

The verdict:
10/10
JES Magazine

inspirational
TEACHERS
inspirational
LEARNERS

by Will Ryan

*A book of hope
for Creativity and the
Curriculum in the
Twenty First Century*

Edited by Ian Gilbert



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The characters in this book are purely fictional. Any similarities between them and real individuals are purely coincidental.

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The Prologue

It was 1993 and the early spring sunshine was streaming through high Victorian windows as I walked into the classroom. Skies were blue, trees were turning green and the birds sang. I was feeling positive because I thought I was turning the corner in my second headship. At last, I thought, the school was on the way up. I moved towards a table with a spare chair and sat with a group of children. I turned to Jenny, a rather sweet eight-year-old with flowing blonde hair, and asked, 'Tell me, Jenny, what are you learning about today?' In gruff, flat Yorkshire vowels she replied, 'Well, if you ask me it's all a load of rubbish.'

The thing about working in primary education is that the highs can be very high but the lows can be very low.

The children were cutting out parts of diagrams from a pre-published worksheet and sticking them onto another piece of paper to depict the water cycle under the heading of 'The Journey of a River'. The activity was relatively undemanding and there was little evidence of pride in what was going on.

I asked Jenny to explain why she wasn't enjoying the lesson. She told me to walk to the end of the lane and look at the river because there were dead fish floating on the surface. She then told me that her grandfather and a group of friends (who were local miners) had in the past 'clubbed together' to buy fishing rights. They told her how they had racked their brains to prevent kingfishers and herons from robbing them of their investments. She knew about the boats that used to travel between the local coal mine and the power station pulling huge floating skips full of coal that would be used to generate electricity. She spoke of paddling and damming the small brook that feeds into the river. Then she told me how the river would eventually flow under Europe's largest suspension bridge and into the Humber ports. She concluded: 'We shouldn't be doing the journey of a river – we should be doing the story of a river.'

Those thoughts stayed with me for many years. I learned so much from her comments and further researched the idea of using an emotional hook to engage pupils' learning. I started to explore the concept further and found out how the

limbic system in the brain works in precisely that manner. I also spent much time considering the key elements that would be in Jenny's story of a river. I pictured the group of enterprising miners and their need to think in order to seek solutions. I thought about how literacy and the arts could be involved and how the 'story of a river' would create a sense of awe, wonder and spirituality. As I did this, a new model of pupil creativity started to emerge in my mind that would be fit for the century we live in.

Time moved on. Jenny continued to point out the school's failings to me. She was a 'school council' all on her own. Jenny moved to secondary school and I moved on to join the local authority's school improvement service.

More or less fourteen years after that fateful day in Jenny's classroom I was sent to a school with several newly qualified teachers to observe them teach as part of the borough's monitoring programme. The head took me to the first classroom and introduced me to one of the NQTs, saying, 'Will, may I introduce Jenny Cole.' We both looked at each other and said, 'Oh no,' followed by, 'We have met before.' Both phrases were uttered in perfect unison. I was looking straight into the eyes of the former pupil who had seemed to invent the concept of student voice.

I asked about the lesson that I was about to watch and I was told it related to the journey of river. I was handed the lesson plan which had been downloaded from the internet. The session involved a diagram and the children sequencing sections of text so that they could piece together the story of the water cycle. In Ofsted terminology the lesson would have been graded satisfactory.

The thing about working in primary education is that the highs can be very high but the lows can be very low.

When it came to providing feedback, I reminded her of our conversation all those years ago and told her how I had learned so much from her remarks.

Without further comment from me, she said, 'I didn't follow my own advice then, did I?'

With the trace of a tear in her eye, she went on to say that she found the job so frustrating because her mind was full of ideas. She had wanted to take the class to different locations along the local river. She had wanted to take them to an abandoned warehouse by the wharf and sketch the disused buildings and then set an adventure story there. She had wanted to take her class of disadvantaged children up into the Pennine mountains to find the source of the river and feel the icy cold water as they paddled in the youthful beck. She had wanted the children to go to the river estuary before it flows into the sea, to watch the fish being unloaded onto the dockside and then to meet the crew of the lifeboat. She concluded that sometimes her mind was so full of plans that her head hurt.

I asked her why none of her ideas were possible and got the response: 'I am not allowed. We have all been told that there can be no time for extras because we have to raise standards by 5% in English and mathematics. The literacy subject leader said the class couldn't do story settings until next term. I was not able to go to the coast because the Year 6 class always do contrasting environments. I was also told the health and safety issues are too great and there would be problems because the parents wouldn't pay the voluntary contributions. And besides, the leadership team told me that we all followed the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) schemes and there was no need to deviate because all I had to do was make sure the children covered the journey of a river.'

The constraints were too great. And while we are simply managing them we will not be inspiring young lives. This book is based on an analysis of what our most inspirational teachers do. So ask yourself these questions:

- When did you last inspire someone?
- Are you content with the answer?
- Do you feel the need to read on?

This is a book that tells you what inspirational teachers do.

Overcoming the Matthew Effect

For unto everyone that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

Matthew 25:29

Now that is a quotation that sounds a bit depressing. Malcolm Gladwell first introduced the idea of the ‘Matthew Effect’.⁶⁹ The principle implies that your life chances are still largely determined by where you are born and to whom you are born. We all recognise that this is the era of the internet and free information for all. As a consequence the kid wearing blue trainers from Bash Street Primary School should be able to excel. Sadly too often they don’t. In 2008 the Sutton Trust reported, ‘It is appalling that young people’s life chances are still so tied to the fortunes of their parents, and that this situation has not improved over the last three decades.’⁷⁰

So what could be done to change this situation? Well, I certainly believe that inspirational teachers can play a significant role. Gladwell identified five key factors that led to success in life. I have added how the inspirational teacher can have an influence:

The inspirational teacher creates a sense of aspiration and a desire for success.
They open the door to life’s opportunities.



The inspirational teacher gives children a sense of self-belief and shows them the benefits of taking risks and this helps them to make lucky breaks. Many people have observed that you make your own luck in this world.



Inspirational teachers open the world of the twenty-first century to the children so they understand and can make the most of the time they are in.



Inspirational teachers focus on developing uniqueness of thought, originality and creativity so that children learn to spot the unique opportunities that exist.

Inspirational teachers build a strong work ethic in the learners and qualities such as perseverance and resilience. Malcolm Gladwell refers to the 10,000 hour rule of hard work. The Beatles practised for this amount of time in a Hamburg nightclub before they made it big. In the words of violinist Pablo de Sarasate, 'I have practised for fourteen hours a day and now they call me a genius.'

Meanwhile back at the park bench ...

Enough of all this pontificating. You will recall that I was sitting on a metal bench in the middle of a northern town and the chill is now starting to rise up my spine. I looked once more at page of the newspaper that was blowing around my feet. It was from *The Times* dated 3 February 2010. The article was entitled 'How to Recognise Opportunities in Business'. With a little adaptation it offers a mantra for an approach to enterprise education in schools.

| | |
|----|---|
| 1. | <p>Observe the world</p> <p>Budding entrepreneurs are encouraged to carry around a notebook and record everything that 'bugs' them in the world. This book has already argued that a prime purpose of primary education should be to understand what is right and what is wrong and what is fair and what is unfair. The minute children start to recognise a need to change something they have taken the first step along an enterprise journey.</p> |
| 2. | <p>Focus on your passions</p> <p>Anthony Robbins argues that the first trait of a highly effective person is their passion for the task at hand.⁷¹ Jim Collins in his book <i>Good to Great</i>, an analysis of American businesses, proves that the most successful companies have something at their heart that they are passionate about. Inspirational teachers can ignite a passion within children and focus that passion through an enterprise journey.⁷²</p> |

| | |
|-----|--|
| 3. | <p>Look at what is in front of you</p> <p>Whilst it is important to have a clear long term goal or clarity about what you are trying to create, you also need to break it down into smaller next stages and proceed in a systematic and strategic way.</p> |
| 4. | <p>Understand your customers</p> <p>The best enterprise projects are always produced for a far wider audience, group or client base than the teacher. Therefore it is important during an enterprise journey that learners always spend time researching their needs of the target group.</p> |
| 5. | <p>Don't reinvent the wheel</p> <p>Whatever product or service you seek to provide always make sure it has your unique mark on it. When I wrote my first book, my editor gave me just one instruction and that was to make sure I wrote the book that only I could write. It was at that point that the fog lifted and I felt empowered. A product or service might build on a previous model but never simply copy it.</p> |
| 6. | <p>Be thorough</p> <p>Plan and prepare meticulously at all stages. When you are about to take a risk be aware that if it can go wrong it will go wrong! Therefore try to alleviate any weaknesses as you move along within a project.</p> |
| 7. | <p>Rediscover your imagination</p> <p>Creativity and using your imagination to solve problems are fantastic ways of opening up opportunities. Did you know that the man who invented the ring pull on a can got the idea from peeling a banana?</p> |
| 8. | <p>Pair up</p> <p>Never try to do anything totally alone and always be prepared to take advice – being a member of a multi-disciplinary team will always pay dividends.</p> |
| 9. | <p>Leave your comfort zone</p> <p>Get used to taking risks as it will make you stronger and always remember that the fear of failure will never be as bad as the feeling of regret.</p> |
| 10. | <p>Take advantage of the current climate</p> <p>Be aware of the opportunities that only exist at the current period of time.</p> |

The journey to emotional literacy

Some educationalists have stressed the absolute importance of teaching emotional literacy in schools. Howard Gardner argues that the brain has a number of intelligence centres and the key to effective learning lies in unlocking all of these centres. Most of these intelligences have been reflected elsewhere within this book. However it is now appropriate and important to focus on two specifically, with a third to be introduced later in the chapter. The first of these is *interpersonal intelligence*. Our best teachers not only model how but also teach their learners to:

- Relate to others
- Work as a team member
- Lead a team
- Empathise with others and demonstrate care
- Adapt roles to suit social situations
- Be discerning and respond sensitively to subtle changes of mood, behaviour, motivation and intentions in others.

The second of Gardner's intelligences relevant to this chapter is *intrapersonal intelligence*. Inspirational teachers equip learners to:

- Understand their inner self
- Make sense of thoughts, emotions, values and beliefs
- Be sufficiently 'in charge' of themselves to be able to act on those understandings and change the way in which they learn, behave and relate to others.

Gardner argues that, from a very early age, children are placed into a normal distribution curve of ability often based on a narrow range of testing which focuses on verbal-linguistic and logical-mathematical traits. Teachers and schools rightly place a considerable emphasis on disturbing that curve of distribution in order to produce better academic results. However we all know that academic excellence does not guarantee success in life and that the qualities of interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence are important if our youngsters are to grow into successful adults.

Therefore all teachers should ask themselves the following questions:

- Am I fully committed to helping the children in my class to become competent adults who are able to follow their own goals in life?
- Do I believe that the classroom should be about far more than just delivering programmes of study from the National Curriculum or National Frameworks?
- Do I want to provide genuine high quality learning experiences that will provide the children with knowledge, skills and understanding and prepare them to lead a full and active life in which they believe they can and will achieve?
- Am I prepared to do something about it, no matter how much it will make me feel that I am going against the grain and may get into trouble?

Any teacher who answers yes to these questions will recognise the role that emotional literacy plays within the inspirational classroom. Emotional literacy can be defined as the ability to recognise, understand and appropriately express emotions. It matters because it enables individuals to achieve their best and make a greater and more fulfilling contribution to society. It has been claimed that EQ is more important than IQ for predicting lifelong success in both the workplace and personal relationships. Teachers who promote emotional literacy in their classrooms contribute significantly to the emotional well-being of pupils. This is essential if successful learning is to take place. Children need to feel safe from harm whether it be physical or emotional. They also need to feel valued as an individual, empowered by belonging to a caring community and succeed through challenging but achievable learning activities.

Inspirational teachers recognise that:

- The best learning is an emotional experience which involves risk taking but should also build confidence.
- Emotional well-being can either help or hinder learning.
- When there is an emotional involvement in learning it will motivate pupils.
- Positive emotions within a classroom influence learning skills including concentration, memory and problem solving.

- Through supporting the emotional needs of all children the most vulnerable will also be supported.
- The emotional climate of the classroom is extremely important as it will promote creativity, risk taking and innovation for both teachers and pupils.

Tales of Inspirational Practice

Classrooms that sustain a positive state of mind

Daniel thought he was a good teacher *and he was*. He thought he was creative and could come up with original ideas *and he could*. He thought he took risks *and he did*. He was a good teacher who was dedicated to his work. He planned meticulously. But Daniel wanted to do better because at this stage he was not an *inspirational* teacher. Then one day he read an article which claimed that saying five positive things to a child each day had a profound effect. This made him read and research further and he realised that he was failing to take full account of how the brain worked. Daniel started researching the concept of sustaining a positive state of mind within his classroom. As a consequence he started to change his practice. In addition to his usual meticulous planning he took a set of prompts into the classroom each day which became a mantra for his classroom practice. The prompts included:

- Make sure that positive statements outnumber any form of criticism by at least four to one.
- Speak to each individual by name and making eye contact.
- Through conversation find out more about learners, their lives, hobbies and interests.
- Ensure that regularly changing displays demonstrate how you value children's work.
- Constantly model and communicate high expectations, a sense of purposeful pace and challenge children further in a positive context.
- Catch the learners who are doing well and celebrate it immediately.
- Ensure all learners receive positive constructive feedback that provides affirmation.
- Allow children to affirm their own successes and celebrate the successes of others.

Daniel didn't find this challenge easy. Maybe he had the features that are sometimes typically associated with males and didn't easily engage in emotionally based conversations. But over the period of a term he persevered until all those elements were regularly in place in his classroom. The responses he was receiving from the pupils got better and better as the confidence levels within the classroom grew and grew. However he still did not regard himself as the inspirational teacher he wanted to be. So during one summer holiday he decided to think again and went back to the key research. He then drew up his own set of professional development objectives for the following year. These included:

- Developing a new set of criteria to differentiate the outcomes of children's work using a technique called Must-Should-Could. In telling his class what he was looking for in any task he told them of the elements it *must* have to be an acceptable response to the challenge. Then he told them what it *should* have to be a good response. Finally he asked them to consider what else they *could* add that would make their work unique and exceptional and stand out from the rest.
- Ensuring that learning activities are as real-world related and authentic as possible because this provides relevance and often an emotional hook into learning.
- Ensuring that the pupils learn as much from their peers as possible by providing opportunities for collective and collaborative activity.
- Encouraging learners to choose their own strategies for learning.
- Reducing the amount of written recording or text-based learning in favour of more physical–tactile, visual–spatial, musical or team-based approaches.
- Encouraging learners to spend more time showing, telling and teaching each other.
- Creating opportunities for learners to reflect on how they solved problems, handled their tasks or made sense of their learning.

Remember at the start of this case study I said that Daniel already had the features of a really good teacher. His dedication and professionalism, however, moved him to a new and exceptional level and the practice in his classroom is now truly inspirational. Children bound through the doors and seem to eat out of his hands. Everybody achieves and helps others to achieve. The last occasion I spoke to Daniel was late on a Thursday afternoon. I was just about to leave the classroom when

... an inspirational text that should be on the reading list of all educational administrators and on the bedside table of all school leaders and classroom teachers.

The verdict: 10/10.

Martin Spice, Published in TES Magazine

... this book will remind you of why you came into the profession.

*Mark Wheeler, Executive Head Teacher of
Trinity Croft and Thrybergh Fullerton schools*

Over the years too many people have created a mythology around teaching and learning that has over-complicated what is, at its heart, a very simple set of principles: translate tough concepts into the tangible, make it matter, be inspirational and provide contexts and experiences. In this book, Will nails it!

Richard Gerver, educational commentator, author and broadcaster

Will's enthusiasm for teaching is contagious. He speaks from the heart whilst drawing on a wealth of research from some of the most inspiring educationalists in the world. Yet it is his practical approach, with so many examples of great ideas, that makes this book such a useful tool for teachers.

Chris Quigley, Director Chris Quigley Education Ltd

Ranging from *The Beano's* Bash Street Kids to Lorenz's butterfly effect, and with words such as 'joy', 'passion', 'awe' and 'wonder' featuring throughout, this book is certainly an inspirational read. Although aimed more towards primary teachers, the ideas it contains are equally applicable to the secondary sector.

*Jan Sargeant, Senior Adviser (Secondary),
North Yorkshire Local Authority*

A valuable read for any primary school teacher.

Angela Tuff, education consultant



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