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Group N: *Thinking Outside the Policy Box* (Chair: Nancy Stewart: TACTY)

What Might Be: Against Prophetic Pedagogy

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The Learning without Limits Project, which our presentation is based on today, is a body of work which has developed from the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge since the late 1990s when Susan Hart, Donald McIntyre, Mary Jane Drummond and Annabelle Dixon first began working with teachers who had rejected ideas of fixed ability thinking and practices based on them. All of the Learning without Limits core ideas and principles are derived from the work of real teachers in real classrooms. We have been privileged to research alongside them, helping to articulate and theorise what they do and why they do it that way. Together we have all been working 'against prophetic pedagogy', the title for our presentation today.

The Italian educationalist Loris Malaguzzi first used the term 'prophetic pedagogy' in a commentary on the exhibition 'The 100 Languages of Children' which opened in Bologna in 1990. The exhibition demonstrated the capacity children have for sweeping away all taxonomies and rendering redundant the notion of stages of development. It offered evidence for the claim of the ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas that the human person, as Other, is 'refractory to all typology, to every genus, ... to every classification.' (Levinas, 1969:73).

Such a view of each of us as radically free, and as such unpredictable, surprising, and always Other, never an object to be known, seems to us a view it is necessary for any teacher to keep in mind.

Malaguzzi, who thought continually about the importance for educators of their image of the child, of what he called the child's 'bio-cultural reality', returned to the idea of 'prophetic pedagogy' two years later, shortly before his death. He said this:

... [P]edagogy of a behaviourist nature... has the good fortune of being very easily applied... This kind of pedagogy is part of what I call 'prophetic' pedagogy... Prophetic pedagogy knows everything beforehand: it knows everything that will happen. It knows everything and it has no uncertainty, it is absolutely imperturbable, it contemplates everything and prophesies everything and sees everything; sees everything to the point that it is capable of giving recipes for the parts of an action, minute by minute, hour by hour, objective by objective... This is a coarse and cowardly thing, which is

humiliating to teachers' ingenuity, and a complete and visible humiliation of children's ingenuity and potential. [Cagliari, P. et al. (2016) *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A selection of his writings and speeches, 1945-1993.* Oxford: Routledge, pp. 421-2]

It is our view that current education policy acts to advance prophetic pedagogy, and that mainstream schooling is suffused with it. Prophetic pedagogy knows everything beforehand because it requires children to be monitored in particular ways and via particular mechanisms, notably tests, and uses the data collected to project children's futures within the system, to keep them 'on track'.

It uses such projections to justify particular kinds of sanctioned intervention, and cloaks these actions in a language of social justice. This is ironic not least because such an approach actively *prevents* attention being paid to the individual pupil. In place of attentiveness and receptivity, a coming-alongside the pupil, categorisation and pre-sanctioned processes are substituted.

Pupils made visible according to the tenets of prophetic pedagogy are grouped by ability, withdrawn from class for booster programmes or intensified forms of test-preparation, offered a narrower curriculum, and such like.

The risk is that children are not listened to, trusted, given time, allowed.

Under prophetic pedagogy, a child risks being regarded more as an array of successes and failures, an array of scores, and less as a whole person.

Prophetic pedagogy is founded on fixed ability thinking, itself a long-standing feature of schooling. Such thinking holds that children come in kinds, that one child is, once and for all, 'of low ability', another 'bright'. Such language has become the lingua franca of the system.

Fixed ability thinking is what makes the child's future prophesiable, and the language of fixed ability helps keep it so. The Schools Minister recently told the Education Committee of the House of Commons that the creation of a tutor-proof 11+ exam, supposedly to distinguish those who are academically highly-able from those who are not, was 'the Holy Grail' his department were searching for.

Nothing could illustrate more clearly the acceptance by policy-makers of fixed ability thinking and its bleakly-deterministic image of the child than that remark, save perhaps the stated intention to return to a school-system based on the bankrupt notion of segregation by academic 'ability'.

The limits which a 'learning without limits' approach seeks to abolish are the limits imposed by prophetic pedagogy, fixed ability thinking, and an image of the child not as infinite in her or his individuality, and hence as always potentially unpredictable and surprising, but as one of this or that kind.

We use the phrase 'learning without limits' in the two books the team has published as a way to acknowledge Stephen Jay Gould's insight in 'The Mismeasure of Man'. Gould writes:

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 opportunity to strive or even to hope by a limit imposed from without but falsely identified as lying within. (Gould, 1981: 29)

Next, we build on what we have outlined as the limitations of the prophetic approach and talk some more about what we know about the thinking of teachers who take an alternative stance: teachers who are committed to 'learning without limits'. These teachers – we – are willing to reject fixed ability, or “bell curve thinking” (Fendler & Muzaffar, 2008), and live instead with the question-mark of possibility. This can be illustrated with a short story told by a teacher at a recent Learning without Limits Network meeting:

The teacher told us about a child who, since starting school in reception, had been reluctant and, more often than not, refusing to enter the classroom or collaborate with peers. During the first term of year 2, the child had decided to start participating – they had decided to change their mind. The teachers were surprised and somewhat mystified. They asked themselves: why? What was it that was the significant change? Their conclusion (supported by a conversation with the child) was that “they know that they are wanted here.”

In the phrase articulated by the class teacher: “they know that they are wanted here” is an implicit reference to the key principles that underpin the principled stance identified in the first Learning without Limits study – the spirit of co-agency recognized in “they know”; the mutual trust evidenced in the word “wanted”; and the community that sustains an ethic of everybody referenced by the word “here”.

The teachers' commitment to the concept of transformability,

... a firm and unswerving conviction that there is the potential for change in current patterns of achievement and response, that things can change and be changed for the better, sometimes even dramatically, as a result of what happens and what people do in the present' (Hart et al, 2004, p166)

is to be found not in one significant act or grand gesture that changed the child's mind, but in the cumulative effect of striving; the attentiveness that enabled the child to KNOW that THEY were WANTED, HERE (Linklater, 2013).

The teachers in this child's school had, over years, paid regard to the child in the ways that they acted to convince them of their uniqueness and irreplaceability (Gaita, 2004 in Linklater, 2013) to the community of the class and school in which they could

belong. This achievement was not an act of prophetic pedagogy – it was not a case of “I believe it therefore it will happen”. Nor were the conditions enriched because of any sort of diagnosis of the child’s place on any sort of bell curve of attainment. Rather, this was a story of pedagogic possibility: the persistent striving and re-imagining demanded by the principled belief that things can change, and be changed for the better when the conditions are right.

This story was also a story about how, while in our dreams we might wish to imagine life outside, or without, “the box”, there is also hope within the box. This was a story of something that happened this month. Every school already has what is needed to start to see these sorts of changes.

As we said at the beginning, the Learning without Limits core ideas and principles come from the work of real teachers in real classrooms. These ideas and principles are not just sitting inside the pages of a book, or becoming fossilised in particular practices, because other people are developing them in the Learning without Limits Network.

The Network brings together people in schools and communities who are committed to the educability of Everybody. We explore existing and emerging understandings and practices linked to the underlying Learning without Limits pedagogy. We meet once a term, in Cambridge. Usually we take a core Learning without Limits idea and explore it together – for example we have organised seminars on co-agency, the language of ability, open-ended opportunities for learning, the ethic of everybody.

Even though the policy climate is hostile right now, we can’t afford to do nothing, or to wait for better times, or take a ‘hands behind backs’ stance. People are doing really fantastic things, both here in the UK and abroad. So come and join the Network, mull over the challenges, conundrums and dilemmas together, and share with others what you are doing in your setting as agents of What Might Be.

References

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