

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

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## Creating Learning Without Limits

### **Creating Learning Without Limits**

MANDY SWANN, ALISON PEACOCK,  
SUSAN HART & MARY JANE DRUMMOND, 2012  
Maidenhead: Open University Press  
168 pages, £22.99, paperback, ISBN 978-0-33-5242115

### **Introduction**

In 2004, a book appeared which challenged many teachers' traditional views about ability labelling and the grouping of pupils in school. The book in question was *Learning Without Limits*, co-authored by Susan Hart, Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond & Donald McIntyre, and with contributions from nine practising teachers chosen to provide compelling case-studies (from Year 1 to Year 11) showing how it was possible to develop effective practice, free from determinist beliefs about pupil ability. The book was dedicated to *FORUM*'s founding Editor Brian Simon (1915-2002), who worked so hard throughout his life to discredit widely-held but totally flawed preconceptions about fixed innate intelligence.

The book received a number of glowing reviews, many commentators recognising that only when we dismantle all the structures rooted in the fallacy of fixed ability or potential can we have a truly effective and liberating state education system. It was described by university lecturer Chris Kearney in a review in *FORUM* (Volume 46, Number 3, Autumn 2004) as 'an important, timely, courageous and optimistic book'; and Chris ended his piece by highlighting the authors' use of an inspiring comment by Loris Malaguzzia, the dreamer and pioneer who helped make creative approaches to learning a reality for the teachers and children of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy: 'the continuing motivation for our work has been an attempt ... to liberate hopes for a new human culture of childhood. It is a motive that finds its origin in a powerful nostalgia for the future and for mankind' (page 259). And writing in the *Times Educational Supplement* on 4 June 2004, Professor Tim Brighouse said of *Learning Without Limits* that 'here is a book that could change the world'. He went on to say: 'A growing number of teachers, including the nine in this book,

passionately believe in the limitless potential of the youngsters they teach. Of course, they care about their pupils, but they also care (with a sincerity that communicates itself to these pupils), about the pupils *they might become* – and are never resigned to their achieving less than that potential’.

Now we have a brilliant sequel to that 2004 book which is a study of a small and very successful primary school in Hertfordshire where the headteacher, Alison Peacock, was one of the original participating teachers in *Learning Without Limits*. As the authors say in the Preface, the one feature of the School that makes it distinctive is that underpinning all its work is ‘a fundamentally different view of learners and learning, of curriculum and pedagogy, from that promoted by the standards agenda’.

**Clyde Chitty**

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This book is about Wroxham, a community of teachers, non-teaching staff, children and parents, who are taking control of how they develop their primary school inspired by ideas about learning without ability labelling. It is a book to give education research a good name in its insistent connections between practice and theory. It is academically rigorous and inventive, morally and politically committed and provides for others a seductive invitation to reflect on, modify and transform their practice based on shared principles. The authors provide a compass for educators emerging from a long shadow of demoralisation when there has seemed no alternative to submission to pressures of targets, levels, lesson objectives, and pre-planned teaching and learning activities derived from the ideas, values and aspirations of others. They ask (p. 4): ‘what if school development were driven by a commitment on the part of a whole-school community to creating better ways for everybody to live, work and learn together?’ The Wroxham community have reclaimed school development as about active participation and reflection; as depending on public dialogue between teachers, children and their families. They are part of an important movement in education whereby a suppressed yearning for self-expression and solidarity is finding voice despite or because of the excessive and even comic continuing determination of politicians to put their stamp on education and post it back to the 19th century. These are the ‘mediocrats’ [1] who persist in their attempts to supply the ways of life that will support stuttering neo-liberal financial systems in which the inevitability of failing schools, because of the manipulations of the market, are an echo of, and mirror for, failing states.

The head teacher of Wroxham, Alison Peacock, was one of nine teachers, each from a different school, who had volunteered their principles, theories and practice for description and analysis as participants in the *Learning without Limits* research team initiated by Susan Hart. Their reflections and actions were

recorded through case studies in an earlier book.[2] The teachers shared a common belief that wonderful teaching and learning should and could proceed without recourse to the labelling or grouping of children according to ideas of ability. They worked in schools where others shared their ideas to varying extents. This book outlined the moral, political and empirical arguments against an education which sorts children and young people according to conceptions of ability and potential. It illustrated the way such processes limit their achievements and sense of self-worth. At the Brian Simon memorial lecture in 2010, Clyde Chitty described the *Learning without Limits* team as 'the true inheritors of Brian Simon's education legacy' in documenting the way conceptions of ability act as a means for the reproduction and authentication of a stratified social order, and for obscuring the injuries of social class. In the *Learning without Limits* project an inverted purpose of schooling as 'reproducibility' is righted to become the 'transformability' of learning capacity. It is this that forms its core idea.

Three key shared principles were derived from observations of the nine teachers which they used to guide ideas about what to do and what not to do next in interactions with learners. These were 'co-agency', 'everybody' and 'trust'. Changes in learning capacity are seen to depend both on what children and teachers do separately and together. Imagination and empathy may be required for teachers to grasp how to remove limits to, and enhance, the learning capacity of individuals and collectives. An 'ethic of everybody' means valuing all children and young people equally, acting to promote all their interests by encouraging everyone's learning, participation and solidarity. It involves countering privilege and inequality. For example, at Wroxham, visitors are not allowed to jump the lunch queue. The principles of 'co-agency' and 'everybody' involve significant departures from practice shaped by prevailing ideologies. Yet it is the third principle of 'trusting the learner' to respond to invitations to learning, to have enquiry at the centre of his and her being, that may need to be most strongly reasserted against restrictive forces of layered accountability for the learning of children imposed on children themselves, their teachers, schools, local authorities and governments. It is a system in which no-one is trusted and hence an ethic of trustworthiness is undermined.[3]

When Alison became a head teacher at Wroxham, a compelling opportunity presented itself to explore what can be achieved when a whole school attempts to 'create in reality their vision of an education based on inclusive egalitarian principles, including an unshakeable bedrock belief in everybody's capacity to learn' (p. 7). Under the influence and guidance of Alison, staff at the school gradually accepted invitations to enter into dialogue about, and to adopt, a set of shared principles which would bring coherence to practices which had previously had a more fragmented and unexplored provenance. Inevitably this has been a continuing, incomplete, emergent process given the immanence of neo-liberal values and the power of habit, cultures and traditions of practice. Despite the best efforts of any of us to act within an adopted values framework, our practice is underpinned by a mixture of values

and principles some of which we may be only murkily aware and some entirely unaware. We can be very adept at thinking with one set of principles in one part of our minds and quite different ones with another. For example some who claim to be adopting inclusive values may continue to believe in the language of special educational needs with its strong links to segregating practices and deterministic views of ability. Wroxham teachers increasingly avoid this language and focus instead on what they can do to create enabling conditions for every child's learning. The school shows the extent to which common purposes can be achieved as values and principles are discussed, owned and form the basis of a passionate commitment. For some adults and children, this stripping away of the authority of past practices has been revelatory. As one teacher commented when she dared to move away from creating attainment groups in her class: 'I just think it's a horrible thing to do when you look back at it now'.

In early 2003, Alison inherited a school that had been designated by school inspectors three years previously as 'in special measures' with 'massive underachievement' and an 'unteachable' class. It had a demoralised staff and children who derided those who took an interest in learning. She saw the inspection system as labelling this and other schools as in the 'bottom set', a devaluation from which it is difficult to emerge. The school had a narrow curriculum of English, Mathematics and Science. Alison set about building the confidence of staff so that they could reengage children in the joy of learning. Change was rapid. In a few months the school was taken out of special measures and subsequent inspections documented a rise in the official appreciation of the changes secured within the cultures of staff, parents and children at the school. The inspection report of 2011 found the school 'outstanding in all areas'. The school community consciously reflected on the dangers of being seen as now promoted to the 'top set' and even achieving 'perfect' status as a hub for teacher education within surrounding schools. The inspection system may be less monolithic than I am disposed to think and inspectors themselves may be more or less compliant with authorised policy and more or less ready to promote alternatives. Yet there was no direct endorsement in the report of the conviction at the heart of this school that achievements are best promoted by establishing fertile conditions for teaching and learning rather than focussing on attainment outcomes. One glorious, inspired, irreverence in the book is the trip to the Natural History Museum of year six students on the day before their national tests (SATS).

A portrayal of a subtle model of leadership at the school is among the most significant features of the book. It provides a view of strong leadership based on respectful relationships which is in stark contrast to the one reflected in the government approved macho-pronouncements of the Chief Inspector of Schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw. This ex-headteacher of a secondary school has claimed: 'If anyone says to you that 'staff morale is at an all-time low', you know you are doing something right'. (*The Guardian*, 12 May 2012). At Wroxham most hierarchies have been 'dismantled'. A view of leadership that is

diffused amongst all adults and children is entailed by serious application of the principles of 'trust', 'co-agency' and 'everyone'. Alison sees herself as an experienced 'lead learner'. She introduced the conviction into the 'Learning Without Limits' project that its 'principles' must apply equally to both adults and children. This is expressed in the claim that 'increasing the learning capacity of staff is the condition for increasing the learning capacity of children'. For greater consistency this might be better articulated through a recognition of the mutual prompts to be open to learning that can pass between adults and children when both receive 'an irresistible invitation to join in a shared learning journey' and extend their 'freedom to learn'.

Besides being a principal instigator of teacher and child learning and school development dialogues, Alison also provides a shield or 'umbrella', deflecting outside pressures so that her staff can have space to reacquaint themselves with their own educational principles and the implications of these for action. In supporting teachers to enhance their teaching and learning capacities the research team identified seven dispositions that mediated these developments in addition to the three original learning without limits principles. These are: openness, questioning, inventiveness, persistence, emotional stability, generosity, and empathy. It is unclear how important these are intended to be in the development of the learning (and teaching) capacities of children. The enthusiasm and clarity with which teachers from the school are explaining their work to others, following the publication of this book, is an indication of the distribution of leadership and potential sustainability of the changes taking place.

Opportunities for shared learning, teaching, discussion and decision making are central to the development of learning capacity at the school for both adults and children. Many of the conversations about learning as well as curriculum planning between adults, including both teachers and teaching assistants, are based around meetings of the four Faculties. Children learn with designated learning partners and attend weekly mixed age circle group meetings chaired by year six students. Learning reviews between staff, children and their parents are held twice a year. Collaboration in learning takes place in class groups and through mixed-age support. An imaginative example involved older children planning a visit to a mill for a younger class, recognising that they were 'closer to the minds' of these children. At the base of the invitation to learn is a rich and varied curriculum and a school environment with an arresting display of artefacts and machines, a brightly painted double-decker reading bus in the playground, an old motorcycle and sidecar in the library. There are visiting sculptors, dancers and musicians. There is a gardening club and school radio station. A teacher enthusiast has helped the integration of Forest School activities into the curriculum, using an area of the school grounds.[4] Children are active in their assessment of their own and each other's learning, drawing on the reflections in their own learning notebooks.

I think the authors are unnecessarily cautious about the transferability of the principles, ideas and examples of practice within this book to other schools,

including secondary schools. This book is not about 'evidence based practice' but about how adopting shared values and principles can guide the actions of adults and children, even in difficult times, so that they can build a beautiful place for them to learn and be together. It is not a copy book but a rich source for stimulating ideas and examples to prompt reflection and action. It encourages alliances to be made with approaches which share its principles. The ideas have formed the basis of university courses and local authority guidance to schools. It holds up a mirror which reflects the sheer nastiness of the extremes of ability branding such as at Crown Woods school, with its three mini-schools segregating children by buildings, break times and uniforms as if it were an agri-business for the sorting and disposal of livestock.[5] This is a book which recaptures our capacity to think otherwise, to know that another educational world is possible and within our reach.

**Tony Booth**

### Notes

- [1] David Smail (1993) *The Origins of Unhappiness: a new understanding of personal distress*. London: Harper Collins.
- [2] Hart, S., Hart, S., Dixon, A., Drummond, M.J. & McIntyre, D. (2006) *Learning Without Limits*. Buckingham: Open University Press.  
<http://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk>
- [3] O'Neill, Onora (2002) A Question of Trust. Reith Lecture 3. London: BBC.
- [4] Vandewalle, M. (2010) Come Rain or Shine: a whole school approach to Forest School, *FORUM*, 52(1), 43-47.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2010.52.1.43>
- [5] Yarker, P. (2011) Moving in Darkness: back to the future at Crown Woods College, *FORUM*, 53(4), 421-426.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/forum.2011.53.3.421>

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I began writing this review within days of the publication of the Government's proposals for a purportedly 'reformed' primary curriculum. With its massively prescriptive, heavily content-dominated, reductive and retrogressive agenda it runs total counter to the practice of Wroxham School, which is the focus of this book, and to the values of the research team who authored it. Despite its rhetoric of offering increased 'freedom' the governments' proposals, if enacted, would severely limit the professional judgment and practices of teachers and the learning of children – both endorsed by the school and the book's authors. Rather than fostering learning without limits as the school strives to do, the proposals would limit learning in Wroxham School and others to an extent not

seen in English primary/elementary education since the Revised Code of the nineteenth century. There has never been a better time, or perhaps a more difficult time, to draw readers' attention to the values and principles made explicit in this 'story of a school'.

The book is intended to meet the need expressed by Fielding & Moss: 'Education today needs fewer large-scale quantitative studies comparing performance on pre-determined outcomes and more critical case-studies of possibility, opportunities to enrich our imagination and vocabulary' (quoted on pp. 126-127). It very largely succeeds in meeting this need: possibility, imagination, moral purpose are all illustrated and celebrated.

However, like so many past observers of ground-breaking practice such as Edmond Holmes' encounter with Egeria in 1907 or the Plowden Committee's visits to 'progressive' primary schools in the 1960s the research team have perhaps been too beguiled with practice that is congruent with their own predilections so that their accounts of it lacks a suitably critical edge. That 'critical' edge is focussed devastatingly on past and present 'standards agendas' and on the currently dominant 'view of learning (as linear, measurable and quantifiable)' complemented by the 'equally damaging view of the children who do the learning, who can themselves be known, measured and quantified in terms of so-called ability, a fixed internal capacity, which can be readily determined' (p. 1). Those views of learning and children are comprehensively and convincingly demolished both by the practices of teachers and children at Wroxham School and by the arguments and principles espoused by the authors.

The book is based unashamedly and very persuasively on 'some unshakeable convictions: that human potential is not predictable, that children's futures are unknowable, that education has the power to enhance the lives of all' (p. 1) Illustrated by plentiful examples from the school, it succeeds in describing 'a fundamentally different view of learners and learning, of curriculum and pedagogy, from that promoted by the standards agenda, and a radically different approach to the distribution of leadership, power, monitoring and accountability' (p. xiii). That approach is spelt out clearly through a number of themes and associated sub-themes including:

- (a) Extending freedom to learn for both children and teachers: offering choices; listening to children; learning together; involving children in assessing their own learning; extending freedom to learn;
- (b) Rethinking learning relationships: towards shared understandings; building and communicating acceptance; the importance of empathy; maintaining steadfastness of purpose; making connections;
- (c) Creating a school-wide culture of learning: collaborating and supporting focussed on children's learning; stimulating thinking focussed on children's learning; creating structures and experiences that foster staff learning; connecting with wider community of ideas and practices; fostering dispositions that increase the capacity for professional learning; and enhancing a sense of moral purpose;

- (d) The power of collective action: leadership; collective action; passion and commitment to learning without limits;
- (e) A distinctive approach to school improvement through impetus for intrinsic improvement; creating conditions and dispositions for the development of professional learning;; partnership and collaboration; and monitoring and accountability involving intrinsic criteria and shared responsibility.

My criticism is not about the practice in the school; there is so much there to admire and praise. I have no doubt that I too would be beguiled by children who are not labelling themselves as level this, that or the other but who see themselves as empowered learners able to exercise a degree of choice and control over their own learning and with voices of their own which are heeded to and responded to.

I do have a few reservations about how the 'story of the school' is told. There seems to be a lack of 'critical distance' between the researchers and the school, I suspect, because of a congruence of basic values. There is no hint of criticism or questioning of the school's policy and practice. There is no suggestion of any problems or shortcomings with the head teacher's style of leadership. Apart from reference to one wilful class (successfully rehabilitated) and a difficult individual (successfully managed) the children themselves are seen through 'rose-' (not 'Rose-') coloured spectacles. The two-year study reported in the book did not begin until two years after the appointment of the pioneering headteacher and thus no in-depth account is available of that crucial period when the fundamental groundwork was laid for the exciting developments that followed.

I have no doubt from the account that teachers did increasingly internalise the notion of 'learning without limits' but I would have liked more recognition of the difficulty involved in their dispensing with the notion of 'ability'. There are occasional glimpses of this as in the references to 'the *gradual* elimination of the vocabulary of differential ability' and to how teachers *increasingly* distanced themselves from the use of 'labels' (my italics). But how difficult was it really for teachers (and parents) to escape from an outside culture which reifies 'ability'? I would have liked more too on the inevitable, understandable compromises the school has to make with the official compliance culture – hinted at in the reference to one teacher 'who planned the unit of work to ensure that the children's suggestions would also *satisfy* National Curriculum requirements' (p. 89) or in the statement that 'When people are talking about learning ... they do not *usually* focus directly on levels and what can be done to boost them' (p. 113).

This is a 'story of a school' which needs to be told and despite my criticisms it is told well. So many schools and teachers could take heart from the experience of Wroxham School. They need to read this book. The original *Story of a School* was published by the late 1940s by Attlee's Ministry of Education under the incomparable George Tomlinson, a genuine believer in teacher



autonomy. It is inconceivable that the current Department for Education could ever publish an account based on the kinds of principles put into practice at Wroxham School currently and those at Steward Street Primary School sixty years ago. The recent primary curriculum proposals bear witness to that fact. To adapt the title of the book and to employ a different sense of the word, those of us sharing the authors' 'unshakeable convictions' need 'to create', and 'without limits', when confronted with current political dogma.

**Colin Richards**

