# PART 1
# Beyond ability-based teaching and learning

# 1 Ability, educability and the current improvement agenda

This book is about two very different kinds of learning: one that is widespread, and one that is, at present, much less commonplace. The first is the learning that starts in the very earliest days of schooling, as young people begin to hear and understand the judgements that their teachers make about them and everything they do. They learn very quickly about their standing in comparison with their peers, particularly in relation to their supposed 'ability'. The words 'more able', 'average' and 'less able' may not be spoken in their hearing, but young people soon learn the category they belong to, and where their friends fit into this hierarchy of ability. Even when neutral labels are used for the groups to which children are assigned, or for the tables at which they sit, the messages are easy to read. Formal reports, marks, grades, levels and comments on written work: these are all sources of information about young people's supposed ability. This kind of learning is reinforced daily, through many different kinds of experiences: it is not difficult to learn one's place, though it can be extremely damaging, as we will argue throughout this book.

There is an alternative, a second kind of learning, which in this book we are calling 'learning without limits'. This is learning that is free from the needless constraints imposed by ability-focused practices, free from the indignity of being labelled top, middle or bottom, fast or slow, free from the wounding consciousness of being treated as someone who can aspire at best to only limited achievements. Learning without limits becomes possible when young people's school experiences are not organized and structured on the basis of judgements of ability.

Commitment to reconstructing the curriculum and organization of schools to foster this second kind of learning is by no means new. For some advocates of comprehensive education, this idea was at the heart of the original campaign for comprehensive reform. Since comprehensive reorganization, many teachers committed to comprehensive ideals have indeed attempted to develop, in their own classrooms, learning free from the constraints imposed by judgements of ability. However, the public task of developing a convincing and practical alternative to ability-based teaching and learning has, until now, not been seen as a priority. In this book we explain why we believe this task is

such an urgent one. Drawing on a recent research study with a small group of teachers, we describe what they have taught us about classrooms that foster this second kind of learning, about the principles that guide their teaching and about their own role in creating learning without limits.

## Ability and identity

When young people's learning is dominated by judgements of ability, their sense of identity may be profoundly affected, not just while they are at school, but beyond, into adulthood. Readers of this book will no doubt be able to bring to mind people they know whose lives have been affected by being written off as incapable of serious academic achievement at crucial points in their education. Narinder, one of the teachers whose work is featured in this book, describes how she was told, as a pupil, 'not to bother staying on at school as this would be a waste of my time and the school's. This was the message to a devastated youngster in the 1960s.' She duly left school and went to work in a factory. Later, with encouragement from a supportive family, she went back into education. She trained as a teacher and in time became the head of a large, multicultural primary school in the Midlands. Nevertheless, she says, 'this message has always stayed with me; and although I constantly guard against other youngsters suffering the same fate, I am even more acutely aware of injustice, particularly with the dawn of school targets, where only the level 4s are seen as an asset to the school.'

For Mark, a much sought-after house painter and decorator of our acquaintance, the decisive moment in his education came much sooner, when he failed the 11 plus. The 11 plus was a public examination, a combination of intelligence and attainment tests, which, until the 1960s, was taken by nearly all pupils in English state schools, in order to allocate them to different kinds of secondary schools, with very different levels of status and prestige. The practice persists in a few local education authorities. Mark says that, having received the message that he was 'thick', he went on to 'muck about' at secondary school. His family were supportive of him personally but were not worried about success at school as long as he got a job – which he did, with his uncle who worked in the timber trade. Despite now having his own successful business, Mark still thinks that the world probably sees him as thick because he failed the 11 plus and because he is not (in his words) a 'fast reader'. He feels that the failure was largely his fault, but the experience has made him a strong supporter of the comprehensive system for his own children. He thinks that comprehensive education 'gives kids a second chance' and they're 'not written off' as they used to be.

Anne, another of the teachers whose work is featured in this book, reports that for years she was placed in the bottom set and not expected to

achieve academically because of difficulties with reading. Luckily, she had supportive parents and in time encountered some more open-minded teachers. She too went on to teacher training college and later gained a degree in mathematics and statistics. Some years later, when she noticed that her daughter was experiencing similar difficulties with her reading, she was able to take action to help to prevent her daughter's learning being held back in the way that her own had been.

Narinder, Mark and Anne feel strongly that what happened to them should not have happened, and should not be allowed to happen to future generations of children. Yet the ideas about ability and potential that informed and were used to justify the judgements made about earlier generations continue to have currency in schools. Indeed, in recent years, these ideas have gained renewed strength and legitimacy as part of government-sponsored initiatives to raise standards and improve practice in schools.

As we explain in more detail in Chapter 2, in this book we take a critical view of ability thinking in all its guises. We argue that basing teaching on perceived differences of ability undermines teachers' efforts to provide a fair, enabling and fulfilling education for all young people, and their determination to give everyone the best possible start in life. We believe that many teachers will be familiar with our arguments and already share our concerns about ability-led practices. However, we also recognize the considerable pressures that teachers are under in the current context, where discourses of good practice insistently promote differentiation by ability as an essential feature of good teaching. We recognize, too, that when teachers use the concept of ability to categorize pupils, they bring to these practices their own values and find their own ways of making them work to fulfil their professional purposes. In order to present our critique of the concept of ability and the practice of ability labelling in a way that is respectful of these intentions, we must first examine some of the ways in which they can be construed as both helpful and necessary to educators in carrying out their professional work.

## What do we mean by ability?

In a useful overview of the development of the notion of ability, Jill Bourne and Bob Moon (1995: 26) describe ability as a 'common-sense' concept that, in the United Kingdom, in the twentieth century, came to be seen as 'a natural way of talking about children'. Yet, they note, the fact that we have words such as 'intelligence' and 'ability' does not mean that they exist, any more than the unicorn does. The concept of ability is culturally and historically specific: 'not so long ago, children and their achievements were looked at very differently, as they are in other places of the world today'

(*ibid*.). But, because talking about ability seems a natural way of talking, people do not normally stop, in conversation, to rush to the dictionary or to question each other's meanings. When we do take time to look more closely, we realize that there is considerable scope for confusion. When young people are identified as 'more able' or 'less able' than others, are we saying something about innate intelligence or inherent capacity to learn? Are we implying a fixed or stable difference in degree between those deemed more able and those deemed less able? Or are we simply saying something about differences in their current ability to perform certain tasks, their observable ability to do certain things – like reading or mathematical calculations – according to agreed criteria? Although the distinctions between various meanings of 'ability' easily become blurred, there are significant differences between them that warrant closer examination.

The view of ability as 'inborn intelligence' has been deeply influential in education in England over the past century. According to this view, ability is seen as a genetic inheritance, a given amount of innate, general, cognitive power distributed according to the normal patterns of variation of all naturally occurring phenomena. This general cognitive ability is assumed to drive learning, so when young people of different abilities put maximum effort into learning, differences of attainment will inevitably result. According to this view, then, ability labels not only *explain* differences in attainment but also *predict* future events. Because learning is thought of as determined by ability, and the amount of any individual's ability is given, it seems, on the surface, a reasonable assumption that people assessed as 'more able' or 'less able' will always remain so; someone who is judged less able today cannot become more able tomorrow unless the original judgement turns out to have been mistaken. According to this view, it is important for teachers to know each individual's ability and potential in order to adapt their teaching accordingly. Judgements about ability are the points of reference against which teachers formulate expectations, make decisions about appropriate learning opportunities, decide how to interact with pupils and evaluate their progress.

This view of ability has its origins in theories of intelligence and the practice of intelligence testing, which claimed to offer objective means for reliably measuring inherent ability and potential. This practice promised to serve as an instrument for achieving greater justice and equality in education, by distributing opportunity on the basis of measured intelligence rather than social circumstance. However, over the years since IQ testing was first introduced, many of the old claims and certainties that gave credence to ideas of fixed, inherent ability have long been abandoned. Since the 1920s, psychometricians have themselves continually revised their theories about what precisely intelligence tests measure. While they continue to use the measurement of IQ to compare individuals and make

predictions of various kinds, most no longer hold to the view that IQ is fixed, since their own studies have clearly demonstrated that this is not the case. Equally, they have abandoned the idea that what IQ tests measure is raw intelligence, undistorted by differences in environment and opportunity. While debate continues over what constitutes intelligent behaviour, there is now broad agreement among psychometricians that IQ tests do not measure raw intelligence; what such tests measure can only ever be what has been learned (Sternberg 1998).

The idea that differences of attainment reflect fixed or stable differences of ability is not, however, necessarily incompatible with the recognition that all abilities are learned. There is a second view of ability, which places great emphasis upon the influence of environmental factors in the development of intelligence, especially during the crucial formative years up to the age of 5. This view is informed and supported by the knowledge that measured intelligence (in terms of rank order) tends generally to be fairly stable, that it is quite a good predictor, from the age of 5, of people's likely success within the educational system and that it is a very good predictor when people are tested at the age of 11. This psychometric evidence provides reassurance that there is a scientific basis for ability labelling. The problem with this view, as we show in detail in Chapter 2, is that it dis-regards the impact of the school upon differential attainment. Without a state education system, it certainly seems probable that the relative educational achievements of most people would be largely determined by their families' relative social and economic advantages during their childhood. But, with a highly developed educational system, are we prepared to accept that the influence of schooling is so slight that the success of students within it is largely determined not by their learning experiences at school, but by what happens to them before they start school at the age of 4 or 5? We view that as an unnecessarily pessimistic and determinist position. We believe that not only we, but also all our readers, have sufficient experience of individuals who have, at school or later, achieved high levels of educational success for none of us to be at all persuaded by the counsel of despair.

An educator who makes use of ability labels may not, however, be subscribing to the idea of ability as a fixed or inherent attribute. Ability labels can be used simply to refer to differences in young people's current abilities to *do* certain things. According to this third view, 'more able' and 'less able' pupils are those who are demonstrably better or worse than others at, say, reading, or maths calculations, or historical analysis, or literary criticism, according to agreed criteria. Ability labels are used simply to compare attainments or performances on a range of measures. Their purpose is to assist in the process of differentiation, enabling the teacher to match the range of tasks provided to the range of current abilities represented in the

class. Thinking of differences within a class on the basis of three broad categories (more able, average, less able) also helps to make the teacher's task manageable. It seems safe to assume that the pupils in each category can be treated in the same way: they have reached similar levels of ability, and therefore can be assumed to have similar learning needs, in the sense of the next steps that they are poised to take in their learning. According to this 'performance' view of ability, comparative judgements do not purport to explain differences of performance. Nor do they necessarily claim to predict potential; although there is often an underlying assumption that this might be the case, it is also perfectly possible for the ranking order of ability of young people to change. In theory, the less able readers of today could become the more able readers of tomorrow.

A teacher may therefore feel comfortable in using ability labels in this comparative sense, while consciously rejecting the idea that potential is permanently fixed. This purely 'performance' view allows for a much more complex view of individual abilities. Any particular individual might, in theory, be among the most able in science, mathematics or art, and among the least able in reading. In practice, though, it often seems that the same people come to be seen as 'more able' and 'less able' in most areas of the curriculum, or at least in the high-status academic subjects. In the absence of an alternative explanation, the temptation is to infer from these recurring patterns that differences of attainment do indeed reflect differences in underlying general cognitive ability. Indeed, as we saw in Anne's story above, differences of attainment in key curriculum areas, such as reading, can be – and are – frequently assumed to be reliable indicators of differences in overall academic ability and potential. This assumption is especially dangerous when applied to reading attainment, since we have expectations, in the UK, that success and achievement in reading should start (and therefore failure can be identified) at a much earlier age than is considered appropriate or desirable in continental Europe.

## Ability in the current context

The conviction that it is helpful, indeed essential, for teachers to compare, categorize and group young people by ability in order to provide appropriate and challenging teaching for all has been reinforced again and again in reports by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) since the late 1970s. It has also been given strong endorsement by government-sponsored initiatives to raise standards since the Education Reform Act of 1988. OFSTED inspectors are briefed (and trained) to check that teaching is differentiated for 'more able', 'average' and 'less able' pupils. Teachers are expected to make explicit in their schemes of work how this differentiation is to be achieved.

Government policy specifically recommends ability grouping as the basis for effective teaching in secondary schools (DfEE 1997); the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies both firmly endorse ability-based grouping.

In these various developments, what exactly is meant by 'ability' is not made explicit, so there is scope for teachers to interpret what is being recommended in ways that fit their own beliefs and values. However, the new emphasis on target setting and value-added measures of achievement have made it increasingly difficult for teachers who reject the fixed view of measurable ability to hold on to their principles, since they are continually being required to act as if they subscribe to it. The practice of measuring children's attainments, and predicting future achievement, starts early, in the last year of the Foundation Stage, if not even earlier in the nursery or pre-school, for which many local authorities are now developing an 'entry profile'. The Foundation Stage Profile, introduced as a statutory requirement in the academic year 2002–2003, requires educators to use 13 different scales, each of nine levels, to record children's achievements during the year in which they turned 5. They are formally assessed again, in Year 2, when at least one-third of them have not yet turned 7, and yet once more in Year 6, at a time when one-third of them will not yet have turned 11. At both Year 2 and Year 6, targets are set for each school and each local authority, specifying the percentages of children who are to achieve particular levels. The Year 6 targets are set with reference to the Year 2 results, and the Year 2 targets will in future be set with reference to the Foundation Stage Profiles. Early years educators who do not conceptualize their young children's learning in terms of scores, levels and targets are, nevertheless, required to carry out these procedures.

Secondary teachers, too, are compelled to comply with practices that may conflict with their espoused values and beliefs: for example, they are required to sort their students into sets geared to tiered examinations. Just at a time when adolescents perhaps need most encouragement and stimulus to commit their best efforts into study at school, they have to be sorted into groups that they and their teacher know impose preset ceilings on possible future performance. This constant requirement to predict future levels of achievement, and to reach prespecified targets, makes sense and can be justified only if it is assumed that current differences between young people in terms of their test results will persist in future tests and examinations. It presupposes that current patterns of achievement reflect stable differences in young people's potential.

However, the view of ability that underpins the current improvement agenda is not quite the same as the first view of ability discussed in this chapter. While it shares with the first view the idea that differences of attainment reflect inherent differences of ability and potential that cannot be changed, it assumes that overall attainment can be improved. This

'improvement' view of ability challenges expectations about what young people at particular points on the ability range are capable of achieving. Ability measurement helps in drawing attention to the scope for raising achievement. The claim is that there is scope for everyone's achievements to be raised, because ceilings of achievement, as currently predicted for young people of different abilities, are set too low. The task for improvement efforts is to raise expectations of potential – predicted ceilings of achievement – for everyone, and devise measures that will enable schools to realize this newly recognized untapped ability or potential.

We trace the roots of this fourth view of ability back to a particular analysis and critique of what was happening – and what was thought to be going wrong – in schools in the decades prior to the Education Reform Act of 1988. According to this analysis, a major cause of the so-called crisis of standards in schools was failure on the part of teachers to differentiate their teaching adequately to cater for the needs of pupils at different points on the ability range. The point was reiterated again and again in HMI reports in secondary and primary schools, particularly in relation to teaching in 'mixed ability' classes (Hart 1996a). This explains why a major focus of reform initiatives has been to endorse differentiation by ability as an essential feature of good practice, and to fund development initiatives designed to support educators in refining their skills in differentiating teaching.

On the surface, this fourth view of ability has considerable appeal, raising everyone's sights about what individuals can achieve, and going some way to reinstate the notion of entitlement, emphasized in the 1988 Act, but since then largely neglected, and dropped from the national agenda. However, there is mounting evidence that, in practice, it is serving not as much to extend opportunity and enhance achievement for all, as to ration opportunity and resources and justify anew writing off some young people as incapable of significant improvement. For example, in a deeply alarming study, Gillborn and Youdell (2000) explore the impact of government initiatives, including league tables and target setting. They studied two secondary schools with very different traditions, ethos, grouping practices and patterns of student achievement. Their analysis shows that the idea of fixed ability is being used, in association with the push for 'improvement', to justify, morally and educationally, the selection and concentration of resources and effort needed to maximize success in examinations – what Gillborn and Youdell call the A–C economy. Judgements of fixed potential now sanction the practice of dividing pupils into three categories: 'safe' ones (who would perform well anyway without extra input), the 'without hope' group (who would not achieve five A–C passes even if extra resources were to be put in) and the 'underachievers', where it is worth placing extra effort, and offering extra support and additional resources (*ibid*.: 134). Predictably, Gillborn and Youdell found that boys, students receiving free

school meals and Black students were overrepresented in the 'without hope' groups.

Similar processes can be seen at work in primary schools, where extra resources are allocated to children who are thought likely to move up a crucial level in their SAT results at Key Stage 2, boosting scores so that their schools make a good showing in the league tables and meet the targets set for them by both the LEA and central government. It is important to acknowledge that these are by no means just unfortunate and unintended effects of the pressures created by externally imposed targets and league tables. Schools have been provided with extensive 'booster' programmes specifically designed to raise levels of achievement for particular pupils thought capable of reaching crucial grade thresholds with extra support. The constant pressure to improve young people's attainments in a context where, at the very same time, ideas of fixed ability are being strengthened, emphasized and officially endorsed places educators without question in an intolerable professional double bind. They are held accountable for meeting development targets and for improving performance, while those who set the targets, and to whom they are accountable, resolutely promote a view of fixed ability that places the principal determinants of achievement outside the educators' control.

We believe that the current improvement agenda is based on erroneous assumptions and is profoundly misconceived. Its proponents have failed to appreciate that many teachers had already embarked on their own, self-inspired reform agenda and, in line with comprehensive ideals, were trying to construct an education system based on a more optimistic view of human educability. We have a very different interpretation of 'what went wrong' during the decades prior to 1988. Our argument is that, during the early years of the development of comprehensive education, too little priority was given, for a variety of reasons, to the crucial pedagogical task of developing and elaborating approaches to teaching free from the constraints imposed by ability labelling. Since this interpretation provided the stimulus for the research that forms the basis for this book, we explain our argument in detail in the next section.

## Ability and the development of comprehensive education

As we noted above, rejecting the idea of fixed ability was, for some educators at least, at the heart of the campaign for comprehensive reform. Clyde Chitty, a longstanding campaigner and advocate of the comprehensive ideal, recalls his own beliefs and aspirations at the time as follows:

> We believed that the comprehensive reform has no meaning unless it challenges the fallacy of fixed ability or potential in education. It should aim to dismantle all the structures rooted in that fallacy that act as barriers to effective learning while, at the same time, it should facilitate practices that enable everyone to enjoy a full education.
> (Chitty 2001a: 20)

Rejecting 'the fallacy of fixed ability' opened the way for an education system to be built on a more optimistic view of human educability, one responsive to the natural propensity of human beings not just to learn but to *change* over time. The reconstruction of education that the advocates of comprehensive education called for involved not just structural changes but also the transformation of forms of internal organization and teaching approaches. Teachers committed to this vision of the future of education approached their work in a spirit of enquiry and adventure, aware that modes of teaching appropriate in the new, non-selective environment had still to be invented.

Much important pioneering work was certainly carried out in both primary schools and secondary schools, in the 1960s and 1970s, to explore new approaches to pedagogy capable of enabling 'all young people to succeed' (Chitty 2001a: 22). But energy was diverted from this task into fierce debates surrounding the relative merits of ability and mixed ability grouping. Resisting forms of grouping that would reconstruct the selective system *within* a comprehensive framework seemed to be the most urgent priority. As Brian Simon, a leading critic of intelligence testing and campaigner for comprehensive reform, notes in his autobiography: 'If the new schools were to be rigidly streamed and the children divided into a set of hierarchical teaching groups, the whole purpose of making the change to comprehensive education might be subverted' (Simon 1998: 106).

Debates about the best forms of grouping were rehearsed again and again, but never finally resolved. It is perhaps not surprising, then, given the duration and intensity of these debates, that somewhere along the way comprehensive ideals started to be equated (by supporters, in some cases, as well as critics) with the struggle to defend mixed-ability grouping and teaching. While a great many teachers were certainly engaged in the crucial pedagogical task of developing teaching approaches free from the limits imposed by any ability labelling, the public tasks of articulating in generalized terms what they were doing and helping them to develop and refine their practices slipped off the agenda. Yet, as the terminology of the debate all too clearly reveals, a commitment to mixed-ability grouping and teaching does not necessarily imply 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, while still holding fast to ideas

of fixed ability. Indeed, ideas of fixed ability, which had clearly survived the abolition of selection, emerged alive and well at the heart of these debates.

Researchers who might have been helping to articulate and develop the new pedagogies were side-tracked into trying to help to resolve these organizational issues, but repeatedly failed to produce conclusive results, at least with respect to measures of academic achievement. These outcomes were widely reported as a failure to prove the case for mixed-ability grouping. However, they could also be interpreted as a striking failure on the part of advocates of ability-based grouping to demonstrate its superiority over mixed-ability teaching. This was despite teachers' inevitable lack of experience in managing mixed-ability classes and the lack, as yet, of any clearly defined models of pedagogy to support them in developing teaching approaches to fit the new situation. When researchers failed to substantiate claims that mixed ability would produce better achievement, as well as better attitudes and behaviour, their findings tended to reinforce fears and presuppositions that commitment to mixed-ability teaching was ideologically, rather than educationally, driven. For those who are convinced that the ability range is a natural and unalterable fact of life, it seems pointlessly impractical to insist that children of self-evidently different abilities should be taught together.

Meanwhile, in the primary sector, with the abolition of 11 plus selection, non-streamed or mixed-ability classes had rapidly become the norm. Just as in the secondary sector, primary teachers had to adjust their thinking and practice to respond to the new situation. John Coe, a head teacher, writing in the journal *Forum* in 1966, acknowledged that 'bringing down the selective barriers is not enough. This is only the first step that gives us freedom. Now our concern must be to devise ways of using that freedom so that we might bring a greater good to all our children' (Coe 1966: 79). In the primary sector, however, issues of organization and grouping often seemed to take priority, in research and literature, over issues of pedagogy (e.g. Galton *et al*. 1980). Within-class ability grouping became a widely used organizational strategy. There was widespread use of graded schemes, particularly in language and mathematics, to cater for different levels of attainment.

We now believe that it was the failure to move on from preoccupations with grouping to concentrate on the elaboration of effective pedagogies that caused the all-through comprehensive project to falter. When the backlash came – directed particularly against mixed-ability grouping and teaching – teachers committed to the radical reconstruction of education as the necessary consequence of the rejection of fixed ability thinking were not ready to defend their cause. We (for we count ourselves amongst them) had neither a convincing theoretical rationale nor the empirical evidence capable of persuading policy-makers and fellow practitioners of the feasibility and desirability of our alternative agenda. Commentators on the

educational scene succeeded in recasting the problems of underachievement, originally seen as the product of a selective system (and so justifying comprehensive reform), as the failure of the comprehensive project.

Our alternative interpretation of 'what went wrong' leads us to very different conclusions. Like Clyde Chitty, we are convinced 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 adult life' (Chitty 2001b: 115). 'What went wrong' is that we failed to press forward with the task of reconceptualizing pedagogy to reflect this more optimistic view. The lesson we must learn from that period is that, if we are to take forward the vision of a system of schooling that 'allows everybody to enjoy a full education' (Chitty 2001a: 2), the pressing task, for practitioners and researchers, is to develop convincing and clearly articulated models of teaching as alternatives to ability-based pedagogy.

## The Learning without Limits project

This is the task we set ourselves in the research project that forms the basis for this book. The *Learning without Limits* project was set up in 1999 at the University of Cambridge School of Education. The name of the project was inspired by a powerful passage in Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*, which seemed to capture our central concerns. He 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 an opportunity to strive or even to hope by a limit imposed from without but falsely identified as lying within.
>
> (Gould 1981: 29)

Our research strategy (as we describe in detail in Chapter 3) was to bring together a group of teachers who had rejected ideas of fixed ability and to study their practice, in order to explore and try to identify what was distinctive about teaching free from ability labelling. The response to our advertisement in the national press reinforced our conviction that there were many other educators who shared our concerns. We held 17 interviews, and a team of nine teachers (four primary and five secondary) from a range of very different teaching contexts was eventually established.

Over the following year, members of the university team spent many hours in the teachers' classrooms, observing and interviewing both teachers and pupils. We also met together 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. These detailed individual accounts form the core of the book and can be found in Part 2. We hope that teachers reading them will find, as well as inspiration, elements that relate directly to their own work.

We then summarized the key ideas in each account and collectively looked across all nine accounts for common themes and differences, in order to try to identify the key concepts and practices that might be distinctive of teaching free from determinist ideas about ability. In Part 3 of the book we explore the central ideas of an alternative pedagogy that emerged from the research, and the purposes and principles through which the teachers translated them into practice.

## Common concerns

Although it could seem naive to think that there is a chance of halting the juggernaut of reform as currently conceived, our grounds for hope lie in our awareness that there is actually a degree of overlap between the values of our project and some of the values underpinning the current standards agenda. For instance, 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 in achievement. The current programme of reforms rightly recognizes 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 the undesirable and dysfunctional effects of many of the externally imposed reforms, that there might come a compelling opportunity to present a more powerful, promising and equitable improvement agenda built around a critique of theories of intelligence, the use of intelligence testing and the practices of ability labelling. When that moment comes, we need to be in a position to exploit it to the full. The purpose of the research described here was to prepare ourselves and the wider professional community to seize that opportunity.