BARBARA MACGILCHRIST AND MARGARET BUTTRESS

Transforming Learning and Teaching

TRANSFORMING LEARNING AND TEACHING

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TRANSFORMING LEARNING AND TEACHING

'we can if … '

Barbara MacGilchrist
and
Margaret Buttress

Paul Chapman
Publishing

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Dedicated to Gareth Brooke-Williams

an inspirational and charismatic headteacher who always believed *'we can if … '*.
(1952–2001)

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Barbara MacGilchrist
Margaret Buttress

Introduction – '*we can if . . .*'

We introduce this book by describing:

- **what the story is about**
- **how the story is told**
- **how it can be used.**

The story

This book tells the story of how a group of primary schools transformed learning and teaching. It is a 'warts and all' story, which provides a fascinating insight into the day-to-day realities of trying to bring about school improvement. The book describes the wide range of practical strategies the schools used for supporting and enhancing:

- children's learning
- teachers' learning
- the schools' capacity for learning.

It describes how the focus on learning led to significant improvements in children's motivation, behaviour, engagement in learning and learning outcomes. It also illustrates how, through teachers learning with, and from one another, the schools' capacity for sustained improvement was strengthened.

The book is based on an action research project entitled 'Learning to Learn' which concentrated on the development of children's understanding, skills and attitudes about themselves as learners, and about the learning and thinking strategies they were currently using, and could use in the future.

Throughout, the book gives the children's perspective on the impact that the project had on them. It describes what worked for the schools, and what did not. It draws out the main lessons learned for:

- children
- teachers
- support staff
- headteachers
- parents
- external consultants.

It raises issues about the transfer of learners from primary to secondary school.

The story told by the schools is an important one. It reminds us that there is much more to education than a narrow concentration on target setting and league tables. It tells the story of a group of schools committed to: inclusive education for all; the provision of a rich, broad curriculum, and the development of young people's confidence, self-esteem and the skills and attitudes needed to become lifelong learners.

How the story is told

The story begins in Chapter 1 with a brief description of the 'Learning to Learn' project and those involved in it, to provide a context for the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 describes – warts and all – how the 'Learning to Learn' headteachers and their mentors came together, developed a learning orientation and brought their staff on board. Chapter 3 recounts how the schools developed their teaching practice to develop pupils' learning.

Adults learning to learn take up the following two chapters. Chapter 4's account of how the schools supported teachers as learners and researchers, is followed, in Chapter 5, by how the schools provided leadership for learning, and the different people involved in that process.

The spotlight then refocuses on the children. Chapter 6 deals with the strategies the schools used to accelerate learning and Chapter 7 with how the schools kept track of children's learning.

The impact of the 'Learning to Learn' project is summarized in Chapter 8 in respect of:

- children's levels of achievement in English, mathematics and science, and how these outcomes compared with other schools in the borough and with schools nationally
- teachers and their teaching practice
- the headteachers
- parents
- those who work with the schools.

The progress made by the schools is affirmed in Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection reports. The children's own story about the growth of them-

selves as learners and about their learning journey follows in Chapter 9.

The different strands of the 'Learning to Learn' story come together in Chapter 10. The lessons learned and the implications for future practice in schools and LEAs are identified. The story does not end here however. The schools are continuing to work together and have now been joined by some more primary schools and a group of secondary schools to form an enlarged 'Learning to Learn' network. This network of schools is building on the work of the original group of five to ensure that the lessons learned by them inform the next stage of their learning journey together.

How the book can be used

The book is intended for school leaders and practising teachers in primary and secondary schools, and for those who work in an advisory or consultancy capacity with schools. It will also be of interest to those training to be teachers and to their teachers.

Theme headings are highlighted at the beginning of each chapter. Subdivisions of each heading are similarly marked, to enable the reader to see the big picture at a glance. Most chapters end with a concluding section in which we review what we did, and reflect on what we learned. These reviews and reflections can be used as a starting point for individual, group or whole-staff learning and professional development. In the last chapter, arising from the lessons learned, we identify some key principles that need to underpin the transformation of learning and teaching. We conclude with a series of questions to promote discussion amongst practitioners and policy-makers.

Throughout the book there are practical examples of the 'Learning to Learn' project in action, which it is hoped practitioners will find informative and useful for enhancing their own practice. For those involved in networked learning communities, or about to be, the book offers practical strategies for maximizing the effectiveness of such groups.

In using the book it is important to bear in mind the strapline – *'we can if … '* . This was our guiding mantra because it signified our belief that *all* children (and adults for that matter) can learn. It underpinned our commitment to inclusive education for all in the context of a broad and balanced curriculum for the twenty-first century.

Barbara MacGilchrist
Margaret Buttress
April 2004

1

Setting the scene

Effective educational leaders are continuously open to new learning because the (leadership for learning) journey keeps changing. (Stoll et al., 2003, p. 103)

We set the scene by describing:

- **the 'Learning to Learn' project**
- **the LEA context at the beginning of the project**
- **the schools**
- **our guiding mantra – *'we can if … '*.**

This chapter describes the rationale for the 'Learning to Learn' project and gives an outline of how the project was designed. It also provides background information about the outer London borough in which the five schools were located, and a pen portrait of each of the schools involved. It ends by describing the reason for our guiding mantra, *'we can if … '*.

The 'Learning to Learn' project

The project grew out of a learning partnership between a group of primary schools, their local education authority (LEA), the outer London Borough of Redbridge and a higher education institution (HEI), the Institute of Education, University of London. The overall purpose of the project was to support, promote and share good practice in learning and teaching, so as to improve the quality of the learning experience for *all* young people and raise their levels of achievement. The emphasis on *all* the children was important because an inclusive approach to education for all was a guiding principle for the project. The project was underpinned by two fundamentals. First, that developing, changing and improving learning and teaching in the classroom is at the heart of school improvement. Secondly, that to do this children and teachers, along with the headteacher and other school staff and those

who support them from outside, including parents, need to learn with and from one another. This belief was premised on our view that a focus on learning rather than on performance will enhance children's progress and achievement.

After much heart searching and debate, we decided to use the following question as our initial starting point:

> Does the development of teachers' and children's metacognitive skills significantly enhance children's achievement in learning?

We began with this question because we were very aware that there is a growing amount of research evidence to show that, if children are taught to develop and understand their thinking strategies, then this can make a real difference to their learning in school and beyond. We knew that, as Stoll and colleagues (2003) argue:

> Becoming skilled at metacognition requires focused teaching, lots of examples and a great deal of practice. When pupils have developed proficiency with monitoring their own learning and identifying what they need next, they are more able to transfer their learning to new settings and events, to have deeper understanding and to build the habits of mind that make them lifelong learners (p. 70).

We also knew that, to enable this to happen, teachers need to have a good understanding of how children learn, so as to be able to use this knowledge to try out and develop a broad repertoire of teaching strategies.

As will become clear in the chapters that follow, this question about metacognition, in other words – thinking about thinking – was the beginning of a long journey that led us along an exciting, challenging route with many different pathways and some dead ends! Very soon into the journey, we recognized that there was much more to learning than metacognition. Therefore, we broadened our horizons and focused on metalearning – learning about learning. In concentrating on the learning process, and the factors that can contribute to effective learning, we found ourselves exploring social, emotional, cognitive, neurological, psychological and physiological aspects of learning, and the practical implications of these in the classroom and across the school as a whole. The children had a central role to play in this process. Listening to children's views about themselves as learners, about their learning and about the things that teachers do that best supports their learning, was of fundamental importance to the project. So much so, that throughout the book, we have ensured that the children's story is described and told. We believed, as Jean Rudduck and colleagues (1996, p. 1) do, that:

> what pupils say about teaching, learning and schooling is not only worth listening to, but provides an important – perhaps the most important – foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools.

In recognition of the fact that learning is a complex process, the project drew on a wide range of research and practice. We paid particular attention to the literature concerned with:

- effective learning (Watkins, 2000; Watkins et al., 2001; 2002)
- the development of metacognitive skills (McGuinness, 1999)
- formative assessment (Assessment Reform Group, 1999; Black and Wiliam, 1998)
- motivation (Dweck, 1986)
- accelerated learning (Smith and Call, 2000)
- multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1993; 1999)
- emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996; 1998)
- learning and the brain (Greenfield, 1997; McNeil, 1999).

Preparations for the project began in 1999–2000 and then spanned two academic years, from September 2000 to July 2002. It combined support and pressure, in a planned way, at different, but complementary levels:

- within the schools
- between the schools
- between the schools and the LEA
- between the HEI, the LEA and the schools.

Chapter 2 describes how the project got started and what the schools, the LEA and the HEI did to make this happen.

The project was designed to ensure that the five schools that eventually became involved, took control of their own improvement processes. Although we were working on a 'project' together, the ultimate aim was to ensure that the learning and teaching practices, developed in the schools, would be sustained, developed and kept under regular review way beyond the life of the project. In other words, this was not simply another initiative or a one-off programme. Rather, it was a serious attempt to improve, change and embed learning and teaching in the schools now and in the future. There was also a commitment to disseminate good practice and lessons learned, not just within this 'networked community', but to a wider network of schools in the LEA in the long term. The writing of this book is part of that commitment.

There were a number of key elements that featured in this action research project. They included:

- a commitment to learning for all
- accepting oneself as a learner (both staff and children)
- rigorous 'critical friendships'
- high-quality professional development including dialogue between and across the schools about the nature of learning

- involving children in their own learning; in other words, viewing them as learning citizens involved in their own learning process
- exploring notions of intelligence and learning styles
- the need to be very specific about learning, so as to inform planning, learning intentions and short- and long-term targets
- quantitative and qualitative assessment to support learners and their learning
- supporting school self-evaluation.

To enable the schools to 'learn to learn' a wide range of strategies was used. These strategies included:

- combined in-service training sessions for teachers, support staff and governors across all five schools
- in-school staff development opportunities focused on learning and teaching
- inter-school visiting by teachers to observe and share practice
- a visit by teachers from all five schools to a Canadian school district
- feedback from regular developmental joint visits by the LEA Advisory Officer for special educational needs and the HEI partner
- the development of a 'critical friendship' network for the headteachers themselves.

The three partners (schools, LEA and HEI) in the project met on a regular basis throughout the two-year period. The LEA contributed the vital support of a management officer, Lisa Starr, who co-ordinated and effectively minuted all meetings, and distributed research papers and documentation. This enabled the process within the project to be clearly documented.

To monitor and evaluate the impact of the project, a range of qualitative (soft) and quantitative (hard) data was gathered at the beginning, during, and at the end of the project. These included:

- pupil, teacher and parent questionnaires
- systematic tracking over two years of the progress and achievement of a targeted cohort of children in each school (those who were in year 5 at the beginning of the project) using a wide range of measures including attainment data
- pupil, teacher and headteacher interviews by the LEA and HEI partners
- documentary evidence, for example, children's work and teachers' lesson plans
- regular joint LEA/HEI classroom observation in each school across the two years
- headteacher progress reports on changes in children's and teachers' behaviours over the two years.

The chapters that follow tell the story of our journey together and the final chapter draws out the important lessons that we learned. Without doubt we found that our learning partnership resulted in changes in the ways in which the children

thought about themselves as learners and approached their learning. These changes led to improvements in motivation, behaviour, engagement in learning and learning outcomes. Similarly there were changes in teacher behaviours and attitudes in respect of their own learning, their understanding of children's learning and their teaching strategies. There were also changes in the behaviour and attitudes of the headteachers as their learning about learning developed over time.

Before embarking on the journey, however, we now turn to a description of the LEA context for the project and a pen portrait of the five schools.

The LEA context at the beginning of the project

At the turn of this century, the outer London Borough of Redbridge served a predominantly suburban area of northeast London with a population of approximately 235,000 inhabitants and a school population of about 43,000 children. Approximately 40 per cent of these children had English as an additional language and there were at least 50 different first languages spoken. Over 2,000 refugee children attended schools in the borough. Minority ethnic communities comprised just under half the total population which was much higher than the national average.

The proportion of Redbridge children with statements of special educational needs (SEN) was below the national figures at both primary and secondary levels. There were, at the time, just over 1,200 children who held a statement meeting their special educational needs, just over 600 of whom were attending mainstream schools.

The LEA maintained 51 primary schools (including nurseries), 17 secondary schools and five special schools. All of the secondary schools had their own sixth form. Some 56 per cent of pupils stayed on in their schools, which was more than twice the national average. Schools were popular both with Redbridge residents and with parents living in neighbouring boroughs.

The project evolved from discussions between the Chief Education Officer, the LEA Advisory Officer whose prime responsibility at the time was special educational needs, a serving primary headteacher and one of the Associate Directors of the International School Effectiveness and Improvement Centre (ISEIC) based at the Institute of Education. The LEA Advisory Officer, Melanie Foster, was committed to developing a network of schools in the borough to share learning and promote inclusion. She was committed to inclusion and she firmly believed that schools working in collaboration to pool expertise would be better placed to generate professional knowledge and skills in order to problem-solve, improve learning and teaching and raise achievement for *all*. The headteacher, Gareth Brooke-Williams, was committed to school improvement. He wanted to share the exciting practice that was developing in his school and to learn with and from others. The HEI partner, Barbara MacGilchrist, had a long track record in school improvement research and practice, and had already worked in partnership with the borough on a number of occasions.

The proposed project had the support of the senior management team within