

THE BRIAN SIMON MEMORIAL LECTURE 2015

Children First: an alternative approach to assessment

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ABSTRACT The author discusses the importance of listening to children and engaging them in dialogue about their learning. She does not accept that assessment should entail labelling children and believes such practices encourage a culture of fixed 'ability' thinking. Through examples of specific children, the author illustrates the importance of openness as a disposition that allows children to surprise us with what they are able to achieve.

It was a great honour to give this lecture, not only because of the special nature of the event, but also because of the eminent audience. I chose to speak about children and ways in which we might imagine engaging them much more meaningfully, in the process of assessment, as part of learning.

From the earliest days of my teaching career I have been convinced of the importance of listening to children. Not just listening to *what* they say, but paying attention both to what is left unsaid and the manner in which behaviour and actions can tell us more than words. It has always seemed ridiculous to me that, as adults engaged in the act of teaching, we should assume we always know more than the people we set out to teach. When it comes to assessment and choice of task to enable the next steps to be learnt, it has always felt natural to me to work in partnership with children rather than take on the role of judge.

Grades Setting a Ceiling

My first teaching post was at a secondary comprehensive school in Harlow, where as a primary-trained teacher I was given a timetable that comprised a wide range of subjects and left alone to teach a range of classes of 11-13-year-olds. There was no syllabus, there were no textbooks and the Internet had not yet been invented. My first term was very challenging, but I recall some wonderful children and enjoyable classes. At the end of my first term, I was asked to produce reports. These were simple reports that merely required a grade for attainment, a grade for effort and a single word or short phrase in summary for each child's work that term. I recall sitting in a draughty classroom completing this work when the head of the English Department looked over my shoulder, saw what I was doing and announced, 'You do realise, I hope, that this class can score no higher than a "D" for attainment? You can give them what you like for effort, but this is the "D" group'. I was horrified. I had been teaching a class of 11-year-olds for three months for both English and humanities. I taught them every day for at least an hour and although I was a newly qualified teacher, it was very clear to me that these children were all individuals with differing levels of skill and that none of them would be motivated to continue learning as they had been doing all term if they were to be graded as 'D'. So began a career of swimming against the tide, resisting accepted norms, trying to put principle into practice.

Learning without Limits

My involvement with the first Learning without Limits (Hart et al, 2004) research project meant that I had experienced the privilege of welcoming Annabelle Dixon, Fellow of Lucy Cavendish College, into my classroom to observe lessons, talk to children and interview me. After several such visits, I vividly recall a research seminar in Cambridge when, together with the other teachers researched for the first study, we were presented with a set of principles that the research team believed underpinned practice in each of our classrooms. These principles of trust, co-agency and the ethic of everybody resonated deeply with me, and once recognised, have guided my practice as a teacher and school leader ever since. The importance of establishing a culture of trust where children can feel safe to learn, explore ideas and try things out without fear of ridicule is vital. As a leader, I see how important this is for adults as well as children.

As head teacher of a primary school, there is so much that can be done to set the culture and tone of the organisation for fair or foul. In terms of assessment, my intention is to lead a school where the art of the possible feels within reach, where amazing things can happen if we refuse to set a ceiling on children's learning. The picture below was drawn by five-year-old Mary. It is a picture that fills me with happiness due to its quirky charm and openness. It made me smile when I first saw it, because this image was the first that Mary had ever drawn in school, even though she had been with us for six months.

Never before had she engaged in any kind of mark making in the classroom. Had she been formally assessed through a baseline test in the first two to six weeks of school, as the majority of English four- and five-year-olds have been this year, she would have been awarded a very low score. Mary's story represents the issue that we should all have with labelling children through one-off, adult-led assessments. Even if Mary had been observed throughout the entire first six weeks of her schooling, she would not yet have built enough trust in her surroundings to begin to show her assessor what she may be thinking. Any judgement of Mary would have been at best inaccurate and at worst would have set a limit of low expectation.



Figure 1.

Mary is now in Year Four. Just last week she came to see me to read a story aloud that she had written about the Owl and the Pussycat. She thrives in our school because she is valued for her individuality. When her mother requested a place for Mary at our school it was because she believed that, despite her many needs, we would 'love her for who she was'. Mary's mother was right.

At Wroxham School we have developed an approach to assessment that combines formative feedback in many forms, alongside low-stakes summative assessment. We have created a democratic, equitable culture within classrooms where children are keen to learn for themselves or in collaboration with others but do not experience ranking or ability labelling. We do not believe that intelligence is 'fixed' but delight in the notion of 'transformability' that means the present has a pivotal role to play in future development.

Listening to Children

The quality of teaching is of paramount importance and this takes place within a curriculum experience that we endeavour to make as meaningful as possible.

We use the outdoors a great deal and have recently started a small farming area with chickens. We have a community 'compost committee' and have built a thatched Celtic roundhouse, complete with fire pit. Listening to each other is at the heart of our weekly mixed-age Circle Group meetings that take place each Tuesday morning for 15 minutes. These meetings enable Year Six children to gain experience of leading and facilitating discussions with children from across the school. This forms the backbone of our culture of co-agency, where ideas matter. A group of children from our Year Four class worked at home to compile a 'mood board' of developmental ideas for the school grounds and were instrumental in nudging our Head of School to apply for some funding to enact their ideas. This term, as a result, we have employed a wood carver to create a storytelling circle, with ornate storyteller's chair, beneath an ancient oak tree.

Dialogue between children, and between children and adults, is an area of school life that we value very highly. We recognise that children rehearse, refine and extend their thinking when they express their opinions or seek to explain ideas. We expect our children to talk about their learning and ensure that they have many authentic opportunities to do this. In our Year Two class recently, the children were all filmed individually for several minutes talking about their learning. These mini films were then shown on the teacher's laptop at the beginning of family consultations. Whether or not the child was present at the meeting, the tone was set for a discussion about learning as opposed to grades. In Year Five and Year Six, we arrange Learning Review meetings twice a year. These meetings take place in the head teacher's office, with the child leading a discussion about their learning challenges and successes using several PowerPoint slides that they have compiled. This prompts a rich and very positive discussion between the child, the head teacher, teacher and parents about how everyone can support the child's future learning. Although detailed feedback is provided to families in this 15-minute meeting, grades are not part of the discussion. There are several examples of these films on the school website [1] along with films of children talking about our approach to choosing tasks as opposed to being placed in 'ability'-based groups.

An Assessment Metric without Levels

As a member of the recent Department for Education Commission on Assessment without Levels (2015), I was pleased to find consensus in the group that the consequence of high-stakes accountability in schools too often led to excessive data collection. In one case, we heard of a secondary school that typically spent four weeks teaching, the fifth week revising and the sixth week testing. This disproportionate emphasis on gathering data for accountability purposes exerts an unacceptable tyranny on too many schools. At Wroxham we have not talked to the children about grades or National Curriculum levels for many years. Our reporting systems to parents are written in partnership with the children and consist of a dialogue about successes and challenges, with clear

next steps for learning agreed by both children and teachers. In the background, however, until National Curriculum levels were abolished, we used levels as a metric to ensure that we knew no child was falling through the net. As a way of replacing this metric, we have begun to look closely at how best to usefully record learning and progress.

When the new National Curriculum was introduced, we took each of the National Curriculum strands for English and mathematics for year groups 1-6 and used the Key Performance Indicators developed by the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) (2014) to decide how many areas of a subject we would record progress against, throughout the year. Each class teacher then developed a grid to record the initials of those children against a broad heading, 0-4, as seen in Figure 2.

Year 3 Unit Evaluation form

Date: 12/10/14 5/12/14 Subject: English-writing

Key Performance Indicator: introduces inverted commas to punctuate direct speech

Learning objective(s): to punctuate speech in a narrative text
Add speech punctuation from a dictation

0 no understanding/knowledge	1 Emerging At early stage of development (support needed)	2 Securing Growing ability and independence (prompting needed)	3 Secure Exhibits skill independently	4 Mastery Exhibits skill spontaneously and with confidence
	DT OS BLS BLS RT RT OS TP MR JM J	AN JM IR TP JD IR HL DT AJ MR JJ JD	RB WA CC MS ET LT JA LPA RB LPL LQ JH H-S CC LT ET DD LPA LQ ZBS LQ MS LT MP ZBS JH MP JA EA LR	NA EA DD MS J
Other comments:				

Figure 2.

At the end of the year, these grids were then transferred to a summary sheet, as seen in Figure 3. We did not aggregate the scores but used this document as a detailed resource for evaluating the achievement profile of each child across the year.

When assessing the quality of writing we study the final draft and provide detailed feedback. Contrast this with the following piece of writing noted by John Blackie, HMI (1963) and reproduced in his book *Good Enough for the Children?*

My father is on the broad side and tall side. My father was a hard working man and he had a lot of money. He was not fat or thin His age was about 30 years when he died, he had a good reputation, he is a married man. When he was in hospital, I went to see him every Sunday afternoon. I asked him how he was going on, he told me he was getting a lot better. My father was very kind and gave me and my cousins cigarette cards. He likes doing woodwork, my father for me, and he likes a little game of cards now and then, or a game of darts. He chops the wood and saws the planks and he is a handsome man but he's dead. He worked at the Rubber works before he died.

John Blackie read this moving piece during a school inspection and was taken aback to see that all the teacher had felt fit to write in response was: 'you keep mixing tenses'.



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Surname	Forename	Date of Birth	Can find 10 or 100 more or less than a given number	Can recognise the place value in a three-digit number (tens, ones)	Can read and write numbers up to 1000 in numerals and words	Can add and subtract numbers mentally	Can add and subtract numbers with up to three digits, using formal written methods	Can recall and use multiplication and division facts for the 3, 4 and 8 multiplication tables	Can write and calculate mathematical statements for multiplication and division using the tables they know (2 x 1 digit) using mental and progressing to formal written methods	Can count up and down in tenths; recognise that tenths split from dividing into 10 equal parts etc.	Can recognise and write fractions of a discrete set of objects: unit fractions and non-unit fractions with small denominators	Can recognise angles as a property of shape or description of a turn	Can identify horizontal and vertical lines and pairs of perpendicular lines	Pupil premium (Yr5)	SEN register
Child A	A	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	-	-	-
Child B	B	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	-	-	-
Child C	C	3	4	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	-	-	-
Child D	D	4	4	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	-	-	-
Child E	E	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	Y	-	-
Child F	F	2	3	2	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	+	-	-
Child G	G	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	-	-	-
Child H	H	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2	2	-	-	-
Child I	I	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3	-	-	-
Child J	J	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	-	-	-
Child K	K	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	3	3	-	-	-
Child L	L	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	Y	-	-
Child M	M	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-
Child N	N	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	-	-	-
Child O	O	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	3	-	-	SEN	-
Child P	P	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	2	-	-	-	-
Child Q	Q	4	4	4	3	4	4	3	3	3	4	-	-	-	-

Sample Cohort Grid - Mathematics Assessment – Yr.3

Figure 3.

Writing composed by children, deserves to be valued. Assessment of writing at Wroxham School is an ongoing process in partnership with the children. Where possible, the child shares their writing with others and engages in a conversation with the teacher about what they are writing. When children are editing their first or second draft, they use a green 'editing pen' and may display a name card with their editor persona, such as 'Poppy Paragraph' whilst engaging in this process. This enables the teacher to know at a glance which children are editing their work, thereby having the opportunity to talk with the

child about their planned review for the next draft. When the teacher provides written feedback on the final draft, time is provided for children to note the key points for development. Targets are not set, but feedback is used formatively to support future writing.

Children need to be supported to become writers. Anna, a child with Down syndrome, began writing when she was in Year One. Figure 4 is an example of one of her first drawings of a family member, in this case, Grandpa.

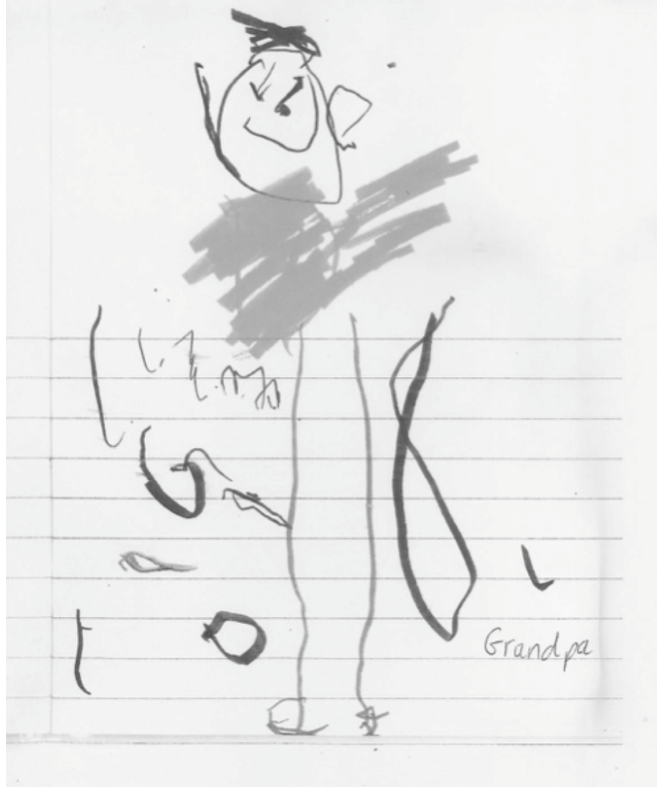


Figure 4.

Anna's writing, as can be seen from Figure 4, was still at an early stage, but increasingly, she was absorbing all kinds of information about English as her speech began to rapidly develop. The class was learning about explorers and travel and Anna showed great interest in stories about this. One day, when she went home, she found a box of chalks and took them upstairs to her bedroom.

Initially, her mother was dismayed to see chalk all over Anna's room, until she saw that on the cupboard door, the word 'boat' had been written, together with an illustration (Figure 5).



Figure 5.

We had not been teaching the word 'boat' specifically to Anna, but on her own terms, in her own time, she shows us through this action that she has learnt more than we knew. It is the joy of children surprising us with new learning that should be at the heart of any classroom where co-agency is valued. Long may schools have the integrity and courage to value individuality, and delight in the learning of children like Anna. Through listening to our children, thereby gaining insight into their thinking, we have the best possible chance of enabling assessment to be helpful, formative and enlightening.

Notes

[1] www.thewroxham.net

References

- Blackie, J. (1963) *Good Enough for the Children?* London: Faber & Faber.
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ALISON PEACOCK is the Executive Head Teacher of the Wroxham Teaching School. Alison's work at Wroxham has enabled the school to secure and sustain 'outstanding' status. Alison resolutely opposes determinist assumptions about ability. She was one of nine teachers whose classroom practice helped form the basis for Learning without Limits approaches, and she co-authored, with M. Swann, S. Hart and M.J. Drummond, the book *Creating Learning without Limits* (McGraw-Hill, 2012). A member of the Cambridge Primary Review team, and of its Trust, Alison has served on a number of national panels and educational commissions, most recently the Commission for Assessment without Levels. In 2014 she received the DBE for services to education. *Correspondence:* alison.peacock@thewroxham.net

