacher will be recalled by their students with a specific event if they encouraged the students in a creative manner and were motivational. It is this specific recollection that is often the powerful influence in the lives of the respondents. They will be recalled in general because they were committed to their work, they provided positive feedback and they interacted and communicated respect. Their character and personality will be encouraging and inspirational. For all teachers these ideas can provide inspiration and motivation, in the case of the general, they also give guidance on the key aspects of practice. In terms of informing debate on teaching this work has highlighted the absence of low inference directly observable factors in 'best' teachers. This may be due to the way the question is phrased, but interviewees did not respond by saying, say, that their best teacher was on time.

For teachers this list provides a set of aspirations against which an individual can reflect and seek to improve. For teachers of teachers it provides a list against which a teaching student can be matched. The difficulties arise in trying to teach the 'teacher as person' affective characteristics - are the 'best' teachers born or taught? Or both?

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