An Alternative Approach to School Development: the children are the evidence

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ABSTRACT In this article, the authors describe the alternative approach to school development taken by the head teacher and staff of a primary school in Hertfordshire. Their approach is based on a resolutely optimistic and anti-determinist view of every child's capacity to learn, and their commitment to working as a school-wide community of learners. The article illustrates how the culture, policies and structures of the whole school were harnessed to the process of transformative change, and shows how staff members were given the support that enabled them to play their full part in bringing about these changes. It demonstrates how, when people are learning together, the power of the collective strengthens the learning capacity of everybody.

How do schools need to change in order for every child's learning to flourish? The research study described in this article is premised on the belief that one of the most fundamental, urgent and far-reaching changes needed in the education system is to dispense with the damaging belief, which has dominated schooling for more than a century, that learners are each endowed with a given amount of intelligence or ability, which can be reliably known and remains stable throughout life. This belief must be replaced with its antithesis: a resolutely optimistic view of human educability, around which new structures and classroom practices can be invented and implemented.

As long-time readers of *FORUM* will know, this is not, regrettably, a new idea. Many articles, indeed whole editions of the journal, have been dedicated to this topic since the 1960s. It was one of the main drivers of the move to end selection and introduce comprehensive schools. However, the experience of the twentieth century has shown that much more is needed than structural reform alone. The idea of fixed ability not only survived comprehensive reform, but ironically became an important element of the conservative critique of comprehensive education. It has been given new strength and legitimacy as the underpinning rationale of the policies and practices promoted by the standards agenda, with the result that the many teachers who are unwilling to divide young people into 'more able', 'less able' and 'average' are finding it

increasingly difficult to resist such practices, given the requirement constantly to act as if future learning can be reliably predicted from present attainment.

The Learning without Limits project was set up in 1999, at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, to open up a fresh debate about fixed ability thinking and to support the development of approaches to teaching that do not rely on determinist ideas of ability. In the first phase of the research (1999-2004), we focused on individual classrooms, arguing that any move away from determinist pedagogy would need to be supported by clearly articulated and practicable pedagogical alternatives. Our aim was to support the work of teachers who were determined to resist ability labelling by elaborating one or more alternative pedagogical models. Our study of the everyday classroom practice of nine such teachers who had developed practices congruent with their beliefs led us to the core idea of *transformability*. Although the term was not used by the teachers themselves, it was coined in the course of the analysis in order to capture – in contrast with the predictability and fatalism of ability labels – the conviction common to all nine teachers not only that change was possible but that they themselves had the power to increase and transform young people's capacity to learn, in partnership with them.

The study showed convincingly that it *is* possible for individual teachers to sustain developments in their practice that are consistent with non-determinist views of learners and learning. However, as well as being constrained by external policy pressures, their capacity to do so is also significantly affected by the degree of support available from like-minded colleagues in the school and senior management. Elaborating an alternative pedagogy was clearly only the beginning of what was needed in order to mount a more effective and lasting challenge to fixed ability thinking and practices. We needed to understand more about how the cultures, policies and practices of the whole school community could be harnessed to the process of transformative change. What changes, for example, in curriculum, grouping, assessment, relationships, can be made in order to increase and strengthen young people's learning capacity? What support is needed for staff to enable them to play their full part in bringing about these changes? What do members of the senior leadership team need to do in order for the idea of transformability to become the stimulus and guiding force for whole-school development?

The opportunity to explore these broader questions arose when one of the teachers who had taken part in the earlier study was appointed to the headship of The Wroxham School in Hertfordshire. Alison Peacock was committed to developing a whole-school learning environment free from the damaging effects of ability thinking and ability-based practices. She was determined to embed the core idea of transformability at the heart of school development. She invited researchers from the Learning without Limits project to help document what happened next: this research project is the subject of *Creating Learning without Limits* (Swann et al, 2012). None of us knew, at the outset, what the study of Wroxham would show.

Trust

Alison's approach to school development was based on a deep trust in people. Whilst she had a clear sense of the kind of school she wanted to create, she was convinced that the way to do it was to give her teaching colleagues the opportunity to do their own thinking and learning, and to develop their classroom practices in their own time and in their own ways. There was in fact an exact parallel between her trust in her teaching staff and her trust in children. Indeed, she consciously applied to her work with staff the same principles that she used to guide decision-making in her work with children. Like all the teachers in the original Learning without Limits project, she had an unshakeable belief in children's capacity to learn; she trusted that the more children were given rich learning experiences and freedom to do their own learning, the more competent, capable and creative they would show themselves to be. She trusted that, in these conditions, the children themselves would be the best evidence there could be of the redundancy of ability labels, the best evidence of the need for more empowering ways of thinking about learners and learning, the best stimulus there could be for professional learning and development. For this reason, she placed a shared focus on children's learning at the very heart of her approach to whole-school development.

Learning from Children

During the research at Wroxham (2005-7), teachers were interviewed at regular intervals about their teaching, their learning and the changes they were introducing in their classroom practice. Their accounts provided many rich examples of how trying things out and seeing how the children responded gave rise to new insights, understandings and questions. As the months passed, it became clear how these developments were indeed taking them in directions consistent with Alison's vision.

Learning about Children's Writing

Martyn, for example, remembered his concern on meeting his new Year 4 class in September. He was worried about the quality of their writing and identified some of the factors that seemed to be affecting them: lack of motivation, a desire to stick to what was safe, rather than the riskiness of taking risks, fear of not having good ideas, lack of enjoyment and imagination. But some months later, his views had changed considerably. An exciting day in the woods, playing out the adventures of Robin Hood (a much-loved hero of Martyn's own childhood) was a turning point. Martyn saw his children enjoying themselves, getting excited, inspired, motivated – and no wonder: in his own words, 'they were heavily armed, with bows, arrows and swords, there was a lot of clinking and clanking as they explored'. But best of all, coming back into the classroom at the end of the day, with no apparent need for direction or instruction, he saw them settling down to write ('and some of them wrote pages!').

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The children's responses to the Robin Hood experience proved that lack of motivation and imagination are not permanent deficits, but states of mind that can be changed, for the better, by the teacher's choices. And the teacher's perceptions of what is possible can be changed too, can be enlarged and deepened, in response to what the children do in these new conditions.

Later in the same term, Martyn's class worked on a collaborative writing project with Year 6 children: Martyn watched them with close attention and considerable pride. After the project, looking at the transcripts of the lesson, Martyn described what he had seen:

> They were bouncing ideas off each other, they were supportive, weren't they? They were encouraging, they were very patient with each other, they were honest and they were clearly focussed … And they reflected on their writing, they edited it, they improved it … there was so much learning in there.

This is a rich and generous analysis, showing how the new opportunities that Martyn was offering children had far-reaching effects on the teacher, not just on the children. Consider how much Martyn is saying here about learners and learning: first, the range of powers he identifies in these eight and nine year old children – to generate and express their ideas, to listen to one another (not just to their teacher), to empathise with one another as learners, to understand that they can help and be helped, to see clearly what's going on and to say what they see, to put their backs, their hearts, minds and wills into what they are doing. Secondly, his description reveals the key concepts that make up his current definition of effective learners: their independence, their willingness to take time, their recognition that learning goes slowly, that it's worth waiting for. Thirdly, Martyn is saying something important about how, in certain conditions, writing in school can be a worthwhile pursuit in itself. Peter Medway has memorably described much writing he saw in school in dismissive terms, deploring 'the pretence of writing for an imaginary audience, for an imaginary purpose, in an imaginary persona' (1980, p. 13). Martyn, in contrast, sees his children stepping back, reflecting on their writing, treating it as worthwhile, believing that they do have something worth saying, and trying to say it as well as they can. Trying things out and seeing how children respond has expanded Martyn's sense of what is possible for children. Equally important is that, in the process, he has also learned about his own growing power to transform learning capacity.

Learning about Self-assessment

During this same period, Jo, teaching Year 5, was thinking about how to enhance children's participation in formative assessment, as part of her studies for a Master's degree. In her dissertation, Jo reported on her investigation, with the help of her class, into how the development of a shared 'meta-language' about learning can enhance children's capacity for self and peer assessment. In

the course of changing her own practice in giving feedback, shifting from a focus on correct answers to a focus on thinking, Jo introduced the children to a variety of 'thinking tools', and invited them to use these ways of talking and thinking about learning in regular reflections on their own achievements.

Jo attentively observed and documented the changes in children as a result of changes in her classroom practices and expectations, identifying several significant themes. She noticed, first, that children had more confidence about themselves as learners; in particular, she saw them move towards what Carol Dweck (2006) calls 'a growth mind-set', as they came to recognise and appreciate their own increasing powers as learners. Secondly, she recorded the growth in children's understanding of the purposes of self-assessment, and its formative effects. Gradually, the children came to grasp and benefit from the two-way traffic of reflection, both externally, between the teacher and children, and internally, as children wrote for themselves in their self-assessment journals, learning, in the process, to make sense of their mistakes, successes, sticking points, struggles and challenges.

The children's enthusiastic response to Jo's invitation to join her in learning how to do things differently provided convincing evidence of their capacity to exercise more independence, more control, more agency. As an on-going partnership in learning was established, the expectations of everybody were raised. And Jo realised that she had changed as much as her children, in terms of what teachers can do in the practice of assessment. As she wrote in her thesis, 'At the heart of formative assessment is the shift from the teacher as the giver of knowledge, to someone who facilitates learning and is led by the learners' (Swann et al, 2012, p. 44).

Learning about Relationships

The establishment of an on-going partnership in learning also turned out to be a key factor in turning things around when Year 2 teacher, Sophie, encountered a challenging class in her second year of teaching. Sophie had begun the term full of confidence in the strategies that she had developed, in her first year, to increase children's choice and control over their learning. She was looking forward to extending her repertoire with her new class. But their behaviour in the first few weeks convinced her that the strategies she had used so successfully with the previous class were not going to work with the new group. The children seemed to have difficulty staying seated on a chair and focusing on the tasks in hand. They told her that they were 'the bad class' and that no-one wanted to work with them. Sophie felt herself being drawn, against her better judgement, into a cycle of negativity with them. They seemed to be forcing her to 'come down hard' on them, even though that was against everything she now stood for as a teacher. But what else could she do?

The alternative that she chose took enormous courage. It involved trusting that if she worked *with* the children rather than against them, this would lead to a radical change in the children's attitudes, behaviour and their commitment to

learning. It involved trusting that children would respond positively to her invitation to work in this new kind of partnership. Working with the children, rather than against them, meant, first and foremost, listening to, and empathising with, what they had to say about themselves as learners and as a class. Based on these discussions, the class drew up a list of positive things that they would like people to say about them, and these were used as points of reference when other staff commented favourably on individuals, groups or the whole class. Working with the children also meant creating daily opportunities for dialogue, so that they could genuinely contribute to the shared task of making their classroom experience more harmonious and purposeful. Dialogue with the children gave Sophie insight into the kinds of activities that would inspire the children's interest and imagination; she noticed how much more enthusiastic and focused the children seemed when they had a chance to contribute in this way. If an activity did not go so well, this also became a focus for shared discussion, so that lessons could be learnt for next time. Inevitably, there were setbacks along the way, and sometimes Sophie's trust was tested to the limits; but, in the end, it was shown to be well-founded. What she called 'a natural balance' was eventually established in her relationship with the class.

From the first, Sophie refused to blame the children. When setbacks happened or progress occurred more slowly than she hoped, she continued to trust that positive changes could be made, and that her choices and actions would be part of making those changes. But only a part. 'It was about me and that class', she explained, 'we had to find a way of working together'. She understood that she could not transform the community of the classroom simply by her own efforts; to use her powers as a teacher effectively, she needed to give the children more control over their own choices and actions. She trusted that increasing children's powers to act for themselves would not lead to classroom anarchy.

The key to her understanding is in the meaning she ascribes to the pronoun 'we'. Her use of this term is very close to the way in which it is used in the pre-school movement of Reggio Emilia, in Italy. Carla Rinaldi, formerly Director of Services for young children in the region, writes about the centrality of participation in 'our way of being and teaching'. She expands on what participation means, for children, teachers and families: 'not only by *taking part* in something, but by *being* part of it … part of a common identity, a "we" that we give life to through participation' (Rinaldi quoted in Valentine, 1999, p. 9). It is in just this sense that Sophie uses the word 'we' to represent the genuine partnership she aspires to, in which she and the children can work together for the same purposes, with shared commitment and responsibility. In this sense, 'we' can indeed build a harmonious and cooperative community. As Sophie and her class of six and seven year olds went on to prove

Learning about Grouping

In Cheryl's Year 1 classroom, new ways of working were evolving as she experimented with dismantling ability grouping. The impact of these convinced her not only of the limits that ability grouping could place on learning, but also of the damaging impact of ability labelling on the learners themselves. Looking back, Cheryl remembered how a student had recently asked her if she could work with a child of lower ability, 'and I just thought it's awful to label them like that, (yet) it's not very long ago that we did that'.

As she explored alternative approaches to planning and grouping, and observed how the children responded, she began to see more clearly the problems entailed in an approach that involved dividing children into three broad groups and planning on that basis. She saw how planning and objectives could work against the best interests of children and their learning: 'If you have ability grouping, when you're sitting doing your planning, you're thinking of three different things to do that are linked to the objective and I think sometimes it's easy to lose sight of what the children are getting out of it'.

With this approach to planning, Cheryl recognised, the children had no say in the kind of task allocated to them; often the task allocated to the 'lower' group was very limited in terms of interest and scope for imaginative challenge. For example, in a literacy lesson, where the task was to write a poem, 'you'd get the high ones that would go off and write their own poems, and you'd have the low ones with some blanks, to put the missing words in'.

Now, instead, in such an activity, Cheryl made sure that every child was given the opportunity to write a poem, independently, while the adults in the classroom would be on hand to support anyone who asked for help. One day Cheryl observed, with some satisfaction, that 'Tina was crying because she didn't have time to finish her poem'. Why was this sad sight such good news? Because earlier in the year, Tina had displayed some of the traits of what Dweck (1999) calls a 'helpless learner', describing herself in resolutely negative terms: 'I can't write', 'I don't like writing', 'I can't do it'. Now, however, Tina's frustration was caused by the end of the lesson, by external conditions, not by her imagined internal defects as a writer and learner. Another unwilling writer, Eddy, had become equally enthusiastic, wanting to share his own poem with the whole class.

How different would Tina's and Eddy's experiences have been, Cheryl reflected, had they both still been assigned to a 'lower' group: 'When you've got the lower ones that all sit together, they know they're in that group … they're all thinking about themselves and struggling a little bit … they feel they have to have an adult there'. (a good description, incidentally, of the conditions that create 'helpless' learners.) Here Cheryl recognised, for herself, both the limits that grouping can place on children's learning, and the benefits of her new approach.

As Cheryl's approach became more open and flexible, giving children more choice over activities and how and when to engage with them, she began to appreciate the redundancy of ability labels and the expectations that go with

them. She was frequently surprised when the children who opted for help were not the ones she would have expected. She began consciously to refrain from making judgements about what particular children would do and learn. Labels, she realised, were more of a hindrance than a help to her work with the children. She wondered why she had found this a difficult step to make: 'Is it yourself as a teacher, you just want the control over what they're doing, that you don't let go a little bit? … You need to take a step back and think why you're so intent on putting these little things [labels] on'.

Cheryl did take a step back; she gave the children more time, space and control. In her planning, she prioritised thinking about the meaning of classroom activities from the children's point of view. She was surprised and delighted by the children's positive responses: she saw clearly the intellectual, social and emotional benefits. The children were self-motivated, engaged, more active, inventive and imaginative; they were mixing with different children and working together in different and unexpected ways; and, crucially, they were happier. As was Cheryl: 'I just think it's a horrible thing to do when you look back at it now … I never want to go back'.

In her rejection of previous planning and grouping practices, Cheryl was not following a school-wide recipe for self-improvement, or working from an official hand-book of helpful suggestions. Like her colleagues, she was finding her own way through a problem that she had conceptualised for herself, in her own terms. At one point she drew a parallel between ability-labelling in the primary school and being told what to do as an adult at college, for example, what courses to choose: 'like somebody choosing a course for you, because *they* think that's what you could do – and not giving you the chance to *do that yourself*'. Cheryl was, by this time 'doing it herself', creating learning without limits in her own classroom, in her own way. Her commitment to children's learning, to the educability of everybody, had grown; she had seen for herself how children 'can push themselves forward', and had followed suit. The evidence of the children's growth, the flourishing and unfolding of their capacities, was the stimulus for her own professional development.

Towards a Shared Vision

These four brief accounts clearly show how the teachers used the gifts of trust and freedom to do their own thinking and learning and to develop their practice; they did so in ways that were both distinctively individual, *and* consistent with Alison's vision for whole-school development. While focusing their attention on their chosen areas of practice, all four teachers experimented by offering new experiences to children that helped to strengthen their trust in children's learning capacities and to expand their sense of what was possible. They were all developing their understanding of how classroom conditions can help to expand these capacities; they were all coming to recognise their own power to bring about change; and they were all using the evidence provided by children to affirm and stimulate these developments. The core idea of

transformability, though never named, is clearly visible in their reflections; these snapshots of their thinking and changing practice exemplify the processes through which this powerful concept was indeed becoming embedded in school development.

But trust and freedom are not, in themselves, the whole story. In her leadership role, as in her work with children, Alison understood that people needed on-going support for their learning if they were to find these gifts genuinely empowering. Her subtle approach to leadership was to harness the power of the collective in building a 'school-wide culture of learning' to support and energise learning within the whole school community. It is to this aspect of her approach to school development that we now turn.

A School-wide Culture of Learning: first steps forward

Over the years of our study of Wroxham, it became clear that the work of building a school-wide culture of learning was based on two mutually supportive approaches. The first of these, evident even in the earliest days of Alison's headship, was the introduction of small-scale but significant initiatives, designed to support the development of new ways of being together, and new ways of thinking about learners and learning, for staff and for children, to replace the disabling effects of ability-based thinking and practices.

One of these initiatives was the introduction of mixed-age circle group meetings, right across the school. These groups, led by Year 6 children, not by staff, met (and continue to meet) weekly to discuss a range of practical issues about the school as they arose, including aspects of teaching and learning. For example, plans for a maths evening, when families were invited into school to be taught by the children, were developed in these meetings.

The meetings created regular, sustained periods of time in which new ways of thinking and new relationships were, first, made possible and then, over time, actualised. Through the meetings, everybody – adults and children – was able to experience and learn how much was to be gained by working in partnership. In place of the hierarchies of worth endemic to environments permeated by ability labelling, adults and children of all ages met together on equal terms: everybody was included; everybody had the right to be heard; and steps were taken to make sure that even the youngest children were enabled to be genuine participants.

In effect, the circle groups created new spaces into which the children grew, learning to use the new opportunities being offered to them. They were given the experience of taking control, of sharing power with adults, discovering their own capacity to lead and to contribute to things that genuinely mattered to them – the harmony of their school and classrooms. The meetings created new spaces for adults too, where they could see children in a new light, embracing and appreciating their competences and enabling them to question the validity and usefulness of judgements about ability.

Another significant structure was the creation of Faculty teams, replacing the more common practice of individual teachers taking responsibility for a single subject area of the curriculum. Staff members, including teaching assistants, chose which of three teams to join: the Humanities Faculty, the Creative Faculty or the Citizenship Faculty. The teams met three times a term, for two hours after school, with refreshments provided.

This new structure embodied a distinctive approach to staff development and professional learning. No longer were more experienced teachers expected to judge the performance of colleagues and identify areas for improvement. Instead the whole staff were invited to work collaboratively to deepen their understanding of children's learning, and develop new practices informed by this understanding. The professional purposes of the teams were three-fold. First, they took responsibility for the quality of experiences and opportunities offered to children in their curriculum areas; secondly, they monitored the quality of children's learning in these areas, looking for evidence that their classroom initiatives were bearing fruit; thirdly, their collaborative approach nourished and sustained their own learning as they shared their observations and reflections. Like the individual teachers we have described, the Faculty teams were resolutely focused on children, on children's learning and on their own capacity to make a difference to that learning.

Building a Community of Professional Learners

But these new structures were only a part of what was going on. The second key leadership approach, in harnessing the power of the collective, was to create a community of powerful learners, dedicated to a distinctive kind of professional learning. This is learning that people can only do for themselves: it cannot be done to order or on demand. It is intellectually and emotionally challenging; it happens slowly; it is a struggle, rather than a piece of cake. It is both personal and also intensely social. When people are learning together, the power of the collective strengthens the learning capacity of everybody.

As we studied the learning of the staff group, we became aware of how leadership support strategies were chosen for their capacity to nurture particular *dispositions* – ways of being, ways of engaging with others and with experience – that enable and sustain this distinctive kind of professional learning. One of these dispositions was openness – to new ideas, possibilities, opportunities and experiences. Openness entails a willingness to learn from anybody and everybody. Significantly, it also requires the learner to abandon the belief that there is only one right way, one ready-made solution. The learner is open to surprises, ready to see the unexpected, the unpredicted, and the unpredictable. In particular, openness to children's learning capacity is resolutely anti-deterministic; it renders meaningless the practice of predetermination and pre-judgement; it does away with any ceiling being placed on what anyone might do, or learn, or accomplish. And the growth of this disposition in the teachers at

Wroxham, as we have seen, was stimulated by the children themselves – who were, indeed, the evidence.[1]

The growth of openness in the staff group was further enabled by a parallel openness in the nature of support offered by the leadership team. Alison and her senior colleagues carefully avoided imposing their ideas or presenting their own solutions. Leadership support took the form of listening, questioning, making suggestions and providing resources, but without putting pressure on people to take up ideas or pre-judging what the outcomes of their conversations with colleagues ought to be. Alison prioritised opportunities for colleagues to come together, routinely, to share ideas and experiences. As a result, the conversations that people engaged in together supported everybody in using the evidence of children's learning to guide the development of their practice, and to build a rich new vocabulary for talking about their own and children's learning. By valuing everybody's ideas and approaches, Alison communicated her belief that there were many different routes to creating learning without limits and that everybody's contribution was important. In these ways, she created conditions that foster openness, enabling everybody to stay in control of their own learning while nevertheless benefiting from the support and energy of the whole staff group.

As time went on, the collective was able to play an increasingly important part in nurturing dispositions such as openness. Growing recognition of the value of openness, rather than certainty, for example, meant that colleagues were able to draw reassurance and inspiration from each other's explorations and struggles as well as from their successes. Individuals took pride in their own choices and in working things out for themselves, spurred on by the recognition they received from the team. The sustaining power of the team gave individuals the confidence to take risks as they explored new possibilities. It both supported them in their endeavours and generated ideas to help. Martyn described it like this: 'We are open to new ideas, and new ways of working; if something doesn't work we just think about it and think how we can change it, how we can work with it, rather than just give up on it altogether'. In this way, the capacity of individual teachers to make choices in the interests of increasing children's learning capacity was enhanced by the power of the team.

Resolute Optimism: energy, passion and hope

The life-force of school development at Wroxham is the shared belief, across the staff group, in *something worth striving for*, a belief that Fullan (2003) describes as the 'moral imperative'. On more than one occasion, Alison quoted Fullan's fine words as she reflected on the changes taking place, as the culture of professional learning gathered strength across the school. And the outcomes of this culture were the energy, passion and hope that have been harnessed to the alternative approach to school development described in this article.

In many ways Wroxham is an ordinary school, not unlike thousands of others up and down the country. But one feature of the school is distinctive: the

commitment of the whole school community to the big idea of transformability, with its underlying trust in children as rich, strong and powerful learners. At Wroxham, this transformative mindset is by no means a half-hearted expression of 'what might be', a wishy-washy hope-for-the-best approach; it is a passionate determination. As Alison explained, what sustains people at Wroxham, and drives them on, is passion: 'Passion connects to persistence; people are prepared to persist because they believe in what they're doing and think it will make a difference'. The source of their energy is their sense of pulling in the same direction: by acting together, they have learned – and continue to learn – what they can achieve together.

Note

[1] It is possible to trace a connection between this disposition of openness and the insights of another contributor to this issue, Amy Milik. In her article, written with Mark Boylan, Amy describes how the birth of her daughter had a powerful effect on the way in which she now sees children's learning: 'I suppose it was seeing that babies learn so much without being taught. I saw how my own daughter is so inquisitive and so determined, and she will keep trying something until she succeeds'.

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