

# **The Learning Powered School**

Pioneering 21st Century Education

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# Foreword

It is a strange irony that in the face of substantial international evidence that schooling is out of step with the needs of society, there are so few signs of real change. Despite this powerful evidence, education systems around the world are proving deeply resistant to change, change that is needed, as this book makes abundantly clear, if young people are to be prepared adequately to live happily and productively in the twenty-first century. Young people need to be helped to build up the mental, emotional and social resources to enjoy challenge and cope well with uncertainty and complexity. And learning, so the research tells us, is one of human beings' deepest sources of happiness and satisfaction. Yet in the UK, as the authors of *The Learning Powered School* point out, over 200,000 persistent truants regularly miss a day a week of school. More than a quarter of pupils in Years 9, 10 and 11 actively dislike school. What has gone wrong? And more importantly, how on earth can we put it right? *The Learning Powered School* provides much needed answers to these urgent questions.

First, the book shows us the science, and clarifies the vision of twenty-first century education that the new sciences of learning are helping to underpin. No engineer would dream of attempting to design a bridge without due regard to the relevant design principles. So, quite rightly, *The Learning Powered School* starts from first principles. Contrary to the pervasive but erroneous idea that an individual's ability is fixed, we now know, for example, that the brain is like a muscle, in that its intelligence grows with exercise. Selling this idea to learners and their teachers could, in itself, cause a major shift in the prevailing educational axis. How much more learning of all kinds, how much more enthusiasm for engaging with the potential delights of learning, would be generated if all young people understood that learning is learnable; that their horizons are not fixed? The authors quote the work of Professor John Hattie whose comprehensive review of research has shown that helping pupils become more independent, more reflective, and better able to plan and evaluate their own learning, turns out to be a better way of boosting their attainment than drilling them in the subject-matter.

Research also shows that the language we use to talk about education and learning deeply affects how individuals see themselves as learners. Even something as simple as changing 'is' to 'could' or talking in the classroom about 'learning' rather than 'work' can make a difference. The Building Learning Power (BLP) approach which the book describes offers teachers and pupils alike a rich vocabulary for thinking and talking about what learners actually do, and this in itself enables them to expand their capacity and appetite for learning.

Having laid the scientific foundations, *The Learning Powered School* quickly gets down to the job of outlining a plausible and practical way forward. Mercifully, the solutions offered do not depend on convincing politicians or waiting for high-level policy changes. Nor does the BLP approach depend, to get going, on the

availability of expensive resources. The great strength of BLP is that any teacher who is convinced by the evidence so powerfully presented in this book will be able to get started immediately. Indeed, the book's main focus is on a wealth of tried and tested strategies that teachers and school leaders can introduce today to begin to transform the learning experience of their pupils.

The experiences of the schools that have been using BLP principles and practices over recent years, clearly documented here, show that this is not a high risk strategy as far as results are concerned. In giving pupils a language with which to think about the process of learning; in giving teachers strategies to encourage their pupils to become more engaged and more effective in their learning, BLP provides a 'both / and' solution with which it would be hard for anyone to disagree. Teachers boost the development of students' confidence, capacity and appetite for learning itself, as well as helping young people to achieve as well as they can in terms of more conventional syllabus content. Students get a better preparation for life and improved examination performance—a seductive package indeed.

I challenge anyone to read this book and not find themselves convinced that the world of education is at a cross-roads. The choice is not whether to teach students Shakespeare or furnish them with skills for life; it is whether to join the growing army of teachers and educationists who are developing the 'both / and' approach, or not. One road perpetuates the sterile debate between 'traditionalists' and 'progressives' that is still largely characterised by nineteenth century attitudes and prejudices. The other road is shaped by science. It is a road that is built on the substantial evidence now emerging about what learning is and how it can best be fostered. It is a road out of the cul-de-sac of assessment-driven schools and a performance culture that produces 'teaching to the test' and dependent, passive learners—high and low-achievers alike—who frequently lack resilience and real-world intelligence.

*The Learning Powered School* is a unique book. It speaks in a voice that is at once authoritative, visionary, engaging and accessible. Its message is passionate and urgent, its intellectual underpinnings are beyond reproach, and its multitude of suggestions for action are imaginative, practical and tested by real teachers in real schools. In a globalised world characterised by rapid change and technological innovation, in which young people have few certainties about their futures; in which most people will have several careers; in which we are faced with some of the gravest international challenges ever to face mankind, it is vital that our young people are equipped with the values, the insights and the skills they will need to navigate their way through the jungle of opportunities and threats. The authors of *The Learning Powered School* are true pioneers; leaders of a growing band of innovators who have shown that an alternative is not only possible, it can be realised now.

**Professor Patricia Broadfoot CBE**

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# Introduction

## Introducing *The Learning Powered School*

In this chapter we:

- introduce Building Learning Power
- explain its core beliefs and research roots
- give an overview of BLP's reach and practice
- outline the structure of the following chapters

## What is Building Learning Power?

**B**uilding Learning Power is an approach to helping young people to become better learners, both in school and out. It is about creating a culture in classrooms—and in the school more widely—that systematically cultivates habits and attitudes that enable young people to face difficulty and uncertainty calmly, confidently, and creatively. Students who are more confident of their own learning ability learn faster and learn better. They concentrate more, think harder, and find learning more enjoyable. They do better in their tests and external examinations. And they are easier and more satisfying to teach.

Building Learning Power—BLP for short—is an attempt to refocus schools on preparing youngsters better for an uncertain future. Today's schools need to be educating not just for exam results but for lifelong learning. To thrive in the twenty-first century, it is not enough to leave school with a clutch of examination certificates. Pupils need to have learnt how to be tenacious and resourceful, imaginative and logical, self disciplined and self-aware, collaborative and inquisitive.<sup>1</sup>

### Five core beliefs for a big ambition

There are five core beliefs that underpin this focus.

#### The tests of life

The **first** is that the core purpose of education is to prepare young people for life after school; to get them ready, as Art Costa, an American educator with similar views, says, 'not just for a life of tests, but for the tests of life'. We think this means helping them build up the mental, emotional, and social resources to enjoy challenge and cope well with uncertainty and complexity. If you strip away political dogma, the evidence is overwhelming that this aim is not currently being achieved for very many students. Of course, this has to be done in a way that also develops literacy and numeracy, and gets young people the best test results possible. That is the challenge that BLP schools and teachers are willing to take up.

#### A spirit of resourcefulness and resilience

**Second**, we believe that this is a goal that is valuable for all young people. Not all youngsters are going to do well in exams; that is a statistical certainty. So there has to be another outcome that is useful and relevant to those who are going to flip burgers and clean offices, fix cars and cut hair, as well as those who are going to plead cases in court or prescribe medications. We think this involves helping young people discover the things that they'd really love to be great at, and to strengthen the will and the skill to pursue them. BLP schools aim to build that spirit of resilience and resourcefulness in all their students.

**Third**, we think this aim is particularly relevant in societies, like ours, that are full of change, complexity, risk, opportunity, and individual responsibility for making your own way in life. In our grandparents' day, many youngsters knew pretty clearly what their role and station in life was destined to be—miner, housewife, priest, primary school teacher. Not any more. In the swirling currents of today's world, many youngsters are at sea. And that makes them anxious, angry, confused, and vulnerable. That is the lack that BLP aims to put right.

Confident in a  
changing world

**Fourth**, we believe that 99% of all young people are capable of developing this confidence, capability, and passion. We think that our society's notion of 'ability' has been too closely tied to academic achievement, and to the assumption that some youngsters have got a lot of that sort of ability, and some not very much. We think that real-world intelligence is broader than that, and that it is not fixed at birth, but something that people can be helped to build up. The aim of BLP is to generate and broadcast practical ideas about how to expand real-world intelligence more and more effectively.

Intelligence is  
learnable

And **fifth**, we don't think that this challenge has been anywhere near met yet. There has been a lot of talk globally about lifelong learning and the 'wider skills' or 'key competencies' for life. But much of it has been at the level of wishful thinking and vague exhortation, or simplistic 'hints and tips' that don't get close to doing the job that needs to be done. We think what's needed has to be seen as a gradual, sometimes difficult, but hugely worthwhile process of culture change by schools and habit change by teachers.

BLP is vital, difficult  
and do-able

The depth and challenge of what is involved, if we are genuinely to deliver on this big ambition, has been widely underestimated. BLP schools have been pioneering ways of taking this ambition really seriously. We think it is time to move from vision statements and soundbites to sustainability and precision.

### **Achieving the ambition: vital, difficult and do-able**

This book shares with you the fruits of these endeavours so far. A good deal has been learned over the last decade about how to do this well—and about how not to do it! We know from what schools tell us that the ambition is achievable. As well as stories of success we have gathered cautionary tales, because the latter can be helpful and instructive. And a great deal more remains to be discovered. BLP is a journey of exploration, not a neat glossy package. It is a set of practical ideas, frameworks, and resources generated by schools and teachers willing to take these aims seriously and try them out.



We have been privileged to work, over those ten-plus years, with some superb teachers and headteachers, schools and local authorities, some of whose journeys you will read about in the pages that follow. They have generated and trialled all kinds of ideas, and have helped us to pull them together and present them in ways that other hard-working teachers will, we hope, find practical and inspiring. But it has to be said that those schools, adventurous and pioneering though they are, will always be the first to admit that they are still achieving only a fraction of what they now believe is possible. The journey deepens and becomes more exciting as you go along.

## A journey of exploration

BLP is definitely not for those who want a quick fix. It demands of schools exactly the same kinds of resilience and resourcefulness that they are aiming to strengthen in their students. They have to be willing to keep going even though some teachers—and indeed some students—may not like it or ‘get it’ to begin with. There may well be rational scepticism, or even reflex cynicism, to be overcome. Is BLP, as someone put it, ‘just another bloody initiative’? There are legitimate worries about whether the exam results might be put at risk, whether parents will appreciate what is going on, or whether the local authority or Ofsted (or similar regulators across the world) might disapprove. Leaders have to know their school communities well, in order to judge best how to challenge and reassure in the right measure: where they can push and take a few risks, and where they will have to be patient and prepare the ground more slowly. All of these issues, and many more, will be aired in the pages that follow.

## Taking it up: doing it right

So far, thousands of schools and classrooms around the planet have experimented with BLP. Some of them, like Red Beach School in New Zealand or Park View Community School in County Durham, have really ‘got the bug’ and deeply embedded the principles of BLP in every aspect of school life. In such schools, you can find the spirit and language of BLP in the way reports are written, the way teachers talk to each other and plan their lessons, the kinds of work that is displayed on the walls, and the way the pupils ask questions, face difficulty, and work together. Some have had more of a ‘dabble’, and adopted some techniques that are still rather on the surface. Others have assimilated ideas from BLP into different frameworks—‘personal learning and thinking skills’, ‘social and emotional aspects of learning’ or ‘key competencies’, for example—or into the general ethos of the school, in a way that takes up some of the spirit of BLP but no longer calls it that. All of this we think is fine, and there are stories of all three kinds here.

## Some have dabbled

## Some have ‘got the bug’

## Whole-school experiences

Sometimes BLP gets taken up by enthusiastic individuals or groups of teachers in places that have not taken it on as a whole-school or college-wide project. This was more likely in the early days. Now we work mostly with schools where there is a collective will—or at least the senior leadership team wants there to be—to adopt the aims and principles of BLP across the whole community. It is these whole-school experiences that we are concentrating on in this book, so one of its main audiences, we hope, will be school leaders who are interested to know what the BLP journey might look like, what are the benefits and outcomes, and what are some of the pot-holes in the road that they could usefully avoid.

A collective will

## Classroom culture

BLP is about culture change in schools. By a 'culture' we mean all the little habits and practices that implicitly convey 'what we believe and value round here'. The fact that Art occupies a fraction of the time devoted to Maths, or the emphasis on 'target grades' in school reports, tell you more, we think, about the culture of a school than does its Vision Statement. The medium of a school is its most powerful message. And the most important messages are conveyed to students in classrooms. Classrooms are the places where, hour after hour, students experience the values and practices that are embodied in the school, rather than just the ones that are espoused. We have learned that you can't make young people into powerful, proactive, independent learners by pinning up a few posters, or by delivering a stand-alone course on 'learning to learn' in Year 7. Unless you can actually see and hear the commitment to the development of students' learning capacities in the middle of a routine Year 9 lesson on simultaneous equations, or a Year 4 project on the Vikings, we don't think that the teachers have really 'got BLP' yet.

Culture change

So the heart of BLP concerns the details of the micro-climate that teachers create in their classrooms. What they do and say, what they notice and commend and what they don't, what kind of role model of a learner they offer: all these are of the essence. And especially what matters is how they design and present activities so that, over the course of a term or a year, their students are cumulatively getting a really good all-round mental work-out. All the learning bits of their brains are being stretched and strengthened, one by one and all together. As you will see, BLP teachers tend to get quite specific about what the elements that go to make up a 'powerful learner' actually are, and how they can best be exercised. We want this book to be of as much interest to classroom teachers as to school leaders.

All-round mental work-outs

## Anyone can be a role model of learning

### Involving everyone

But BLP really takes root in a school when the whole community supports the vision and finds ways of helping to make it real. We have found that teaching assistants of all kinds can play a vital role. So do the administrative staff in the school. People who type letters or look after the buildings can be powerful role models of learning. Support from governors really helps to reassure heads and their staff that these ideas, though some of them might be a little strange at first, are worth trying out. Parents obviously play a vital role in supporting the school, and also in directly encouraging their children to persist in the face of difficulty, and to realise for themselves when they need help and when they don't. We have a growing body of knowledge about how schools can work with parents to forge stronger partnerships. And where schools feel they also have the sympathetic support of local authorities, they may feel free to be more adventurous, and so progress a bit quicker on their journey. Thus we hope this book will also be read by support staff, governors, parents, and local authority officers.

### Convincing others

Finally, we would like national educational bodies to take more note of the things we are finding out. In England, that would mean Ofsted, the Department for Education, civil servants and government ministers, and the headteacher and teacher unions. Many of these bodies retain an overriding concern with 'standards', traditionally defined. They still measure the success of education largely in terms of literacy scores and examination grades—though many of them also bemoan the fact that there is too much 'spoon-feeding', or worry about the many bright students who struggle when they get to university because they have never learned how to manage their own learning.

## An interim survey of evidence

If these bodies could be convinced that there were smart practical things that schools could do that both increased the test scores and helped students develop positive attitudes towards learning more widely, how could they possibly not approve? Though we don't yet have a large-scale evaluation of BLP, we have sufficient evidence from schools to persuade us that this 'both/and' philosophy is an achievable reality. *The Learning Powered School* is an interim survey of that evidence, and we hope that these national organisations will indeed find enough here to make them take note.

# Part 1

## Background Conditions

In Part 1 we look at the layers of Learning Power culture change that are to do with beliefs and values. A school that wants to go down the BLP route needs to keep reminding itself why this direction is so important; otherwise, when routine demands crowd in, it is all too easy to lose focus and commitment. It also needs to keep developing the collective understanding of the science behind BLP—otherwise it is all too easy to be blown off course by the re-emergence of more familiar habits of thinking and planning.

It is also important that a school develops its own curiosity about the approach and the research that underlies it, and to feed that curiosity with reading and discussion. And it helps to prevent the developing BLP culture being derailed by scepticism, or even knee-jerk objections, if those reactions can be anticipated and countered in a well-informed and rational way. If BLP is to take root, it is highly desirable, we have found, to allow plenty of time for such questions and objections to be aired.

BLP asks teachers to change their habits, and they quite rightly need to be convinced that the change is going to be worth the effort—and that it will actually make a difference for the better. Taken together, these form the background conditions—the preparation of the soil, into which the seeds of BLP are going to be sown—which will help to maximise the likelihood of germination.

# Chapter 1

## Vision: Why schools have to change

In this chapter we explore the reasons for seeking to change education, focusing on:

- creating economic prosperity
- wellbeing
- social trends
- increasing digitalisation
- the competitive educational environment
- the pressure of being successful
- disaffection among young people

Greeting his pupils, the teacher asked:

*'What would you learn of me?  
And the reply came:  
How shall we care for our bodies?  
How shall we rear our children?  
How shall we live and work together?  
How shall we play?  
For what ends shall we live?  
And the teacher pondered these words,  
And sorrow was in his heart,  
For his own learning touched not these things.'*<sup>7</sup>

## Another way of winning at school

It is very hard to break the hypnotic spell of 'standards', as defined by examination success. Despite an increasing barrage of fine words and good intentions, it is the examination results by which schools' and students' performance are ubiquitously judged—by politicians, and by the media. Politicians like to look effective, so they have to show they are having an impact on 'hard data'—and examination grades are conveniently countable and statistically manipulable. Hence the ritual annual fanfare about 'best ever results' (1% more A grades; hooray!), and the equally predictable counterpoint of 'dumbed down tests'.

It is much harder to find ways of showing whether 16-year-olds are more inquisitive, determined, imaginative, and convivial than they were a year ago, so politicians tend not to try. But unless such indicators are developed, GCSE and A-level results will continue to be the tail that wags the dog of education.

As someone once said, if we do not find ways of measuring what we value, we will end up just valuing what we can measure. And that distorts the process of schooling, and inhibits teachers from pursuing other aims that they know to be more important.

It is also obvious that, once a single indicator is selected to be the measure of success, people will find ways of manipulating that indicator to their advantage in ways contrary to the original spirit of what 'success' was supposed to mean. In economics this is called 'Goodhart's Law': 'once an indicator becomes a target—especially if funding depends up on it—it stops being a good indicator.'<sup>8</sup> Only someone with a complete lack of insight into human nature could be surprised by the fact that, if 'number of operations performed' becomes a target, hospitals will start doing more of the quick and easy operations (like cataracts), and fewer of the harder and longer ones (like heart surgery). Or headteachers will discourage low-achieving pupils from attempting difficult subjects, connive at their absence on the

Judged by  
exam results

Measuring what  
we value

# Chapter 2

## Science: The underpinnings of BLP

In this chapter we explore:

- the key scientific ideas behind Building Learning Power
- other important educational research
- the thinking behind the language of BLP
- the core BLP frameworks

- imitation (openness to picking up other people's ways of thinking and behaving).

We think these are interesting differences that are worth debating. But clearly the overlaps and synergies greatly outweigh the differences, and, as BLP has developed, we have learned a good deal from HoM about what these capacities mean, and how to develop them.

## Learning to talk about learning

The Project for Enhancing Effective Learning (PEEL) began in a Melbourne high school in 1985, and has since produced a stream of publications that are both practical and well-researched. PEEL brought together a group of innovative teachers and a group of education academics based at Monash University. Still going strong more than 25 years later, PEEL was the first project to explore the use of 'metacognition'—getting students to think about their own thinking—in classrooms. PEEL has generated empirical evidence for the effect of these interventions on students' engagement, achievement, and the development of positive dispositions towards learning in general. These included what we would call in BLP questioning, persevering, planning, reasoning, revising, making links, distilling and collaborating, as well, of course, as meta-learning. With its concern for conjoining detailed practical techniques with sound theory from cognitive science, and rigorous evaluation, PEEL was a vital influence on the development of BLP.<sup>11</sup>



## From skills to dispositions

*'Dispositions to learning should be key performance indicators of the outcomes of schooling. Many teachers believe that, if achievement is enhanced, there is a ripple effect to these dispositions. However, such a belief is not defensible. Such dispositions need planned interventions.'*

John Hattie, *Visible Learning*

## Beyond skills

Many people who are interested in learning talk as if it were a set of skills. But in BLP we seldom use the word 'skill' now; we talk instead about learning habits, dispositions and attitudes, or sometimes the 'qualities of mind' of the powerful learner; and about 'capacities' in a particular sense outlined later. This shift in terminology reflects the influence of a particular strand of research that has emphasized the difference between skills and dispositions.

David Perkins and others have shown that people often appear less capable than they are, not because they don't possess the skill they need, but because they don't realise that now is the right moment to call that skill to mind and make use of it. They lack what Perkins calls 'sensitivity to occasion'. People frequently do not think as well as they might, for example,



not because they can't, but because the situation did not activate the thinking capacity which they actually have. To put it crudely, we have to be *able* to think and learn, but we also have to be *ready* and *willing* to do so.

Thus there is no point in training young people in 'thinking skills' if, the moment they leave the classroom, those skills curl up in a dark corner of their minds and go to sleep. If we want young people to be enthusiastic in pursuit of their interests, and robust in their response to life's challenges, then skills and techniques are not enough. They must not only possess the requisite capabilities; they must be ready, willing and able to deploy them when the time is right.

And that means we have to help the skills turn into dispositions. Our job is not finished until using the 'learning muscles' has become second nature: a spontaneous part of the way our pupils look at the world. And this implies that we have to think about how to help learning power become flexible and pleasurable, as well as skilful. We need to move from thinking about learning as a set of techniques and skills that can be 'trained', to a set of dispositions, interests and values that need to be 'cultivated'.

*'The starting point—the new idea—is that everyone can develop learning power. In the past children were coming in with a certain 'intelligence' level and we were topping it up, filling the brain with knowledge. But in fact all children can learn; it's just tuning in to different dispositions.'*

Primary teacher, Bristol

From training  
to cultivation

## Learning versus performance cultures

Several recent research papers<sup>12</sup> have found, paradoxically, that pupils do better on their tests when they and their teachers focus on learning rather than on performance and achievement. These add considerable weight to BLP's working assumption that there are ways to get better results at the same time as helping students strengthen their learning power more generally.

Building students' confidence in their own capacity to learn turns out (not surprisingly) to boost their examination performance. On the other hand, several studies have found that narrow pressure for results—'achievement pressure' in the jargon of the trade—is not an effective way of raising results. Pressure to raise children's levels of reading has very little effect on their ability to read, and does significant damage to their enjoyment of reading<sup>13</sup>.

For example, in a very well conducted study by Cheryl Flink and her colleagues, two groups of teachers of 10-year-olds were told either that 'your job is to help pupils learn', or 'your job is to ensure that pupils perform well'. The latter group felt under greater pressure, and were thus



# Chapter 3

## Beliefs and assumptions: Barriers to whole-hearted buy-in

In this chapter we explore a variety of doubts, anxieties, challenges, and misapprehensions about BLP through a series of frequently asked questions, including:

- risking examination results
- affording the time for BLP
- fear of Ofsted
- ‘It’s what we have always done’
- ‘Does it work for gifted and talented?’
- ‘Parents will be suspicious’
- ‘Pupils like to be spoon-fed’

### 'OK, but it's still my job to help students get the right answers.'

Yes it is. They will need to get 'right answers' if they are to pass their exams. But the critical thing is how you help them. Do you help them in a way that means they have to remember what it is that you did, or which merely gives them a technique that is triggered by a particular problem? If so, they may not really understand what it is they are doing—and that means they may be completely thrown by an apparently trivial change in the way the problem is worded. David Perkins describes a class of students who complained bitterly that they had been taught how to calculate the time it took for an object to fall from a twenty metre tower, but that the exam had asked them about a rock falling down a twenty metre hole—and they couldn't do it.' In the rush to help them 'do it', you may not be helping them to do it for themselves, or to do it in a way that is flexible and thoughtful. Nudging, coaxing and encouraging may have better long-term impact than explaining and drilling.

Professor Jo Boaler of Sussex University has found that girls in top maths sets often struggle for a very particular reason. Teachers have high expectations of top sets, so they tend to rattle through the material at a speed that enables students to learn techniques and procedures, but not to really 'get their heads round' what is going on. Boys, Boaler discovered, are more willing to settle for this instrumental kind of understanding than girls. The girls tend to worry more that they don't really understand what they are doing, and this leads not only to greater anxiety but also to underachievement. Boaler concludes:

*'Maladaptive patterns will be countered when students are exposed to environments in which they are encouraged to try things out, to get things wrong as they do so and to have the time and space in which to develop their understanding... Only when these conditions are realised will students feel happy about facing challenges on which they may not succeed.'*

### 'BLP sounds like warmed-up 1970s romantic liberalism to me. It didn't work then, and there's no reason to suppose that it will work now.'

Apart from the evidence that it does work—in the sense of producing more confident young people who do better on their tests—this fear (or criticism) is misguided. Yes, BLP encourages students gradually to take more responsibility for their own learning; but this is very far from being merely 'child centred' or worse, 'laissez-faire'. BLP does not suppose that a hands-off approach will result in every little spirit being able to flourish in its own way. We know that, for example, an absence of adult direction results in



# Part 2

## The Classroom Experience

In Part 2 we turn to the question, What exactly is it that teachers are being asked to do differently? The chapters explore four key aspects of this change that impinge directly on students.

Chapter 4 looks at teachers' demeanour: at the way teachers talk about learning, and the attitudes towards learning that they model in the classroom. Both of these influence how students engage with what is going on in their lessons, and the attitudes toward learning which they themselves develop.<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 5 focuses on pedagogy—the way teachers design and deliver lessons—and discusses ways in which the learning-power habits can be cultivated, both implicitly and explicitly, through the activities that are on offer, and the way the classroom environment is constructed.

Chapter 6 looks beyond the individual lesson at the broad design of the curriculum—the way the timetable is constructed, or how enrichment activities are used to broaden learning power.

Finally, Chapter 7 discusses assessment and progression: practical ways in which teachers can check whether BLP is actually making a difference—both so that individual students can be supported and encouraged in their developing learning habits, and so that teachers can know how well their own hopes and aspirations are being achieved.

# Chapter 4

## Teachers: Walking the talk

In this chapter we explore:

- the importance of teacher language
- power of teachers as role models
- examples of BLP talk
- examples of BLP ‘walk’

## 'Do you speak Learnish?'

Through such questions students are being encouraged to:

slow down, notice, and appraise strategies and steps

stop skipping quickly on to 'the right answer'

become more reflective and thoughtful

look for alternative ways of proceeding

develop the habit of thinking for themselves

become more interested in difficulty itself

bring a flexible intelligence to bear

think how they might regulate the difficulty of tasks for themselves

1. How did you do that?
2. How else could you have done that?
3. Who did that a different way?
4. Which are the tricky bits? What's tricky about them?
5. What could you do when you are stuck on that?
6. What would have made that easier for you?
7. What else do you know that might help?
8. How could you help someone else do that?
9. How could I have taught that better?
10. Where else could you use that?
11. How could you make that harder for yourself?
12. ...

# Chapter 5

## Teaching practice and the classroom environment

In this chapter we explore:

- the changing role of the teacher
- classrooms where the process of learning is made visible
- teaching through dual-focused objectives
- taking account of emotional intelligence
- the social aspects of learning
- designing activities which stretch learners
- the importance of reflection in learning

## Six: Reflection and responsibility

Here we explore the way in which teachers have encouraged their students to take charge of their own learning, planning what they do, distilling meaning from it, and revising it accordingly.

### What the principle looks like in practice

**Barbara Imrie of Chosen Hill School in Gloucester** knows that reflection on learning isn't just something that happens in the few minutes before students leave the room. Reflection is a formative part of the lesson and she makes sure her students practise it regularly to secure their understanding, review progress, and plot changes of direction. With her Year 10 English class, Barbara regularly takes the opportunity to pause and help her students reflect on how they are progressing. She prompts them to check their understanding: 'What do you know now that you didn't know before?'. She encourages them to generate their own questions for enquiry: 'So what questions are you asking yourself about his character and motivation?'. And she nudges them to attend to *how* they are learning and the ways they might need to hone the learning habits that are in use: 'Do you think we need to stretch our link-making habits at this point?'. A quick link-making workout (some 'spot the connection' games) could fine-tune her students' ability to delve deeper into the text. Barbara also encourages them to take time to reflect more deeply on their learning. When a student stumbles over an explanation she says: 'Do you need time to think about it... I'll come back to you later'. A little later, it is the student himself who says: 'I'm ready to come back to that point now, Miss'.



### What the principle means

Lessons where reflection and responsibility go hand in hand give students more say in the process of selecting, planning, organising, adjusting, and evaluating their learning than is normal in the traditional teacher-centred school. This is a common theme in innovative schools these days: we hear a lot about 'student voice' and 'co-construction of the curriculum'. BLP tends to potentiate these kinds of innovation by giving the students a richer language in which to couch their reflective thinking. And it also helps to keep both students' and teachers' eyes on the underlying purpose behind giving students greater control over their learning: to build habits of mind that will stand them in good stead in a wide variety of real-world situations after they have left school (or indeed university).

A central idea in this context is the concept of 'work in progress'. Drafting, prototyping, experimenting, and trial-and-error are the hallmarks of this. Students are encouraged to bring their reflection to bear on the process of crafting an increasingly satisfying product—whether that be a poem, a

Winning  
students over



# Chapter 6

## Designing the learning-powered curriculum

In this chapter we explore:

- how the curriculum can be adapted to better allow the development of learning habits
- creative adjustments to the timetable
- how learning can be taken outside the classroom
- how learning can be made more authentic
- how students can play a greater role in their own education

## Principle Three: Extension of learning beyond the constraints of school time and place

**How can we design experiences beyond the short classroom lesson to create extended experiences and reach into the informal learning lives of young people outside school?**

### Giving time for and coherence to challenging learning

The opportunity to deepen learning habits is limited when the curriculum is divided into hour-long lessons and when an individual subject is given one or two lessons a week. Although it is important to train students to work with urgency and commitment, short and infrequent lessons tend to invite a more teacher-led style of pedagogy, with teachers focusing on curriculum coverage rather than the development of deeper learning habits.

Constant student movement from subject to subject in the course of a school day limits coherent learning experience. Students may see as many as 14 different teachers in the course of the week, and while variety is clearly valued by students, this feature of the traditional timetable may hamper the development of learning habits.

More and more schools are now re-timabling lessons to last for half a day or even a whole day. This gives students more opportunity to pose questions, explore issues and investigate for themselves (see the case study of George Pindar College, from page 143). Even where schools do not wish to be as radical as this, they are often asking themselves where and how they might create more extended learning opportunities within their curriculum. In Design Technology, students often work for a whole term on crafting a tangible product; why should they not have the same opportunities for extended, challenging, creative, and reflective learning in English, or Spanish, or Science? Can we judiciously sacrifice a little bit of breadth for the incalculable rewards of a good deal more depth, they begin to wonder. At Park View, for example, their thematic projects give students extended opportunities to work independently and collaboratively in ways that stretch their learning behaviours.

When Year 9 Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) ceased to be a statutory requirement, Macmillan Academy in Middlesbrough developed their Year 8 and 9 'baccalaureate' which builds on the learning foundation laid down in Year 7. During these two years, students experience a wide range of learning opportunities where the exercise of choice is central to the learning that they then pursue. The curriculum comprises five component parts: Academic, Enrichment, Enterprise, Project, and Service. The traditional academic curriculum—which still accounts for 50% of the Baccalaureate award—is substantially augmented by an enrichment programme, substantial enterprise learning opportunities, a voluntary

Extending the ideas  
of Design Technology



# Chapter 7

## Assessment and progression: How do we know it's working?

In this chapter we explore:

- the purposes of assessment
- some useful dimensions of progress
- different types of evidence
- examples of assessment in practice

## Learning stages (Imitation)

### Stage 4

- I try to adapt other people's ideas for myself.
- When I need to, I look at other people's learning to monitor my own progress.
- I choose to imitate as a way of learning.
- If I need to, I can focus all my senses and attention on what I am imitating.
- I actively look back, adjust, check and review when imitating.
- If I need to, I can motivate myself to learn by imitating others.

Here children are fully aware of the value of the behaviour and are able to use it to advantage when necessary.

### Stage 3

- I try to learn by watching others.
- I sometimes learn from other people's ideas or instructions.
- I try to ask questions so I fully understand what I'm imitating.
- I manage to use what I have learnt from other people.

At this stage children are aware of the value of the behaviour and are becoming less dependent on the teacher

### Stage 2

- I know that imitation is using an idea, not copying the answer.
- I am aware that I can learn by watching others.
- I can ask others if I am on the right track.
- I need help to use all my senses when imitating.
- I can ask for instructions to be repeated if needed.
- I am aware that I need to concentrate on the person I am imitating.

At this stage children are aware of using the behaviours but need help, prompts, encouragement, scaffolding

### Stage 1

- I might take notice of what other people are doing.
- I need to know that I can learn from what I see others do.
- I might ask for help.
- I might listen to other people's ideas.

### What to avoid

- Thinking that imitation is copying.
- Letting others do the learning for me.
- Showing no interest in how other people do things.
- Giving up quickly when somebody is trying to show me 'how'.
- Getting annoyed when others show me how to do things.

At this stage children are usually unaware of using these behaviours

Developed by teachers at Simpson School, Milton Keynes

# Part 3

## Whole-School Activity

So far we have discussed seven layers of Building Learning Power's '10-ply' approach to culture change. The chapters in Part 1 focused on getting the beliefs and understandings right, so that everyone involved sees why learning power is so important, and is clear about what is realistically possible. Part 2 looked in some detail at what BLP actually asks of classroom teachers as they talk to pupils, plan lessons, design the curriculum and check to see if 'building learning power' is really happening. Classrooms are the engine rooms of a school's culture, so it was right to devote a good deal of attention to what goes on in them. But individual teachers' impact on pupils is limited if the whole-school culture does not support them. A learning-powered school is more than a series of learning-powered classrooms. It is these whole-school issues that we explore in Part 3.

In Chapter 8 we address the crucial issue of school leadership. Where some approaches to leadership treat it as a technical matter, and others as a matter of personality, BLP puts the vision first, and then asks: What kind of leadership is going to be effective to achieve the specific aim of helping young people achieve in a way that also builds their confidence, capacity and appetite for real-life learning? In a nutshell, if we want students to become powerful learners, school leaders have to work at creating a community that thrives on enquiry. Chapter 9 continues this theme by looking at the kinds of professional development that help to bring that community into being, and at how to support teachers who might initially be sceptical or reluctant to change their ways. Recent work by Dylan Wiliam and others on building professional learning communities is very helpful here.

'No school is an island', John Donne might have said, and culture change affects not just those who work in a school but all those who have a stake in it. Pre-eminent amongst those are parents, and in Chapter 10 we take a look at some of the ways in which BLP schools have worked to explain the approach to parents and to get them on board with the vision and values of BLP. From redesigning the school's website to running workshops for parents to help them build their learning power, many schools have found it very worthwhile to invest in helping parents understand what twenty-first century education could be.

# Chapter 8

## Leading the learning powered school

In this chapter we explore:

- the importance of leadership
- changing views of leadership
- leadership BLP-style
- a vision for learning
- approaches to innovation
  - creating a dialogue
  - supporting a culture of enquiry
  - keeping the learning on track
- looking at the school through the BLP framework

## First steps to implement the vision

Visions of the future can be necessarily hazy at first. Successful leaders realised the ideas would have to be crafted, explored, and expanded by everyone in the school. They knew that simply telling people about their vision wouldn't work; eventually everyone would need to see it as their vision and understand their part in making it a reality. What was needed was to start a dialogue—firstly with a few colleagues and then more widely—about the what, why, and how of the changes.

Where headteachers delegated responsibility for BLP to a colleague, and did not seem to be personally involved, we found that the chances of successful implementation were slim. So were they when protestations of support for BLP were mingled with strong traditional messages about the importance of results at all costs. In one of our secondary schools, where BLP had been slower to take root than in comparable schools, one of the assistant principals said in her interview with the researcher:

*'I think we have been giving a bit of a mixed message to the staff, if I'm honest. We are a high-achieving school, and teachers are under a lot of pressure to get the best possible results. But this isn't really compatible with taking risks and trying new things out in your teaching. So I think our progress has been slower than it might have been, because of that.'*

Harmful mixed messages

## Getting the dialogue going

Headteachers have used many concrete ways of getting things going, including sharing ideas in SLT, giving teachers BLP books, and engaging a trainer to deliver an introductory professional development day. However, the most successful way of getting started seems to have been to create a sustained dialogue about learning throughout the school. No big fanfares, no invited speakers, just talk amongst ourselves about learning. This in itself can represent a subtle shift in the school's approach to staff learning which echoes BLP's messages: it is a learning journey which no-one can do for us. Such dialogues were created through informal staffroom chat, or having colleagues take a learning walk around the school to look at learning (not at teaching, or at pupils' 'work', of course).

A dialogue about learning

The most successful approach to fostering the dialogue was often to commission a 'learning review' where a trained consultant worked with a group of staff to look deeply at the sort of learning that is going on in classrooms. These learning reviews (which we describe in more detail in Chapter 9) often had the effect of helping staff to focus on the kinds of learning processes that they were routinely asking students to use—and to identify where this 'mental exercise regime' might be partial or narrow, as well as where in the school it might also already be more broad and comprehensive. Learning reviews enabled staff to look at their teaching

Reviewing learning

# Chapter 9

## Professional development in a community of enquiry

In this chapter we explore:

- the stages of professional learning
- the nature of habit change
- learning reviews
- teacher learning communities
- peer coaching
- learning enquiries
- the value of appreciative enquiry
- doing classroom observations
- overseeing professional development



## Professional learning as habit change

Schools that have taken building learning power seriously have quickly realised the centrality of professional development (PD) in making it work. But they also realise that effective PD has to be more than a one-day course and 'away you go'. Thinking of the primacy of learning rather than teaching has implications not just for students' learning but for staff learning. Teachers' habits as learners have to become part of the picture; how they go about changing is as relevant to their discussions as what changes they are aiming to bring about. In other words, the staff learning has to undergo the same sort of shifts as students' learning. So the school has to think of PD in a split-screen way: '**what**' has to be learned and '**how**' it might be learned.

The primacy  
of learning

Changing the habits of a professional lifetime is not simple. It involves un-learning and re-learning: unpicking, readjusting, trying things out and seeing what works. It's about staff using their own learning power to effect changes in themselves. And the desired change is not just in what they think and believe; it is in how they spontaneously talk and act and plan. Even small shifts in the type of language a teacher uses take time to implement fluently. They have to stop using previous language, start using new language, hesitantly at first, then in different contexts, more frequently and with greater fluency.

Changing  
teaching habits

Becoming proficient, and then developing further so that the 'new' approach becomes second nature, takes time and effort. The scale overleaf, adapted from a model proposed by American philosopher Hubert Dreyfus, makes it clear how many stages a person has to go through before they achieve flexible and effortless expertise in a new skill. Developing expertise involves progressing from stilted, hesitant, and rigid behaviour (conscious incompetence, the 'clunky' stage) through the developing ability to read situational cues and routinise behaviour (conscious competence), and onwards to developing smooth, flexible intuitions that naturally make the most of situations (unconscious competence). It is perhaps worth noting that this progress is not inevitable; if it were, everyone would become expert eventually. Learning, as BLP suggests, involves the active habits of noticing, questioning, experimenting, reflecting, and discussing. In the process of becoming learning-power coaches, teachers very often find that they are developing their own learning power.

Realistic  
expectations about  
effort and progress

It can be useful to discuss models like this with staff, so that they pursue their BLP journeys with realistic expectations about the amount of time and effort that is going to be needed. Unconsciously assuming that change is easier than it is can quickly lead to demoralisation ('I'll never do it'), self-recrimination ('I'm just not clever enough to get it'), or resentment ('This is just stupid; why are they making us do this?').

# Chapter 10

## Sending BLP home: Involving parents in their children's learning

In this chapter we explore:

- a new kind of parental engagement based on BLP
- some examples of practical initiatives to engage parents

help with Tom's connectives? Sometimes it seemed as if there was little parents could do other than endorse the report and praise their children for having done well, or exhort them to do better.

But BLP reports for parents are beginning to take a difference approach. The one shown opposite is a prototype that Nayland Primary School have been working on. It offers parents an insight into their child's use of and progression in learning habits. This is information that parents can more readily understand and, more importantly, do something with. It offers a talking point about what the child does at school and furthermore suggests how the parent might pick up on the points and coach their child to develop further.

Christ Church C of E Primary School in West Bromwich attached each child's feedback from a Blaze BLP quiz to their usual end of year report, and used this as an introduction and invitation to an open evening to find out more about learning behaviours and what the school was doing to encourage their use. 90% of the parents attended and all were enthusiastic about the new approaches.

Although such reports are in their infancy they offer an important bridge between learning at school and at home, and many BLP schools are turning their attention to developing them.

## 2 Learning at home

Many parents have become deeply involved in 'doing homework' for and with their children. Perhaps because they have picked up how important it is to 'get things right' and do tasks properly, they help with homework to ensure answers are right, things look neat, and that there's enough volume. So homework is often seen as a chore for both pupils and parents alike. The pupils have little responsibility or choice other than to do it and get it right.

Debby Hughes, a Year 2 teacher at St Augustine's Catholic Primary School in Kenilworth, wanted to explore the possibilities of co-planning with her pupils in order to nurture their curiosity and encourage them to take greater responsibility for their learning. She decided to begin this shift with their home learning. In order to keep the task as open and potentially rich as possible she began by sharing only the title of the learning topic and then asked pupils to generate questions around what interested them about the topic. With the ideas scribed they went on to discuss how they could go about finding the answers. Lastly the group generated ideas about how they could demonstrate their learning to their teacher. The pupils were given the week to complete this self-generated home learning. They had free choice about which aspect of the topic they would research, how they would research, and how they might present their learning. And, as this

### A revolution in report writing



## Part 4

# Reflections

In the final part of the book we take a step back from the practicalities of BLP, and adopt a more reflective stance.

In Chapter 11, we tackle the vital job of assessing the evidence for the impact of the approach. We report on the reactions and impressions of the schools themselves, and discuss various kinds of data which they have been collecting in order to inform and guide their own journeys. But we also look at the effect BLP has had on students' performance in public examinations, specifically Key Stage 2 SATs and GCSEs—remembering that the improvement of such 'results' is not the main purpose of BLP, but also that it would be problematic if those results were found to suffer. We also look at what school inspectors such as Ofsted have had to say in their reports on BLP schools. Overall, this 'mid-term' survey of the impact of BLP is more than reassuring; it is highly encouraging.

In Chapter 12 we carry out a short reflective round-up of the main arguments and issues raised in the book, and try to see what the future holds for approaches like BLP. While some national governments and political parties are either uncomprehending of, or actively hostile to, such approaches, we are cautiously optimistic that they will continue to prosper. BLP chimes well, we have found, with the educational values of many teachers and school leaders, and they are eager for the mixture of precise language, clear illustrations and practical suggestions that nevertheless is not prescriptive, and continually invites schools to craft and customise their own version.

# Chapter 11

## The impact of BLP: Does it work?

In this chapter we explore:

- the effect of BLP on students' academic performance
- Ofsted inspectors' observations
- independent evaluations of BLP schools
- some action research by BLP teachers
- students' self-perceptions
- teachers' and others' perceptions of students

It is well-nigh impossible to draw hard-and-fast conclusions that prove that BLP has had specific effects on students. Nevertheless, there are a variety of kinds of evidence that, taken together, give us increasing confidence that the approach is having beneficial results. They include the following:

## Types of evidence

**1. Students' performance on tests and examinations.** Whilst the practices of BLP are not aimed directly at raising standards as traditionally defined, but at building wider transferable dispositions towards learning, it is vital that we can show that these practices do not damage or jeopardise results—or may even improve them.

**2. Inspection reports.** It is not explicitly in the brief of Ofsted inspectors to look for the development of learning-oriented habits of mind—their main concerns are with achievement and safety—but it would be encouraging to find that they notice and approve of the effects of BLP strongly enough to make comments in their reports.

**3. External evaluations.** A similarly objective source of evidence can be provided by external evaluations of BLP. We report the results of several of these.

**4. Action research projects.** Small-scale research projects, in which teachers rigorously evaluate for themselves the effects of BLP-related changes and interventions in their classrooms, provide very useful fine-grain evidence both of impact and implementation. A good many of these have been dotted about in previous chapters to illustrate the finer points of BLP.

**5. Students' perceptions of themselves as learners.** Whilst there are all kinds of well-reported problems with focus group interviews, self-report questionnaires and the like—are respondents taking them seriously, for example, or are they merely telling you what they think you want to hear?—it is clearly useful to know if youngsters *feel* as if they are being helped to become more resilient, resourceful, imaginative and so on.

**6. People's perceptions of the process.** Although testimony from leaders, teachers, TAs and parents does not, by itself, constitute incontrovertible evidence for BLP, nevertheless it would be helpful to know if they are seeing positive effects on their students. We have also noted comments schools have made on students' behaviour more generally.

We provide some evidence on each of these in turn.