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The
Best
Teacher
in **YOU**



HOW TO ACCELERATE
LEARNING AND
CHANGE LIVES

ROBERT E. QUINN
KATHERINE HEYNOSKI
MIKE THOMAS
GRETCHEN M. SPREITZER

More Praise for *The Best Teacher in You*

“The very best teachers are the ones who know their learning is never done. Bringing together the expertise of academic research, this book offers tangible ways that reflective, growth-oriented teachers at any level can help themselves continue to grow their practice.”

—Ellen Moir, CEO, New Teacher Center

“This is highly practical, with real classroom case examples, useful tools, well-grounded guiding principles, and more. It is honest and intensely relevant for the teachers and the schools that are under undue pressures these days, a book that has heart and soul.”

—Jim Evers, retired teacher and author of *Becoming a School Where Everyone Matters and Crisis in School Management*

“The authors have uncovered insights that characterize the extraordinary teachers who produce results three or four times higher than normal teachers. Their careful insight and compelling illustrations provide guidance that every teacher, parent, and leader will find useful.”

—Kim Cameron, Associate Dean and William Russell Kelly Professor of Management and Organizations, Ross School of Business, and Professor of Higher Education, School of Education, University of Michigan

“This book identifies the characteristics of teachers who really make a difference. The highly effective teacher will feel reinforced. The teacher looking to improve will learn from stories and research that are inspirational and implementable. This should be required reading for everyone entering the education profession.”

—R. Kirk Hamilton, PhD, Executive Director, Buckeye Association of School Administrators

“In the same way transformational leaders make a difference in the lives of their employees, transformational teachers inspire students to exceed expectations. Based on the authors’ groundbreaking research, this book is for anyone interested in helping students reach their highest potential.”

—Julian Barling, PhD, Borden Chair of Leadership, Queen’s School of Business, and author of *The Science of Leadership*

“Teaching is more than pedagogical technique or student test scores. The authors capture the complexity of teaching and provide a road map for understanding the dynamics of what it truly means to be a highly effective teacher.”

—Thomas J. Lasley, Executive Director, Learn to Earn Dayton, Dayton Foundation, and Professor, School of Education and Health Sciences, University of Dayton

“Can highly effective teachers help their peers ‘set classrooms on fire’? *The Best Teacher in You* not only says yes but also tells us how. Teachers, parents, and public-policy makers should take this insightful and inspiring study to heart.”

—Richard Celeste, former President, Colorado College, and 64th Governor of Ohio

“This book is a wonderful text for a professional development session with teachers who have been in the field a few years and were feeling as if they were not getting the most out of their students.”

—**Dr. Joy Cowdery, Janet Brown Rothwell Distinguished Professor of Education, Muskingum University Education Department**

“*The Best Teacher in You* is an affirming and encouraging resource, challenging teachers at all stages of their careers to reflect on their practices and continue growing and developing as teachers and learners.”

—**Tricia Ebner, NBCT, gifted intervention specialist and member, Ohio Educator Leader Cadre, Lake Middle School**

“*The Best Teacher in You* provides real-world examples and practical tools to help teachers be the best teacher they can be for their students. The book provides practical and insightful examples from some of the best educators identified through a rich, data-driven analysis of actual student performance.”

—**Larry Hilsheimer, Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer, Scotts Miracle-Gro**

“There are multiple paths to uncover the best teacher within. *The Best Teacher in You* introduces a framework that explores effective, powerful practices to leverage individual educators’ strengths and empower them despite the challenges of society.”

—**Richard Lewis, Executive Director, Ohio School Boards Association**

“This book provides powerful insights into highly effective teachers and the symbiotic relationships they foster with their students that yield improved teaching and learning for all. The stories are inspirational, and the authors do an amazing job of providing practical strategies that can lead to the transformation of the practice by others.”

—**Julie Baker Finck, PhD, President, Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation**

“Better schools with better outcomes result from the *best* teachers. This book dissects the attitudes, behaviors, challenges, and personal philosophies that drive highly effective teachers.”

—**Michael Gonsiorowski, Regional President, PNC Bank**

“*The Best Teacher in You* moves us past the histrionics of value-added measures by using them to actually identify great teachers. Following up the statistical evidence with deep qualitative research, this book seeks to find out what makes great teachers tick. This important work is an affirmation that foundational elements like quality relationships, a growth mindset, a supportive environment, and high expectations are what matter most in education.”

—**Jason Glass, Superintendent and Chief Learner, Eagle County Schools**

“For the highly effective teacher that seems to be locked up inside and is yearning to get out, *The Best Teacher in You* is the key to opening the door.”

—**Carl F. Kohrt, PhD, President and CEO (retired), Battelle Memorial Institute**

**The
Best Teacher
in You**



The Best Teacher in You

*How to Accelerate Learning
and Change Lives*

Robert E. Quinn

Katherine Heynoski

Mike Thomas

Gretchen M. Spreitzer



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The Best Teacher in You

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*To all the teachers who make a difference in the lives of
their students—and in particular the special teachers in
our own lives who planted the seeds for this book.*

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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.

CHAPTER 1

Becoming the Best Teacher in You: A Process, Not a Destination

No punishment anyone lays on you could possibly be worse than the punishment you lay on yourself by conspiring in your own diminishment. With that insight comes the ability to open cell doors that were never locked in the first place.

— Parker Palmer
The Courage to Teach

IN OUR INTERVIEW WITH KELLI, A VETERAN TEACHER WITH 24 YEARS of experience, she told us about her goal of “reaching every student.” While this sentiment is laudable, it also sounded unrealistic, so one of our interviewers decided to push back. He took on the persona of a skeptical colleague and argued that it is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect that a teacher can be successful with every child. Kelli quickly got into the role-play, becoming more passionate as she spoke. She confronted the interviewer: “Why do you have such a negative outlook? It is about you and your expectations for them. You have lowered your expectations. You have given up hope in those kids. What did you think your job was in the first place? It is not about teaching math. It is about getting them to want to learn.”

Kelli’s intensity and commitment brought about a transformation in the conversation. We were no longer in a role-play. We were having the kind of conversation that causes people to listen deeply, reflect, and see differently—the kind of conversation Kelli creates on a regular basis with her third-grade students.



CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Becoming the Best Teacher in You

In this chapter Kelli shares her story of becoming a highly effective teacher (HET). Her journey produced an expanded view of herself, her students, and what it means to be a teacher. With this expanded view came the capacity to do things she could not do before. Based on Kelli's story and the stories we have heard from more than 350 other exceptional teachers, we lay out two overarching perspectives of teaching: one we call the directive perspective and the other we call the co-creative perspective. The first is foundational. The second is elusive, but it paves the way for a teacher to accelerate learning and to change lives.

In the exchange above, two things became immediately clear about Kelli. First, she is a person who does not tolerate low expectations. She expects a lot of herself and a lot from others, even interviewers. This also extends to her students. She expects them to do things they do not believe they can do.

Second, while Kelli is a master of her content, she does not believe that her job is only to transfer mathematical information to students. Math is simply a reason to be with her students. She believes that her real job is to create a desire, a hunger, and a love for learning. She expects that her students will leave her with an expanded sense of themselves. They will leave as empowered people, able to learn in any situation.

While Kelli places great emphasis on growth and achievement, she balances it with an equally intense focus on forming and maintaining relationships. Within a few minutes of being with Kelli, we felt like our conversation mattered a great deal and that we also mattered a great deal. We felt both valued and stretched by this woman whom we had just met. She told us that when she was a student, school was a place where you went to "have things done to you." In contrast, Kelli places greater emphasis on doing things *with* her students.

The Year from Hell

Kelli believes that her ability to engage her students is a function of her own development. She speaks of a particularly important episode in which her assumptions about teaching were challenged and ultimately transformed. She came away from the episode with a new view of herself, her students, and what it means to teach.

She told us that her first year of teaching was “stellar.” Her second year was “the year from hell.” She had many children who were challenging. One was a “belligerent, mouthy, holy terror.” On a particularly bad day, she saw him crawling on his belly at the door of her classroom. She lost her temper and moved toward him in anger. As he scurried out of her way, she turned away from him, slammed the door shut, and walked to the principal’s office. She told her principal that she could no longer deal with this student, so the student was subsequently removed from her classroom.

This event was deeply troubling to Kelli, so she went to some experienced colleagues for advice. Their advice led to a turning point in Kelli’s career. They said, “You have to realize early on that you are not the key to every door.”

As Kelli recounted that conversation, she became visibly upset. She fought to compose herself and then looked up and said with conviction, “I hated that.” She went on to tell us of a vow she took that day: “I told myself, *I’m not taking that. I’m going to figure out how to meet the needs of those kids.*”

A Vow to Learn

This vow represents a pivotal moment in Kelli’s professional life. She could have taken the words of her colleagues to heart and become disenchanted, but she did not. Instead this painful event became an opportunity. It was the beginning of a lifelong journey of learning. In choosing to take this journey, Kelli has developed the ability to work more effectively with difficult students. “I’ve had other kids like that, but I never had another one of those moments.” She described the work she had to do along the way:

I needed to pay more attention to [struggling students]. I had to figure out what works for them, how to have respect for them, how to use humor to diffuse explosive situations. I learned how to make those kinds of kids feel safe in my room, and I learned how to teach them social skills so the other students would feel safe in the room with such a child. And then I learned that I have to be very parent-savvy. I have to sit down and get the parents on my side very early on. So I learned those techniques, and I've never had another year like that. Those seem to be the kids that I'm most drawn to.... I always get those kids now, the most unruly kid, the most disruptive kid, the bully.

Kelli told us that when a difficult child shows up in the school, her administrator says, "Let's put him in Kelli's room because Kelli will know what to do with him."



TEACHER'S TIP

Kelli: Do not be afraid to engage in new learning. Transformative learning begins to take shape when you engage in your own learning.

- Read qualified authors, observe exemplary teachers, view videos, and meet with other teachers who seem to have mastered what you are struggling with.
 - Be willing to forgive yourself for your shortcomings and failures. Vow to make a change and stick with it.
 - Seek a partnership with colleagues who will give you encouragement and guidance.
-

Deep Change

As she pursued her vow, Kelli learned to feel, think, and behave in new ways. She gained new capacity. She went through a learning process that transformed her understanding and aptitude. Robert Quinn, in his work with organizational leaders around the world, has identified two kinds of change that individuals experience: incremental change and deep change.¹

In our lives and in our work, we frequently make *incremental changes*: We make adjustments, we elaborate on a practice, we try harder, and we exert a greater degree of control. In other words, we attempt to solve the problem using the assumptions we currently hold.

Deep change is more demanding because it requires the surrender of control. It tends to be larger in scope, discontinuous with the past, and irreversible. It involves embracing a purpose and then moving forward by trial and error while attending to real-time feedback. Quinn often refers to the process of deep change as building the bridge as you walk on it.

Kelli knew she wanted to go to another level of performance. She wanted to flourish even with difficult students in the room. To acquire this capacity, she had to first reach for a higher standard and not compromise on that standard as her colleagues advised. Then she had to make a vow to engage in deep change. She moved forward in real-time, experiential learning.

When people move forward in this way, old assumptions are challenged and new ones are constructed. When the new assumptions lead to success, learning often becomes exhilarating. People feel empowered by their success and believe that they can do what Parker Palmer refers to in the epigraph as the ability to “open cell doors that were never locked in the first place.”²

Slow Death

We often avoid deep change because it can be difficult and unsettling. Ultimately, this avoidance can lead to disengagement, or what Quinn calls “slow death.” When Kelli’s colleagues told her that she could not expect to be the key to every door, they were unwittingly inviting her to “conspire” in her “own diminishment.” They were inviting her to become an active participant in her own slow death.

What these well-meaning colleagues were doing was understandable. They were trying to comfort Kelli in a time of distress. This pattern is a common dynamic among friends and in organizations of all kinds. When people like Kelli aspire to excellence, they often meet adversity and become frustrated. To relieve her distress, Kelli’s peers advised her to lower her aspirations. In education, as in all the other industries, this

response is a phenomenon that can turn armies of idealistic young professionals into disenchanted victims of the system.

As you think about this dynamic, it is also worthwhile to consider your students' aspirations. Many of them may already travel the path to slow death. Sometimes an entire community of students can be locked into assumptions that prevent them from empowering themselves. What they believe about their ability to learn greatly hinders their own development. Their experiences and the assumptions that result from them can become "cell doors." They may "know," for example, that the act of trying will result in embarrassment and failure. Students who make such assumptions may show little interest in learning. In every industry and in every organization, there are personal and cultural assumptions that lead people away from deep change and toward slow death. Daily conversations that reflect a victim mentality regularly invite us all to the path of slow death.

The Best Teacher in You

Kelli's story illustrates an important point about deep change. Because she engaged in transformative learning, she grew in self-efficacy, or the belief that she could succeed in a demanding situation or activity.³ More specifically, she is now confident that she can learn to teach any child in any situation. Addressing an imaginary problem child, Kelli told us, "If you are defiant, I will get you. I will figure out what makes you work. I might not get tremendous growth and I might not get engagement every day, but I'm going to get something out of you. I'm going to be your new best friend."

While the statement suggests that Kelli is an empowered person, it also suggests that she is an empowering person. She subjects her students to high expectations, and she also partners with them to help them grow into more-effective versions of themselves. Because she has experienced the realization of her own potential, Kelli sees potential in all of her students and feels compelled to help them change the limiting assumptions that they make about themselves.

When a teacher is with students in a way that is empowering to them, the students can transform. When this begins to happen, the transformation in the students loops back to the teacher and another transformation takes place. The work of teaching becomes the joy of teaching because they are in a mutually empowering relationship. Teachers experience the most powerful of all rewards in this kind of relationship—the realization of their best self, or the best teacher in them. Kelli explains it as follows: “I breathe students. They are my life’s blood. I am not whole without them. They bring me joy. They make me frustrated. They make me cry. They give me hope. When I invest in them, I become the best me.”



TEACHER'S TIP

Kelli: Ask yourself, *Do I believe that student growth starts with me?* Be strategic about how you make the learning happen in your classroom. As you prepare your lessons and instruction, consider how you can incorporate formative instructional practices.

- Make the learning intentions clear to students. Be sure students understand what you want them to know and be able to do.
 - Align assessments with the intended learning and allow students to partner with you on collecting that data.
 - Ensure that the feedback you give around the learning is effective. Teach students how to use and give feedback to you and their peers. This strengthens classrooms.
 - Allow for opportunities for strong student engagement and ownership of learning. Teach students how to self-assess and set goals. When the vision is clear for students, they can and will join you on the teaching and learning journey.
-

Transformational Influence

Kelli told us that teaching is about “helping children grow.” Kelli said that she can teach a child to read or do math, but that is not what her kind of teaching is about. Her kind of teaching is about helping each child internalize the desire and the ability to learn. With fire in her eyes and conviction in her voice, Kelli stated, “I am the key to every door.”

In other fields, such as business or government, the few people with this kind of confidence, passion, and capacity are called *transformational leaders*. They know how to engage people in learning that alters their assumptions and mindsets. They help individuals and groups grow into more-effective versions of themselves. They know how to release potential that is unrecognized and unrealized.

In telling us that she is “the key to every door,” Kelli is not claiming that she moves every child forward every minute that they are in her classroom. She is claiming that she is able to enter an elevated state of teaching and learning. She accepts responsibility, faces challenges, and adapts. She does this with confidence, knowing that she can form a relationship with every child; and because of her capacity to do this, she is able to move each child and the class as a whole further than would normally be expected. Kelli has mastered something that can help every teacher become the best teacher they can be. That is why we have written this book.

Two Views of Teaching

Kelli kept surprising us. She kept recounting stories that exceeded our expectations and challenged our assumptions. The same thing happened in our interviews with other HETs, so we began to ask what assumptions are commonly made about the process of teaching.

Because the conventional assumptions of a culture are often reflected in that culture’s language, an examination of the dictionary is a good place to start. To teach is to instruct, train, school, discipline, drill, or educate. Consider the meaning of each word.⁴

- *Teach*: to impart knowledge or skill to
- *Instruct*: to provide with knowledge, especially in a methodical way

- *Train*: to coach in or accustom to a mode of behavior or performance
- *School*: to discipline or control
- *Discipline*: to train by instruction and practice, especially to teach self-control to
- *Drill*: to instruct thoroughly by repetition in a skill or procedure
- *Educate*: to develop the innate capacities of, especially by schooling or instruction

These definitions suggest that a teacher directs and controls the classroom. Teaching is a process in which a more expert person imparts knowledge or skill to a less expert person. The student is in a lower position in a knowledge hierarchy. The student is expected to perform to an existing standard or acquire an accustomed mode of behavior or performance. The provision of knowledge is methodical. The student is subjected to discipline and control. The process may be repetitive and should lead to the development of self-control on the part of the student. We call this view the *directive perspective*.

In books it is common to create an image or list and then use it as a straw man. The image is then attacked and replaced by a better image. This book offers a second image, but it does not denigrate the directive perspective. Great teaching is built on a solid foundation of expertise, direction, control, discipline, and repetition. We need the assumptions and the skills of the directive perspective. They are essential to teaching.

The second perspective that we develop later in this chapter is not better than the first. Instead it supplements the directive perspective with additional capacities that make teaching more effective. It values the directive perspective but moves beyond notions such as discipline and repetition. Great music, for example, is a product of more than mechanics, scales, and simple melodies—it is ultimately about finding a unique musical voice and the courage to express it. To do this musicians have to risk, experiment, learn, and create. In their performances great musicians are deeply and dynamically connected to their instrument, their music, and their audience. Similarly, great teachers are deeply and

dynamically connected to their subject, their content standards, their evolving practice, and their students. In these dynamic connections, there are feedback loops. Knowledge is not only disseminated but also co-created. The teacher and the student join together to generate knowledge. In this process both the teacher and the student grow.

From Novice to Master

Novelist and philosopher Robert Pirsig asks why, in a given activity, some people obtain normal outcomes while others generate outcomes of higher quality. To answer the question, he uses the metaphor of the motorcycle mechanic. He suggests that not all mechanics are the same; the quality of their work varies:

Sometime look at a novice workman or a bad workman and compare his expression with that of a craftsman whose work you know is excellent and you'll see the difference. The craftsman isn't ever following a single line of instruction. He's making decisions as he goes along. For that reason he'll be absorbed and attentive to what he is doing even though he does not deliberately contrive this. His motions and the machine are in a kind of harmony. He isn't following any set of written instructions because the nature of the material at hand determines his thoughts and motions, which simultaneously change the nature of the material at hand. The material and his thoughts are changing together in a progression of changes until his mind is at rest at the same time the material is right.⁵

Pirsig is claiming that there are master mechanics (just as there are highly effective teachers) who produce extraordinary outcomes. They do more than act upon an object with expertise. Just as Kelli is “with” her students, the mechanic is “with” the motorcycle in a relationship of reciprocal influence: “The material and his thoughts are changing together in a progression of changes.” In this learning relationship, the machine and the mechanic are both altered. The machine is being repaired with excellence while the mechanic is also becoming more excellent. The work of the master mechanic is an intrinsically motivated labor of love because when he does his work, he also produces a better self. He is expressing the best mechanic in him.

Mastery in the Classroom

Excellence is a dynamic process. We take the liberty to rewrite and then elaborate on Pirsig's account with respect to a master teacher to describe what these dynamics look like in the classroom:

Sometime look at a novice teacher and compare his expression with that of a master teacher whose work you know is excellent, and you'll see the difference. The master teacher isn't ever following a single line of instruction. He has a plan, but it soon becomes a rough guide as he begins to respond to students' needs and to improvise. He is fully present, making decisions as he goes. The master teacher is absorbed and attentive to what he is doing even though he does not deliberately contrive this. His actions and the actions of his students are in a kind of harmony. The master teacher's ongoing assessment of his students determines his thoughts and actions, which simultaneously change the nature of what and how students are learning. The teacher and the class co-create a process of reciprocal, real-time learning. In doing this they are becoming a learning community. This process continues until the teacher's mind is at rest and the particular lesson is concluded with excellence. Both the students and the teacher leave the lesson having had a deeply meaningful learning experience.

As this process unfolds, the teacher recognizes needs, facilitates discussion, builds trust, and inspires spontaneous contributions. The natural hesitations within students and the natural disparities among students begin to diminish. The conversation becomes more authentic, more engaging, and more reflective. Listening becomes mutual, and students expect one another to contribute.

As in Kelli's story, the classroom becomes a place where students engage in activities that they find relevant and challenging. The teacher improvises and encourages creativity. As the teacher relaxes overt control, the students take ownership of their learning, and leadership shifts seamlessly from one participant to another. Through discussion they explore the big picture and continually question assumptions. Students begin to see from multiple perspectives. In this heightened, collective state, students arrive at creative, joint conclusions. Participating in the process not only builds knowledge but also increases self-efficacy. Students see

more potential in themselves and in their world, and they begin to more fully believe in their own capacity to learn and create. They feel more empowered and experience the love of learning. So does the teacher.

As you read our adaptation and the accompanying detail, how did you respond? Did it challenge some of your basic assumptions? If it did, you may have felt skepticism and disbelief. Yet most of us have been part of a group in which this kind of “magic” emerges. We invite you to keep an open mind. As you read *The Best Teacher in You*, if something surprises you, first note exactly what it is. Suspend judgment and then open yourself to possibility. Ask yourself how the surprise might help you enlarge your assumptions and expectations regarding the practice of teaching.

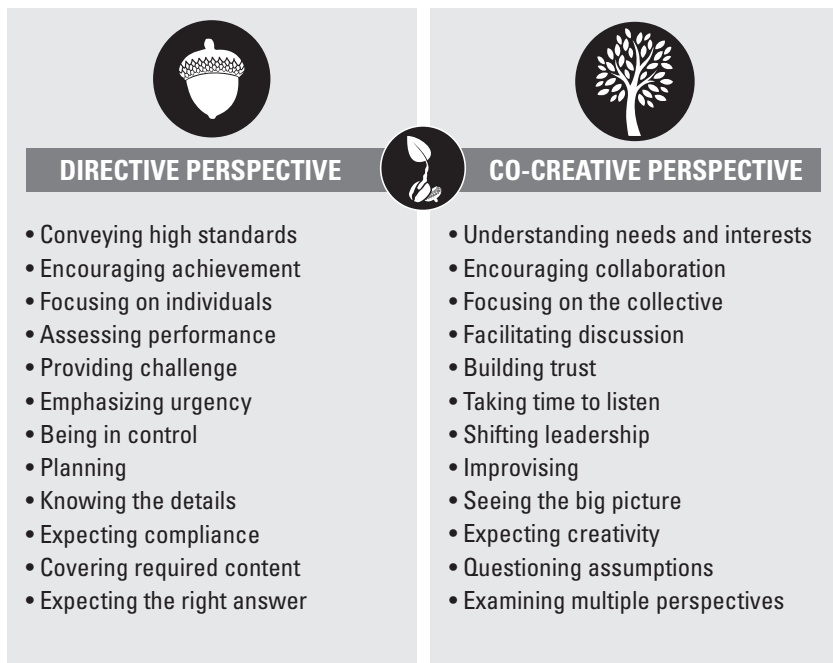
Interconnected Perspectives

Our elaboration of Pirsig’s account suggests that teachers—like motorcycle mechanics—need the directive perspective. But if they seek to accelerate learning and change lives, they need to do what Kelli did. They need to be able to transcend their directive assumptions and move into the realm of co-creation. These two perspectives are shown in figure 1.1.

Two Views

Each of these perspectives provides a set of assumptions or lenses for making sense of teaching. Looking through the lens of the directive perspective, learning is a technical process managed by a teacher. It tends to be about content and control. The teacher is in charge—a person in a position of hierarchical authority, who sets high standards while maintaining order. Planning, assessment, and achievement are emphasized. We use the acorn as a metaphor to capture the essence of the directive perspective because it provides the foundation for good teaching. A new teacher often uses the directive perspective to build his or her confidence and capabilities to create an orderly classroom. While the acorn or directive perspective is an important starting point, it comes to life only when it grows into something more dynamic. The directive perspective can be broadened over time to grow into the *co-creative perspective*.

As the teacher and the students commit to a common purpose and form high-quality relationships, they become a system that has emergent

Figure 1.1 *Two Perspectives of Teaching*

possibilities. *Emergent* means something that is embryonic, like a seed, that can then sprout, grow, or develop into something more complex, like a tree. We include the image of the seedling to reinforce that the more dynamic perspective emerges from the acorn. Without the acorn the tree cannot sprout and flourish.

When individual minds become fully engaged and integrated around a common purpose, collaboration can move to a higher level. Learning can grow into something more complex. The group can learn in ways that the individual cannot. When the group is functioning at a high level, the individual may feel that he or she has become part of something bigger than self, something worthy of sacrifice.

When this happens the social structure can transform. In the conventional hierarchy, the belief is that the teacher must hold students accountable. When collaborative learning occurs, students may begin to hold one another accountable. At this moment of transformation, the teacher can move beyond the role of disciplinarian. The network of

relationships becomes more flexible, and the classroom, as a functioning whole, can acquire the capacity to co-create and learn more deeply.

To bring about the co-creative process, the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning. In this role the teacher pays attention to relationships and works to create a culture of collaboration, a context that is more likely to give rise to full engagement and accelerated learning.

Kelli gives an example. To establish a culture of “what it is to be a learner” at the beginning of the year, Kelli sets a tone of respect, teaches her students how to be effective listeners, and makes them feel valued. Facilitation involves providing challenge and support, asking questions, and moving back and forth in directive and nondirective ways to enable students to join together in the process of co-creation.



TEACHER'S TIP

Kelli: Challenge yourself as a teacher to change what you view about your role. Is your view of teaching a “true barrier” to moving forward with students? If our view of teaching is limited, we will often become disengaged and unhappy with our job.

Connecting the Two Views

The kind of improvisation a master teacher employs cannot occur without sufficient underlying structure. Teachers still must teach content. They still strive for high achievement. They continue to focus attention on individuals, assess performance, and engage in all the aspects of practice listed on the left side of figure 1.1.

What changes in the co-creative perspective is the teacher's stance relative to students. The teacher is willing to surrender control until it is again necessary to take control. In the directive perspective, the focus is on the teacher and the teaching. In the co-creative perspective, the attention is on the learning of the student rather than the knowledge of the teacher. The co-creative perspective focuses on who the student is

becoming and how the teacher can serve as a mediator between where things are and where things could be.

Kelli provides an example of the interconnectedness of the two perspectives. At the beginning of the year, she tries to quickly acclimate students to the rules and the routines of her classroom. Kelli helps students understand the parameters for what and how they will learn. Efficient learning depends on the structures and the fixed processes of the directive perspective. At the same time, Kelli invites students into conversations about “how much you learn, how fast you learn, and the ways in which you learn.” She wants to give students a sense of purpose for their own learning. Learning progresses as a journey that Kelli and her students take together.



TEACHER'S TIP

Kelli: Take the time to figure out what students are interested in and use that interest to build a relationship. If it is not something you know about, approach the child as if you are the learner and you want the child to teach you about his or her passion.

Teacher Development

The two perspectives also have implications for how to help teachers improve. From a directive perspective, teacher development is more likely to focus on honing skills related to planning, classroom management, and pedagogy. This perspective assumes that particular practices reliably produce particular outcomes. Professional development in this perspective relies on experts to provide teachers with scientifically validated solutions to predictable pedagogic problems. All of this is true, but it is also partial by itself.

In the co-creative perspective, a classroom becomes an adaptive organization. It consists of people in relationships with one another. Each student is an interdependent actor with the potential to learn, teach, and

know. Learning accelerates and is deepened when a teacher forms high-quality relationships with students. Learning accelerates further when students form high-quality relationships with one another. To achieve this level of relationship, the teacher continually clarifies purpose, increases authenticity, practices empathy, and opens to the co-creative journey.

Teacher development, in the co-creative perspective, is likely to focus on reflection, self-assessment, interaction, experimentation, and learning from experience.⁶ Teachers engage in activities that challenge them and invite them to examine their own assumptions and beliefs. They are encouraged to empower themselves to explore, appreciate, and integrate alternative assumptions. These experiences enable them to think and act in more complex ways. As they build these capacities, they better understand how to empower students and accelerate learning. Here a teaching practice is not so much a solution to a problem as an opportunity for experimentation, engagement, and learning.

In the co-creative perspective, development is not teaching teachers to know; it is teaching teachers to learn. As a teacher develops the capacity to think and act in more complex ways, his or her effectiveness increases because effectiveness is a function of being in the present and learning to adapt and create in real time. The objective is for the teacher to acquire adaptive confidence and transformational influence.

Reality

Researchers suggest that 10,000 is the magic number of hours needed to attain mastery.⁷ If a gifted pianist, for example, puts in 9,000 hours of practice, that person is likely to have a less luminary career than a gifted musician who puts in 10,000 hours. Ten thousand hours seems to be a threshold.

By the time we graduate from college, we all have more than 10,000 hours in classrooms observing teachers. This extensive socialization means we are all deeply rooted in the directive view of teaching. As we have seen, the directive perspective is at the heart of our experiences, language, and culture. To access the co-creative perspective, we have to undergo deep change and experience transformative learning. In this book you will find stories, concepts, and tools to help you do just that.

Summary

Highly effective teachers like Kelli have daunting challenges. They work with the same students in the same schools with the same resources as other teachers. Their organizational context is hierarchical, conflict-ridden, and politically charged. And while these challenges lead some teachers to feel frustrated, discouraged, and dissatisfied, highly effective teachers somehow learn to perform at high levels.

Through our work with HETs, we have tried to make sense of what accounts for their extraordinary impact. To do this we have drawn from a number of different scientific literatures to develop some hypotheses about the integration of the directive and co-creative perspectives. This book shares our theories with you. Chapter 2 introduces a framework that will help you more deeply examine and reflect on HETs' journeys from novice to master teacher so that you can begin to apply these lessons to your own teaching practice.



PLANTING SEEDS

1. Kelli says, "It is not about teaching math. It is about getting them to want to learn." What are the implications of working toward the one purpose versus the other? How might the two purposes be integrated?
2. Kelli started out well, but her students changed and her assumptions did not. This led to failure and frustration. Her friends advised her, "You have to realize early on that you are not the key to every door." When have you received or given such advice? What arguments justify this advice? How is accepting such advice conspiring in your own diminishment?

3. Kelli made a vow that took her on a new path. She states:

I needed to pay more attention to those types of kids. I had to figure out what works for them, how to have respect for them, how to use humor to diffuse explosive situations. I learned how to make those kinds of kids feel safe in my room, and I learned how to teach them social skills so the other students would feel safe in the room with such a child. And then I

learned that I have to be very parent-savvy. I have to sit down and get the parents on my side very early on. So I learned those techniques, and I've never had another year like that.

How is this kind of learning different from the procedural learning to which we are more accustomed? What are the key requirements for this kind of learning? What does this suggest about your most pressing frustrations?



GROWING YOUR PRACTICE

1. What is one specific practice you can undertake in your next week of teaching to build momentum on the journey to the co-creative perspective? Use the right-hand column in figure 1.1 to help you identify a specific practice. Be specific about when, who, what, and how you will get started.
2. Following Kelli's advice, identify one student whom you would like to reach in a deeper way. Find out what he or she is interested in and use that interest to build a relationship. If it is not something you know about, approach the child as if you are the learner and you want the child to teach you about his or her passion.

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