

Out-of-the-box learning

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A new book documents how staff at a primary school built on a previous study by Cambridge researchers to create an inclusive learning environment - driven by a shared belief in teachers' power to enhance every child's capacity to learn.

For many in education, pressures put on [teachers](#) to meet centralised outcomes have compounded the long-established culture of 'ability labelling' in the UK education system, in which children are categorised as 'bright', 'average' or 'less able', with expectations set on that basis.

In ability-based classrooms, teachers make assumptions about future attainment and educate as if every child's potential is predictable, which can lead to damaging notions of 'fixed ability', since children often respond to predictions by achieving only what's expected of them.

Believing that ability-based practices in schools, around which debate has raged for decades, set limits on teachers' capacity to educate all children, a team of researchers based at the Faculty of Education joined forces with a carefully selected group of teachers who had rejected ability labelling in their classrooms in order to explore and develop a viable alternative.

This first study, published in 2004, outlined a number of key principles for a different model of education, based on the idea of 'transformability' – that all children (not just some) can become more powerful and committed learners given the right conditions and opportunities. This is in direct contrast to what the researchers see as the 'fatalism' inherent in ability labelling, which they argue assumes knowable limits to each child's learning.

When one of the teachers involved in this study, Alison Peacock, was appointed to the headship of Wroxham primary school in Hertfordshire in 2003, she decided to set the idea of transformability at the heart of whole-school development, working alongside the Cambridge researchers to document the process. The school went from Ofsted's 'special measures' to being ranked as 'outstanding' three years later.

The researchers and the head teacher present their findings in *Creating Learning without Limits*, published last month by Open University Press. The book describes the remarkable journey taken by the Wroxham staff group, both their struggles and their triumphs, and discusses how other schools might embrace a similar approach.

The book explores what becomes possible when a whole school staff, acting together, commit themselves to creating an environment free from ability labelling. Alison Peacock encouraged her team to focus on the children's learning as a way into developing and strengthening their teaching and worked with them to put in place new structures – for

example, mixed-age circle group meetings, learning review days, faculty teams – that would lay foundations for a new way of working together. The research team documented the leadership strategies used to support the development of teachers’ thinking and practice and to build a school wide culture of learning.

Alongside these structures, Wroxham staff increased opportunities for children to participate in ‘open-ended’ curriculum experiences, where lesson outcomes cannot be predicted, because they invite children to explore, inquire and experiment for themselves. One of the teachers, Jo Turner, gives an example from a Year 5 maths lesson:

“I gave the children sets of dominoes and a series of activities to choose from that encourage them to investigate patterns, test ideas and explore combinations of numbers. The activities included arranging touching dominoes to make specific numbers using addition and subtraction; making small chains of dominoes where touching numbers are alternately odd and even; and creating magic squares where the lines of dominoes all add up to the same number.”

“Children could choose their own starting points and create their own challenges as their confidence and understanding grew.”

Mandy Swann, lead researcher and a lecturer at the Faculty of Education, explains that, when children are engaged in purposeful, challenging open-ended activities such as these, it is unnecessary – and impossible – to predict what individuals will take from them. “The Wroxham teachers trust in every child’s capacity to learn; they trust that the exploration and collaborative working that they build into these open-ended experiences will result in worthwhile learning for everybody.”

The authors believe that the book – described by the University of London’s Professor Michael Fielding as “likely to become one of the

most important educational books of the decade” – offers a genuine alternative to the ‘standards agenda’ with its reliance on ability-based teaching.

“To believe in fixed ability is to believe in fixed futures and the limited power of teachers,” says Swann. “Instead of [children](#) being constantly compared, ranked and fettered by labels, the rich variety and complexity of each child’s learning should be at the centre of education in this country.”

She adds, “Our research shows that a school can develop into a flourishing and successful learning community without the apparatus that government has put on schools – the targets, objectives and external pressures. A school where, as at Wroxham, teachers share a commitment to learning without limits and have a sense of their own collective power to make it happen is, almost by definition, a school that is learning, improving, developing.”

Provided by University of Cambridge

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