From the *FORUM* archive

Developing teaching free from ability labelling: back where we started?

Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond, Susan Hart and Donald McIntyre on behalf of the Learning Without Limits team

Abstract

This piece from the *FORUM* archive offers an early account of the Learning Without Limits project at Cambridge University Faculty of Education that is dedicated to developing approaches to teaching and learning that do not rely on determinist beliefs about fixed 'ability' and/or intelligence.

Keywords: ability; comprehensive; learning

Introduction by Jane Martin

Twenty years ago, Susan Hart's article on developing teaching free from ability labelling was presented in a number that paid tribute to the work of Brian Simon, educationist, author and founding editor of *FORUM* who died in January 2002. Re-emphasising what Simon stood for throughout his life, Hart was profoundly critical of those who thought it possible to say, from the results of tests applied at the age of 10 or 11, what a child's future accomplishments might be. A conviction that children have different 'abilities', interests and destinies in life has permeated educational thinking at many levels and in many contexts. Selection and the theory of children falling naturally into distinct 'types' was educational orthodoxy from at least the 1930s when 'differentiation', supposedly in the name of equality of opportunity, gave labels to pupils in a manner conforming to their prejudged intellectual capacity. Hence, it followed, schools should treat them differently according to their place in the rank of order of tracks and pathways created for them.

The deep influence of Simon's educational thinking and his commitment to comprehensive schools shines through in an article which reminds us of the importance of history and how alternate understandings of the past might produce different visions of the future. Just as Simon sought to convince others of the centrality of education in the processes of human development and social change, Hart describes the differing practices of nine teachers, both primary and secondary, who challenged received wisdom on the notion of fixed 'ability' and/or intelligence. Casting doubt on practices they know to be of little or no benefit and positively damaging to some pupils and/

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or groups, they present an approach to teaching and learning to which the 'ethic of everybody' is central. In so doing, they emphasise not only those things that they did because they saw them as lifting the limits to their pupils' learning, but the things that they did not do because they saw them as creating or perpetuating already existing limits also.

In the same number of *FORUM*, the educationist Michael Armstrong wrote that for Brian Simon there was always a simple test for any new pedagogy: does it serve to promote and support the common intellectual worth of every student? As Annabelle Dixon noted in the editorial she presented for the volume, cherishing the idea of 'transformability' as opposed to 'ability' labelling and 'ability' grouping undoubtedly passes that test.

Developing teaching free from ability labelling: back where we started?

Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond, Susan Hart and Donald McIntyre on behalf of the Learning Without Limits team.

Susan Hart, a lecturer at the University of Cambridge, Faculty of Education, was the initiator of the research project that she describes below. Here she offers an alternative pedagogy, based on the research that is an exciting and radical new approach to teaching free from ability labelling.

If you like to think of history as progress, it's worth taking a look at some of the back copies of *FORUM* from the 1960s and 1970s (great value at three shillings and sixpence each). For contributors to the journal at this time, the idea of fixed ability as a way of understanding differences in achievement was indubitably a thing of the past. The battle was won. Claims for IQ testing as a measurable and reliable predictor of academic potential had been thoroughly discredited. The negative consequences of systems built upon these assumptions had been widely recognised. In its place, these educators were espousing a much more optimistic view of human educability. They were actively working to build a comprehensive system of education which would not place barriers in the way of children's development; within new structures, they were exploring fresh pedagogical approaches, determined to exploit to the full their newly acquired freedom from the iniquities and inequities of selection.

Yet 40 years on, ideas of fixed ability are still alive and well in our schools. Children

are still divided into groups of the 'more able', 'average' and 'less able' and work provided accordingly. Ofsted inspectors check that teaching is differentiated for each of these groups ('blobs', as one teacher called them recently), on the assumption that otherwise the 'more able' are held back by 'slower learners'. In spite of considerable research evidence to the contrary, government policy specifically recommends 'ability-grouping' as the basis for effective teaching and for raising standards for all. And from the earliest stages of formal education, teachers are required to make explicit predictions about future development several years ahead on the basis of existing attainment. Such predictions only make sense, and can only be justified, if they are underpinned by the assumption that current differences reflect stable and relatively unalterable differences in potential.

So what has happened to erase from collective memory all that was once known about the damage that ability labelling and ability grouping does to teachers' and children's hopes and expectations? Have we really forgotten about the painful sense of rejection, and loss of self-esteem and motivation that comes from being written off as 'less able'? Are we no longer concerned about the inequalities inherent in judgements of 'ability', about the dramatic wastage of talent that comes from viewing large numbers of children as incapable of serious achievement? Do we no longer recognise the link between ability labelling and the oppositional behaviour expressed by some groups of pupils who reject the schooling that they believe has rejected them? All these – and many more – effects of ability labelling and grouping have been repeatedly identified by research spanning several decades, including recent research in the 1990s. How, then, can we have allowed fixed ability thinking, and the organisational and grouping practices that come in its train, to regain such a spurious credibility and become once again established in the majority of schools?

The explanation is to be found, at least in part, in the imposition of a reform agenda by successive governments which has been premised on the conviction that the comprehensive project in its most radical form was and is fundamentally misguided. While there clearly was a period in the 1960s and 1970s when beliefs in fixed ability were seriously challenged (and some educators deliberately shifted to the language of attainment rather than ability), this reform agenda has put in place a set of initiatives built around unquestioned assumptions of relatively stable differences of 'ability'; they explicitly require teachers (whatever their personal beliefs and values) to make advance judgements about pupils' potential as if such predictions were both possible and legitimate. Yet, as Gillborn and Youdell point out in their recent challenging text *Rationing Education*, these views of ability, 'as a fixed, generalized and measurable potential, are completely incompatible with critical notions of equal opportunities and at odds even with leading contemporary research in psychometrics'.[1]

As the 'bog-standard' comprehensive comes under renewed attack and 'diversity' becomes the buzzword for educational provision in the new millennium, there is an urgent need to challenge this dismissal of the ideas that inspired the comprehensive project. If the limitations imposed by ability-labelling are not to be perpetuated in the name of raising standards, there is a summary need to refresh our collective memory about the possibilities originally raised by the rejection of theories of IQ and fixed ability for *liberating learning on a scale previously unimaginable*. In some senses, it is true that we are 'back where we started', as Brian Simon (founder editor of *FORUM* and leading critic of theories of IQ and intelligence testing) intimated might happen if we did not successfully combat the re-emergence of selection.[2] But at least we are now in a stronger position to move forward. We can use the lessons of experience to rethink the comprehensive project in the context of today, to campaign for the reinstatement of its key ideas at the heart of national education policy and to identify ways forward that will enable us to explore and exploit its as-yet unrealised potential.

Limitations of the focus on mixed-ability grouping and teaching

What emerges from an examination of the history of the development of comprehensive education, as it unfolds in the pages of this journal, is that the backlash came before the important pedagogical task of developing the necessary new teaching approaches had made significant headway, at least in the sense of being articulated theoretically and made widely available for discussion and debate. With hindsight, it seems that the project stalled over debates about the pros and cons of mixed-ability grouping which were rehearsed again and again but never finally resolved. Given the duration and intensity of these debates, it was easy to lose sight of the fact that the espousal of mixed-ability grouping and associated modes of teaching did not in itself reflect a radical break with ideas of fixed ability. It is possible to defend 'mixed ability' approaches as more just and educationally sound than ability-based grouping and teaching, while still holding fast to ideas of fixed ability. The comprehensive project became equated (by supporters, in some cases, as well as by critics) with the struggle to promote and defend mixed-ability grouping and teaching, with the consequence that the more radical possibilities for the reconstruction of education arising from the critique of theories of IQ and fixed ability slipped off the agenda.

If we are to reignite the spirit of comprehensive reform, as Clyde Chitty urges in the most recent issue of this journal, then reopening debates about mixed ability versus ability grouping is arguably not the best place to focus our energies. Chitty argues persuasively that 'one of the great tragedies of the last hundred years has been our failure as a nation to take on the essential concept of human educability and

thereby challenge the idea that children are born with a given quota of "intelligence" which remains constant both during childhood and in adult life'.[3] If Chitty is right, what is needed is to put debates about fixed ability *thinking* back on the agenda, and to give urgent priority to the critical *pedagogical* task of further developing, and articulating theoretically, approaches to teaching underpinned by a more optimistic view of human educability. It was with a view to making a contribution to this task that the 'Learning Without Limits' project was set up in 1999 at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. The project was funded by the Wallenberg Centre for the Improvement of Education, as part of a broader programme of research under the umbrella title Beyond Conventional Classrooms. We hoped to contribute to that programme by generating one or more models of teaching free from reliance on conventional notions of ability. In this article, we describe the nature of the research that we have carried out, and the ideas for an alternative model of teaching that have emerged.

The Learning Without Limits project

The project's name was inspired by a powerful passage in Stephen J. Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*, which we felt captured the essential concerns that prompted the research. Gould says:

> We pass through this world but once. Few tragedies can be more extensive than the stunting of life, few injustices deeper than the denial of an opportunity to strive or even to hope by a limit imposed from without but falsely identified as lying within.[4]

The project began by advertising nationwide for teachers to contact us who had themselves rejected the idea of fixed ability, and who had been developing their classroom practice accordingly. The response to our advertisement reinforced our conviction that there were many educators 'out there' who shared our concerns. People with similar interests contacted us from all over the country. Fifty teachers sent for information about the project, and 22 sent in applications, in which they were asked to write in detail about why they wanted to be part of the project. We were deeply moved by some of the personal experiences described in those application forms, including one from a teacher, who at the age of 16, had been devastated to be told by her headteacher that it would be 'a waste of everybody's time' for her to stay on in the sixth form. Another wrote, 'Even if I am not selected, I am genuinely delighted to know that such a project exists'. We held 17 interviews, and a team of nine teachers (four primary and five secondary) covering a range of very different teaching contexts was eventually established.

Over the following year, members of the university team spent many hours in these teachers' classrooms, observing and interviewing both teachers and pupils. We also

met together in Cambridge to share our thinking and develop the research collectively. In constant collaboration with the teachers, we gradually built up individual accounts of the key constructs at the heart of each teacher's thinking, and an understanding of how these constructs worked together to create their distinctive pedagogy. We then summarised the key ideas in each account and collectively looked across all the accounts for common themes and differences, in order to try to identify the key concepts and practices that are distinctive of teaching free from determinist assumptions.

Ability vs transformability

From this collective analysis, we have generated the idea of 'transformability' as the possible basis for an alternative pedagogy which consciously rejects ability labelling. The difference between 'ability' and 'transformability' lies in the particular view of pupils' futures which guides teachers' action in the present. With ability-based teaching, young people's academic futures are already, in some senses, laid down; their upper limits are determined by intellectual capacity, or lack of it, that lies within. There is nothing that teachers or learners can do to change these upper limits, only strive to ensure that each pupil reaches his or her given potential. This is done by making the predicted future implied by the labels 'more able', 'average' and 'less able' the central point of reference against which essential teaching decisions are made. Teachers form groups, design tasks, sequence and pace teaching and evaluate progress on the basis of what is considered 'appropriate' for these different groups of learners if they are to achieve their presumed potential.

With transformability-based teaching, the future is inherently unknowable. Pupils' academic futures are *in the making* in the present; they are being created in and by the present. From the point of view of pedagogy, this alternative vision of the future in the present changes *everything*. It gives teachers a very different sense of the importance of the present, and of their own power, and their pupils' power, to affect the future by what they do in the present. Teaching cannot be guided by predictive labels because, if the future is being created in the present, then to make pedagogical decisions in the present on the basis of such categorisations is indeed to *create* those futures-as-predicted. There is nothing fixed or unalterable about existing patterns of achievement and response. Indeed, the pedagogical task *is* to stimulate – and make possible – growth, development and change, to create classroom conditions that will release learning from the limits that create and are reflected in existing patterns. Through the choices they make – how they think as well as what they do – teachers work to *transform* current patterns – and future possibilities – by opening up opportunities that might otherwise have remained closed, and by taking concerted action in the present to prevent and remove external limits on learning

that might otherwise have constrained pupils' achievement. Essential pedagogical choices – such as how to organise classrooms, group pupils, design tasks, build relationships and evaluate their own and their pupils' success – are not just choices *to* act in certain ways, in line with their beliefs and understandings, they are also choices *not to* act in ways that they believe will create or perpetuate existing limits on learning (see Table I, page38).

There is a sense of history embedded in these choices – teachers' sense of their own place and part in history – that is a distinctive characteristic of transformability-based teaching. These teachers know where they are coming *from*, what kinds of constructions of learners and practices need to be left behind; they also know what they are working *towards*. As a reference point for classroom decision-making, this sense of the future being made in the present translates, at classroom level, into what we have come to call 'an ethic of everybody': *everyone* must have the best possible chance to develop their existing competences and enjoy the satisfactions and successes of learning that previously were thought only to be available to the academically gifted few; *no one* must have their future possibilities constrained by limits operating in the present (notice how often, in the right-hand column of Table I, the words everyone, everybody and no one appear). With ability-based teaching, an ethic of 'differential treatment' applies: differences justify and, in some cases require, different treatment. Transformability emphasises *universal entitlement* rather than differences: *everybody* counts, *everybody's* learning is equally important, *everybody* contributes to the learning environment. And so it follows that teachers work constantly to create – and if necessary invent – approaches that allow everybody, without exception, to engage in the activities provided, to contribute to the learning that takes place, to have the experience of being excited by learning, to gain something worthwhile, and to feel a sense of safety and belonging. These are aspirational goals that, by definition, are not yet achieved. Indeed, many of the constraints which prevent their achievement are arguably not directly susceptible to individual teachers' influence. But the essence of transformability-based teaching is that it:

- knows that they are not yet achieved
- believes that progress can be made towards achieving them in the current context, and
- believes that there are things that teachers can do to bring them closer to realisation.

As well as a basis for decision-making, the 'ethic of everybody' provides an uncompromising framework for the continuing evaluation and development of classroom practice.

Does 'ability' always mean 'fixed ability'?

We hope that this contrast between models of teaching based on ability and transformability will also prove useful to the many teachers who do use ability labelling but, sharing our concerns, do not use it in a fixed, deterministic way. At a research seminar, early in the project, where we had shared the aims, intentions and methods of the project with an audience of teachers, researchers and lecturers, a colleague approached us afterwards, convinced that we were misinterpreting what many teachers mean by ability labels. He argued that when teachers talk about 'more able' and 'less able' children, they're not necessarily talking about *fixed* ability. 'It's just a convenient shorthand', he said, 'for talking about differences in children's current abilities, for instance in reading and maths. When "ability" is used in this way, it needn't have all the negative repercussions that have been traditionally associated with it'.

His intervention was a timely reminder, in our quest for an alternative model, of the need to formulate our arguments and show that our starting points apply equally to this apparently less determinist usage. For this view of ability could be even more pernicious in its effects than fixed ability labelling if it is not subject to the same caution and critical scrutiny as the idea of fixed ability has intermittently been, because it is assumed to be benign. Whenever the language of 'ability' is used, there will always be ambiguity about what is meant, and potential for misinterpretation – by other adults and by children – as long as ideas of fixed ability persist and predominate in our culture. And if these different (actual) abilities are used to divide children into permanent groups and sets, or to justify systematic selection and provision of different tasks and learning opportunities, the practical consequences of ability labelling will be broadly the same whichever interpretation of ability teachers have in mind. Indeed, as the research by Gillborn and Youdell referred to above indicates, the new era of PANDA (Performance and Assessment) comparisons, target-setting and league tables creates a climate in which there is pressure to treat ability as if it *were* fixed, in order to justify the targeting of scarce resources to the groups most likely to boost SAT and GCSE results. Our notion of 'transformability' affords a new theoretical perspective which we hope teachers will find useful in reviewing their own use of 'ability' labels and the consequences for children's learning.

Towards an alternative reform agenda

If our analysis is sound, and the concept of 'transformability' does capture something pivotal to pedagogies free from ability labelling, teachers who have consciously rejected the idea of fixed ability should recognise and be able to connect with our account of it, even though they have probably not articulated their thinking and practice quite in this way before. At the very least, it provides a fresh idea, a fresh way of reading (*cont. p42)*

TABLE I: Decision-making for transformability

Choices NOT TO:	Choices TO:
How limits on learning come into being	**Creating learning without limits**
1. Teachers' beliefs/expectations	
• I don't think of children in terms of ability labels. I think that ability labels are damaging to teachers' thinking because they write off some children's potential. They reduce teachers' expectations and make it seem that failure or limited achievement is inevitable for those labelled 'low ability'. They create the impression that there is no point in trying to help 'less able' children to become more successful learners. The children then pick up these messages and begin to lose faith in their own capabilities.	• I work on the basis that everyone can be helped to become a better learner. I give priority in my teaching to activities concerned with strengthening and developing all children's intellectual powers. If anyone is having difficulties, or doesn't seem to be making progress, I don't put this down to lack of ability. I assume that something is blocking their learning and try to work out what it might be. I look for ways of adjusting or changing what I am doing or the opportunities that I am providing, to see if the pupil and I can find better ways into learning.
2. Children's beliefs/expectations of themselves	
• I try not to do anything that might damage children's sense of self-worth, their belief in their own capabilities or their expectations of their own learning. I think that ability labelling limits learning by undermining children's confidence, and their willingness to engage in classroom activities and to persist when they encounter difficulties.	• I believe that children's contribution to their own learning is crucially important, so it is vital to do everything possible to build self-belief and confidence in their own capabilities, and to repair and rebuild this where it has already been damaged. I do this by planning tasks and activities that are accessible to everyone, and ensuring that they offer everyone the possibility of success and satisfaction.

3. Classroom ethos

- I think that ability labelling creates a divisive ethos that is damaging to everybody's learning. It gives high status to some and low status to others. It drives a wedge between learners, making them think that 'less able' pupils have nothing to contribute to the learning of 'bright' pupils.
- I try to create an inclusive classroom ethos in which everybody has equal status. I demonstrate this equal status through the way I set tasks, and structure groups, through fostering collaboration, through the way I respond to and use pupils' contributions, through recognising achievement in a variety of ways and making success routinely available to all, not just to a few.

4. Acknowledgement of diversity

- I don't think it's right to say 'I treat all children the same, regardless of gender, class and ethnicity'. I think that limits on learning can be created unless schools recognise diversity and do all they can to reach out to pupils of different social, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds, and their parents.
- I make a point of choosing content and trying to teach in ways that recognise, connect with, and actively build upon every learner's diverse experience, knowledge and background, to create a learning community where no one feels marginal and everyone has a rightful place.

5. Concepts of teaching and learning

- I don't think of teaching in terms of curriculum 'delivery'. Learning is limited by an approach that sees teaching as the delivery of parcels of pre-packaged content to passive learners.
- I think learning is also limited by being seen purely in individual terms, as something that goes on just in the minds of individual learners, so that there is no need for talk and interaction between learners.
- I prefer to approach teaching and learning as a partnership, a process of exchange. What the pupils bring and contribute is as essential as what I bring and contribute to the learning that takes place. I try to create an environment in which everyone genuinely has, and is conscious of having, some control over their learning.

- Learning is limited too where the affective/emotional dimensions of learning are overlooked, or considered unimportant; pupils won't engage fully, contribute their ideas or take risks in their learning if they are afraid of the teacher or of how their peers will respond.
- I pay as much attention to the emotional dimensions of learning as to the intellectual. In planning, I consider how to harness and heighten pupils' emotional investment in classroom activities. I want everyone to feel excited and lit up by learning. I also take active steps to ensure no one feels embarrassed or shown up; I work to create conditions where people feel safe and expect to be successful, where they do not feel personally threatened and so switch off or panic.
- I see learning as a social and collective endeavour, in which everyone has a part to play. I make lots of opportunities for students to use talk as a means of learning, to work collaboratively and contribute to one another's learning.
- Pupils will clam up, give up or find other ways of disguising difficulties if they are afraid to admit that they do not understand or feel personally threatened.
- I recognise that it can be difficult to admit you don't understand or ask directly for help. I try to make myself accessible by circulating round the classroom, and try to respond gently to requests for help, even the second or third time. I try to create a sense that we're all working together, that we're all on the same side.

6. Classroom language

- Almost everything that happens in classrooms is mediated through language, and there is enormous potential for communication between teachers and learners to break down and for learning to be limited when patterns of classroom communication are simply taken for granted.
- I try to organise patterns of communication in the classroom so that learning is developed through dialogue, creating a bridge between the learners' language and the curriculum. I try to empower learners by helping them to develop a language for thinking and talking about learning.

7. Task design

- I don't set up activities that will exclude any members of the group. I also avoid tasks that are differentiated
- Wherever possible, I prepare tasks and activities that recognise and cater for differences but are accessible to all and

by levels of attainment or presumed ability because they cumulatively limit the opportunities for learning to which some children are exposed. They may also undermine children's confidence, motivation and self-esteem by conveying negative messages to them about their capabilities. I don't want to make judgements in advance about what individuals can achieve, and so put limits on their learning myself.

offer an open invitation to everyone. This allows learners to respond and extend the activity in their own way. I ensure that there is always something worthwhile to learn that is achievable by everyone, and that there is sufficient variety and choice to cater for different learning preferences and strengths. Sometimes I offer a choice of harder and easier activities and encourage people to choose, and mostly they don't go for tasks that would be too easy because they want to feel satisfied with their learning.

8. Grouping

- I avoid grouping strategies that systematically limit the learning opportunities available to some learners and can lead to polarisation, disillusion and disaffection through the creation of divisive and excluded groups.
- I use flexible grouping strategies that do not close down learning opportunities, and that give positive messages to all learners about their capabilities and their contribution to collective learning.

9. Assessment

- I don't limit my pupils by expecting them always or mostly to show their learning in writing. I think this disadvantages children who find writing difficult or who express themselves more effectively in other ways. I don't use marks or grades when giving feedback on work except when I am explicitly required to for progress reports and examinations.
- I create a wide range of opportunities for learning and demonstrating learning that are not solely dependent upon children's facility in expressing their ideas in writing. I try to give individualised feedback on learning in ways that help pupils to understand what they can do to improve their work and increase their control over their learning.

10. Peer culture

- I know that peer relationships and youth cultures can work against classroom learning if these dimensions of pupils' identities and social worlds are ignored or suppressed.
- I try to teach in a way that acknowledges learners' social worlds, relationships and cultures and is responsive to them. I try to adapt my teaching in order to harness them positively into the school curriculum.

classroom teaching, illustrated by a set of nine rich descriptive accounts of highly individual and distinctive practices, which can be used as a stimulus to renewed discussion and debate around the ideas of fixed ability. More ambitiously, we believe that the idea of transformability-based teaching could also play a central and critical part in the construction of an alternative improvement agenda, built around a critique of theories of intelligence testing and ability labelling.

Although it could seem naive to think that there might be a chance of halting the juggernaut of reform as currently conceived, there are points where the values of our project clearly overlap with those underpinning the current reform agenda. There is a common concern that the talents and capabilities of many young people remain untapped throughout their formal education. There is a common wish to challenge assumptions that not much can be expected of young people from disadvantaged social backgrounds, and (according to a report in the *Times Educational Supplement* of 4 January 2002) a common commitment to concerted action to reduce class-based discrepancies of achievement. The current programme of reforms rightly recognises the power that schools and teachers have to influence young people's development. It is just possible, then, as results reach a plateau and evidence accumulates of undesirable and anti-educative effects of many of the externally imposed reforms, that there might come an opportunity to present an alternative improvement agenda which offers a different, more readily sustainable and self-regenerating approach, rooted in teachers' own values, commitments and aspirations. When that moment comes, we need to be ready with convincing evidence to support this alternative agenda. We will need to have completed the vital theoretical and practical task that was begun, but never satisfactorily carried through, in the 1970s and early '80s. We now know that our failure at the time to articulate viable and effective models of teaching capable of liberating learning from the constraints of ability labelling cost us dear. We should lose no time in seizing the initiative now.

With the Learning Without Limits project, we have taken a first step. We have identified the principle of 'transformability' and around this elaborated a multifaceted model which attempts to articulate how the practical strategies of teachers who

have rejected ability labelling work together to create a distinctive pedagogy. As we have shown, practice based on transformability is necessarily in a state of constant development; working for change is written into its nature. Improvement does not have to be imposed on teachers, and superimposed upon existing teaching, by managers or inspectors because the driving force comes from teachers' passions and sense of social justice; teachers' desire and ability to make a difference are what makes teaching worthwhile.

However, we recognise that what we have done in our project is just a first step. Further close collaboration between teachers and researchers will be needed to carry the work forward. The idea and practices of transformability need to be further elaborated through engaging with the understandings and experience of a wider group of educators. We also need to share and develop further understanding of the dynamics affecting young people's choices to engage with or disengage from school learning. A further area for research and development work is to share and build an explicit, collective understanding of the social determinants of learning. If, as we have argued, a central part of the teacher's task is to understand and act upon the social processes through which limits on learning come into being, this understanding and action will need to look beyond influences at work in individual classrooms, and indeed beyond the walls of schools.

These are some of the next steps needed to take the work of the project forward. We hope that we have done enough, so far, to persuade policymakers and practitioners that there is a more promising, just and constructive alternative improvement strategy that we could pursue and that it is one worth fighting for.

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Notes

1. D. Gillborn & D. Youdell, *Rationing Education: policy, practice, reform and equity,* Buckingham, Open University Press, 2000, p65.
2. Brian Simon, 'IQ redivivus, or the return of selection', *FORUM*, 38(1), 1996, pp4-7.
3. Clyde Chitty, 'IQ, racism and the eugenics movement', *FORUM*, 43(3), 2001, pp 115-120.
4. S. J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man,* New York, Norton, 1981, p29.

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