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## Is 'Learning without Limits' a Framework of Values?

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**ABSTRACT** In this article the author connects his own work with Brian Simon's writing on IQ (intelligence quotient) testing and selection and with the Learning without Limits project. He discusses the significance he gives to a values framework in the development of education and asks whether 'Learning without Limits', in part, stands for a similar framework. He sees the work of the Learning without Limits team as a bright light. It is powered by renewable energy, in a murky educational landscape itself powered too often by the same dubious energy sources that may destroy this planet unless we stop using them. This work matters.

### **Connecting with Brian Simon**

Towards the end of the 1960s, I taught in a large comprehensive school in the London Borough of Wandsworth. I was committed to widening the move to comprehensive community education and defining what that meant. But I had already been groomed to believe in the efficacy of intelligence tests at my university where I studied experimental psychology and logical positivist philosophy. I was further corrupted during my training as an educational psychologist. I arrived for my first job in Nottingham in 1970 ready to do families a favour by giving IQ (intelligence quotient) tests to their children so that, if they failed, I could offer them the specialist teaching and small classes of the special school.

After a few repetitions of my sales pitch, I realised that the people I was talking to had something to say. I was introduced by parents and children to arguments against a stigmatised, devalued education for those categorised at the time as 'educationally subnormal' and to the rejection children felt at being pushed out from their communities. I later discovered that my persuasive speech had been invented, almost word for word, as a subterfuge by Alfred Binet, creator of intelligence tests with the conscious hidden purpose of removing

some children from the society of others. It was social engineering. Quite rapidly, I added to my opposition to selection for grammar schools, opposition to the use of IQ tests and the segregation of children into special schools.

I gained support from Bernard Coard's (1971) concern about racism within the categorisation process for special schools. This is a continuing issue across Eastern Europe, with the scandalous placement of large numbers of Roma children into special schools (UNICEF, 2009; O'Nions, 2010). In the early 1970s, too, I was a peripheral member of a group producing the radical psychology magazine *Humpty Dumpty*, which was both anti-selection and anti-segregation. But I found particular support in Brian Simon's critique of the use of IQ tests in *Intelligence, Psychology and Education*, republished in 1971 but containing his writings from the 1950s. At that time opposition to the use of IQ tests amongst educational psychologists was an uncommon, isolating, almost unspeakable position, and within my professional group seemed unpublishable, so his work had particular value.

I took a job in Sheffield in 1974, which was the only place where an educational psychologist could express a refusal to administer IQ tests at interview. But my colleagues routinely used them and some interesting dialogues took place. My office was next to the test cupboard. I came to argue that a rejection of ideas of fixed inability required the dismantling of the special needs education system. This later encompassed structures to do with gifted and talented students. These systems constantly recreate fixed ability and selection thinking. People have a remarkable capacity for simultaneously holding contradictory beliefs, so I am very aware of how colleagues can work on ridding exclusionary pressures for some students while at the same time reinforcing them in, and through, others.

I found that selection out of mainstream education by disability or categorisation as 'having special educational needs' was of little concern to most education academics, including those who would otherwise argue strongly against selection by presumed ability within and between schools. It seemed that selection for special schools was regarded as 'natural selection' as opposed to the unnatural selection for grammar schools. So thinking of comprehensives as an answer to the question, 'three schools or one?' (S. Simon, 1948) omitted the way segregation, and the special education system of which it was part, multiplied the hierarchy of schools and continually reinforced the ideas of selection by presumed ability in all schools.

The widespread use of corporal punishment in the early seventies also had a powerful influence on my thinking. I wrote to a friend shortly after I arrived in Nottingham to take up my first job as an educational psychologist that I could hear the swishing of canes all over the city from my office window. In our London school at least some of us were disgusted by the way the head teacher would take a run at a stooping child, cane in hand, an act that could be viewed widely from the main block of the school with a view of the administration spur which included the head teacher's office. I cannot recall finding anyone in Nottingham who objected to its use, even within the

teachers' unions. Yet for me, corporal punishment was abusive, and plainly wrong. It was a breach of human rights. It was 'anti-educational' though I was not about to suggest that this had to be proved through randomised controlled trials to test its effect on reading attainment.

Similarly, I saw selection between schools, and many forms of selection within schools, as also requiring opposition on moral and political grounds. Its abusive nature is well illustrated by Patrick Yarker and Melissa Benn's article on Crown Woods school in London (Yarker & Benn, 2011), and by my granddaughter's recent experience where, after being tested on entry to secondary school, students have been allocated to one of four sets called 'A\*-A', 'A\*-B', 'A-C', and 'C', which must really mean 'F', or 'of little value to this school'.

Reading Brian Simon now, he seems ambivalent about the nature of the arguments for comprehensive education. In arguing for change he suggested that 'only educational considerations should operate'; that his book '*sets out ... the educational reasons for eliminating early selection*' (Simon, 1971, p. 9, my emphasis). Clyde Chitty reiterated this focus on 'educational' justifications for promoting comprehensive education, at a Brian Simon memorial lecture. But I do not think 'educational' and 'political' are exclusive categories. Earlier, Brian Simon had given greater emphasis to moral arguments for resisting selection:

We are not concerned with what is the 'easiest' way of teaching, but with the effect that present methods have on children. *If this is bad*, then however difficult it may be, new methods should be evolved; if this means changing the structure of the educational system, the necessary changes should be made. (Simon, 1953, p. 41, emphasis added)

As I heard Maxine Peake say, playing Hamlet in the cinema, 'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so' – which might be expressed as, 'there is nothing good or bad but values make it so'. If you come to see the use of IQ tests and selection as primarily for the purposes of undesirable social engineering then you have to oppose them on moral and political grounds.

### **The Significance of Frameworks of Values**

When I first started writing seriously about education as an academic, I saw two principles as marking out the direction of my work: 'a comprehensive principle' and a connected 'principle of equality of value' of all. I worried away at these ideas and gradually extended them over the years, through innumerable dialogues with teachers and students in many countries, into a framework of values, which I incorporated into the most recent edition of the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). This encourages the connection of values to detailed action and the retracing of steps from actions back to values. Values, for me, are only given meaning through action. They are deep-seated beliefs,

which act as pushes to, or motives for, action – they provide a sense of direction as well as impulses to act in the moment.

To engage in right action we need to link actions and values. I represent my framework of values as a series of 16 headings on a three-dimensional figure; a dodecahedron with some unused corners. The headings are not themselves values but become values as their meanings are elaborated and the implications for action are understood (see Figure 1). My framework can be seen as a values universe, proposed as a basis for dialogue. The three fundamental principles of the Learning without Limits work, ‘everybody’, ‘trust’ and ‘co-agency’, are entirely compatible with this values framework and I see dialogue between these schemes as fertile for both.

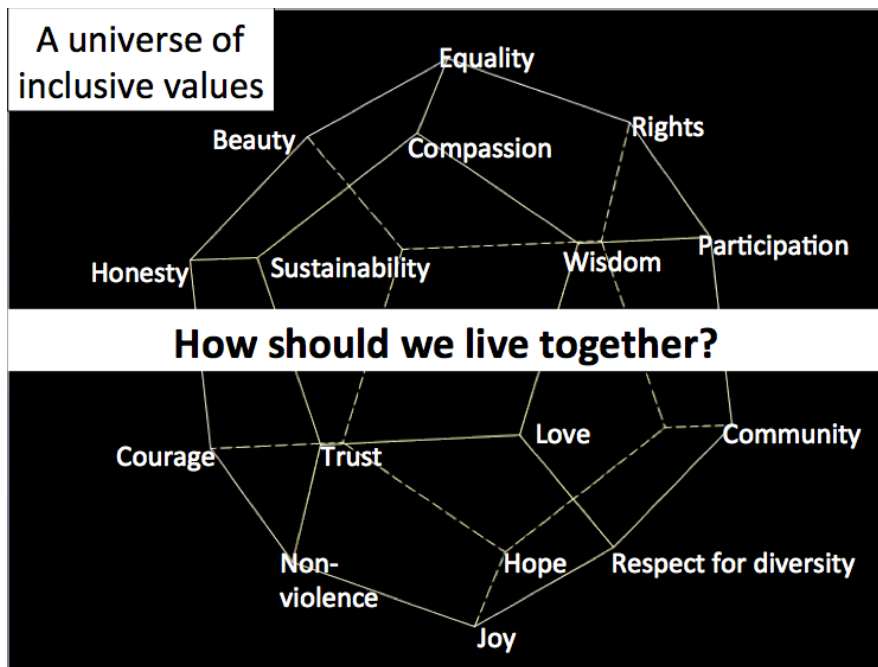


Figure 1. A universe of inclusive values.

The values framework is an answer to the question: ‘how should we live together?’ This age-old philosophical question took the form in past eras of: ‘how should a rich man live?’ But now in the twenty-first century it can take the form: ‘how should we live together on this planet – us – animals, trees, rocks and air?’

In recent years I have started to contrast ‘inclusive’ with ‘excluding’ values, which could also be called ‘neo-liberal’ values (see Figure 2). This distances my position from those who claim particular values to be universal. Neo-liberal values dominate thinking about education and are always liable to subvert and

take over from more inclusive values. In this way a concern with *equality* can give way to a concern with *hierarchy*, *rights* to *opportunity*, *participation* to *consumption*, *community* to *in-group*, *respect for diversity* to *monoculture*, *sustainability* to *exploitation*, *trust* to *surveillance*, *honesty* to *image*, *courage* to *compliance*, *non-violence* to *abuse* –which includes *discrimination* and *selection* – *compassion* to *self-interest*, *hope* to *determinism*, *love* to *authority*, *joy* to *reward/punishment*, *beauty* to *efficiency* and *wisdom* to *power*. A universe of excluding values provides another answer to 'how should we live together?', but it is often hidden from mind. It represents dark matter exerting background control over education.

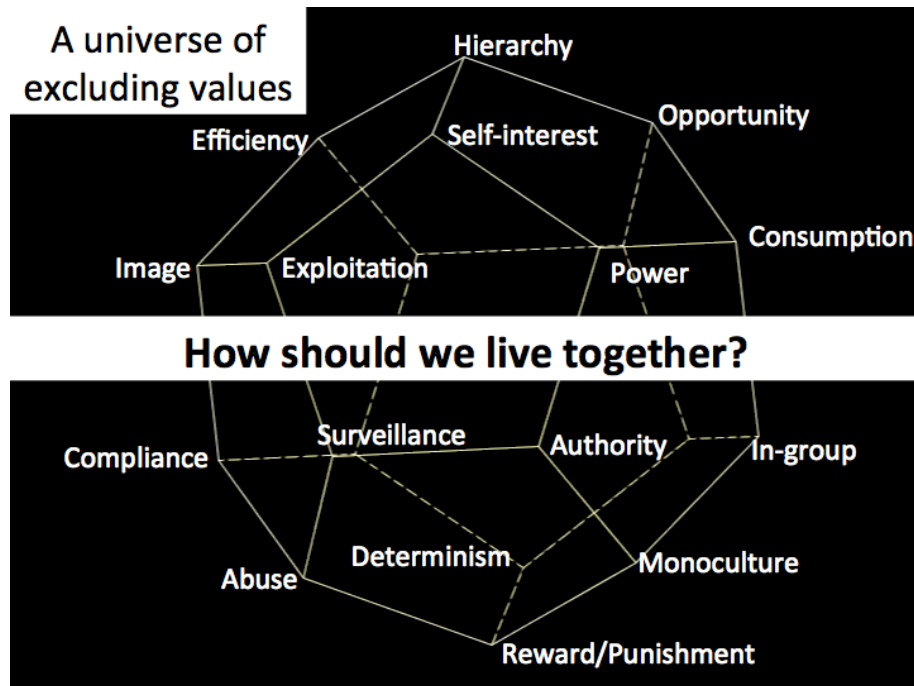


Figure 2. A universe of excluding values.

My emphasis on values underlying action contrasts with a view of values as fine words to be flourished rhetorically. Schools in England are required to promote four values as fundamentally British and to integrate them into their teaching. These are said to be 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs' (Department for Education, 2014, p. 5). They have been revived from earlier proposals to reduce 'extremist' fundamentalism though this does not include the market fundamentalism favoured by the government itself. The meaning of these four values headings is left unclear; they cannot be seen as particularly British and their detailed implications for action are poorly considered. For example, 'respect for the rule of law' implies that access to legal representation and the

outcome of court hearings are unrelated to wealth. One might also consider how respect for the law in schools is encouraged by a selective 'national curriculum' which does not apply to academies or free schools.

I sometimes say that I am concerned with promoting 'values-led educational development' but I really mean 'values-explicit development' since all actions are underpinned by values. Activities to connect one's own and other people's actions and values involve the development of *values literacy*. One school involved in Index for Inclusion work proposed the idea of values walks in which school activities, customs and artefacts are observed and the values underlying them are analysed. This activity has spread to other schools.

### **Where Does a Framework of Inclusive Values Lead?**

Brian Simon saw de-selection as having far-reaching consequences:

Some pioneers among junior school heads who find the system, *with its attendant evils, abhorrent to their educational purposes*, have abolished streaming in their schools. This is not an easy thing to do; *above all it requires a re-thinking of the whole question of the content and methods of education to meet the new conditions of teaching and new purposes*. (Simon, 1953, p. 41, emphasis added)

Ending selection changes everything. I have taken the opportunity to produce a way of dividing knowledge (a 'curriculum') for the twenty-first century based on inclusive values, principles and imperatives (see Figure 3). My detailed scheme involves the subjects: food; water; clothing and body decoration; homes and buildings; mobility and transport; health and relationships; literature, arts and music; communication and communication technology; the Earth, solar system and universe; sources of energy; life on Earth; ethics, power and government; and work and activity. Devising a framework of knowledge involves a parallel question to 'how should we live together?', which I frame as: 'what do we need to know in order to live together well?' In developing this scheme of knowledge I worked at revising and replacing traditional curricula to create a knowledge framework that is anti-selective, that is more closely related to the experience of children and their families, that is accessible to all, that breaks down distinctions between academic and practical or vocational knowledge, that links to both local and global concerns, that prepares children and young people to understand and engage in economic activity and that reflects the pressing issues of our time. It encourages an end of the separation through education of mind from body, of us from our natural world.

Schools in many countries have been using the Index for Inclusion in a variety of ways and to varying extents. They see its values framework, its 70 indicators and 2000 questions, as sources of ideas to ground their approach to educational development. As part of this work in England we have promoted activities along the route that Boudica took in her efforts to expel the Romans called: 'Walking the Boudica way'. There is an implication here about walking

with pride and confidence, so that you can take control over your own development and rid it of other people's values (Booth & Higham, 2014).

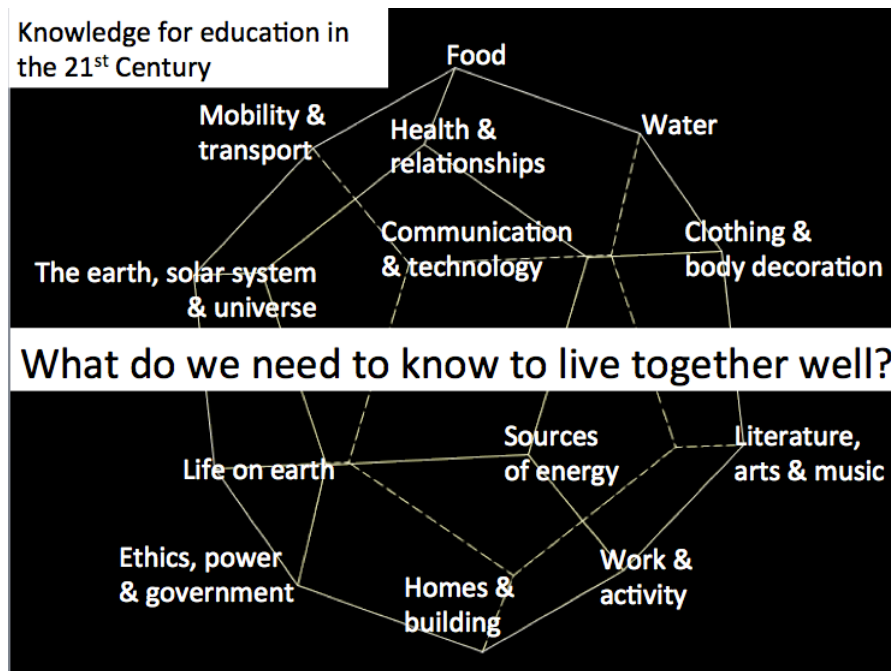


Figure 3. Knowledge for education in the twenty-first century.

### So, is Learning without Limits a Framework of Values?

I have argued that a coherent approach to developing comprehensive community education involves something like my framework of inclusive values and the avoidance of its opposite, excluding or neo-liberal values. When we give our work a label – 'index for inclusion', 'values-explicit educational development', 'learning without limits' – the label may come to stand for far more than we say. I have been fairly explicit about what my labels stand for. But does Learning without Limits stand for a framework of inclusive values? Is it opposed to a neo-liberal ideology that currently dominates education so that it goes beyond its core principles of everybody, trust and co-agency? I think the answers are yes and yes.

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