One of the ways to ascertain headteachers’ views on their priorities is to invite them to describe an expert teacher. When asked, all 12 interviewees gave immediate responses. I very much had the impression that it was an issue that they had all thought about and that they had clear views on the subject. The following reflections are typical. An expert teacher is someone

who has fantastic subject knowledge; one who is very good at leading and managing children in the classroom, making lessons exciting, catering for different types of learners; somebody who plans effectively; somebody who fits in with school policies and programmes – very much a team-player, supports others, evaluates critically. When you walk into his or her classroom it is exciting, the environment is exciting, they are using resources in an imaginative way. And the children make progress. It’s about children making progress, both within lessons and over time. And then reflecting what they are doing and analysing what they are doing at different intervals, so that they are assessing children all the way along and then modifying and changing as they go. (Debra)

An expert – somebody who knows their children, understands the needs of their children despite whatever criteria...you know, that we have to meet and match; somebody who plans brilliantly – and delivers – a creative curriculum and somebody who assesses well, understands ...as I said, understands their needs and plans for the next steps and when you walk in the classroom the
children are just absorbed and engaged in whatever activities are being led at that time. (Janice)

I think, an extremely good teacher is very, very imaginative and very emotionally supportive of the children. You know, children with difficulties of all sorts would feel very supported by her, very understood by her. She did a lot of work with them over behaviour and responsibility for each other and for themselves, and her classroom was always, you know, a lovely place to go into, with lots of stimulating... she would create a great sense of awe and wonder and excitement about learning and it would be very, kind of, vibrant. (Maggie)

Oh well, I think some people have an empathy for children. The ability to kind of walk in their shoes. I think it’s about, with little children... I think the things that make you good are being child-centred, understanding about child development, understanding about play and just having this kind of natural delight in young children – you can’t bottle it. (Georgie)

Common attributes with a slight digression on method

Although the quotes above display slightly different emphases, a closer examination suggests that there were several factors which most – if not necessarily all in all cases – headteachers considered to be crucial attributes of an expert teacher. At this point, as a writer I am faced with a dilemma: what might readers conclude from the order in which I present these factors? I could start with those I think the current government might most approve. Another option might be to begin with those I most identify with, but, as I am not – and never have been – a headteacher, who am I to say which are the most important attributes? Or, as a researcher I could opt for the number of times an attribute was mentioned and start with the most discussed. That might be considered the most objective approach but it is not as straightforward as it might appear. If someone repeatedly stressed a particular view, for example, would that count as one mention or several? Compare this to another individual who stated the same thing very emphatically but only once. How would this be accommodated in a tallying system?

A further option was to present the attributes in alphabetical order, but, in my view, that would make for a rather disjointed discussion