

CREATING LEARNING WITHOUT LIMITS

Mandy Swann, Alison Peacock, Susan Hart, Mary Jane Drummond

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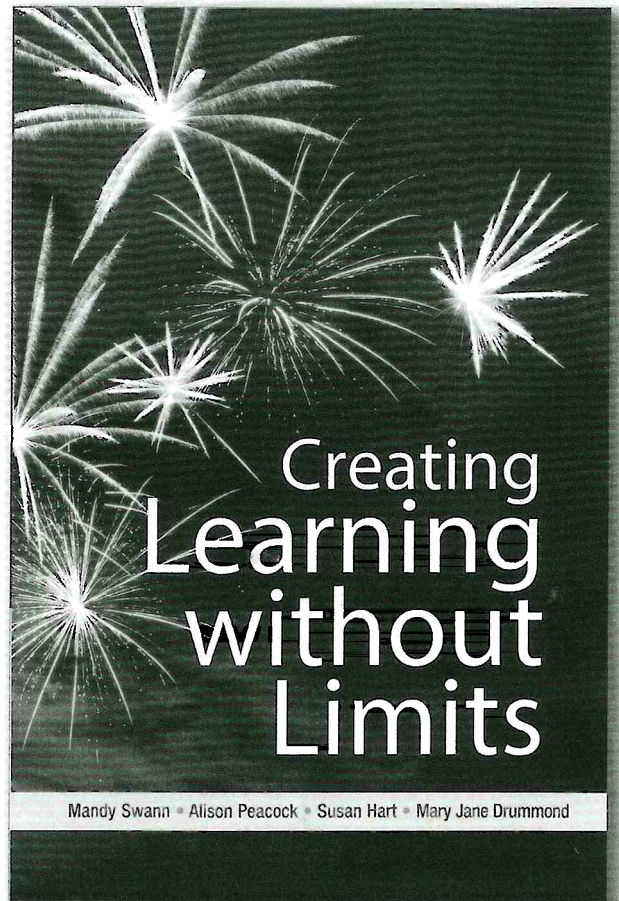
This book is about a three year study into the changes brought about by a new head teacher, Alison Peacock, when she took over Wroxham Primary School in 2002 after it had been classed as 'failing' and put into Special Measures.

This book was such a shock to the system that I couldn't just write a review. I felt that I had read about, for the first time, a serious attempt to create a truly inclusive school in the way we dream of, but barely dare hope for:

"Wroxham is not about abandoning ability grouping, and it is not about mixed-ability teaching. It is about a deeper and much more far reaching project - rejecting fixed ability thinking in all its guises, and with all its negative effects on children, teachers, curriculum and assessment. It is about replacing the fatalism of ability labels with a more hopeful, powerful and empowering view of learners and learning" (p115)

Wow!

The book describes actual practices which were very carefully thought about in order to foster an environment in which every child would be free to learn. One example which impressed me was a decision to not praise children for their compliance with adults, or 'rules', or their external achievements (i.e. *"That's a very good picture you have drawn"*), but for the process they used - how they used their own thinking and effort to learn something. This was to stop them feeling that they



had to work out how to please the teacher rather than how to evaluate themselves in relation to their own goals.

The book also describes the seven 'dispositions' which increase the capacity for learning in both children and teachers: openness; questioning; inventiveness; persistence; emotional stability; generosity; empathy, and how the teachers were supported to develop these in their individual teaching practices. The underpinning values are the opposite of those espoused in the 'Standards Agenda' and the school is open and proud of that.

I was worried when I read it that 'our' children - disabled children and children with the label of challenging behaviour - might still be exceptions in the minds of the teachers and researchers, but gradually I came to trust that they really were talking about everybody. Right near the end they finally spell it out:

"Although in our account of developments at Wroxham we have not addressed issues of ethnicity, class, gender and disability explicitly, it is our conviction that the analysis of interacting influences which lie at the heart of teachers' power to make a difference means that these issues can be taken into account in an equitable and empowering way, when the principle of transformability inspires approaches to school improvement" (p123)

The book challenged two of my prejudices, pockets of cynicism and doubt within me that inclusion will ever really happen. One was my feeling that there are not enough inspirational leaders/teachers to make inclusion happen other than in small, time limited pockets of good practice, to lead 24,000 schools in England and Wales alone, to resist the Standards Agenda and make inclusion happen for all children. This was challenged by Alison's underlying faith that her teachers were all capable of working out how to develop the dispositions identified above if she applied the principles of 'inclusion' to them as well as the children. The main point being that you cannot by pass the stage of thinking for yourself, nor should you. There was no

dependence on downloaded lesson plans at Wroxham. How teachers and children assessed their own progress and development was also revolutionised.

My second prejudice was about parents. The government are continually telling us that parents want the best for their own children and need 'choice' in order to get it. They need the information necessary to make those choices such as the National League Tables and Ofsted Reports. Would they be too afraid to support a school which was not interested in those things? The answer seemed to be the opposite:

"It was clear that one reason why they (parents) valued the Wroxham approach so highly was because their priorities for their children were not concerned with standards, achievement, and academic goals; they wanted their children to develop a thirst for learning, to feel happy about themselves, to be rounded individuals and good members of the community" (p93)

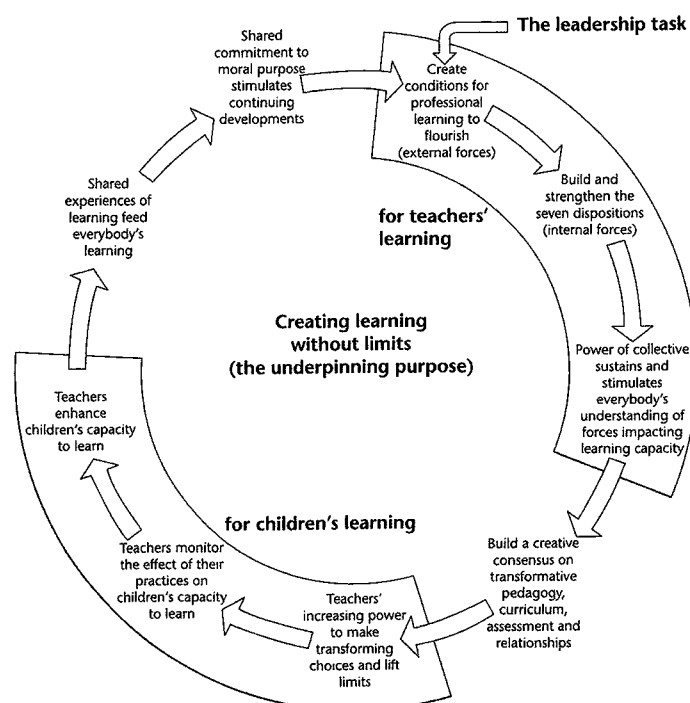
And perhaps most surprising of all, although it shouldn't be, was that whilst pursuing this different agenda, the attainment levels of the children rose as a 'by product', keeping Ofsted happy and the school being marked as 'outstanding' by 2006 and again in 2009, so there is no loss of anything, only gain, for even those who fear 'inclusion' will lead to a 'dumbing down' for all.

To sum it up, in the words of a new member of staff **"The children feel invincible, as if there is no limit to what they can achieve"**.

Even the references at the back are a mine of information about some further reading we can do if we want to learn how the transformation we want can, and is, being done. It is one of the most hopeful books I have read for a long time.

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Micheline Mason



Creating learning without limits. a model of school development (Figure 6.1)