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## ‘Pedagogy for Transformability’: a challenge to ‘psychological prisons’ of fixed learner identities and claims of ‘pedagogic naivety’? Teachers’ Perspectives

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**ABSTRACT** This article shares the perspectives of 18 primary teachers reflecting on their exploration of a ‘pedagogy for transformability’. It highlights the social, emotional and academic impacts of this approach on children, and the pedagogic choices and thinking of the teachers involved in the project. The findings demonstrate the unequivocal potential for a ‘pedagogy for transformability’ to address many of the current challenges in the education system.

The oppressed, having internalised the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject his image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly ... It is the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion. (Freire, 1996, p. 29)

As a primary-school head teacher, and more broadly a leader and educator, I am desperate to help create an education system which is genuinely inclusive and enables transformability for all. In my view, this is achieved by embedding the pedagogic principles of trust, choice and collaboration. These principles should be modelled in school leadership and established in all learning environments. In this way, the social, emotional and academic well-being of teachers and children is both protected and promoted. The fostering of these pedagogic (and leadership) principles will empower everyone to be the best they can be and

contribute to ‘the formation and transformation of a society’ which works for the good of all (Kemmis, 2012, p. 895).

However, based on personal experience and research in the field, a continued hyperfocus on pupil outcomes (Department for Education, 2016) contributes to the perpetuation of pedagogic approaches that do not work for the benefit of all (McGillicuddy & Devine, 2018). This focus is evident in the high-stakes testing of children, the outcomes of which have historically been used as a proxy measure for the quality of education and learning within individual schools. In this culture – where learning outcomes have been privileged over learning processes – the impacts are seen on leadership choices, teacher agency and, ultimately, the oppressive pedagogic approaches borne by the children (Roberts-Holmes, 2015).

At a classroom level, these pedagogies and practices are embodied in widely unchallenged and accepted labels related to ability (Bradbury, 2019) – or labels such as ‘clever’, ‘sporty’, ‘difficult’ or ‘quiet’. To question this ‘orthodoxy’ is seen as pedagogically naive (Yarker, 2011), but it is pernicious and embedded through, and within, practice and language related to fixed ability groupings. This is particularly true in mathematics (Marks, 2016) and establishes ‘psychological prisons’ for learners (Boaler, 2005), from which it can be difficult to escape.

These labels influence how children are spoken about by their peers and those responsible for teaching them (Alderton & Gifford, 2018). This, in turn, determines how they are treated and which opportunities might be afforded to them; who they might sit with, talk with, and learn with; and, ultimately, how they see themselves. Unsurprisingly, these labels, left unchallenged, become a self-fulfilling prophesy (Francis et al, 2017) and ensure that they continue to be unchallenged, as the learning outcomes provide evidence of their ‘truth’ and cement the naivety of those who might be brave enough to challenge them. Are these the foundations of ‘psychological prisons’ for school leaders and teachers?

In response to this felt and lived educational reality, through a doctoral research project I offered the opportunity for local school leaders and teachers to engage in an exploration of an alternative approach to pervading current practices premised on notions of fixed or given ability. Through a local head teacher’s network meeting and a subsequent email outlining the project in detail, all of the schools in the network were offered the opportunity to engage with the study, with the intention of school leaders enabling teaching staff to self-select into the study. Eighteen teachers across five schools self-selected to join the project.

This article draws on the experience of this project. This case study of teacher perspectives offers an opportunity to challenge the ‘psychological prisons’ and hegemonic structures of fixed ability grouping, and explores the impacts of developing a pedagogy for ‘transformability’ (Hart et al, 2004). Pedagogy within this frame of understanding acknowledges that children’s capacity to learn is not fixed or given, and that the pedagogic choices teachers make can restrict or release this capacity.

## Study Programme

The study provided two continuing professional development sessions. During the first session, I shared the core principles of 'pedagogy for transformability' and encouraged those involved to engage with some academic reading and to keep a log of 'significant moments'. For the second session, I facilitated an exploration of the research related to fixed ability grouping and seeing children with fixed identities, considering more closely the impact this had on children from the child's perspective.

Following the initial continuing professional development sessions, I encouraged the participants to consider the pedagogic principles they had been reflecting on and develop practical responses within their own practice. Three discussion-group sessions were provided (within the usual staff-meeting timetable), roughly six weeks apart, for all of the participants to share ideas they had tried in their own practice, share challenges they had faced and, through this sharing of experience, develop solutions to the challenges. In this way, the participants were encouraged to develop their own practice, rather than follow a prescribed set of practices, and develop at a pace and manner that suited both them and their children. This closely mirrors the approach taken by the Learning without Limits network (Hart et al, 2019).

Throughout the project, the teachers were encouraged to explore how they might develop their own pedagogy to challenge approaches premised on fixed ability labelling and notions of fixed identities. Whilst a particular approach/methodology to teaching and learning was not prescribed, some staff did visit the school where I led in order to meet with staff and pupils, or visited to observe teaching and learning taking place in order for them to develop their own interpretation.

The teachers who took part in the study had a range of experience, from newly qualified teachers to those who had been in the profession for over 20 years. Equally, some of the participants had taught in only one school, where others had taught in more than four, with subject specialisms from across the curriculum. In light of this and the differing characters of the individuals, the pace at which practice was adjusted was along a continuum, with teachers planning further adjustments for the upcoming academic year.

At the conclusion of the project, which ran from January to July 2019, all of the original participants were still engaged and took part in a final interview. The interview sought to draw out participant reflections on the impact of the project on themselves as practitioners and on the children academically, socially and emotionally.

All of the interviews were transcribed and pseudonyms were assigned. An initial interpretation of the material was undertaken, highlighting all references to impact on the teachers and children. The elements of the initial interpretations below, which have been highlighted in italics, reflect recurring themes in the teachers' responses and were derived from the typicality, rather than the universality, of their responses.

## Initial Interpretations

### *Impact on Teachers' Pedagogic Choices*

The four key areas where the teachers reported adjustments to their previous practice were: creating *access* to all learning for all children; trusting and enabling children to make effective *choices* about their own learning; reflecting carefully on the *language* they chose within the classroom; and encouraging *collaborative learning*. The examples cited below highlight the small adjustments that the teachers made, rather than any wholesale changes to practice, and the vast majority of these adjustments were the outworkings of mindset changes about how children were seen as learners.

The teachers improved access to learning for all children through enabling *individualised empowerment*, *responsive intervention* (rather than predetermined) and *relational interactions* based on improved holistic knowledge of the children. This is reflected most clearly in the following responses:

The children are allowed to self-assess at the start of any learning opportunity just by them having the time to think about what they can do already, what they want to do next. (Kate)

Teaching assistants, or me, are not set for anyone. We have a working area that you could sit in if you wanted support or I'd just walk around and collar and interject as needed. (Morgan)

The choices provided for the children to make about their learning were within three different spheres of classroom life, and were constantly underpinned by *teachers' willingness and ability to intervene* as necessary to challenge the children to justify their choices, or resume control of the choices if these were understood as being ineffective or inappropriate on the occasions in question. The children were afforded choice over the *type or level of challenge* they undertook to embed or demonstrate their learning; the *resources or level of support* they needed to successfully share their learning; and the *learning partnerships and seating arrangements* they formed. The teachers typically reported that the children were successful and mature in their choices, upholding the trust placed in them to make these choices well.

The most challenging element of practice to adjust was almost universally reported as being language – particularly in relation to how teachers *described the tasks or challenges* without framing *learner identity* through their choice of language. The participants also developed their practice around *questioning, in order to challenge pupil choices*, enabling pupil voice within that, and developed their ability to support the children in their choices or paired talk through *modelling* in the first person.

Gina's response highlights the importance of considering how we talk to children about the choices they make:

[The] biggest impact has been on the language that I use for the children and the way I describe, the way I talk about, the challenge

that they can have ... I am much more careful in my choice of language because you realise that you're limiting them with your language without ... you're unconsciously doing it ... they quite often say, 'Which is the tricky one?' And I say, 'They are all tricky or they are all easy. It depends how you feel about it – that is the tricky part, you have got to decide.'

The final area of practice which was expected related to the development of collaborative learning practices and cultures. These were achieved through allowing and encouraging *learner-led choices* and fluidity within those choices. This approach allowed the children to choose their learning partner and be able to adjust this choice throughout the series of sessions, in response to the challenges they undertook. This required the teacher to establish a classroom culture where the children could be confident in trusting the motives and choices of their peers. On other occasions, the *teacher facilitated collaboration* through classroom organisation or predetermined pairings and groupings (i.e. not always pupil choice and the teacher responding to the previous day's learning and required next steps) or through *teacher prompting* (either guiding effective choices or setting parameters on choices that could be made).

A common theme in the participant responses relating to pedagogic choices was the importance of the teacher's curriculum knowledge – the ability to move backwards and forwards within conceptual development – and 'knowing the children inside out and back to front'. It was acknowledged that this is potentially more challenging for those new to the profession or those changing year groups:

I think, for teachers who are new to teaching, it is quite challenging because I do feel the more experienced you are, the more you know the curriculum, the more you can adjust it and plan for children's needs and things, but that is a very big challenge, knowing them inside out and knowing what they need to achieve. (Mandy)

#### *Social and Emotional Impact on Learners*

The positive social and emotional impact on the children, generated by the adjustments to pedagogy, was unequivocal. The sense that the learning in the classroom was for *everybody* and all progress, at whatever level, was valued had a positive impact on the children's *well-being*. This sense of well-being in the children was established through an increased sense of *empowerment and self-worth*, which, in turn, contributed to increased *confidence*, and subsequently manifested itself in *improved resilience and motivation* for learning. Consequently, the children were recognised as being *happier* and demonstrating an increased *enjoyment* in learning:

It has been eye-opening, watching them being, like, really liberated with what they do ... and they don't have a hang-up now about what they choose or what they do because they know that today's

work is not tomorrow's, and what they have found hard today they might find easy tomorrow. (Hannah)

It was also reported that as a result of increased empowerment and self-worth, the children demonstrated an improved *attitude to learning*. Typically, the children were more willing to take on *challenge* beyond that which would have normally been presented, and demonstrated increased *resilience* when faced with difficulty. The responses suggest that there was a proportionally better *impact on girls and those currently attaining at a lower level*, as agency and self-esteem were developed, respectively. As the classroom practice and culture became more embedded, it was reported that the children were increasingly able to make *effective and insightful choices* about the type or level of challenge they undertook, and grew in *independence* as they approached new learning:

I think, for all of the children, even the children that were more confident beforehand, they still had to kind of make conscious choices, so I think definitely it has empowered the children and given the learning back to them almost, without taking control away [from the teacher]. It is ... it has definitely made them consciously think about the choices that they make in the classroom. (Charlotte)

#### *Academic Impact on Learners*

The academic impact on the children was also reported as being positive in terms of the children showing increased *participation* and having *accessed* learning above that which they would previously have been enabled to access. The teachers suggested that this was related to a sense of *enhanced learner identity* in the children – a willingness in the children to make *choices* that challenged the children's prior perceptions of their ability, facilitated by improved access to learning challenges and supporting *resources*.

The sense of enhanced learner identity, best understood as the children expanding their sense of themselves as a learner, is captured in Annabelle's observation: 'He's developed his ... "I can do this. I can, you know, but I need to do that one, I need to have a go at that one" outlook'. The children were increasingly successful at recognising their *next steps for learning* and making *accurate choices* in the challenges they undertook. This was shown through an awareness of the appropriate level to start at when engaging with their work, and the ability to move between levels of challenge as they either succeeded more quickly than anticipated or found they had overpitched – this *fluidity* demonstrates the academic impact of being able to effectively self-assess and adjust. Whilst choosing the levels of challenge they undertook, the children were typically making effective choices about who they worked alongside as a *learning partner* and the *resources* they selected to support their thinking.

The academic impact of accurate and effective learning choices has led to positive academic impacts in terms of *progress and attainment*. It was suggested by two of the teachers that, in some cases, the children would make progress and

achieve well whatever approach to teaching and learning was adopted within the classroom. Furthermore, it was also noted that when there was a range of initiatives that had also been introduced alongside the project-guided pedagogy, it was difficult to pinpoint what precisely contributed to the positive academic outcomes for the children.

Overall, however, it would appear that no particular pupil group had their progress or attainment impeded by the approaches explored and, on the flip side, *girls and currently lower-attaining and middle-attaining* children benefitted. Those children previously recognised as achieving at a level of *greater depth* embedded and more readily articulated their learning and understanding. Interestingly, some responses reflected that whilst there may not have been a great change in progress, and therefore attainment, within this academic year, improved *progress was observed within individual sessions*, which, over the long term, coupled with the improved social and emotional impact, could only lead to longer-term improvements in academic outcomes.

The qualitative nature of this study has precluded the opportunity to analyse progress and attainment data to verify and support the teachers' reports of academic impact. However, this does not undermine the value of the qualitative evidence and presents a possible avenue for further exploration in the future.

### *Impact on Teachers' Pedagogic Thinking*

The responses in relation to *teachers' pedagogic thinking* were resoundingly positive, particularly around the impact on them as professionals and on the children as learners. The key themes were around *agency and choice, language, access and identity*. The teachers foregrounded the liberating effects of agency and choice, both for themselves and the children. This is best captured in John's comment:

It was really interesting to watch. Prior to this, we have been ability-grouping and the children were very clear on where they sat in the classroom, and the realisation that they could go and choose their challenge, they could choose where they sat, it was like watching newborn lambs in a field or cows coming out of the shed for the first time. They were, sort of ... they had a spring in their step, they were really excited. I think that the whole trust thing about me saying, 'I am going to trust you to choose what is right for you, where you're going to sit' – they absolutely loved it. They thrived on it and, later on, I got feedback from them to say that they were really empowered by the fact that I was trusting them to make a good decision.

Another significant issue was that of *language*. Within the interpretation of the responses related to the teachers' pedagogic thinking, the use of language referenced was different from the context of framing challenges mentioned

earlier. The consideration here was ‘how to talk about children effectively and professionally without creating labels’. The teachers acknowledged that language which carries a label, such as ‘low ability’, is often used unchallenged as a shorthand for what is transient in terms of children’s identity and current understanding, and gradually becomes a fixed identifier.

A related challenge raised by the participants was the importance of refining how activities were presented with respect to language, which may convey hierarchy in the description – in essence, all activities are easy if you can do them, as much as all activities are challenging or hard if you cannot yet do them. This included the importance of creating *access* to different types or levels of challenge and recognising the role of *self-identity* in shaping children’s choices, and considering how to overcome this for individuals and within the whole-class culture.

A typical teacher response with regard to their pedagogic thinking following their exploration of a pedagogy for transformability can be summed up in the following comments from three teachers with differing levels of experience:

It has been transforming. It has been freeing. (Jessica)

To put them into four, maybe five groups, to expect all of them to fit exactly into one of those groups is, like, what the ... ? But they don’t ... that is not real life, that is not ... we wouldn’t expect people to do that. You know, we are all busy as adults going ‘Don’t you pigeonhole me’ – but it is alright to pigeonhole children? (Kate)

This is the first time in my teaching career where something has felt natural and has just felt like, ‘Let’s just do it!’ (Matthew)

### Concluding Thoughts

The current educational context in England in 2020 is shaped by the government White Paper *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (Department for Education, 2016). *Educational Excellence Everywhere* is positioned, through the discourse within it, as a response to a government-framed issue of social justice – the difference in learning outcomes between vulnerable pupil groups and different regions within England. Whilst it cannot and should not be argued that a disparity in outcomes between children and regions is not an issue of social justice, the measures by which this is articulated are contested (Alexander, 2016). *Educational Excellence Everywhere* states: ‘We believe that outcomes matter more than methods’ (Department for Education, 2016, p. 9). Whilst this is a precursor to devolution of responsibility to choose how best to achieve ‘unapologetically high expectations’ (p. 8), little attention is given within the document to educative processes and the broader impacts these might have.

This perspective on the purpose and measures of quality in education constricts the identities of teachers in the system, and consequently the



pedagogy employed. This, in turn, shapes the identity of learners: how they are seen by teachers and how they see themselves and others (Marks, 2014). The social and emotional impact on children of fixed ability grouping and thinking ultimately affects academic outcomes (Apple, 2004) and, more concerningly, can impact on their life choices (Bradbury, 2019). If the current educational agenda is genuinely framed by issues of social justice, then rather than focusing on learning outcomes, a focus on the learning process is more pertinent. As it stands, the lofty goals of *Educational Excellence Everywhere* are a contributing factor to the injustice they seek to address. Furthermore, two significant consequences of an unbalanced focus on outcomes over pedagogy and ever-stretching expectations surrounding outcomes are a crisis of teacher recruitment and retention, and learner well-being.

However, there is a choice about how, as school leaders and teachers, we choose how best to achieve the ‘unapologetically high expectations’. The interpretations of the teachers’ perspectives from this small-scale research project highlight the positive effect of a pedagogy for transformability on both teacher and learner well-being. It also, seemingly, addresses the learning needs of vulnerable groups by addressing the needs of the individual and those at all levels of prior attainment, particularly girls. As Woods (2019) notes, there is ‘nothing new and shiny’ about a pedagogy for transformability; it is an adjustment in mindset – an increase in trust, choice and collaboration. The barriers to a pedagogy for transformability are not related to the impact on learners and teachers, but rather to the orthodoxy of fixed ability thinking and practices, which are left unchallenged by an unbalanced focus on pupil outcomes.

This study did not seek to present a definitive truth. Rather, it sought to highlight perspectives within different school contexts for others to interpret, consider and apply as is fitting to the needs and flexibilities of their specific school community. It has presented, however, the truth that, from a teacher’s perspective (admittedly not derived from the widest sample), a pedagogy for transformability enables activities and behaviours which seemingly support improved learning environments, emotionally, socially, academically and professionally.

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