



# Outstanding Classrooms

A guide to good practice



# The outstanding classroom



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## About this report

**D**uring the past decade, in all kinds of schools around the world, I have observed over 8,000 lessons – from Mumbai to New York, Barcelona to Birmingham, Jeddah to Jarrow.

As an observer, coach, inspector or reviewer my simple definition of an outstanding lesson is a lesson I just don't want to leave. I want to know where the teacher and pupils are going next and what their individual 'learning moments' will lead to.

So what does create an outstanding classroom? What exactly is happening in a primary classroom when that great double act of teaching and learning is taking place? How can teachers move their practice, in Ofsted terminology, from 'good' to 'outstanding'?

This short guide will explore the key elements of an outstanding classroom, helping you to reflect on practice in your own school, and outline some approaches you might consider to help move your lessons to outstanding.

Inside this report you will find:

- Ideas and guidance about the key elements of the outstanding classroom: what constitutes vibrant and inspiring teaching, outstanding English and mathematics lessons, the curriculum in the outstanding classroom, differentiation and orchestration.
- Case studies from outstanding classrooms.
- Action points and checklists as well as key issues to consider when you are looking to review and improve classroom practice.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Roy Blatchford

Roy Blatchford is Director of the National Education Trust. Previously he was Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools (HMI) in England, with national responsibilities for school improvement and for the inspection of outstanding schools.

Roy has extensive experience of writing inspection frameworks, and has inspected over 800 schools in the UK and abroad. For many years he worked as a teacher and headteacher, in a variety of schools including 13 years teaching in inner-London. He was Principal of Walton High and Walton Learning Centre in Milton Keynes, described by Ofsted as "a first class centre of learning – innovative and inspiring". Roy has written or edited over 150 books and is a regular contributor to the national media.

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### CHECKLIST

In outstanding classrooms scholarship, a love of learning and intellectual curiosity should all be evident. Children should have opportunities to:

- Make sense of and deal creatively and positively with the circumstances of their lives, their current environment and the world at large.
- Command language in its major forms and use them readily, competently and easily to serve their purposes.
- Observe critically; assemble evidence; analyse and reflect on what they have discovered; draw conclusions based on evidence and thoughts; test their conclusions as far as possible; adapt and restructure these according to the outcomes of testing; communicate their conclusions to others; hold them up to scrutiny; and review in the light of discussion and informed commentary.
- Learn to think, respond and behave according to the form and conventions of major disciplines; that is, they are able, where necessary, to act as scientists, historians, geographers, technologists and mathematicians would.
- Be problem solvers: they can engage with and bring reason and practical resource to bear on the challenges and problems they encounter.
- Possess a critical faculty which enables them to distinguish between the substantial and the trivial, the genuine and the spurious, and to identify the crucial points in argument, data, literature and presentation.



# Creating an exciting climate for learning

**I**n outstanding classrooms there is always that judicious balance of the fun and fundamentals of learning. Enjoyment, humour and warm relationships abound. So too does an unequivocal focus on practising basic and higher-order skills. Excellent teachers accept no substitute.

Ask any group of children what makes for effective classroom learning and they talk about the teacher who loves their subject and shares that passion with their pupils through rich tasks and activities. To use a word that has sadly gone out of fashion in some quarters, in my opinion it is the promotion of *scholarship* that matters.

*There is no fear of failure because teachers and pupils alike support one another's triumphs and disasters.*

## The freedom to make and learn from mistakes

Outstanding teachers create climates for learning which engender confidence and motivation among the learners. Critically, there is no fear of failure because teachers and pupils alike support one another's triumphs and disasters. Opportunities for risk-taking, exploration of new knowledge and concepts and experimentation permeate. Learners' potential is spotted and encouraged. In the true sense of the word, education – 'to lead out' – underpins the learning environment.



# Inspiring and vibrant teaching



**P**upils are infected by the enthusiasm of their teachers. Pupils deeply respect the teacher who has a breadth and depth of knowledge that they themselves can, at their age, only dream of and aspire to. Just think for a moment of the teachers you remember with affection from your own school days. Yes, it will be the teacher who knew and valued you as a person. It will also be a teacher who shared their ambitions and enthusiasms.

Outstanding classrooms are vibrant places where what is on the walls, windows, floor and ceiling matters. The teachers have given thought to learning prompts, keywords, photos (taken by pupils) celebrating achievement and displays of high-quality pupils' work to which their peers can aspire.

Furthermore, books and electronic resources are accessible and fit for purpose. The mobile device is present, no more nor less important than a pair of scissors. It is a tool for learning which each generation of young people masters more skilfully than the majority of its teachers.

“

*Outstanding classrooms are vibrant places where what is on the walls, windows, floor and ceiling matters.*

”

# English and literacy in the outstanding classroom

**H**igh-quality teaching of English and standards of literacy are at the heart of the outstanding classroom.

First, the current Ofsted inspection framework places a strong emphasis on key skills in primary schools. The definition of outstanding teaching makes explicit that the teaching of reading, writing, communication and mathematics must be “highly effective and cohesively planned and implemented”.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the same emphasis features in the 2012 Teachers’ Standards. All teachers must have a clear understanding of appropriate teaching strategies for early reading and mathematics. Equally, teachers of whatever age range or subject are expected to promote “high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English”.<sup>2</sup>

Third, the 2014 National Curriculum in England places great weight on the place of high-quality English teaching:

*The national curriculum for English aims to ensure that all pupils:*

- *read easily, fluently and with good understanding*
- *acquire a wide vocabulary, an understanding of grammar and knowledge of linguistic conventions for reading, writing, and spoken language*
- *write clearly, accurately and coherently*
- *are competent in the arts of speaking and listening.*<sup>3</sup>

These expectations from Ofsted, the Teachers’ Standards and the 2014 National Curriculum are rightly highlighting the foundation stone in the primary classroom. Without a child being able to access the printed word, progress across the curriculum will be negligible. Teachers must give primary children the dignity of being able to speak, read and write with fluency to make their way in the fascinating global society they will be shaping.

“  
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 ”







### CHECKLIST

In the most effective and engaging English lessons I regularly see some of the following in action:

1. Pupils being expected to answer questions in developed phrases rather than just monosyllables, from Nursery onwards.
2. Teachers giving more time for pupils to develop fuller oral responses to questions posed.
3. Teachers enabling pupils to pose questions to one another, in order that pupils practise their sounds and speech patterns.
4. Direct and regular intervention/correction from staff in how children speak and pronounce their letters.
5. Volunteer staff and governors giving time to small groups of children in order to develop their conversation, vocabulary and basic social skills.
6. The development of structured and regular drama/acting opportunities in which children are expected to project their voice and practise speaking at length, with good eye contact.
7. The regular use of limericks/couplets/verses/short poems being set to be learned by heart and for recitation in class groups; parents can be involved creatively in this.
8. The consistent use of established EAL techniques (pattern, repetition, consolidation, elaboration) with children, particularly boys, whose first language is English.
9. The regular use of short dictations, across the curriculum, and with an emphasis on keen listening and high-quality presentation of writing.
10. A focus on how children are actually holding a pencil/pen and how they are forming their letters on a consistent basis.

# A word on mathematics

“  
It is *applied* mathematics, accompanied by a relentless practising of basic number bonds, which is the bedrock of successful primary classrooms.  
”

## Real life mathematics

**R**eal life mathematics in outstanding classrooms comes alive when teachers create real and realistic problems for pupils to solve: when Year 6 pupils plan educational visits through costings and time plans; when they cook at school they use ratio; when they explore a range of data handling in science and geography. It is applied mathematics, accompanied by a relentless practising of basic number bonds, which is the bedrock of successful primary classrooms.

### CASE STUDY

Grove School is a large primary in inner-city Birmingham. It has an outstanding tradition in the teaching of mathematics, including an annual Maths Olympiad. Headteacher Pam Matty writes that it is always telling as to how mathematical games are developed in school:

*A good example is the game of input and output, sometimes known as the function machine game. In the Early Years this can be a magic box where a small object is put in and a large object is pulled out, or one toy is put in and two are pulled out. As you move through school this 'game' will evolve into a much more complex formula*

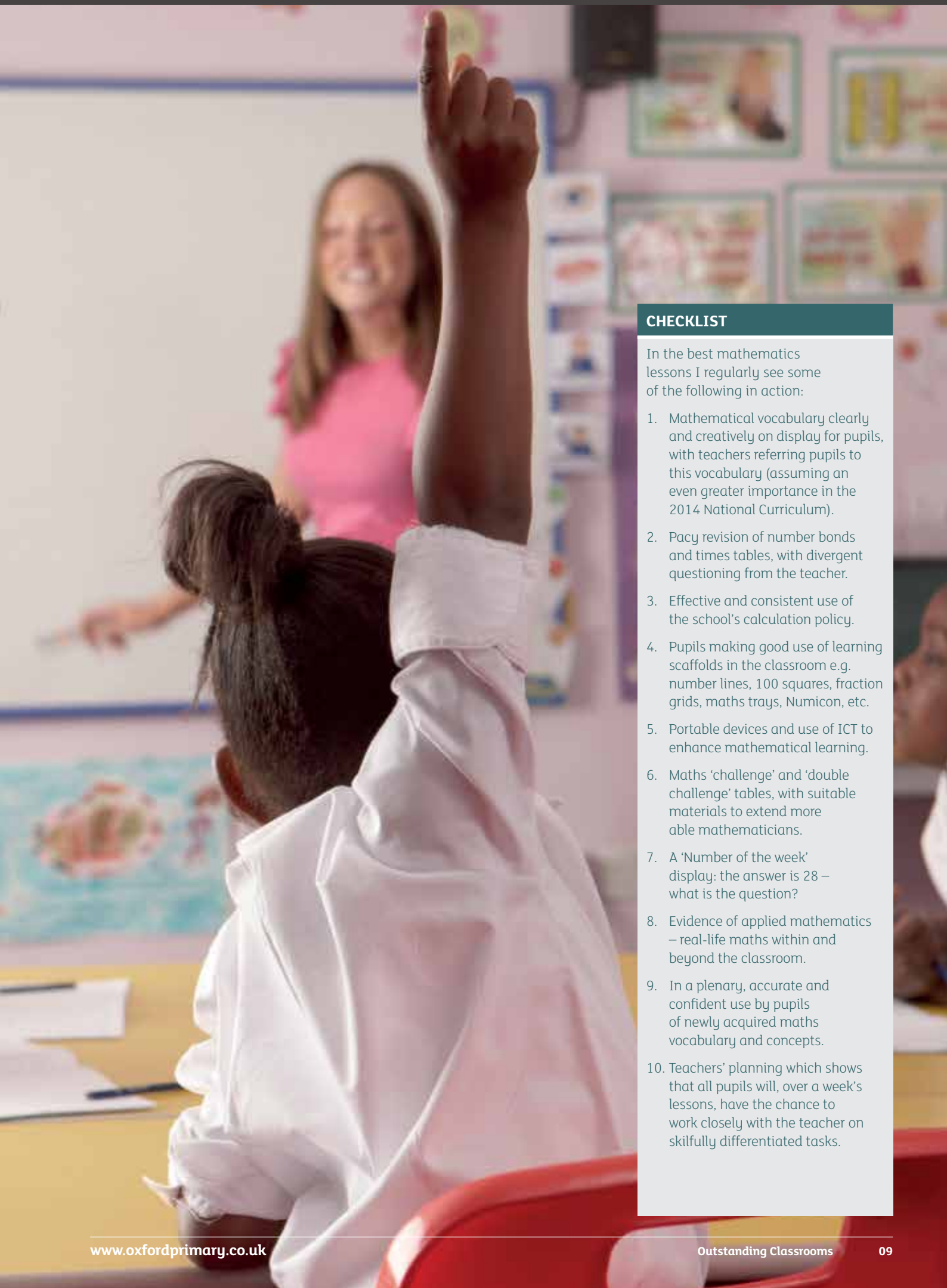
*involving squared numbers, divisions and a multiplicity of operations which will be recorded as an algebraic expression by the child leading the game. This is one of many examples of how schools have core mental games they use all the way through school.*

### ACTION POINT

Read *Number and Calculation: Getting the best results* (OUP) for ideas and practical guidance from experts on excellence in mathematics.  
[www.oxfordprimary.co.uk](http://www.oxfordprimary.co.uk)







### CHECKLIST

In the best mathematics lessons I regularly see some of the following in action:

1. Mathematical vocabulary clearly and creatively on display for pupils, with teachers referring pupils to this vocabulary (assuming an even greater importance in the 2014 National Curriculum).
2. Pacy revision of number bonds and times tables, with divergent questioning from the teacher.
3. Effective and consistent use of the school's calculation policy.
4. Pupils making good use of learning scaffolds in the classroom e.g. number lines, 100 squares, fraction grids, maths trays, Numicon, etc.
5. Portable devices and use of ICT to enhance mathematical learning.
6. Maths 'challenge' and 'double challenge' tables, with suitable materials to extend more able mathematicians.
7. A 'Number of the week' display: the answer is 28 – what is the question?
8. Evidence of applied mathematics – real-life maths within and beyond the classroom.
9. In a plenary, accurate and confident use by pupils of newly acquired maths vocabulary and concepts.
10. Teachers' planning which shows that all pupils will, over a week's lessons, have the chance to work closely with the teacher on skilfully differentiated tasks.

# The curriculum

## What makes an outstanding curriculum?

Outstanding lessons are rooted in a rich curriculum, carefully planned and skilfully resourced by the teacher. In the best schools and the most engaging classrooms, teachers have a very clear idea of the social, personal and intellectual outcomes which they wish pupils to achieve.

Teachers know well their individual pupils' predispositions to learn. Above all in an outstanding classroom, teachers have a clear grasp of the potential pupils have to develop their talents and aptitudes in various directions. The 2014 National Curriculum aims to allow teachers greater freedom to use their professionalism and expertise to help all children realise their potential.

In great classrooms I know well, there is not a single and simple curriculum blueprint. Schools and teachers follow different paths, and rightly so. But there is a clarity of vision and purpose about the planned curriculum.

The latest Ofsted school inspection framework tasks inspectors to consider the extent to which leaders and managers:

*"... provide a **broad and balanced curriculum** that meets the needs of all pupils, enables all pupils to achieve their full educational potential and make progress in their learning, and promotes their good behaviour and safety and their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development."*

The *School inspection handbook*, January 2014, states that inspectors must consider how well leaders and managers ensure that the curriculum:

- focuses on the necessary priorities for ensuring that all pupils make excellent progress in reading, writing and mathematics
- is broad and balanced (in the context of the school) and meets the needs, aptitudes and interest of pupils
- promotes high levels of achievement and good behaviour
- promotes the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of all pupils
- is effectively planned and taught.<sup>5</sup>

“  
In an outstanding classroom, teachers have a clear grasp of the potential pupils have to develop their talents and aptitudes in various directions.  
”

### CASE STUDY

Red Oaks Primary School in Swindon bases its memorable and exciting curriculum around what it terms as 'The Big Questions'. Staff and pupils together decide on a question, and ask themselves what they want to know in answer to that question. They then construct their curriculum accordingly, with detailed planning in relation to skills and knowledge acquisition and, vitally, progression from Reception to Year 6.

The following are among the school's recent Big Questions – topics which have led to outstanding lessons and outcomes for pupils:

- Are there only seven wonders in the world?
- Does every picture tell a story?
- Have we left the past behind us?
- What will you do when I'm gone?
- What lies beneath and beyond?
- Do you have to be a hero to make a difference?
- What is great in Great Britain?
- Is there any justice in the world?



### ACTION POINT

At Oxford Owl, [www.oxfordowl.co.uk](http://www.oxfordowl.co.uk), you can find *Pathways: Managing and Implementing the National Curriculum 2014* to guide you through the challenges and opportunities of the new National Curriculum using a unique four-step system to effective school improvement.

# Skilful orchestration

## The balance between teaching and learning needs

A hallmark of great classrooms is that time within lessons is skilfully orchestrated. The teachers do not rattle on at pace, galloping through the scheme of work for fear of running out of time. Rather, they deliver narratives and explanations at a speed consistent with pupils' understanding and internalising new concepts, knowledge and skills. Young minds are afforded time to reflect, ponder and be challenged as they tackle a demanding activity – and that of course leads to manifest good progress by pupils.

“

*Skilful orchestration of time is all about skilful differentiation.*

”

Teaching and learning are a great double act. One requires the other. The effective teacher helps pupils, through various techniques, to think about the progress they are making: daily, weekly, and over a term or a year.

### Teacher feedback

The teacher and pupil reflecting on progress together, through marking and dialogue, identify next steps in learning and what particular support or extension might be required to ensure the pupil's individual needs are met. This is as true of an infant teacher observing the development of fine motor skills, as it is of the Year 5 teacher concentrating on improving writing skills.

And skilful orchestration of time is all about skilful differentiation. All teachers know that just about the hardest aspect of teaching a class is getting 'the learning moments' right for individuals' different abilities and aptitudes – what Ofsted describes as matching learning activities to the needs of pupils.

### CHECKLIST

Here is what I see teachers doing skilfully in well differentiated lessons:

1. Knowing pupils' prior attainment and knowledge of a subject.
2. Meticulous tracking of pupils' progress in different skills.
3. Thinking through which pupils work best with others, and the optimum size for effective group work.
4. Judging when independent learning will best deepen knowledge and understanding.
5. Knowing when best to harness the library, film and internet to expand pupils' thinking.
6. Setting up one-to-one catch-up and intervention sessions, before, during and after school.
7. Setting meaningful homework, well scaffolded for individual needs.
8. Knowing what factors inhibit progress and seeking to remove those barriers promptly.
9. Identifying special needs such as poor hand-eye coordination, delayed cognitive development, temporary medical problems, etc.
10. Practising 'differentiation down' to ensure higher attainers are extended in their learning.





# Talk less, do less

“

*The outstanding teacher expects, from time to time, to talk and do less than her pupils.*

”

## Promoting best practice in the classroom

**I** fondly say that all teachers need a chaise longue in their classrooms, so that just occasionally they can sit back and admire what they have created – and enable the pupils to work harder than the teacher!

Best practice for promoting excellent progress is certainly rooted in the teacher who expects, from time to time, to talk and do less than their pupils. Take for example the Year 6 teacher I observed who, in introducing a week's lessons, shared her lesson plans with the class and explained how each day one pair of pupils was going to run the lesson starter; another would lead the mini-plenary; and how another pair would conclude the session and set appropriate homework!

To teach is to learn. The best teachers enable their pupils to make significant progress and practise their own articulacy by doing just that on a regular, well-planned basis. Consistent with the age and growing maturity of the pupil, creative teachers encourage independence. In the best lessons, this independence is demonstrated by pupils taking a responsible and conscientious approach to their classwork and homework. It will not happen by magic. Effective teachers nudge, cajole and model independent learning habits. In common with good parents, they give 'roots and wings' to children.

Of course, the example cited above is not the only way to organise or teach a lesson. The skilful teacher uses a balance of activities and types of teaching based on the needs of the lesson.





### OBSERVATION CHECKLIST

This checklist provides questions to ask when co-observing a primary classroom, thinking about moving from good to outstanding:

- What are your first impressions of the learning environment? Is it light, airy and the right temperature for learning?
  - Does the classroom, and the areas around it, reflect the range of work? What is special, or striking, about this work?
  - Is the classroom arranged so that all children can be involved in discussions and also use their workspace to write, design and implement?
  - How do the children react to your presence as a visitor? Are they happy to talk and explain?
- In what ways does the style of teaching and learning reflect that this is a Year 1, Year 3 or Year 6 class and therefore distinctive in terms of the particular stage of learning?
- How is furniture configured? Are children sitting on the carpet for too long? Where does the teacher position her/himself?
- To what extent do the children take control of their learning and how able are they to explore a range of learning areas? Are the children aware of what will come next in terms of their learning (e.g. if this is a Year 6 class are the children aware of preparation for their move to the secondary stage)?
- In the time you are in the room, count the minutes (a) the teacher talks; and (b) children converse with a proper focus. Is the teacher working harder than the students? Are the children responding easily and readily to the task/stimuli provided?
- What evidence can you see of the children's independent learning skills appropriate to the year group? If the teacher left the room, would the children continue to work on the current task?
- Is the level of work appropriate for the more able learners and is it sufficiently demanding? Has the work been effectively scaffolded, whilst retaining an intrinsic interest/challenge, for those who have learning or personal management difficulties?
- Is homework or other independent study/research important to the lesson being observed? Has there been some form of lead-in and are there possibilities for extension?
- What evidence is there of (a) fun; (b) scholarship; (c) intriguing digressions; and (d) the teacher sharing personal enthusiasms?
- How well does the teacher demonstrate his/her own specialist subject knowledge? Do they extend horizons and leave students magically wondering?



# The best lessons

In the Chief Inspector's 2012/13 report on schools and classrooms in England, the following are identified as common misconceptions, leading to less effective teaching:

**Pace** – A belief that the faster the lesson, the better the learning. While pace is important – pupils may lose concentration in a slow lesson – teachers concentrate too often on the pace of the activity rather than the amount of learning.

**The number of activities** – Some teachers believe that the more activities they can cram into the lesson, the more effective it will be. This is often counterproductive, as activities are changed so often that pupils do not complete tasks and learning is not consolidated or extended.

**Over-detailed and bureaucratic lesson plans** – Excessive detail within these plans can cause teachers to lose sight of the central focus on pupils' learning.

**An inflexible approach to planning lessons** – Some school policies insist that all lesson plans should always follow the same structure, no matter what is being taught. The key consideration should be the development of pupils' learning rather than sticking rigidly to a format.

**Constant review of learning in lessons** – In lessons observed, significant periods of time were spent by teachers on getting pupils to articulate their learning before they had completed enough work. Indeed, inspectors observed lessons where pupils were asked to self- or peer-assess work before they had been able to complete more than a sentence or two.<sup>6</sup>

The same HMCI report gives two useful case studies of outstanding primary practice, which share the common characteristics of high expectations, detailed subject knowledge, good and attentive behaviour and an unremitting focus on what children are expected to learn.

## CASE STUDY

From the outset of a Year 3 literacy lesson, the teacher established a very 'business-like' atmosphere. Pupils had resources at the ready, were highly attentive and worked briskly. The teacher had high expectations of all pupils; they were all to review and apply what they knew about the use of modal verbs. Pupils listened intently as the teacher recapped previous learning, using a story to prompt the class to identify examples and justify them. There were excellent opportunities for speaking and listening, as pupils identified the correct spoken language for each example. The teacher challenged all pupils, including the most able, by asking individuals to reflect on her detailed marking of the work in their books. Pupils appreciated this and rose to the challenge of answering the precise questions that the teacher had posed. Next steps in learning were clarified for all; each pupil pursued their own target, made rapid progress and reached above average attainment levels. In preparing the lesson, teaching and marking, this teacher drew on excellent subject knowledge to make sure that all pupils understood about modal verbs, and could use them in speech and in writing.<sup>7</sup>

## CASE STUDY

In a Year 6 science lesson, the teacher had evidently high expectations of all pupils. The teacher led the pupils through the detailed workings of the human digestive system, with short, sharp direct inputs and a series of challenges set for the pupils. During the lesson, pupils were asked to explore different models of the digestive system, while the teacher and teaching assistants reinforced pupils' learning and extended it by asking pupils to predict what would happen next and encouraging them to question. Pupils were expected to be curious and became engrossed, applying the correct technical language such as pancreas, oesophagus and bile. They learned rapidly, showing their thirst for knowledge and answered questions such as 'Does food just slide down the oesophagus? What other factors may be assisting?' This lesson used skilled teaching to enthuse pupils while teaching them key scientific knowledge.<sup>8</sup>



These Ofsted descriptions capture concisely many of the hallmarks of outstanding teaching and learning. For my own part when I think about the best teachers, I think of the epitaph of Sir Christopher Wren: 'If you seek his monument, look around you'. Confident teachers in vibrant classrooms can invite, with confidence, any passing observer to see pupils' progress and enjoyment in learning right across their classrooms: from detailed record-keeping and regular, incisive marking to the quality of their wall displays, oral interventions and the passion they bring to a subject.





## To conclude

- › Great lessons are all about richness of task, rooted in teachers' excellent subject knowledge and passion to share that wisdom with children and young people.
- › Pupils' prior knowledge of a subject is endlessly surprising.
- › High expectations – the excellent teacher accepts no substitute.
- › Timely digression and intervention promote memorable learning moments.
- › Doing more of the same does not transform standards of attainment – doing differently can.
- › To make real progress pupils need to have the freedom to make and learn from mistakes.
- › Teachers must give pupils the dignity of being able to speak, read and write with fluency if they are to make progress across the curriculum.
- › The best teachers are children at heart.
- › The skilful teacher uses a judicious balance of activities and types of teaching based on the needs of the lesson.
- › High-quality marking from teachers fuels pupils' rapid progress.
- › A sense of purpose, humour and good relationships abound in the outstanding classroom, as does a love of learning.
- › When observing the best lessons, you just don't want them to end!

# Outstanding Classrooms

A guide to good practice

Available to download at  
[www.oxfordprimary.co.uk](http://www.oxfordprimary.co.uk)

For further support please call  
our customer care line on **01536 452610**.

Oxford University Press is grateful to the headteachers and staff of those schools referenced in the case studies.

Please note: The photographs of children in this report are for illustration purposes only. They do not show children from the schools featured.

## About the National Education Trust

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The National Education Trust is an independent foundation leading and promoting excellent practice in education.

The Trust brings extensive international and national experience to bear upon improvements for learners, from early years to university entrance. It assists education leaders and practitioners in sustaining success and tackling underperformance, and has a track-record of influencing national policy and practice.

Roy Blatchford is Director of the National Education Trust  
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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ofsted *The framework for school inspection: The framework for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended)* (120100). Manchester: 2013
- <sup>2</sup> Department for Education, *Teachers' Standards* (DFE-00066-2011). 2012
- <sup>3</sup> Department for Education, *National curriculum in England: English programmes of study*. 2013
- <sup>4</sup> Ofsted *The framework for school inspection: The framework for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (as amended)* (120100). Manchester: 2013
- <sup>5</sup> Ofsted, *School inspection handbook: Handbook for inspecting schools in England under section 5 of the Education Act 2005* (120101). 2013
- <sup>6</sup> Ofsted, *The report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills Annual Report: Schools 2012/13*, (130236). 2012/13
- <sup>7</sup> Ofsted, *The report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills Annual Report: Schools 2012/13*, (130236). 2012/13
- <sup>8</sup> Ofsted, *The report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills Annual Report: Schools 2012/13*, (130236). 2012/13

## RECOMMENDED PUBLICATIONS

- Department for Education, *Teachers' Standards* (DFE-00066-2011). 2012
- Ofsted, *Getting to good: How headteachers achieve success* (120167). 2012
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