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1 An alternative improvement agenda

Swimming against the tide: the premise for the research

We began this research drawn together by some unshakeable convictions: that human potential is not predictable, that children's futures are unknowable, that education has the power to enhance the lives of all. Few would argue with these simple truths, and yet they are at odds with the prevailing spirit of the age, a time in which teachers are required to use the certainty of prediction as a reliable tool in their planning and organization of opportunities for learning. Targets, levels, objectives, outcomes – all these ways of conceptualizing learning require teachers to behave as if children's potential is predictable and their futures knowable far in advance, as if their powers as educators can have only a limited impact on the lives of many children and young people. Furthermore, closely associated with this view of learning (as linear, measurable and quantifiable) is an equally damaging view of the children who do the learning, who can themselves be known, measured and quantified in terms of so-called ability, a fixed, internal capacity, which can readily be determined.

This determinist thinking is not limited to those of any particular political persuasion. Nor is it an issue of transient significance. It is the legacy of a long-standing and ongoing, deep-rooted orthodoxy about the nature of 'ability' and how best to set about educating children. This legacy has given rise to limited and limiting thinking on the part of policy makers about children and about how to structure and organize learning and schooling that is widely shared, as the following three extracts show.

Back in 2005, when our research project was just beginning, a recently published education White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*, drew on these damaging beliefs about differential ability and potential to express government commitment (in this example New Labour) to the maximum progress of every child: 'We must make sure that every pupil, gifted or talented, struggling or just average, reaches the limits of their capability' (DfES 2005: 1.28).

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Let us pause, for a moment, to digest this single sentence. Its sentiment, though intended to be aspirational, is essentially deterministic, even fatalistic. It assumes that children naturally fall into one of these four categories and that it is right and proper to think of children in this way. It suggests that there are limits to every child's capability that can be known and reached, that to struggle is a sign of failure, and that to be 'just average' compared to those thought to be 'gifted or talented' is by definition to be second rate.

Five years on, and after a change of government, this determinist thinking continues to permeate the pronouncements of ministers. In 2010, for example, addressing a group of MPs, Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, was reported as saying:

Children from wealthy backgrounds of low cognitive ability overtake children from poor backgrounds and high cognitive ability before they even arrive at school . . . So, in effect, rich thick kids do better than poor clever children, and when they arrive at school the situation as they go through gets worse.

(Clark 2010)

While the concern to act on inequality of opportunity is surely welcome, if we unpack the conceptual apparatus used to formulate this concern, we can see that it perpetuates deeply limiting beliefs about ability and potential. It assumes not only that, as part of the natural order of things, there simply *are* 'clever' children and 'thick' children, but also that we can determine which are which from their differing attainments at a very early age. High and low ability are treated as fixed, stable states; those who are 'clever' have greater potential for learning than those of lower ability, so we must and should expect more of the former. These assumptions – about ability and potential – give rise to ill-placed confidence in the linearity and predictability of learning. Children are expected to progress in line with their presumed potential; only if they do not is there concern that something may be awry. So early differences in children's attainment – before they even arrive at school – take on a massive, predictive significance, setting expectations and influencing practices that shape the whole course of a child's future school career as a learner. Linearity and predictability are mainstays of the current 'reform' agenda. The emphasis of policy across parties is on children attaining at each stage of their schooling the differential targets that have been predicted from their attainments at previous stages. Learning, in this view, is a ladder up which children must climb (in broad groups) steadily, consistently, and in time together from rung to rung towards predetermined outcomes.

Since the publication of the 2005 White Paper, and in the name of raising standards, the drive to measure children's progress up the ladder has increasingly affected many aspects of teachers' and children's lives in school. The use

of numerical 'levels' has become so ubiquitous that both descriptions of individual children and differences between children are now primarily formulated in terms of levels. At parents' evenings, parents find themselves hearing about their children's learning not in all its rich and multifaceted variety, but about their levels. Their child, they may be bewildered to be told, 'is a secure 3b in reading' but only 'a 2c in writing'. Teachers are encouraged to plan, predict, report on progress and express concerns specifically in terms of levels (whether children are reaching, failing to reach or exceeding 'expected' levels). Attaching a level to the performance of each child on a daily basis and, indeed, discussing with children what they need to do to move up to the next level, have become widely used practices. Special booster groups, with accompanying teaching materials, have been set up to help children to move up a level in the Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs), as have special courses for teachers in Key Stage 2 to help them lift the achievement of those at level 3 to a level 4 before taking their SATs. Children whose current levels are thought to be too far below those of their peers are routinely given different tasks to do 'at their level', often carried out with a teaching assistant outside the classroom. These dehumanizing ways of conceptualizing learners, learning, progress and achievements invite children and young people constantly to compare themselves with others, rather than fostering a strong positive sense of themselves as competent, complex, creative people each capable of playing a full part within a collaborative learning community. They prevent young people, and their teachers, from experiencing and savouring the joys and endless possibilities of learning. Permeating, as they do, the avalanche of policy and directives, they inevitably affect teachers' beliefs as well as their practices, especially those of beginning teachers.

There is another way

Yet the determinist views of learning and ability that underlie the ladder model are deeply flawed, as many decades of research have shown (Hart *et al.* 2004). Alexander (2001, 2008) has pointed out, following extensive comparative studies of primary education in many countries, that elsewhere in the world key terms in the educational lexicon tend to be more suggestive of cultural rather than natural influences and of external agency in learning. Teachers need a much more complex understanding of learning and of the many interacting influences that underlie differences of attainment if they are to be able to use their powers as educators to transform children's life chances. So, what if teachers were to jettison the linear model of learning at the heart of existing models of school improvement? What if, instead of being constantly compared, ranked, and fettered by labels, children's learning capacity was enabled to flourish and expand in all its rich variety and complexity? What if planning for

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preordained and predicted levels was replaced with planning experiences and opportunities for learning that promote deep engagement, that fill children with a sense of agency, that endow them with motivation, courage and belief in their power to influence their own futures? And what if school development were to be driven by a commitment on the part of a whole-school community to creating better ways for everybody to live, work and learn together, in an environment free from limiting beliefs about fixed abilities and fixed futures?

In this book we argue that school development inspired by this alternative vision is both necessary and possible. We present the findings of our research study of one primary school which, in just a few years, moved out of special measures to become a successful, vibrant learning community (also rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted), not through the use of targets, planning, prediction and externally imposed blueprints for pedagogy but through a focus on learning (rather than simply attainment), nourished by deep belief in the learning capacity of everybody. This alternative approach, as we shall show, is no easy option. It is highly demanding of all those involved. The crucial difference is that the demands are born of the challenges that staff set themselves arising from their firmly held principles and beliefs about learning rather than driven by external accountability. The purpose of this book is to explore how these dramatic changes were achieved and what lessons can be learnt from the experiences of this one school that can support other schools in developing their own approaches.

The original *Learning without Limits* project

Some of the principles which informed developments at Wroxham had their origins in a previous study at the Faculty of Education in Cambridge. This earlier study had explored alternatives to ability-based pedagogy, drawing on the thinking and practice of individual teachers working in a variety of different contexts. The *Learning without Limits* project (Hart *et al.* 2004) was designed to learn from and give a voice to teachers motivated by a particular view of learning: learning free from the unnecessary limits imposed by ability-based practices. The study was prompted by awareness that while decades of research had demonstrated the unintended damage that can be done – to children, teachers, and curriculum – by ability labelling and other practices derived from false assumptions about IQ and fixed ability (see Appendix A for a comprehensive evidence base), there was still no credible, articulated alternative to ability-based pedagogy. It was a matter of profound concern, the research team reasoned, that these assumptions not only continued to have currency in schools, but in recent years had been given new strength and legitimacy as part of government-sponsored initiatives to raise standards and improve practice in schools. They believed that studying the work of teachers who resolutely maintained an optimistic view of human educability would enable them

to propose an alternative model and agenda for improvement, backed up by evidence.

The nine teachers who joined the research team of the original project worked with young people aged from 5 to 16 and had expertise in different curriculum areas. While their practices were distinctively individual, the research team found that they shared a radically different mindset, a different way of making sense of what happens in classrooms, based on a radically different orientation to the future that came to be called 'transformability'. Rather than accepting apparent differences in ability as the natural order of things, and differentiating their teaching accordingly, these teachers did not see the future of their students as predictable or inevitable. They worked on the assumption that there is always the potential for change: things can change for the better, sometimes even dramatically, as a result of what both teachers and learners do in the present.

For these teachers the concept of inherent ability, an inaccessible inner force responsible for learning, residing in the individual and subject to the fixed, internal limits of each individual learner, had no currency or value. In its place, the research team discerned the powerful alternative concept of learning capacity, which resides both in the individual learner and in the social collective of the classroom, and is by no means fixed and stable. This concept of learning capacity, evidenced in the various daily practices of these teachers, released the teachers from the sense of powerlessness induced by the idea of inherent ability. Furthermore, they realized that the work of transforming learning capacity does not depend on what teachers do alone, but on what both teachers *and* learners do – a joint enterprise, the exercise of co-agency. Convinced of their own (and their students') power to make a difference to future learning, they used their rich fund of knowledge about the forces – internal and external, individual and collective – that shape and limit learning capacity to make transforming choices. Working on the principle that classroom decisions must be made in the interests of all students, not just some – a principle the research team called 'the ethic of everybody' – and rooting their work in the fundamental trust in their students' powers as learners, the project teachers made good their commitment to the essential educability of their learners.

The study amassed convincing evidence that teaching for learning without limits is not a naïve fantasy, but a real possibility, in good working order, accessible to observation and analysis. The research team developed a practical, principled, pedagogical model (see Figure 1.1), arguing that elements of this model would be recognizable to other teachers who shared similar values and commitments and had themselves developed classroom practices in line with their convictions. They hoped that their work would convince more teachers that the alternative 'transformability' model is a practical and empowering way of realizing their commitment to young people's learning.

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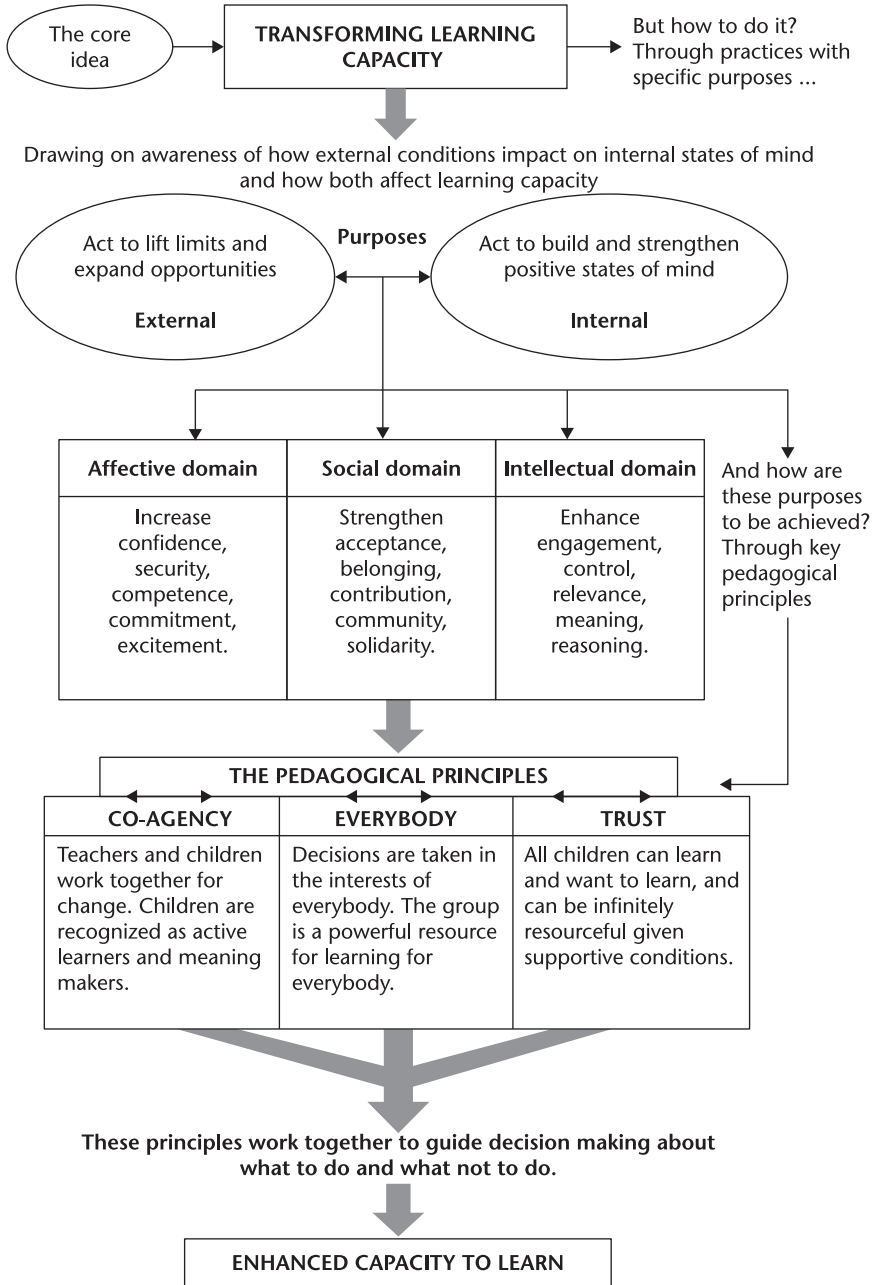


Figure 1.1 A practical, principled, pedagogical model

Source: Adapted from Hart *et al.* (2004).

However, the nine teachers in the original study were all working in different schools, in different parts of the country. The focus was inevitably limited to what teachers found themselves able to do individually, within their own classrooms, while subject to the same statutory curricular requirements, external expectations and national assessment pressures as every other teacher. These nine teachers all recognized that there was so much more that could be done to lift limits on learning and enhance the learning capacity of their students if groups of teachers, departments, whole-school staffs or even whole-school communities were to work together towards a common vision, with shared principles and purposes to guide their work of creating environments for learning free from the constraints imposed by ability labelling and ability-based practices.

The next step: *Creating Learning without Limits*

When one of the teachers who participated in the original project, Alison Peacock, took up a headship in a primary school that was designated by Ofsted as requiring 'special measures' (a failing inspection category), a wonderful opportunity presented itself to explore these wider possibilities. Alison was committed to leading staff in adopting teaching and learning practices devoted to strengthening and transforming children's learning capacity and free from all forms of ability labelling. A new research project was set up, *Creating Learning without Limits*, with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Hertfordshire local authority, to carry out a two-year in-depth study of the work of the staff of The Wroxham School in Hertfordshire. As our enquiry began we did not know what would be involved in developing and sustaining such an environment, but we hoped that through the study we would be able to build a convincing body of evidence to show that this alternative approach to school improvement could lead to the development of practices altogether more humane, equitable and life-enhancing for everybody.

This book tells the story of what we learned from the school community about how to create learning without limits. Our enquiry did not simply focus on individual teachers at the school or their teaching but also on the learning that does and must go on, individually and collectively, as the whole staff of a school work together, day by day, to create in reality their vision of an education based on inclusive, egalitarian principles, including an unshakeable bedrock belief in everybody's capacity to learn. In writing about this school we will show that it is possible to resist the pressures of performativity and the standards agenda, and for school development to be guided by such a vision. We chose to study The Wroxham School not because it is unique, or perfect, but because we know that this is a school where the staff group has become committed to and actively works towards this alternative vision; they show us both that it is

possible and demonstrate how it is possible there, for them, on their terms – not the only way undoubtedly – but one successful way. By studying their ideas, interactions and practices we can learn more about what is involved, the dilemmas and struggles as well as the joys and successes, in making it a reality.

Being in the ‘bottom set’

Alison Peacock first encountered The Wroxham School, a one form entry primary school with nursery in Potters Bar, Hertfordshire, in July 2002 as a prospective applicant for the post of headteacher. She found a school in trouble. The school had been judged by Ofsted in May 2001 to require special measures. One teacher recalls an Ofsted inspector describing a class as ‘unteachable’. SATs results in the school had declined dramatically and remained stubbornly low. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) reported that there was massive underachievement throughout the school. The experience of being in special measures since 2001 had given the school an aura of desperation and weariness. Alison recalls that, post 2001, the response of senior management and other staff, in line with their perception of HMI expectations, had been to narrow the curriculum still further, with teaching time overwhelmingly dominated by English, mathematics and science, since these were tested each year at the ages of 7 and 11.

Nearly two years later, during an inspection in December 2002, HMI judged that only minimal progress had been achieved. HMIs had repeatedly observed, and Alison also saw on her arrival, that classroom behaviour for the most part was tightly controlled and suppressed, although there were also extreme incidents of furniture being thrown and children running off site. There was little evidence of engagement with learning or effort on the part of many children. Alison noticed that the Year 6 children were part of a youth culture that derisively labelled any peer who showed interest in learning as a ‘boffin’. Many parents complained that their children were bored and unchallenged; some parents also expressed worries about bullying. Alison was not deterred, however, by what she found. On the contrary, she chose the school *because* of its circumstances. The experience of being placed in ‘special measures’ following an Ofsted inspection brought about similarly debilitating effects for the staff of a school, she thought, as the well-documented demoralization and loss of a sense of competence and capability that tend to follow from young people’s placement in a ‘bottom set’. She was inspired by the challenge of showing not only that it was possible to turn things around, but also that a different approach to school development could succeed where the ‘blame and shame’ model had failed. Reflecting on the reasons why she chose Wroxham, Alison recalled how ‘I’d probably chosen to come to Wroxham because it was in the bottom set. I hadn’t consciously recognized that’s what I’d done . . . I wanted to prove there was another way of doing things.’ Her confidence has

been shown to be well justified. Since her appointment in January 2003, the school has been inspected by HMI three times, and four times by Ofsted. Following very rapid improvement in standards of behaviour, engagement, leadership, management systems, appearance, levels of motivation, parental satisfaction and feedback from the children, the school was taken out of special measures in October 2003 and was among the 100 top performing schools in 2004–5 based on the ‘value added’ measure of progress between Key Stages 1 and 2. It was recognized by Ofsted as ‘outstanding’ in 2006 and again in 2009.

Alison’s approach to leadership

Alison’s confidence that, with support and leadership based on *Learning without Limits* principles, dramatic changes could be made at Wroxham, derived in part from her previous experience as a teaching deputy head in a nearby school. There, as a class teacher, her practice had been predicated on her conviction that each individual child must – and could – be offered an irresistible invitation to join a shared learning journey. She worked to create a learning environment where it was safe to take risks, where confidence would increase, where everybody would become caught up in the excitement of learning. All children would be given the opportunity to develop the capacity to surprise themselves and those around them.

It was at this school that Alison had participated in the *Learning without Limits* research project. Alison’s thinking and teaching feature as a case study in this publication, contributing to the development of the core idea of ‘transformability’ and the key purposes and principles that lie at the heart of teaching free from determinist beliefs about ability. As these ideas about pedagogy were being elaborated by the research team, Alison frequently asserted her belief that they applied just as much to adult learning as to children’s learning, and that the model of classroom pedagogy could not be fully effective for children unless the same principles and purposes were also being applied to support the learning of the teaching team. The purposes and principles could, Alison suggested, form the basis of an alternative approach to school improvement.

In the pedagogical model presented in *Learning without Limits*, and shown here as Figure 1.1, teachers are conceptualized as working simultaneously on two different fronts – internal and external – to enable positive change to happen. Using their understanding of what can limit learning, both in the learning environment and within the minds of young people, teachers strive to enrich and enhance learning opportunities in ways that will also impact positively on young people’s states of mind: their belief in themselves as learners, their attitudes to learning, their sense of belonging and their willingness to invest emotionally and intellectually in their learning in school. Alison believed that these same core purposes should apply to her work with staff. Everything she did from her first day needed to be directed towards building more positive

states of mind among staff as well as children. She recalled, 'As headteacher, I saw my role as someone who should seek out even the tiniest chance to foster and nurture confidence amongst the staff so that they could begin to approach school differently.' Each member of the school community should be enabled to believe in themselves as learners for whom the next irresistible challenge was always within reach. In a school such as this no one, adult or child, would be 'written off', each person would be valued as an individual whose learning would never have a ceiling set upon it. Everyone within the school community needed to believe that the future was in the making in the present, and that their every action in the here and now could lead to a new way forward.

Alison believed that the three key pedagogical principles – co-agency, trust and everybody – in the *Learning without Limits* model also had direct, practical relevance for her approach to leadership. In the classroom context, the principle of *co-agency* focuses on the necessity for change to be achieved by teachers and children working together. The principle guides teachers towards decisions that they believe will increase children's active participation and control over their learning, their positive sense of themselves as competent thinkers and learners and their ability and willingness to engage in and commit themselves to the learning opportunities provided. Alison intuitively understood that the same principle should guide her own decision making in thinking about how she would lead the school. Her decisions and actions should lead staff to feel positive, energized and in control of their own learning. The principle expressed her belief in leadership through listening, dialogue and working together, not top-down authority or external dictat.

In the classroom, the principle of *trust* implies that young people want to learn and will take up the teacher's invitations to engage with enthusiasm and commitment if they find activities relevant, purposeful and meaningful to them, and if the classroom conditions are supportive of their learning. If children refuse the invitation or appear to be inhibited in their learning, this basic position of trust means that teachers automatically re-evaluate their choices and practices in order to try to understand what might be hindering the children's engagement. Applying this principle to the leadership task, Alison trusted that staff did not need to be told what to do. She trusted that, if a sufficiently supportive environment could be created within the whole-school community, then, as active thinkers and learners in their own right, staff would take positive steps to develop their practice, without her pre-determining what these steps would be. While she felt it was important for everyone to have a sense of 'where we were heading as a school', in terms of a broad vision, the actual practices would be developed by the teachers themselves, in partnership with Alison, the children and the whole-school community.

Thirdly, the principle of *everybody* asserts, in the classroom, teachers' fundamental responsibility and commitment to acting in the interests of everybody, rather than in the interests of particular individuals, or groups of

learners. The principle also recognizes that learning has a collective as well as an individual dimension. Teachers work to build a learning community, encouraging children to support and help one another: everybody must be valued, accepted, respected, everybody must feel that they belong, everybody must be recognized as having a unique contribution to make, everybody can learn with and from everybody else. In her leadership of the school, Alison's aspiration was to create a whole-school community where all adult members would also experience a strong sense of belonging: a community where teaching colleagues would be informed and excited by educational theory and would see themselves as lifelong learners.

Alison brought these insights, convictions and principles with her to Wroxham, to the task of leading the school. They embodied both the kind of school she hoped to create and the style of leadership she believed was needed in order to create it. Her approach was based on the hypothesis that staff learning would be the key to transforming children's learning capacities, and that similar conditions would be necessary for both. However, this being her first headship, she had yet to discover how these ideas and principles would translate into the practice of leadership in the complex hustle and bustle of everyday life in school.

Creating Learning without Limits: new research questions

We set out to study developments taking place in the school, guided by Alison's vision, as the school community lived and worked together over a period of two years. Specifically, we wanted to find out what strategies and practices were found to be effective in building this alternative approach to whole-school development. How did Alison go about creating a developmental and sustainable approach to building the learning capacity of teachers and children? How did she communicate her purposes and approach to the school community? How did members of staff take on board and work with the key ideas and principles of *Learning without Limits*? How did their classroom practices evolve? How did Alison manage the apparent tension between maintaining her own not-for-sale principles and offering staff the freedom to do their own thinking and develop their own practice as they thought best? What problems and challenges did staff encounter? How did they all, including Alison, mediate and fulfil statutory requirements? How did Alison sustain courage and belief in her approach, while swimming against the tide of national policy? What did the community learn – and what could we learn from them – about how to create learning without limits?

How the research was carried out

Details of our research approach can be found in Appendix B. Briefly, data collection took place over two and a half years, and was divided into three

phases. In the first phase we explored in a relatively open-ended way what was happening in the school and what different members of the school community thought about these developments. We talked with teachers, observed lessons, recorded people's thinking about new practices and collected documentary information. The headteacher kept a reflective journal of events that she saw as significant, and also discussed her actions, strategies and developments in interview with a member of the university-based research team.

In the second phase, teachers were invited to carry out their own individual enquiries, focused on specific developments in their practice. We hoped that these individual enquiries would enable us to probe in more depth teachers' thinking, and the reasons underlying their decision-making. We encouraged teachers to follow up on current pressing questions arising from their everyday practice, rather than devising special projects which they would not ordinarily plan. We observed lessons and talked with the teachers afterwards about their purposes, the thinking that guided their actions, their evaluation of how well their purposes were being achieved and what they felt they were learning. We also talked with children to hear their perspectives on what was happening in the classroom, and with the parents of these children to find out what they thought of the changes taking place. Alison continued keeping her reflective journal and discussing issues arising in interviews.

Our intention was to work alongside the headteacher and staff group as they developed their approach together. We wanted to document for them the development of their thinking and practice as it occurred in the ordinary and everyday events in their school lives. We were very careful not to introduce ideas, opinions, or understandings of our own, or to offer advice or guidance: we wanted to elicit and probe the thinking of the staff. Our role was to offer a framework for reflection in interviews, methodological support to help them to design their individual teacher enquiries, and assistance in collecting data for these enquiries. All interview transcripts and observation field notes were shared with individual members of staff. In the third phase we formally analysed all the data, shared our preliminary analyses of each teacher's story, and also shared our draft writing and interpretations with them.

The Wroxham team during the research period

Table 1.1 outlines the Wroxham staff participating in case studies, and the year groups they were working with during the period of the research. The teachers' names are their real names and are used throughout the rest of the book. The children's names are pseudonyms.

Table 1.1 Wroxham staff participating in case studies

<i>Year group</i>	<i>Age of children</i>	<i>Class teacher</i>
Year 1	5–6 years	Cheryl
Year 2	6–7 years	Sophie
Year 3	7–8 years	Darrelle
Year 4	8–9 years	Martyn
Year 5	9–10 years	Jo
Year 6	10–11 years	Simon (deputy head)
Headteacher		Alison

Note: Teaching staff are referred to by their real names, but all the children have been given pseudonyms.

The unfolding story

In the next chapter, we draw on Alison's recollections and previous publications to explore how she approached the task of leadership when she first arrived at the school. Subsequent chapters take up our research story from that point. In Chapter 3 we explore the developments in thinking and practice of individual members of the teaching team during the research period and the common elements of practice that they felt were significant. In Chapter 4 we consider the focus of the teaching team on work to foster particular kinds of relationships with children that were fundamental to their work in school. In Chapter 5 we look in detail at the nature of the leadership task and the range of strategies employed in nurturing and sustaining the developments that were taking place. In Chapter 6 we review what we have learned from the Wroxham community about creating learning without limits. We contrast the distinctive approach to school improvement at Wroxham with the approach sponsored by the standards agenda, explore the relevance of our research for others and consider what lies ahead.

By the time the research began, Alison had already been at Wroxham for two years. In order to understand developments that took place over the next two years, we need to be aware of the foundations upon which those subsequent developments were built. We therefore turn first to the early period of Alison's headship at Wroxham and look at some of the developments in practice at that time. We consider if and how the principles outlined in this chapter were reflected in Alison's early actions and initiatives and how she began to communicate her vision to staff.