

Perspectives on 'Choice and Challenge' in primary schools

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Abstract

This article discusses 'Choice and Challenge' as a tool for school improvement and as a 'practicable pedagogy' that attempts to embody the principles of 'learning without limits', rejecting ability grouping and labelling. As considered here, 'Choice and Challenge' emerges specifically from practice at the Wroxham School, led by Alison Peacock, which is the subject of the books *Creating Learning Without Limits* and *Assessment for Learning Without Limits*. The approach involves teachers providing children with a range of option set at different levels of 'challenge' and allowing them to work through the activities themselves, in dialogue with teachers and peers. It aims to motivate children in more enabling ways than grades and ranking, facilitating children's own reflection on and awareness of themselves as learners in a collaborative and non-competitive environment. It can be seen as inducing change by giving educators a 'hook' that delivers positive classroom experiences and thereby encourages openness to the broader philosophy and values on which it rests. The small-scale research project reported on here investigated the implementation of the approach in six primary schools around England. It aims to illuminate some of the issues encountered in doing so, thus stimulating reflection by those wishing to adopt similar approaches to improve schools and enhance social justice.

Keywords: ability grouping; primary; challenge curriculum; assessment; action research

Introduction: alternatives to 'fixed ability thinking' in primary practice

In the concluding chapter of their book *Learning Without Limits*, Hart, Dixon, Drummond and McIntyre (2004). reiterate their conviction that the concept of fixed ability and the practices (such as ability grouping) associated with it are incompatible with social justice. In doing so, they draw on extensive research documenting the deleterious effects of 'fixed ability thinking' on teachers' and students' learning, identities, relationships and outcomes (to their own references, we might now add among others Boaler, 2005, 2009; Boylan & Povey, 2014; Hallam, Ireson, & Davies, 2004; Hallam, Ireson, Lister, Chaudhury, & Davies, 2003; Ireson, Hallam, & Hurley, 2005; Marks, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Stobart, 2008; Wiliam & Bartholomew, 2004). Hart et al. also argue that an alternative agenda for school improvement can be developed from the values and understandings that lead to a rejection of ability labelling, acknowledging that they need to articulate how these 'translate into a coherent, principled and practicable pedagogy' (p.

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244). They adduce the concept of ‘transformable learning capacity’ as an alternative ‘template’ emerging from the various case studies they analyse in the book.

This article discusses ‘Choice and Challenge’ as a ‘practicable pedagogy’ drawing on the ‘transformability’ template and as a tool for school improvement. As considered here, it emerges specifically from practice at the Wroxham School, a school which is the subject of a 2012 study (Swann, Peacock, Hart, & Drummond, 2012) and now of a forthcoming volume (Peacock, 2016). Alison Peacock, head teacher at Wroxham School, was part of Hart et al.’s earlier research and has been committed to ‘learning without limits’, refusing judgements about ability or determinist beliefs about potential as fixed and finite, throughout her teaching career. Her school now has considerable experience of implementing ‘Choice and Challenge’ within its own classrooms and offers training to other schools and teachers in both the approach and its principles. Ideally or in theory, ‘Choice and Challenge’ involves teachers providing children with a range of option set at different levels of ‘challenge’ and allowing them to work through the activities themselves, in dialogue with teachers and peers. It aims to motivate children in more enabling ways than grades and ranking, facilitating children’s own reflection on and awareness of themselves as learners in a collaborative and non-competitive environment. It can be seen as inducing change by giving educators a ‘hook’ that delivers positive classroom experiences and thereby encourages openness to the broader philosophy and values on which it rests.

This article reports on a research project into implementation of ‘Choice and Challenge’ in six primary schools. It was funded by the Department for Education as part of an inquiry into alternatives to national curriculum levels (see Lilly, Peacock, Shoveller, & Struthers, 2014). These levels, which were abolished in September 2014, were controversial in themselves, not least for the ways they became internalised by children and could be interpreted as judgements of present and future potential (Bibby, 2009; Grant, 2009). Alison Peacock (2014) herself has argued that they could be a substitute for and even an obstacle to deeper conversations with children about learning. Their abolition appeared to open a window of opportunity for alternative pedagogical practices, rejecting ability labels, to emerge.

The research project discussed here was small scale. On one hand, it involved a team consisting of a researcher (the author) and four curriculum specialists from the University of Brighton (Nancy Barclay, Chloe Berrisford, Rachel Marks and Sandra Williams). Six primary schools were recruited from around the country. All the schools involved had attended Wroxham’s *Creating Learning Without Limits* conferences and events prior to joining the project, so they had some familiarity with the approach and sufficient interest in it to engage in the research. They included schools in rural, urban, suburban and small town settings and ranged in size from less than one-form entry to two-form entry. One was an infants or lower school catering for children from 4 to 7; two were academies (i.e. state funded but independent from local government control and oversight); one of these was part of a chain running schools around the country and both were part of ‘all-through’ academy trusts that covered education from 4 to 16. All have been anonymised and given pseudonyms in this article: (Charles) Babbage, (Stephen) Hawking, Leonardo (da Vinci), (Anna) Mullikin, (Ada Isabel) Maddison and (Flora) Philip. One school (Babbage) had to drop out of the research at a relatively late stage due to pressures of imminent OFSTED inspections.

The head teacher and a key staff member from each school came together at a launch event at Wroxham School on 31 March 2014. Here, they met members of university team. Subsequently, I visited each school once, spending as much of the day there as I could, observing lessons, being given child-led tours and talking to staff and children (sometimes only one key teacher but sometimes others too). I wrote up my impressions as first person narrative accounts aiming to ‘reflect back’ (Ellsworth, 1997) what schools were doing, which were shared with schools and the research team. My expertise lies less in curriculum specifics, than in theoretically informed

research approaches, ‘student voice’ projects and ethnographic and creative methods for understanding school and child or youth cultures (see, for example, Bragg, 2007a, 2007b; Bragg & Manchester, 2011). While I am convinced of the value and importance of rejecting fixed ability thinking, the visits aimed in part to get a sense of what was happening in practice in the schools, being alert to disconfirming evidence rather than assuming that the ideal version of ‘Choice and Challenge’ described above was (capable of) being implemented in any simple or direct way. The visits also aimed to access children’s perspectives, based on a commitment to the value of their interpretation and a view of children as active agents and ‘beings’ (James & Prout, 1997) engaged in co-creating school cultures. I talked to them out of earshot of the teacher as far as possible, asking questions that were open ended and relatively neutral, such as ‘tell me about your school/your maths lesson’. Where possible, I specifically sought out children who were not obviously ‘high achieving’, on the grounds that this would shed light on the social justice implications of practices. Meanwhile, I gathered examples of the kinds of challenges that were being set by schools, on which my university colleagues were better placed to offer informed feedback. The dialogues that ensued helped to illuminate my implicit assumptions or biases and stimulated further thinking, but the accounts here remain rooted in my own commitments and perspectives. Small-scale research of the kind presented here may not provide systematic evidence about the success or otherwise of any intervention, but instead be of use in illuminating issues and stimulating reflection on how to develop alternative approaches that enhance social justice and contribute to school improvement, and about the pitfalls that might derail the best intentions of those doing so.

School and head teacher perspectives on ‘Choice and Challenge’

Motivations for adopting a ‘challenge’ curriculum

The accounts given by our research participants often highlighted the problematic effects of ability grouping practices. In two-form-entry Hawking, only the year before our study, all classes had previously been arranged on ability ‘tables’; children could only move ‘up’ a table if another child moved ‘down’. The change began almost by accident with a teacher whose Year 5 (aged 9–10) class contained children who had previously been in different classes. She allowed them to choose their seats while they were getting to know each other and faced protests when she tried to revert to the usual system. She reported that one child told her ‘it’s not fair, we’ve been on the orange table all our lives!’

The head suggested to the teacher that she try the Kagan (2009) model of cooperative learning that values different kinds of talk – with ‘talk’ partners and ‘face’ partners and so on, on mixed ability tables. She became an active champion of this approach, describing how she had visited a sceptical colleague’s classroom and physically helped her move the furniture around; eventually, the teacher thanked her and acknowledged how well it had worked. In the space of one academic year, rigid ability grouping was rapidly supplanted by more flexible systems, throughout the school.

Hawking’s head argued that this experience suggested that there was a ‘thirst’ for change, for ‘mov[ing] away from how it was’. Both heads and teachers cited discomfiture at ability grouping or labelling as a motivating factor in their attempts to introduce change:

It’s not been a case of dragging people along the journey, people have wanted to go on the journey, they have been taking things on board, they have developed a reflective ethos, that has then transferred to the children. (Mullikin head)

The old ways never sat right with me, this is a way to break out from this. (Babbage teacher)

For me it's a fundamental belief that everyone deserves to be acknowledged for something, education should find that for everybody. It doesn't sit easy with me, the notion of levels, I know too many people who have missed out on things in life because of that . . . We all deserve that opportunity. (Leonardo head)

For the schools in our study, adopting Choice and Challenge approaches was seen as part of school improvement strategies, no longer 'putting a ceiling on children' (Philip head):

Choice and Challenge allows for acceleration . . . it can help children to believe – being at a different stage is just where they are, they can get better. (Maddison head)

At the same time, they felt it allowed them to define improvement on their own terms and according to their own values:

The excitement of working with teachers [with] whom we are having genuine conversations about learning, that we aren't stuck in the national conversation, it makes it interesting. (Babbage teacher)

In some cases, the discourse of the child as 'expert' was mobilised to validate the challenge curriculum:

Children are the experts on their own learning, if we can empower them to explain where they are with their achievement, you can remove that barrier to that achievement and then they can make more rapid progress. (Maddison head)

Introducing change

An issue that emerged was how to encourage new approaches. Leonardo's head described promoting change without overt and top-down direction, by her making time to talk in weekly assemblies about the learning she had witnessed ('I spied . . .') around the school. She recognised the need to be flexible:

When I started here we were very worksheet-driven, and followed schemes. I tried to give the resources to plan open-ended activities and records, [but] staff found it tricky, said they lost their sense of how the children were doing. So we had to go back to a middle ground between the two approaches.

Hawking's head noted, 'I drop in that "I hate the word ability" but staff haven't quite grasped that yet'. He went on to explain how he had embedded change socio-materially – for instance, in the structure of the forms teachers were given to plan lessons – rather than through direct instruction:

I haven't tackled it head on, just rolled on . . . Our planning formats for next year have different choices on the form, to direct people. There's been a massive change through the back door . . . it has just spread throughout all of the staff, and people have seen that it actually works.

Schools found there were challenges in moving away from ability labelling. Some of these related to parents' responses. Leonardo's head noted that

I've had a parent come in to complain that their child is sitting next to another that they say is 'lower ability' . . . Our parents do like the familiarity of something traditional, that they recognise. They are quite happy to talk about 'my table', that 'my child' is sitting on, they are not quite so happy when

suddenly we don't have sets, which we used to have for maths and English, and quite a few parents remain to be convinced that there is any sense in what I am trying to tell them.

She argued that 'you have to show parents they are getting as good outcomes'. Her school did this by inviting parents in to see children's work and what they were learning, finding that parents were impressed as children began to use the school's 'language of learning'. They also hosted well-received Open Mornings for parents to see lessons. The school was planning to introduce more assemblies at the ends of projects, which parents could attend and then look at children's work in classrooms.

Some heads tried to introduce culture change gradually, for instance, using newsletters or staff meetings to 'talk about the exciting learning that's happening, being careful about what I pick out, so that it's about what you're about as a school' (Philip head), asking staff to 'nominate themselves to talk about great learning or a child you saw. It's just building on that conversation really' (Hawking head). The head of Philip tried to 'change staff mindset' through, for instance, putting a quote on agendas such as 'the bigger your challenges the bigger your opportunity for growth'. She commented that 'the biggest thing is changing teachers' perceptions, challenging the language of, "you are clever," "you did that quickly"'.

In addition, heads faced teacher concerns that 'sometimes doing things differently is confused with doing more work' (Leonardo head), which Babbage's head confronted by explicitly asking teachers to identify non-required but time-consuming elements of their job. Several heads commented that teachers were unclear about how much 'freedom' they had to experiment and change their practice:

I have encountered teachers saying am I allowed to do that? Is that the result of the last 20 years of top-down policy? There are all these myths around this, we need to break them. (Mullikin head)

Alison Peacock advocated a less public approach where a culture of trust had not yet developed:

You need to avoid treating your staff in the same way as you treat a class ie saying 'you are the top star, shame I can't say much about you!' But you can do it one on one, 'tell me more about that' . . . You don't have to be handing out metaphorical stickers, just noticing. Collective noticing starts to spread around, to go a bit viral. I never had a staff meeting where I said 'I don't want you to group by ability', not once. But things started to shift and that becomes very powerful as people start to see things that are working. And if you can begin to build up the trust and things feel more exciting you are more likely to have a go . . . The public forum, if you are not ready for it, could have a negative effect.

School cultures and their relation to Choice and Challenge

In Mullikin school, the head was keen to introduce change, noting that 'there just seems something wrong about being on a low ability table in Year 1 and being on the same table in Year 6'. However, it appeared that the overall culture involved 'fixed ability thinking' and practices. The teacher explained that her Year 4 (aged 8–9) class was organised such that in literacy, children 'sit next to someone of the same ability, but the table [with about six children on] is *mixed*, two *higher*, *middle*, *lower*. In maths, it is ability grouping – we don't tell them but of course they know' (my emphasis). The head and the teacher's questions about 'Choice and Challenge' then centred on whether children of different 'abilities' would choose the 'appropriate' level of challenge and whether sitting on a 'mixed ability table' or what was referred to (revealingly) as a 'fixed ability table' would affect their choices:

- Head: So someone in the *bottom of the highest* [ability group] – might they feel more relaxed about choosing? It's the *borderline* that will be most interesting in each case.
- Teacher: Chloe is interesting, she is *middle* ability, she chose [Challenge] 4, the hardest, she likes to keep up with *the higher children* . . . [parents] might think their child has *moved down* if they go home and say they are sitting next to so and so . . . [but] we will tell children, we are *mixing you up* like we do for literacy, they will see it's everyone and not just them. (Author's emphasis).

In Mullikin's case, judgements about ability appeared pervasive, and new practices were seen primarily as a way of 'mixing' children up in marginally different ways, while reassuring both children and parents that this was not shameful. This raised a question about the overall school culture in which 'Choice and Challenge' was introduced. Mullikin emphasised competition between different 'houses' within the school and had separate playgrounds for different year groups, features that may have reinforced other social divisions based on ability groupings.

In other cases, a commitment to Choice and Challenge approaches was accompanied by other measures promoting more inclusive and egalitarian cultures. Maddison school went furthest towards adopting elements of Wroxham School's other democratising practices such as 'circle group time' as described in Swann et al. (2012). These are mixed age groups involving the whole school including teachers, led by Year 6 School Councillors and Year 5s (ages 10–11 and 9–10, respectively), who chair and take minutes. All Year 6 children at Maddison were automatically part of the School Council; the head was emphatic that there should be no 'popularity contest' involved but that 'all children should have the opportunity to experience being on the School Council'. Part of the circle groups' agenda involved students discussing aspects of their learning, what helped them learn and so on, yielding information that teachers could reflect on and build their future teaching around. I noted that children had a clear sense of agency in relation to their school, identifying improvements to the environment which they saw as having brought about themselves.

'Choice and Challenge' in practice

The challenge of choices

Although Choice and Challenge represents a philosophy or outlook on learning as much as a specific practice, for most schools in our research, it was generally associated with maths. The teacher would present students with tasks described as being at different levels of challenge and let students select those with which they felt confident:

I leave children to choose their own level of challenge, that's working really well and it's good for their self-esteem 'I did the trickiest challenge today miss', and they are ready to celebrate their successes and their risk taking. I still have maybe one or two who are over ambitious but most of the time they choose the challenge they are comfortable with. (Leonardo teacher)

Challenge 1 now is a simple vertical addition, but then a simple word, addition-related challenge, number 2, would be maybe a two-step problem, in the context of money, Challenge 3 would be where they create their own using roller dice, create their own money, do the addition using decimals. (Hawking teacher)

However, we identified limitations where Choice and Challenge was equated with choices of worksheets in maths, where 'lower' choices were more likely to consist of closed questions

rather than more open-ended and creative tasks and where ‘more challenging’ was in some cases associated with ‘bigger numbers’. The head of Babbage school commented that there was often ‘a skills and confidence gap’ in designing meaningful challenges:

I have seen teachers set challenges where the further challenges are not more difficult, they are just bigger numbers. I seldom see teachers having the subtlety to set challenges where the first challenge might inform the others in the plenary, so that those children then have got a contribution to make . . . I want each of the challenges to be equally powerful and valid, equally mathematically justified.

Nancy Barclay from the University of Brighton Maths team also remarked that ‘the way maths is traditionally split into micro level objectives stops people being able to see the big picture’, leading to the problem of ‘making the numbers bigger rather than conceptually more challenging’. She emphasised the importance of focusing instead on ‘the big ideas’ in maths related to logic, pattern spotting and reasoning. Rachel Marks directed us to the concept of the ‘low threshold, high ceiling’ task, which does not differentiate by challenge but involves a task with several different answers. Examples and the philosophy underpinning this are discussed on the Nrich website (nrich.maths.org). Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of learning domains provides one way to understand and think about what children might be doing in different challenges – that is, knowledge/application/extracting information (as might be the case with a ‘calculate the volume of this cube’ question) and analysis/synthesis/evaluation (which is more creative, about drawing comparisons, and would fit an ‘if the answer is x what is the question?’ approaches). As Nancy Barclay pointed out, Bloom did not argue that children who find maths harder should be confined to the former operations but held that they too should experience the joy of the more creative approaches.

In some cases, Choice and Challenge was also being used in literacy. For instance, one Year 1 (age 5 – 6) class in Philip school was given the challenge of re-telling the story of The Little Red Hen, ‘using full sentences to say what happens at the beginning, the middle and the end’. A ‘super challenge’ was to ‘use interesting time connectives’; a ‘super duper challenge’ was to use ‘wow words’ such as adjectives and adverbs. In this case, ‘challenges’ were arguably reinterpreted as ‘success criteria’, but using the language of challenge may have helped children to identify continuities with maths.

In a Year 2 class at Philip school, children composing their own seaside story could

use a laptop or iPad to create my seaside setting; draw a picture of my seaside setting and label it with exciting words and phrases; write a postcard from my character; plan the conflict and resolution for my story; use polishing pens to improve my story and write it up on a writing frame.

The teacher stopped the whole class to tell them about a ‘wow’ moment, a child whose drawing had ‘sizzling’ moments because she had focused for so long and so hard on it. I observed, moreover, that this story had key elements of the ‘higher’ challenges, in that it involved a conflict narrative (one figure was given a speech bubble saying ‘I wish this moment would last for ever’, while another, who was surfing, was shown as already ‘in trouble’ on the water). The question was whether these features would be appreciated as readily in a drawing as in writing and whether, in less experienced teachers’ hands, the hierarchies of challenge could eclipse the achievements of those working at the ‘lower’ end.

Just as with the Maths team, Sandra Williams from the University of Brighton English team argued that focusing on ‘micro-levels’ of literacy, including phonics, risked losing sight of the ‘big picture’ of children’s literature, the engagement with what it means to be a child, with childhood, with the questions about why read, why write, ‘what we have got to say?’. Thus, both

English and Maths need rich, complex, creative, open-ended tasks with multiple entry and exit points; it is important that these are not lost sight of in the composition of challenges.

Children's choices and teacher expectations

Alison Peacock encouraged teachers to use children's choices to open a dialogue. For instance, if a child chose an 'easier' challenge than they might normally do, the teacher could discuss with them their reasons – such as feeling less confident with a new piece of learning or other issues intervening (being tired or unwell that particular day). Nonetheless, some teachers were still concerned about choices being 'right' or 'wrong', although one commented, 'If they make the wrong choice, they will be off-task [and] not concentrating, it's getting them to reflect on that'.

Many teachers recorded children's choices, in various ways. Mullikin school had devised a system of tokens, in which children were given individual numbered tokens, and they put one in a pot next to the challenge task they had chosen, so that the teacher or teaching assistant could note them down. However, it appeared that children had limited autonomy in practice. The class teacher stated that she would often direct 'gifted and talented' children to 'higher' choices while not allowing special educational needs (SEN) or 'very low' children to participate in Choice and Challenge: 'I gave them [low ability] something different, one wanted to do what *the whole class* were doing, he asked if he could, but he went for the hardest and I said, are you sure? He didn't comprehend' (my emphasis). During my visit, while other Year 4s were looking up facts about St Lucia in their atlases, the differentiated task given to SEN pupils was to reassemble and glue into their workbooks a small black and white world map that had been cut into six pieces: arguably this was pointless and degrading 'busy work' that would actively inhibit their development as learners. The sense that children labelled low ability might have an isolating experience in that school was also evoked when I visited the classroom during break time and found one such child sitting there alone; she later told me that she had been instructed to stay behind to 'practice her times table'. It was to be hoped that eventually new approaches such as the challenge curriculum would lead to more inclusive classroom practices overall.

During the launch event, Alison Peacock posed the question: 'Do we unintentionally have a fixed view of what children are capable of that makes it very hard for them to surprise us?':

Let's say you offer your class a range of choices, and let's hope they are high quality ones, that do differentiate and develop conceptually. If you are STILL thinking who will do which one, the shift isn't as powerful as it might be. If you are unconsciously removing the opportunity for children to surprise you, they will perceive that limit.

In this sense, Choice and Challenge is as much about teachers shifting their perceptions about what children are capable of, as it is about children's self-perceptions. There was a clear sense that giving children more freedom in their learning allowed them to inspire teachers further:

Kids love it, their engagement increases . . . it inspires [teachers] to see the children change. (Hawking head)

A number of schools took up the idea of 'surprise' as a key aspect of Choice and Challenge: for instance, the head of Hawking included questions in regular staff briefings about what children had said or done that surprised teachers. He also remarked that since beginning Choice and Challenge, the class teacher's expectations of what her children could achieve had risen significantly. The teacher herself articulated this with delight:

They take homework to another level, if there was something beyond outstanding I would give that to them. They just morph it into something out of this world! Now we are doing Tudors and they have made a meal, used lots of spices, all the stuff we have learned about from the Tudor houses . . . got King Henry to sit around with his six wives, some beheaded, some not, all the gory bits which I'm not comfortable with but never mind! It is lovely, they want to show off their learning . . . I give them the resources they need and they take it home and bring it back looking quite amazing. (Hawking teacher)

Other approaches identified as supporting Choice and Challenge

As already noted, Choice and Challenge was often accompanied by other strategies that were seen to support the goals of inclusion, learner autonomy and engagement broadly speaking, such as Kagan cooperative learning. A Year 5 or 6 teacher at Philip school described how Philosophy for Children 'blew [his] mind', underscoring the importance of 'allowing children time to discuss and reflect . . . it just shows you should never underestimate children, you can always be surprised'. His approach for a task such as 'comparing two cities' was to 'give key areas of guidance' but allow children to 'choose how to go about it. The more prescriptive, the less flexibility you have'. He argued that the evidence for the value of this approach was clear in their books and that he had gradually habituated children to writing comments about their learning to which he would then respond:

We have response time at the end of a lesson about how they felt about their learning, so I can respond and have a dialogue with them. It took a while, at first they were just 'it's ok', I said, that's not enough for me to go on, now I know more where they are and can set a target for the next day, try this next time.

Like other schools in the study, Philip had developed an interest in alternative approaches to maths such as the 'Singapore' approaches. It had adopted the Maths Mastery programme in Years 1 and 2, which they praised for its emphasis on choices, talk, use of concrete, pictorial and abstract approaches (www.mathematicsmastery.org). The head argued that it 'really pushes the growth mindset . . . It's not innate ability, no one should feel limited'.

Maddison's head too introduced more 'conversations' about learning to help promote reflection, such as 'read and respond' time at the start of the day. A child described how 'you come in and do writing or maths and your teacher will have written in your book'. The head explained,

Before, children were given work and teachers would wait for them to get stuck, or even wait until they'd marked their books, then realize they would have to re-teach if they hadn't got it. But now we have processes within the class like talk partners, Kagan, to assess how children are managing, conversations about how children are feeling about their level of skill.

As at Wroxham, teachers at Maddison asked children to write their own progress reports. The Year 5 teacher involved commented on how useful it was, how much more individually and personally children wrote than a teacher might, how articulate they were about what had gone well and what their next steps would be. They could also tell her about aspects of their learning that she did not know about – for instance, their music lessons which had been taught by a specialist.

In Leonardo school, the teacher eventually experimented with allowing her Year 2 class to choose their own learning partners instead of selecting them herself. They did this on a weekly basis rather than the three-weekly basis that had been the case under her direction. She described this as feeling like 'a big risk'. She noted that the more disruptive children might be forced to think about why they had not been picked. 'I can't just tell tell tell, they need to do it for

themselves, motivation has to come from within'. A child who was not picked would be supported by adults and the following week might be asked to choose first.

After this system had been running for a while, she used circle time to discuss with children: 'what makes a good/dream learning partner, and who wouldn't you want as your learning partner?'. Children had an impressively sustained discussion of this issue when I visited. The school had adapted a version of Guy Claxton's 'learning powers' (Claxton, 2002; Costa & Kallick, 2009; Lucas & Claxton, 2010):

We have worked really hard on introducing learning powers, we have six different learning powers: commitment, creativity, resourcefulness, collaboration, determination, reflection . . . trying to make them a central vocabulary that the children can relate to and talk about all the time. They have totally embraced it, they have done amazingly, everything I do will relate back to the learning powers. (Teacher)

The teacher also introduced a 'risk-taking' challenge in response to parents telling her that their children were 'bored' and 'not willing to take risks, to get anything wrong'. She told children a story about the lady who 'invented' chocolate chip cookies by mistake:

We have this choc chip cookie on the board and your name goes on it if you take risks and on Thursday, we will all be sharing this big choc chip cookie, for those who have achieved their risks. They are all very keen to tell me if they have taken a risk now!

Children's perspectives on 'Choice and Challenge'

Children's commitment to ability labels

Choice and Challenge stands in for a larger task, that is, of rejecting fixed ability thinking or limiting and self-limiting labels, whether by teachers or students. However, these are persistent and prevalent, and where this is the case, Choice and Challenge risks being little more than another version of differentiation especially where the teacher dictates (or is perceived as dictating) children's choices for them or where children have benefited from and internalised an existing hierarchical system.

In Hawking school, one child reportedly resisted the change away from ability tables known by colour, saying 'but I am a RED child!'. Others were initially unhappy at working with children of a different [ability] 'colour'. Some children with special needs such as those on the autistic spectrum could struggle with non-linear challenges. The Hawking teacher reported that initially the 'top' dipped and she had to introduce further 'whizzy' challenges to push them:

We do have challenges that children who perceive themselves as the most able are being challenged, out of their comfort zone, they have needed quite a lot of emotional support as their whole world has been pulled from under them . . . (Hawking teacher)

The comments of Year 4 children at Mullikin suggested that they had internalised ability labels, affecting the choices they made:

- You get to choose your level because *some people have more ability at maths than others*. I go for the hardest because I am in the *top* stream for maths.
- I am in the triangles which is the *top* group, so I usually go for 3 or 4.
- For *circles*, [the teacher] will choose for them, because they are *the lowest*. (Author's emphasis)

At Philip school, I visited a Year 2 class, which had just been taken over by the teacher who was committed to working with the challenge curriculum. One girl was adamant that she was ‘in the top group, the greens’. She added ‘We have this new system which is ok . . . The teacher just thought it up over the weekend’ (!). She and the other children on her table described themselves as doing the ‘hardest challenge’, which they further claimed that the teacher picked for them. This may have indicated what they had come to expect under their previous teacher, which seemed to be both gratifying and relatively passive. Philip’s head also reported that their secondary school introducing Maths Mastery, with its emphasis on pictorial and concrete approaches, was meeting resistance from Year 7s who described it as ‘babyish’.

Children’s responses to different challenges

Hierarchies persisted in children’s perceptions such that some children denigrated ‘lower’ challenges as ‘too’ easy – possibly encouraged to do so by value-laden labels such as ‘mild, spicy, hot’ or ‘must, should, could’. Asked what kind of challenges they would make up themselves, some children said that they would be ‘like, times 100!’, suggesting that they too saw them as a matter of ‘bigger numbers’. Following researcher feedback, Leonardo commented that

Children appeared to equate trickiest with best/most prestigious. It could be that more work needs to be done so that children make the most appropriate choice – but this would need careful handling so that learning/aspiration wasn’t limited’. (Email)

In response, some schools were evolving the language they used for the challenges. Philip school was experimenting with less obviously hierarchical labels, such as ‘sizzling’, ‘scorching’, ‘red hot’ and positioning the tasks as ‘floating’ rather than hierarchically arranged.

In Hawking school, the teacher varied the names of the challenges every week in order to prevent children making assumptions about which was easier or harder. For instance, one week she named them after fruit but made sure all the fruits began with the same letter p (peach, plum, pear, etc.). However, when her colleague tried Choice and Challenge, she found that children chose the challenges by name (i.e. ‘I like Mercedes/BMW cars, I will do that challenge’) rather than level, suggesting that they need to become accustomed to the process and aims of Choice and Challenge.

Children as evidence: autonomy and reflective capacity

In reading the responses above, it is important to remember that children in this study were new to Choice and Challenge processes. They filtered their experiences through their own investments in various kinds of identity work and through what they expected of school. The latter derives not only from their direct experiences but also from broader cultural understandings, which might well lead them to interpret schools as competitive, authoritarian, hierarchical environments and as a sorting mechanism for those who are more and less ‘clever’ – regardless of what individual schools themselves might be trying to achieve.

In some cases, children’s comments did suggest that they were gaining a greater sense of agency and self-knowledge through their choices:

- I didn’t understand this one so went for this one.
- I looked at the sheets and chose.
- We choose at our level and what we feel comfortable with. (Hawking children)

- I'm trying to work out the answers, some of us are stuck, some of us are confident.
- When we want to learn more you choose the one where you will learn more . . . you look at it.
- We do it where our confidence is. We looked at C1, it was too easy, we went straight on. (Maddison children)

At Leonardo school, following the discussion of 'what makes a good learning partner', children commented to me, for instance, how they had '[said] to my friend that I won't choose him because we will be silly together'; being left with no choice about one learning partner but finding that they 'turned out to be really good'; 'having to work' with a friend the child had had an argument with, but ultimately helping each other out.

Many schools argued that children themselves were the best evidence for what they were trying to achieve: 'When they go home and explain it to their parents, that's when you know they've got it' (Leonardo head). Some argued that it was their encounters with the children at Wroxham School that gave them a sense of where they should be headed: they noted that the children they met were, for instance, 'very articulate and confident, they have self-belief about learning and are pro-active' (Hawking head). Maddison's head, comparing the Wroxham children to those in his own school, commented that 'The children are free and independent here too, in how they move around the school. This institution is for the children and the needs of the children, not the needs of the school like some schools'.

Children were seen to respond well to being offered new kinds of autonomy. For instance, in teaching pie charts, the Hawking Year 5 teacher allowed the children to develop their own research question and to go around the school collecting data, which they then collated and turned into charts. Not only did this make maths meaningful and relevant but the children also relished the freedom and responsibility the teacher entrusted them with in terms of being able to leave the classroom and did not let her down.

Conclusion

This article has considered how one pedagogical strategy of 'Choice and Challenge', rooted in opposition to ability labelling and grouping, has been taken up and implemented in a small sample of primary schools. (Other strategies with similar aims can be found in a Special Issue of *FORUM for promoting 3–16 comprehensive education* (e.g. Wrigley, 2013) and see also Marks (2016) for comprehensive analysis of ability grouping debates). One obvious conclusion is that no single strategy can by itself overcome entrenched vocabularies and practices associated with ability labelling. In the case of one school discussed here, it has been argued that 'Choice and Challenge' manifested itself as a strategy of teacher differentiation, potentially exacerbating classroom hierarchies and divisions as some children were denied opportunities to choose for themselves. Even in other schools, some children appeared to be second-guessing what their teacher expected of them and devaluing 'lower' choices. Such evidence would seem to support the importance of developing an overall culture in a school that rejects 'fixed ability thinking'.

The issues related to implementing 'Choice and Challenge' were summarised by Leonardo school in an email as follows:

The things we are thinking about are:

- When is a challenge a challenge? The challenge is only as good as the teacher makes it.
- The vocabulary we use to discuss learning so that we no longer refer to 'ability'.
- How we get children (and teachers) to value all levels of challenge.
- How this style of learning is continued in the next class.

- Other ways to facilitate learning without imposing a ceiling. (Leonardo School, email communication)

Citing this communication here achieves two aims. It does aptly encapsulate some of the key concerns that need to be addressed by schools thinking of moving to a ‘challenge curriculum’. But the very fact that it comes from a school demonstrates how, deployed appropriately and in contexts that encourage understanding and reflection on the overall outlook on learning without limits that underpins it, it is a potentially powerful tool that supports teachers and schools to ‘act into a new way of thinking’; that develops new practices, relationships and identities in the classroom; and that allows schools to evolve improvement strategies in keeping with their own values.

A postscript to the project was supplied by the head of Maddison to the Wroxham School some months later:

Ofsted visited last week. The inspector loved the choice challenges and circle groups and our connections with the alliance and yourself. We were RI [Requires Improvement] and have moved to ‘good’ which is encouraging. More importantly we have not gone down a road of second guessing Ofsted but instead have sought out the best practice nationally. This has inspired staff, especially the teachers’ trips to Wroxham. (Email to Alison Peacock)

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