

Swimming against the tide

Resisting the 'blame and shame' model of raising standards, one Head teacher worked with her staff to transform a failing school through a moral and radical approach to school improvement. Here the authors of *Creating Learning without Limits* describe the journey.

The approach to school improvement to which schools have been subject in recent years uses externally imposed pressures – in the form of targets, testing, league tables, performance management systems and rigorous inspection regimes – as the principal means to 'drive up standards'. The pressure created by these accountability structures filters through to everybody – children as well as teachers and school leaders – often with deeply negative consequences for the quality of education. In the name of 'improvement', the complexity of young people's learning has been reduced to a series of numbers, which tell us little more than where children stand with respect to others on the ladder of National Curriculum 'expected' levels [1]. In the name of 'improvement', the curriculum has been narrowed and teaching to the test has become widespread in order to maximise some children's performance on high-stakes tests. Teachers' professionalism has been undermined through a barrage of external initiatives that have sought, in the name of 'improvement', to standardise teaching according to centralised definitions of 'good practice'. School leaders have been coerced into spending time on tasks such as performance management and data analysis, ready for inspection, while privately convinced that such activities have little to do with the genuine improvement of teaching and learning.

But is there an alternative? Is it possible to resist the pressures of performativity and build an approach to school improvement that is not solely focused on raising standards but is life-enhancing for everybody? A primary school in Hertfordshire has shown not just that it is possible but also why it is *imperative* to do so. The Wroxham School in Hertfordshire had been in special measures for two years when Alison Peacock was appointed to the headship in 2003. Despite intensive input from local authority advisors, successive inspection reports had found only minimal progress. The experience had created a climate of desperation and weariness. Alison was not intimidated by these challenges; she took up the post with a clear sense of moral purpose – an unswerving commitment to educating all children, in a school environment where everybody's learning could flourish. She was determined to show not only that it was possible to turn things around but that a radically different approach to school improvement could succeed where the 'blame and shame' model had failed. She worked collaboratively with researchers from the University of Cambridge over two years (2005-7) to document and analyse what was distinctively different about the approach to school improvement being created there. Their findings are published in *Creating Learning without Limits*^a and form the basis for this article.



An alternative improvement agenda

A few years before Alison took up her new post, she was one of nine teachers whose classroom practice was studied as part of the first *Learning without Limits* project^b. The study was prompted by concern that discredited ideas of IQ and fixed ability, once taken for granted as the main reason for differences in attainment, were being given new strength and legitimacy as part of government-sponsored initiatives to raise standards and improve practice. Yet fixed ability thinking – labelling children, for example, as being 'more able', 'gifted', 'average', 'less able' – is the enemy of real improvement. It disempowers both teachers and children because it places the principal determinant of learning – so-called 'ability' – beyond anybody's control. The aim of the study was to articulate alternatives to ability-based pedagogy as the essential first step in promoting a more equitable and empowering improvement agenda: building learning environments in which every child's learning can flourish, free from the damaging effects of ability labelling.

It was her awareness of the enormous scope for enhancing learning that could

be opened up by pursuing this alternative improvement agenda that gave Alison confidence that her alternative approach could succeed where previous efforts had failed. School improvement at Wroxham would and should be driven not by external pressure but by a clear moral purpose: lifting the limits created by fixed ability thinking and enhancing learning opportunities for *all* children. But the challenge for leadership was a complex one. Alison knew all too well that improvement of this kind could not come about through imposition; it required everybody's active participation.

Leadership principles

The earlier project identified three key pedagogical principles that necessarily underpin classroom approaches to teaching without ability labelling^b. Alison maintained that they should also be applied to her leadership of staff; indeed it became evident that fostering the learning of the whole staff team was the key to fostering every child's learning. The first principle – *co-agency* – requires working in partnership, recognising other people as powerful thinkers and meaning-makers in their own right, encouraging them to take initiatives and learn for themselves as full and active members of the community. The second principle – *everybody* – places equal value on the participation and contribution of every member of the school community. Everybody is important; everybody must have a voice; everybody's interests must be taken into account when

decisions are made. The third principle – *trust* – asserts an unshakeable belief in everybody's capacity to grow and learn given supportive conditions.

Though determined to base her leadership around these principles, Alison was well aware that she was swimming against a powerful tide. The structures associated with the standards model of improvement are deeply incompatible with these three principles, and indeed work actively against them. While it took courage to pursue her alternative path, Alison established that, in doing so, she would have the support from within the local authority, the governing body and the senior leadership team.



Laying foundations

Guided by these principles, Alison did not directly confront ideas about ability in the early days of her headship, or attempt to persuade people, through argument and evidence, about the damage that ability-focused practices can do (for a fuller analysis, see Hart et al 2004 and <http://learningwithoutlimits.educ.cam.ac.uk/>). Rather, she trusted that with particular kinds of experiences and opportunities people would come, in their own time, to their own understandings of why ability labelling and ability-based pedagogy were fundamentally incompatible with their deep-rooted professional commitment to doing their very best for children, and re-shape their practices accordingly. Slowly and gradually, she found ways of embedding the three principles in a variety of structures and strategies that laid the foundations for new ways of thinking about learners, for new approaches to curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and for methods of ensuring accountability that were consistent with her vision for the school.

Foundations were laid, for example, for the development of whole-school democracy through the introduction of weekly circle group meetings, involving all staff and all children in mixed age groups. Topics for discussion soon moved beyond playtime issues; it became commonplace for discussions about teaching and learning

to appear on the agenda. The circle meetings made real the idea that everybody should have a voice and actively contribute to decisions that would affect their lives in school. They involved a radical shift in power, and a change in relationships as Year 6 children took on responsibility for making notes of the discussion and decisions in each meeting, and for sharing important points across the different circle groups. Once experienced in this role, Year 6 teams took over leadership of the circle meetings, showing themselves capable of rising to the challenge of planning and facilitating the circle meetings and managing behaviour respectfully and skilfully within the group.

Foundations were also laid for the development of new approaches to the monitoring of children's progress through the establishment, in Years 5 and 6, of learning review meetings. The meetings were held twice a year, attended by individual children, their parents, their class teacher and the head teacher. In contrast with traditional parents' evenings, where the discussion about children's progress typically takes place between adults, with only limited, if any, participation by the child, the emphasis in these meetings was on listening and responding to the child's point of view. The aim was to build a shared understanding of each child's progress and aspirations for the future from the child's perspective, to look at learning in the round, as a personal living experience, rather than focus on targets achieved or levels reached. The meetings also provided an opportunity for staff to see how children capably responded when they had the chance to play an active role and exercise control over the process of learning review.

In parallel with the learning review meetings, there was a fundamental shift in the management of school-wide monitoring and accountability, moving towards a more collaborative approach. Faculty teams were set up, meeting after school three times a term, each taking responsibility for the quality of learning and teaching in a major area of the curriculum. The advantage of this approach was that responsibility was shared among staff; everybody could participate in and contribute to curriculum planning, and in the process develop their own expertise in a cluster of related aspects of primary education. 'Everybody' meant just that. A unique feature of the faculty teams at Wroxham was that teaching assistants and governors were included as full and equal members. The faculty teams provided rich opportunities for learning and sharing: within the teams, members could learn from each other, challenge one another, identify questions to investigate, share their discoveries and put their understanding to good use.

Foundations for the growth of a culture of continuous professional learning were also laid through the sustained support for further professional study across the whole teaching team. Just as it was considered normal, indeed essential, for teaching assistants to be included in the faculty teams, so the professional development of teaching assistants was accorded equal priority with that of the rest of the teaching staff. Four teaching assistants, for example, who embarked on foundation degrees in education, were released from the school for one day a week on full pay to attend their courses. When they were under pressure to complete assignments, they were given study leave, again on full pay. This generous provision was fully supported by the governing body, who were convinced that this kind of sustained further study would benefit the whole school community.

Alongside these various developments, changes in provision and planning to bring the curriculum to life were gradually taking place. Visiting sculptors, writers, dancers and musicians were invited to work with children and staff, to challenge and engage them, to enliven their learning. Staff were encouraged to prioritise open-ended, first-hand opportunities for learning that children would find purposeful, meaningful and rewarding. In response, the children demonstrated the deep, sustained engagement in learning that can happen when children take more control; they started to surprise their teachers with their enthusiasm, competence, energy and expertise.



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Building a safe learning community

In conjunction with these new strategies and initiatives, a 'stable environment' was being created to enable staff to commit their full attention and energy to learning – their own and the children's. Part of this was ensuring that everybody felt psychologically safe and supported. A mentoring system was set up to ensure that all members of staff, including cleaning, kitchen and office staff, had someone to talk to, in confidence, about issues arising in their work. The mentoring system helped to strengthen and sustain feelings of empathy, mutual support and collective responsibility across the staff team as a whole.

Similar care was given to ensuring that the leadership team could also focus their energies and expertise on supporting learning. Alison was very clear about her priorities in the use of her time; she resisted pressures to spend time on administrative activities, such as analysing performance data, which she judged to be of limited value in promoting learning. She also made sure that she herself had support; as well as having her own school-based mentor, her confidence, courage and learning were sustained through regular contact with the wider community of educators, beyond the school.



Enabling professional learning

With these essential supports in place, the central task of leadership [2] was to encourage dialogue about children's learning across the whole teaching team. Alison argued that a passionate interest in children's learning was something that everyone could share: she frequently spent time in every classroom, in order to be able to engage in fruitful discussion about learning with colleagues, not to give feedback on their performance or identify areas for improvement. Being in the classroom meant that conversations about children's learning were rooted in shared experiences. These conversations helped to develop ways of talking about children's learning without reference to notions of ability or levels of attainment, to 'special needs' or deficits, focusing instead on children's present powers as learners, and on how these could be further strengthened and extended.

Maximising opportunities for staff to learn with and from one another was an equally important leadership priority. Staff meetings were always used to talk about learning, and care was taken not to use valuable time together on matters that could be dealt with in other ways. In a break with tradition, and as a result of careful organisation and timetabling, *all* teaching teams (including, of course, teaching assistants and student teachers) were released for half a day, once a week, to review children's learning and together plan activities for the following week. When faculty

teams or staff groups planned unusual, exciting activities or events, they invited other staff in to observe; the observations were followed through in discussion times together, organised for the purpose.

Towards a shared vision

With the principles of co-agency, trust and everybody embedded in these various developments, all members of the teaching teams had space and time to do their own learning and to develop their classroom practices in their own way. A new synergy between children's learning and teachers' learning emerged as people tried out new things, noticed how the children responded, reflected on what to do next, adjusted their plans, saw the children becoming more enthusiastic, committed learners and expanded their sense of what was possible for all children. In the process staff were not just building trust in all children's capacity to learn, but were also gaining confidence in their own powers to recognise and lift limits on learning, to create conditions that enable *all* children to become more powerful and engaged learners through their own choices and actions.

This sense of professional power was nurtured and strengthened by the support offered by the leadership team. Analysis of their approaches to support revealed that strategies were chosen for their capacity to cultivate, throughout the staff group, some key dispositions: *openness* to new ideas and possibilities, to the complexity and uniqueness of each child without pre-judgements about what any child might achieve; *questioning* – constantly searching for better ways of doing things, for engaging learners' powers more fully; *inventiveness* to imagine and try out new practices; *persistence* in the face of challenges; *stability* that enables risk-taking, while holding firm to core values and principles; *generosity* in appreciating difference and diversity, shown in acceptance of everybody in the school community; and *empathy* in listening to others and trying to see the world through their eyes.

The staff team also played an important part in fostering these dispositions, by recognising and encouraging these ways of being and learning in one another. While all members of staff remained in control of their own learning, a strong measure of agreement began to emerge about where to focus their efforts. There was a shared recognition that the quality and intensity of children's engagement increased when they were offered more choice and control over their learning; when children chose their own challenges rather than being grouped by current attainments or allocated differentiated tasks; when children felt listened to and had the chance to contribute to planning classroom activities; when children chose their own learning partners and had the opportunity to learn collaboratively; when children were involved in assessing their own learning and when they were offered authentic, open-ended, first-hand experiences that were relevant and purposeful.

There was an unmistakable parallel between the core principles underlying Alison's approach to leadership – co-agency, trust and everybody – and the pedagogical principles underlying these developments in classroom practice. These shared understandings provided clear evidence that staff were internalising the principles and using them in decision-making, recognising their value for children's learning as well as for their own. The emerging consensus also meant that collaboration within the staff group was especially productive, as people shared experiences and ideas, while always being free to develop their practices in their own ways.

It was through participation in this individual and collective learning, over an extended period of time, that the teaching team gradually came to embrace a shared vision of the kind of school that they were committed to and actively working to create. Although all staff agreed that they had not been put under pressure to abandon ability-grouping, by the end of the research period everyone expressed strongly negative views about it. People insisted that they would never go back to it now that they had come to recognise its impact on children and had seen how children responded when not labelled or grouped in this way.

The story of Wroxham, of course, is about much more than a move away from ability grouping. It is about a deeper and more far reaching moral project: replacing



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the fatalism of ability labels with a more hopeful, equitable and empowering view of learners and learning, and, crucially, enacting these hopes and aspirations in everyday practice. For this to become a project genuinely shared by the teaching staff, they needed opportunities to work out for themselves how it connected up with their own deeply-felt commitment to doing their very best for children. Once the connection was made, it provided an intrinsic impetus to improve, a self-sustaining sense of purpose. In these conditions, in this school-wide culture of learning, all staff members could play a part, individually and collectively, in building the kind of school to which they were now all fully committed.

There is another way

For school leaders who share similar values to those underpinning development at Wroxham, this story is one of hope; it shows that it *is* worth striving for radical alternatives to the current ubiquitous standards agenda. The alternative approach being developed at Wroxham is no easy option; it is highly demanding of all involved. The crucial difference is that the demands are born of the challenges that staff set themselves, arising from firmly held principles and beliefs about learning, rather than

being driven by external accountability.

Giving absolute priority to creating conditions that support powerful professional learning is a key leadership task, because there is no short cut to the learning that makes possible deep and lasting change. The Wroxham story does not – and cannot – offer a blueprint for the development of practices in other schools. The specific developments in classroom practice that we have described, and the structures and strategies put in place to foster the growth of a school-wide culture of learning, cannot simply be transferred to



other school contexts. In every school, teaching teams must do their own thinking and learning, searching out ways forward for themselves and their children, based on their own understandings, their values, their shared moral commitment to the educability of everybody.

Supporting professional learning is the central leadership priority because the task of building a safe, equitable and enabling learning environment for all children cannot be accomplished in a few months or a few years. It requires sustained, high quality professional learning, of the distinctive kind made possible by the dispositions we describe above. The Wroxham teachers were – and are – learning how to see into the ‘why?’ of things, learning how to root every choice, every decision, in the moral imperative. They are learning to shape a pedagogy that is not based on skills, techniques or ready-made lesson plans, but is underpinned by the values of inclusion, social justice and the principle of human educability.

The story of Wroxham shows convincingly that the pedagogical principles of co-agency, everybody and trust are powerful and effective when applied to supporting the learning of staff. While these principles *are* transferable to other school contexts, the non-hierarchical relationships between staff that they entail are incompatible with, and undermined by, practices such as the grading of teachers and observation of classroom practice by the leadership team for performance management purposes. The Wroxham story shows that it is possible to set up systems for ensuring quality and accountability that are consistent with – indeed actively promote – these principles

Footnotes

[1] It is worth noting that the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review argued that the way in which 'levels' are currently used 'may actually inhibit the overall performance of our system and undermine learning.' (DfE 2011 p. 44)^c

[2] For a full analysis of leadership strategies linked to core principles of co-agency, trust and everybody, see chapters five and six of *Creating Learning without Limits*.

rather than working against them. Furthermore, these systems are designed in ways that provide rich opportunities for professional learning for the whole school community.

Finally, the story of Wroxham embodies an important message about the power of collective action: showing how the leadership of the head teacher and the whole school community work together to increase the power that individual teachers have to do things differently. The school-wide culture of learning helps to nurture and sustain each individual. It cultivates shared energy and hope within the team, providing support and inspiration for each individual as they re-align their own values and reshape their practices with reference to the very big transformative idea about human educability at the heart of school development.

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For further information about The Wroxham School and The Wroxham Transformative Learning Alliance visit:

The photos used do not depict staff or children of The Wroxham School.

**www.wroxham.herts.sch.uk
www.wroxhamtla.org.uk**

References

- a. Swann M, Peacock A, Hart S & Drummond MJ (2012) *Creating Learning without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- b. Hart S, Dixon A, Drummond MJ & McIntyre D (2004) *Learning without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- c. DfE (2011) *The Framework for the National Curriculum. A Report by the Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review*. London: DfE.

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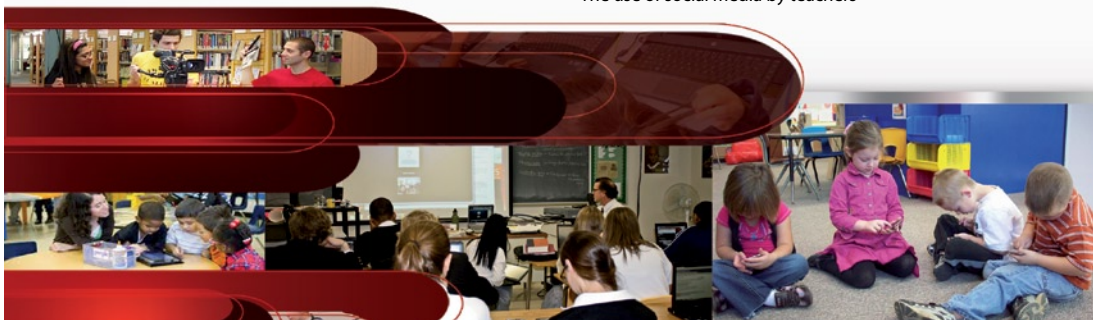
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