

EDITORIAL

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## The Enduring Problem of Fixed Ability: but is a new conversation beginning?

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As Michael Armstrong recently reminded the *FORUM* Editorial Board, the past boasts no educational golden age to which we might wish to return. There is, rather, a tradition that keeps pace with the currently dominant orthodoxy and contends with it; a tradition that advances a worthier educational alternative. This tradition each generation has to rediscover and then refashion for its own day.

Since *FORUM* exists in part to contribute to this contentious tradition, or counter-tradition, and help remake it in the present, this Special Issue opens with a transcript of Michael Armstrong's 2012 Brian Simon Memorial Lecture, a sustained exposition of one of the counter-tradition's distinguishing features: its conception of teaching and learning as an endeavour of reconstruction.

The current orthodoxy conceives learning entirely differently. Its injunction is not 'Know thyself' but 'Know thy National Curriculum level (and sub-level)' and, thanks to the regular deployment of tests purporting to ascertain and measure progress, 'Know thy place'. While recent research suggests that setting (or streaming) pupils by 'ability' is becoming more widespread and apparent in primary schools (which is to say more orthodox), the covert version of this segregational practice has long been entrenched. Pupils are assigned an 'ability' label from the first and located accordingly within the classroom, and in the mind of the teacher. A contemporary Sissy Jupe sitting at a table of 'Hamsters' or 'Squirrels', a 'green' table or a 'blue', wouldn't take long to figure out she was neither girl number 1 or number 10, but girl number 20 still. Indeed, in exploring the not-so-subtle differences between Hamsters, Rabbits and Squirrels, Annabelle Dixon's article (reprinted in this issue, but first published in 1984) reminds us that what we used to call 'the hidden curriculum'

is rarely hidden from the sharp eyes of the children who live and learn within its would-be benevolent structures.

From the first, *FORUM* has carried articles arguing against setting and streaming. The journal was in the forefront of intellectual and practical campaigns against 'ability' grouping and for 'mixed ability' teaching and learning as those campaigns made headway into the 1970s. But 'fixed ability' thinking, albeit for a time cloaked by 'mixed ability' practice, has proved tenacious. Government policy is predicated on it; Ofsted inspectors embody it. The idea that children *are* bright or dull, of high 'ability' or low, and there's an end to the matter, is everywhere given voice and passes without question.

And yet, despite the ministrations of the powerful, teachers (perhaps in some numbers) see through and reject the prevailing discourse of fixed 'ability' and its enforcer-cum-seducer, differentiation. They refuse to badge each child with an identity based on determinist assumptions. They recognise how a system predicated on testing, 'ability'-labelling and grouping, and deficit-models of children, routinely fails large numbers of those it is supposed to serve. Teachers are made angry by it. They realise the system provides narrower educational experiences and more limited curricular offerings for those it channels into lower sets than for their higher-setted peers, and are outraged by its claim to do so for the child's benefit. They understand that the norm of progress and development to which the system would have children conform is arbitrary.

Time was when teachers of English, Media and Drama were among the doughtiest defenders of a conception of the pupil as already strong and capable, worthy to be trusted in class and listened to. To judge by the response to our call for papers for this Special Issue, it is in mathematics classrooms that such a conception of the pupil is currently upheld. We showcase four articles by, or drawing on the work of, teachers of maths or 'numeracy'. Rachel Marks's article, made especially potent by its use of pupil-voice, reveals how 'differentiation' can work to limit what pupils are able to demonstrate. But it goes further, to show how fixed 'ability' thinking shapes the ways in which pupils are responded to in diametrically-opposed ways even when they manifest the same learning behaviours. If ever there was a lesson in how the prevailing orthodoxy prevents a teacher from rightly assessing a pupil, it is the lesson that Rachel Marks observed in a Year 4 classroom and shrewdly analyses here. Fixed 'ability' thinking, made manifest in the words and actions of the teacher, maintains the pupil in a false identity even when the pupil provides clear evidence of its falsehood.

Amy Milik and Mark Boylan offer an extended account of one teacher's journey away from fixed 'ability' thinking and towards a practice reshaped by her own rethinking:

I believe a lot more strongly now that the way adults talk to children and direct children and the tasks they give them can have a big influence on children's ideas about what they can and cannot do. We

have to be careful we don't put a ceiling on their ideas about what they can do.

This article is also testimony to the readiness of a teacher to act on deeply-held beliefs about learning, and to change her mind and her practice the better to help her pupils learn. It is not the lone example here of that.

Gwen Tressider and Anne Watson follow up an article written by Anne in a previous issue of *FORUM* by showing how 'all-attainment' groups in maths have benefits for pupils and teachers, and can be sustained by a department despite current constraints. This article, like that by Amy Milik and Mark Boylan, draws extensively on the practice of the teacher who co-writes it. Jo Boaler, who has recently made public the extent to which her work contending with the orthodoxies of mathematics teaching in the USA has been obstructed and shockingly traduced, offers a quick-fire account of why 'ability' thinking is mistaken. She draws on a variety of specific research findings to buttress her argument and her heartening optimism.

Fixed 'ability' thinking purports to render the pupil unproblematically known, at least so far as the school is concerned. The process of assigning 'ability' labels makes the pupil visible in ways which are, for the purposes of school data, predictable. The pupil is (or is not) on course to achieve the next level, and so maintain (or fail to maintain) her expected rate of progress. In the era of hyper-accountability and performativity, when a school must reach its floor-targets to avoid being placed in an unfavourable Ofsted category, and so lose such limited freedom of action as it may still have, data-tracking and the predictability of 'progress' have replaced more qualitative and fitting indicators of whether or not a school is doing well. In some ways they have corroded beyond recognition the idea of what a school should be and do. They have also driven out the element of surprise. Or so argues Julian Stern, whose article restates the way surprise is intrinsically educative, and returns to wider educational discussion some of the insights of the philosopher Martin Buber.

With its unlooked for destruction of the way things seem to be, clearing space for reconstruction, surprise can be sudden and indicative of something valuably wild in the pupil or the classroom (as Patrick Yarker's article begins to consider). Or, when a class is seen and sustained across weeks as a dynamic learning community rather than as a collection of conveniently-organised individuals, surprise may be a gradual emergence. As Holly Linklater puts it, in an article which seeks to re-establish the idea of a class as a collective: 'There were no fanfares, just an accumulation of small acts of noticing that things were no longer as they had been'. Slow surprises. Her article, drawing on a year-long ethnographic study of her own Reception class, charts her journey of exploration; we see her learning how to teach *everybody*, not 'most people', or 'some people'. Furthermore, the children teach her how to base her 'attentive pedagogy' on a recognition of everybody as fully human, as 'people in the present, as well as adults in the making'. Her approach is a most effective antidote to the de-humanising discourse of Every Child Matters and the

Foundation Stage framework, which she replaces with the language of ethics and morality.

While the articles from mathematicians offer us one distinct, surprising, and so educative, perspective, those from Sally Tomlinson and Terry Wrigley offer another. Their articles are impelled by a comparison of aspects of contemporary English practice with what is going on in other parts of the world. Sally Tomlinson gives an account of her recent international study of what is being done to, or for, or with, the post-16 cohort not destined for AS and A2 courses, but rather left to fend for themselves in the chaos that is Further Education (FE) provision. Professor Tomlinson castigates governments of all stripes for their failure to ensure a coherent offer is made available for these young people. Terry Wrigley looks at models of differentiation developed in Germany and Denmark that seem to avoid ranking or stigmatising students in the manner intrinsic to English models. These classes are built on the premise of student diversity rather than (notional) homogeneity. Students share, collaborate, enjoy freedom of choice and are confronted with complex challenges. There are parallels to be seen here, and in the practices reported by our contributors from classrooms in England, with the key principles outlined by the Learning without Limits research team as characteristic of teaching free from determinist assumptions about 'ability'. These are: trust in pupils, co-agency in the creation and undertaking of classroom activity, and an 'ethic of everybody', a particular way of understanding inclusion.

Two articles extend the range of this Special Issue into the field of initial teacher education. Lani Florian describes a ground-breaking university-based programme in Scotland in which post-graduate students in education were prepared to take full responsibility for the learning and achievement of all pupils. To this end the Post Graduate Diploma in Education at the University of Aberdeen was restructured to prioritise issues of diversity and social justice, right from the start of the course, and to explore how forms of determinism – or 'bell curve thinking' – have been normalised in education, most notably in the fallacious view that 'intelligence' is distributed in a population according to such a curve. John Cornwall's article describes his work with a pan-European teacher education project, which developed a 'Profile of Inclusive Teachers'. He uses the 'four cornerstones' of this profile, which identify and define professional core values and competences, to critique and challenge the status quo in Initial Teacher Education programmes in England.

In compiling this Special Issue we were struck by the way material in one article could be read as evidence of an argument advanced in another, and by how a claim or comment here was echoed and developed there. Is this a conversation, starting once again to be heard more loudly, about the inadequacy and injustice of fixed 'ability' thinking and practice and the imperative need to think and work in a way which, recognising the unlimited educability of all pupils, can educate better? This issue contains examples of such thinking and practice within individual classrooms and departments, and more widely. Mary Jane Drummond, Susan Hart and Mandy Swann recapitulate significant aspects

of the work of the pupils and the whole staff at the Wroxham School in creating a school-wide culture of learning in which 'fixed ability' thinking has no place. A recognition that 'the pupils are the evidence' for the success of such an approach informs this article and is substantiated by it. The eponymous phrase, and the intention behind it, are echoed almost exactly in Holly Linklater's article.

It is also striking, if this time unsurprising, how many of the authors in this issue, while rightly celebrating the success of their alternative approaches, sound a rueful note in lamenting how much more needs to be done, and how many more people and institutions need to be recruited to the cause. Indeed, Amy Milik and Mark Boylan conclude their article, the last in this issue, by asking readers to consider what might be possible from a wider gathering together – a question that they then transform into an explicit invitation – on p. 170. We suggest you turn to that invitation now, before immersing yourselves in the issue as a whole. Maybe the idea of a wider gathering will lodge in your mind as you read on; maybe you will find it hard to resist.

We hope you do. Teaching and learning informed by the principle of unlimited human educability and realised in the classroom helps give the lie to much educational orthodoxy in these brutal times. Read, and receive what cheer you may. The night is long that never finds the day.

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