

EDITORIAL

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## Calling Time on ‘Fixed-Ability’ Thinking and Practice

Six years ago Mary Jane Drummond and I presented a *FORUM* Special Issue about the enduring problem of fixed-ability thinking and practice. We wondered then whether a new conversation about this old abomination might be starting up. If so, it seemed to be a conversation held most earnestly – and to our surprise – among teachers of maths, and not at all among those who make government policy. Despite the wealth of evidence accrued over decades to indicate how damaging the labelling, grouping and teaching practices are which enact ‘fixed-ability’ thinking, such thinking remains sovereign. Recent work by Becky Francis and her colleagues (Francis et al, 2017) reveals yet again how one powerful manifestation of ‘fixed-ability’ thinking – namely, setting – continues to be seen by policy-makers as essential for the upkeep of educational standards and a supposedly natural order.

‘Fixed-ability’ thinking isn’t so much a policy as a way of life in the school system. It enables a host of fundamental questions about the purposes of education, as well as the practices of teaching, to be sidestepped. The only purpose of education allowed to carry weight is an instrumental one: to secure particular exam grades. As for pedagogical practices, they are condensed within the metaphor of teaching as delivery and all that derives from it in terms of how learners are conceived of. The system operates, as one of my undergraduate students put it, via pressure to succeed, not encouragement to learn.

Discussion with those undergraduates about what it is like for young people to be educated within a system predicated on ‘fixed-ability’ thinking and practice offered little comfort for anyone working to change the system. My students talked about the way ‘ability’ labelling had undermined their motivation, their sense of self-confidence and their competence. They remembered various ways in which a teacher had treated them in accordance with their ‘ability’ label instead of trying even harder to find out who they were as learners. They offered examples of how a teacher’s decisions about which student to question, how long to wait for an answer and how to respond to that answer were all informed by assumptions about the student’s ‘ability’. Fresh

from top sets, some spoke of how they had considered themselves imposters among their peers, and how that sense of somehow being unworthy prevented them from acting in their own interests – for example, by challenging the pacing of their lessons.

The idea that ‘ability’ grouping might be educationally damaging to all students, not simply to those in bottom sets, or top ones, or those supposedly wrongly placed, had never occurred to these undergraduates. That ‘ability’ thinking might be wrong in itself drew them up short.

It is not only students who are damaged by ‘fixed-ability’ thinking and practice. Teachers too are harmed, their sense of integrity slowly eroded as they are required to act against their inner conviction that ‘fixed-ability’ thinking and practice are educationally and ethically pernicious. The dominant discourse of fixed ‘ability’ contradicts that which impelled these teachers to take up work as formal educators. It thwarts their impulse to see all students as learners without limit, unhampered by supposedly impassable inner constraints, whether genetically or socially determined. To see all students as without ‘ability’.

This issue of *FORUM* contains writing by, and about, such teachers. They represent all those who, in highly adverse and constrained conditions, nevertheless find ways to work outside the prevailing discourse of fixed innate ‘ability’, and against it. Some are supported by schools whose ethos continually stands against the ‘ability’ labelling of students. Slowly, and as yet piecemeal, a body of alternative practice is beginning to emerge. It is based on pedagogic principles entirely removed from those which govern approaches predicated on the misconception that there exists some pre-determined limit to the extent to which a child can or cannot learn, and that this can and should be discovered, or that there are distinct and different types of learners – the able, the unable, the most able – who need to be labelled as such, grouped in segregated ways, given differentiated curricula and channelled accordingly into their prearranged educational futures.

Central to the emergence of this body of practice is the work of those associated with ‘Learning without Limits’ approaches, so called after the title of the book by Susan Hart, Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond and Donald McIntyre (Hart et al, 2004). Other books have followed, along with pioneering papers and projects which have looked to develop the principled pedagogy Hart and her co-authors called ‘transformability’. The aim has not been to draw up a method or a recipe, or, least of all, a blueprint. It has been to work from a set of educational principles against which to evaluate practice, and with which to enable the development of learning communities. For Learning without Limits is about everybody’s learning in a school – teaching and non-teaching staff as well as students. The catalyst for transforming children’s learning turns out to be transforming the capacity for teachers’ learning. Learning without Limits involves re-conceptualising the learner – or perhaps just recognising him or her – as always able to learn when conditions are right, and as always able to become a better learner, to develop further the drive, energy and desire to learn.

This inborn drive, energy and desire, this learning capacity, is the precise opposite of the notion of 'ability' currently dominant. 'Ability' is understood as fixed, innate and unamenable to development, and as wholly internal to the child. But learning capacity is constituted by external forces as well as by internal resources and states of mind. The range and quality of learning opportunities made available, and the relationships that shape and support learning opportunities, interact with the pupil's subjective states to create or constrain capacity to learn. One's learning capacity has a collective as well as an individual dimension. It can be created or constrained by the nature of the group and by how members work as a group. It can change depending on the emotional state prevailing, on the sense of security or belonging. Never purely cognitive-intellectual, the cognitive aspects of learning capacity can be improved, for learning capacity is not fixed. Rather, it can be transformed, not least because the teacher can, to an extent, control the external forces which help shape it, by changing the learning context.

Consideration of Learning without Limits approaches also suggests that teachers' decision-making – always vitally important – stems from a double conception of the learner. The learner is seen for who they are in the moment, but also as a person in the making. 'Fixed-ability' thinking and practice regards the learner as already made, with an educational future which will replicate the present. By contrast, Learning without Limits approaches acknowledge that any learner's future remains indeterminate, and depends on decisions taken here and now to improve the context for learning, by removing barriers or constraints and by better enabling the power of the learner in the present.

This issue of *FORUM* presents a number of articles engaging with these issues. It opens with one teacher's story, for it is teachers who continue to work against the 'ability' discourse, recognising its falsity and injuriousness. The story is fuelled by a commitment to social justice and the search for an enabling pedagogy in keeping with a particular vision of education. It is made public by Colin Jackson and Hilary Povey so that it might 'become ... a tool with which to think and imagine mathematics education differently'. It is a story of how one department's thoroughly collaborative approach to teaching built professional trust, and, coupled with unshakeable faith in young people as able to learn, especially through shared talk, resulted in radical decisions being made about curriculum content, and significant success for all.

Susan Hart (Hart et al, 2004), Mandy Swann (Swann et al, 2012) and others have undertaken groundbreaking research into Learning without Limits approaches, at whose core are to be found the principles of trust, co-agency and 'the ethic of everybody'. They have built on this work by establishing a network of practitioners and academics to help take it forward. Hart and Swann write about the network and its possibilities in this issue. Quoting Swann et al (2012), they urge teachers, 'wherever possible, to do their thinking in the company of others', so that they may be put back in touch with their committed, creative, expert and thoughtful selves, rather than treated as

deliverers of pre-digested material, intellectual perspectives and classroom activities which others have generated for them.

The great Brazilian educator Paolo Freire suggested (in his *Pedagogy of Freedom*, first published in 1998) that it is our awareness of being unfinished that makes us educable. Those involved in the Learning without Limits network might attest to their own 'unfinishedness'. One such is Katie Woods. A secondary teacher, she writes that *ability labelling of any kind always gives me indigestion*, expressing the visceral level of resistance that 'fixed-ability' thinking can engender. Her article explores what it takes to stay true to core beliefs about the educability of everybody, and the ways in which educational theory can inform and support practice, even as daily teaching tests and helps refine theory.

The complexity of teachers' thinking about 'ability' is taken up by Alice Bradbury, who draws on her own recent research with primary teachers to consider the doubts they harbour about 'ability' grouping, and the ways in which they can be positioned to set these aside and act against their own beliefs. The prevailing view that there exists a 'range of ability', and that children can be positioned as learners across its spectrum, is perhaps the most powerful factor framing how learners are conceived of in school. Teachers who see children in ways which recognise their 'un-fixed-ness', and better respect that they learn without limit when conditions can be made more enabling, run up against the material consequences of 'fixed-ability' thinking as manifested in established grouping arrangements and prevailing notions of what is and is not good professional practice. Such teachers find themselves positioned to work against their own beliefs and better judgement. One of Bradbury's teachers speaks of 'a fear moment' when settled ways of working (predicated on 'fixed-ability' thinking) were changed for the better. Bradbury makes clear the cost in additional labour for these teachers as they look to circumvent custom in their school, or make room for their own quasi-accommodation with it in a way that does not entirely jettison their own foundational beliefs. Bradbury's disquieting conclusion, that 'we cannot assume that practices are indicative of beliefs', should sound a shrill alarm. If teachers cannot be who they are in the classroom, and hence bring honesty and integrity to the teaching-and-learning encounter, a damaging and dangerous lesson is being taught to young people.

Eleanore Hargreaves, a colleague of Alice Bradbury's at University College London, reminds us of the rich life each young person brings with them to the classroom encounter, and the ways in which 'fixed-ability' thinking can prevent that richness and intrinsic worth being valued in school. Hargreaves makes powerful use of the testimony of one young person to support her argument that children feel unjustly controlled by school. That children are 'more than a score', as the slogan has it, cannot be taken for granted within a maintained education system which continues, in the words of a one-time Chief Inspector, 'to undervalue and at last ignore those results which are too intrinsically valuable to be measured'. Hargreaves observes that one hallmark of any system predicated on fixed innate 'ability' is that it ensures certain children see themselves as lesser people.

A blogger on social media as well as an academic, Steven Watson brings an unexpected perspective to considerations of 'ability'. His focus isn't so much the contemporary classroom as the contemporary chat-room. He detects a cultural politics of ability being contested online. Voices of the political Right are increasingly prominent in challenging a perceived 'progressive' educational consensus. By making use of adversarial and provocative rhetoric, these voices hope to foster and intensify division and so weaken the necessary resistance to the next wave of capitalist insurgency into the maintained-education sector. Ramping up arguments about 'ability' online, they wage what Watson calls a 'culture war'. What is it good for? It's good for edu-business.

Ideas which locate 'ability' as originating in one's genes, and hence as inheritable, are an important component of the reactionary political position, currently resurgent, which Watson describes. Terry Wrigley offers a historical overview, along with hair-raising quotations from advocates of genetically determined 'intelligence', and a timely reminder of the ways in which such ideas rest on questionable methods of research and dubious interpretations of findings.

What it's like to be numbered among the excluded is a lesson John Quicke communicates in what he calls a 'roller-coaster mock-epic' of a poem. His accompanying commentary explains what gave rise to the poem, and reflects upon its events. He evokes with clear-sighted honesty the bruised, dispiriting aftermath which results from a classroom encounter gone awry. Teaching, the American educationalist Parker Palmer has said, is a daily exercise in vulnerability. John is surely right to note that any teacher is likely to have had an encounter of the kind he conjures up so recognisably. How many have been able to salvage anything of benefit from the experience, as he has done?

The youngsters who gave John Quicke a hard time (and their fellows who gave me times as bruising) challenge what Rebecca Webb and Perpetua Kirby, in their wide-ranging and judicious essay on the purposes of education, call the assumptions of the conforming classroom. Drawing on their own recent ethnographic studies, they lay out three differing models of education. Mastery and discovery characterise the first two. The third is considered to be 'transformative'. Webb and Kirby end their article with an invitation to *FORUM's* readers to join a discussion of how schools might balance conformity with transformation, and so foster a space for dissensus, thereby enabling new ways to know, do and be.

The art studio is always a space for transformation: of materials and of ourselves. Vicky Grube, who runs such a studio in West Virginia, describes how children make art in it, transforming the material world, re-working the previously known, and so changing themselves. In an unexpected usage, she suggests that 'the child finds the world is intra-active, making one part of itself known to another part of itself'. Her article is packed full of things as well as ideas. The material substances of the studio are enumerated and described and thought about, in ways which occasionally test syntax to its limits, as expression struggles to catch the process out of which insights coalesce and new meanings

are made. The article ends with a reflection on the problem of documenting learning in the art studio, and the trickiness of assessing art.

John Blanchard's article also touches on the demand, so common in school, to show what has been learned or thought. If Webb and Kirby are engaged by possibilities which stem from 'not-knowing', Blanchard is concerned to explore just what it is necessary to know and, in particular, which of the many ways it seems we have for thinking are of most help. His article keeps one eye on teaching and learning, and another on the art of school leadership. He offers practical guidance, as well as summarising theoretical material.

The termly seminars organised within the Learning without Limits network which Susan Hart and Mandy Swann describe in their article often conclude with a brief presentation by a participant about a book that has mattered to them. Michael Young's *Knowledge and Control* (first published in 1971) has yet to figure, but, as John Morgan explains, it remains a notable text. A newspaper profile of Professor Michael Young prompted Morgan to review Young's published work, and he writes here to set the record straighter than it was rendered in the press. For Morgan, Young is no English E.D. Hirsch; after all, Young retains his socialist convictions. Morgan describes the intellectual context out of which Michael Young emerged, and offers a résumé of the importance of *Knowledge and Control*, whose stance on school knowledge it has been claimed Young repudiated. Morgan shows why this is not the case, and calls on socialist educators to reconsider the question of the knowledge to be taught in schools. Just such a reconsideration is required for the success of the historical project of socialist transformation.

Encouragement for everyone engaged in that unremitting transformative endeavour might be gleaned from the experience of those on Guernsey who, at long last, have succeeded in ending the selective system of education on the island. Peter Sherbourne, who played a major role, offers an account. He says determination, conviction, hard evidence and meticulous reasoning eventually won the day.

Determination, conviction, respect for evidence, and faith in reason are as necessary as they are commendable if selection is to be ended throughout England and a comprehensive education service instituted. Such qualities might be supplemented by one more. Ludwig Wittgenstein wondered whether ideas might come with a price attached. Some wouldn't cost much. Asked how you pay for ideas, he is said to have replied: 'I believe, with courage.' Teachers and educationalists working against 'fixed-ability' discourse and practice, and holding resolutely to a conception of the learner, and of teaching, that is in line with their own inner conviction of the malignity of that still-prevailing discourse, might recognise the truth of the philosopher's belief.

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## References

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