High Performance Learning

10th Anniversary Lecture: *Beyond School Improvement*

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Beyond School Improvement

It is now 10 years since I published the Red book and launched High Performance Learning in schools. Over that period hundreds of thousands of children and young people in forward-looking schools have benefitted from being educated in a way that teaches them to think and which prepares them not only for exams, but also for their future lives. In this lecture I want to talk about what we have learned from utilising this concept in schools and the lessons we can take forward for the future.

I want to start by putting all this in context. I grew up in rural North Yorkshire. If you were to ask what I was like as a child the word you might hear is 'curious'. I was interested in everything. I asked endless questions and could be quite annoying. I wanted to know about why we did things in certain ways, why things were as they were, and why people took particular actions. My parents were generally quite tolerant of these interrogations and thought curiosity was on the whole a good thing. Sometimes they ran out of patience and gave me a flippant or wrong answer just for fun. Very confusing for me. Living in the country there was plenty of opportunity to study wildlife: flora and fauna – animals and bugs. I remember being fascinated by the newts that lived in the pond in the field behind our garden and watching them for hours. Of course I didn't know then that this desire to understand was at the heart of the memory process. I was encoding, storing and retrieving. In short, I was creating long term memory.

When I went to school, I found that curiosity was definitely not valued. In my independent, girls' boarding school, knowledge and comprehension was the order of the day and any challenges or requests for clarification were firmly rebutted. It was: 'learn it and repeat it'; 'If you want to do well then learn it better and repeat it accurately'. I found school frustrating and my teachers saw me as disruptive. My tendency not to take things at face value and to ask questions when I didn't understand was seen as an irritant. To be honest, I was sometimes disruptive – or maybe subversive. My schooling and me were an unsatisfactory pairing. I did ok, but I was unsure of my capabilities and school didn't see me as a student worth bothering with.

I came out of school with acceptable but unremarkable results and thought I was a middle-ranking student and always would be. Many students feel that way. School is a powerful influencer when it comes to self-identity and it had a singularly negative effect on mine.

Higher education, by contrast, was a revelation. Curiosity, critical thinking and independent thought were the basic requirements. I thrived. Nothing was seen as secure without compelling evidence, and the ability to critique, make judgements and, indeed, come up with new ideas, was the favoured approach. Through investigation and deep learning, ideas and concepts could be encoded in long term memory ready for efficient retrieval. I also learned that collaboration was really valuable. I had always been sociable and had friends, but these intellectual collaborations were satisfying and together we could achieve more than as individuals. We pulled each other along. I was seen as a successful student and that is how I learned to see myself. Capable of more than I had previously thought.

You will not be unsurprised, then, to learn that when I entered the education profession as a primary school teacher, I was inevitably going to stay curious. I was immediately fascinated by why some individual children found learning new things easy and some did not. In particular I taught a Year 6 girl called Rhona. She found maths hard. I would work with her on a concept and she would seem to grasp it, but the next day it was as if I we had not worked on it. She couldn't retain the new learning. Why was that? Reflecting on this over time, I figured that if I better understood the process/es used by children who found learning easy, then I might be able to better construct learning for those who don't.

This started me on a life-long journey of investigating into how successful learners think and learn. It took me from senior leadership in schools to LA adviser, from there to academia and subsequently to major system-leadership roles. At all points I was looking at understanding the learning processes of successful learners and how we can use that in school to improve teaching for everyone.

When it comes to understanding the learning processes of successful learners – sometimes called gifted – there is a great deal of very useful research. The highly regarded Canadian academic Bruce Shore in 2000 (Shore, B. 2000) summarised what we know in this way:

'Successful learners:

- Do not seem to use strategies that others never use
- Differ from others in the creativity and extent to which they draw upon a repertoire of intellectual skills that are nonetheless available to others
- Demonstrate expert performance by using metacognition, strategy flexibility, strategy planning, hypothesis, preference for complexity, extensive webbing of knowledge about both facts and processes.'

Think about that for a moment. So there is nothing unique to them. What is different then? You could say that successful learners have what we all have but they use it better. The question then arises: how do they know when, where and how they should use these processes and what do we mean by using them creatively?

I was interested in exactly how/where individuals learn to successfully use their capabilities. Is it as a result of natural aptitude, or being taught (coached) by parents, or through great teaching? Turns out that it can be any of these, or probably all. Circumstances play a big role in all of this. For example Richard Feyman, the Nobel Prize winning American physicist, was not seen as a strong student at school. He didn't score high enough to get into the school G&T programme. But his father took him on nature walks and taught him to observe carefully, to investigate, to be precise, to think critically and to link new knowledge to old. That is how he became a high performer. So he learned from his parents, but I could equally point you to examples of individuals where teachers – often one very influential teacher – plays the same role.

So if creating successful learners can be taught and we know what good looks like, shouldn't we try to help everyone to become like these successful learners? Surely, we need to remove the element of chance and make it an entitlement, I thought. But how?

Well, we need to model it, nurture it, support it.

Of course, if everyone is to become better then they will need practice. A lot of practice. But practice of what exactly? Anders Ericsson's work points to the need to be more precise about practice. He calls for Deliberate Practice of the things that matter. In this case we know what matters, as the cannon of research has already identified the skills that lead to expert performance. So it is those elements we need to practise (The ACPs and VAAs) if individuals are to achieve school and lifetime success.

Shore says that there are no special characteristics, we can all do it, Really? I wanted to put that proposition to the test. Try it out and see just how far we could get. In doing so, it was obvious that this experiment had two research questions.

Firstly, how, in a practical sense, can we as teachers teach students over time to become proficient? How do we teach them to understand/value the individual 'successful learner' competencies and also help these students reach a state where they are confident in when, where and how they should deploy them creatively? Of course, it is inevitably over time. This is no quick fix. Even Richard Feyman had to go on many walks with his father – and not doubt he had numerous other similar learning experiences – before he was confident enough to apply these ideas independently. Even then he will sometimes have made mistakes. Mistakes are a part of learning. But, over time he became efficient and confident. That is what successful learners demonstrate: their proficiency.

Secondly, if this was to become a teaching pedagogy, then teachers would need to buy into the idea that special circumstances do not exist. People are not born gifted. This was inevitably going to be very challenging. Accepted public wisdom is that differing levels of ability exist and that only some students have high ability, and hence it is only they who can develop into high performers.

This mindset would be a barrier to realising the skills development aspect. Yet it was vital. It has been firmly and repeatedly proven that what a teacher expects is what they get. As far back as 1968, the famous Pygmalion in the Classroom experiment demonstrated the power of teacher expectation (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). So if these ideas were going to work, the skills framework would not be enough. Teachers would need to recalibrate the art of the possible – change their mindset. How?

This, then, is how High Performance Learning came into being as a concept. It is the practical mechanism for solving these critical questions. It positions the idea of #EveryoneCan at the front and centre and recognises that only if teachers buy into this idea can it become a reality. It identifies the research-derived list of intellectual competencies (ACPs and VAAs) associated with successful learning and shows how they work in harmony to create successful learners. It invites teachers to teach in a way that makes the ACPs and VAAs the drumbeat of their classroom, working over time to increase the proportion of students who meet the criteria that defines successful learners. It challenges the school to help their students develop the agency that comes with an understanding of how they learn and how to learn better. All this inevitably leading to better academic outcomes and also that intellectual confidence that makes them life and work ready.

In 2016, the book, High Performance Learning: How To Become A World Class School, was published and the HPL concept was formally introduced to schools. I was curious about how this would work in practice and at scale.

I wanted to start what Rutget Bregman in his Reith Lectures calls a moral revolution. Of course I knew that it would tough but I had the vision and a scalable strategy and all I needed was the unflagging persistence to make it happen.

It gained an encouraging reception from the start and a lot of interest globally. It was welcomed by educationists with some teachers typically saying that 'it is a summation of everything I have always thought teaching should be'. It was gratifying to receive the affirmation for the overall concept but that did not mean that school leaders were prepared to change their schools and work in this new way.

'Where is the evidence of impact?' I was asked. 'I don't know,' I replied. 'No-one has tried it yet. I am inviting you to create the evidence base. What I can say is that it can't do harm and it may prove absolutely transformational.' It is for this reason that I would like to pay thanks to those pioneering headteachers and principals who in the first couple of years were brave enough to join this campaign for better education. I am in your debt.

It was exciting to see what happened when schools began to implement. Some of the outcomes were as anticipated and some were not. There were areas where we ran into problems on implementation and others where the impact was more significant than even I had hoped.

Right from the outset it was clear that working in this way had a profound impact on students and their confidence. They just got what it was all about. From budding entrepreneurs in Abu Dhabi to adolescents in Cornwall, we suddenly had students who held and expressed their own opinions, were confident learners and relaxed about their own learning journey. They knew they were building towards high performance and, if they were not there right now, it was just 'not yet'. The pressure was off. They were happier, enjoyed school more and achieved better results. It was humbling and sometimes moving. For example, Blake at Albany Learning Trust in Chorley, Lancashire, a school refusenik and keen boxer. Hearing him explain how HPL had been a lightbulb moment for him that had helped him improve both in school and in boxing remains a poignant reminder to me of why this is all worthwhile.

As expected, mindset shift in teachers proved challenging. We needed to line up the evidence from psychology and neuroscience. But it was tough going. It helped that Carol Dweck's work on growth mindset was in vogue, as this was moving general opinion from fixed mindset to understanding that intelligence is developmental, but in 2016 most schools were firmly locked into segmenting students by ability and using predictive testing to set targets for achievement. They were locked into the concept of destiny with the possibility of a small amount of growth (stretch targets) in the more ambitious schools. Many fierce debates occurred in schools adopting HPL around the #EveryoneCan agenda – and they still do. Remember the evidence though: the most successful learners do not have special powers, they just use what we all have better.

Finally, we encountered the problem of 'programmes'. Schools had programmes to counter every issue or problem. They were segmenting schooling and seeing every aspect as separate and needing different treatments. Behaviour, engagement, curriculum, well-being, inclusion, etc., etc. It was complex. By contrast, we were explaining that HPL is not a programme: it is a holistic way to view the educational process with a clear and simple goal in mind. It is an example of system thinking. We settled on describing it as a lens through which to view all aspects of the school's teaching and learning, and the HPL adoption scheme as a mechanism to help the school move into that space. This programme-focused approach was so prevalent that it was hard for school leaders to think in a different way. It was expected by inspectors and governors and it took school leaders with exceptional vision, ambition and bravery to take the bold decision to work differently. Thankfully, the school system has some exceptional school leaders in all sectors and it is those who saw the potential of HPL and helped the HPL community to work out the wrinkles in implementation.

These three early factors remain live and in some cases are even more evident than at the start, but in the subsequent 10 years a lot has been learned about the power of HPL.

As I launch the 10th Anniversary Edition of High Performance Learning: How To Become A World Class School, we now have a clearer understanding of how to move the HPL theory into practice in schools and have significant evidence of its impact on students, teachers and schools.

We understand, in a practical sense, how teachers can teach students over time to become proficient learners who can reach high levels of attainment (my first research question). We have found that HPL aligns well with other developing ideas and evidence from fields such as Cognitive Psychology and assessment for learning and that these are helpful in implementing HPL in classrooms. We have established that the 7 Pillars are crucial vehicles in generating a robust and sustainable HPL landscape for HPL in schools. Each one is vital in creating the context for helping teachers to teach in a way that supports students to acquire mastery of the HPL competencies. We have learnt that teaching in this way can be very satisfying for teachers and aligns with their professional values and professionalism.

On my second research question of how to get teachers to buy into the idea that special circumstances do not exist, this remains a work in progress – even in schools that have been HPL schools from the early days. Over the last ten years the research base has become increasingly confirmatory with neuro-science developing rapidly as a concept and demonstrating how neural pathways can be developed and enhanced. Evidence for the proposition is now overwhelming, so we are on safe ground. But evidence does not always change beliefs, and moving teachers into this mindset and retaining them there is an ongoing maintenance job for school leaders. In a survey currently on the UCL website, 94% of primary teachers thought genetics was at least as important as the environment in determining intelligence and, according to the Educator Magazine (2017), 79% of teachers believe what CATs tests predict when the research shows that CATs can only predict around a third of performance. It is against this background that HPL is operating. Misunderstandings abound.

Even where individual teachers believe, their actual behaviour may not reflect this. The familiar is comfortable and the challenges HPL makes to some accepted school practices like setting and differentiation is less so. The HPL community has got better and better at making the case and at supporting senior leaders on how to approach this with their own school community, but the prevailing School Improvement practice of segmentation of students makes it challenging and senior leaders have to be creative, persistent and unyielding on this particular topic.

We also better understand the optimal conditions for success. All schools that adopt HPL see its impact but for some it is absolutely transformational. I was interested to understand what makes the difference. It turns out that there are 3 key factors.

Firstly, fidelity to the concept. Perhaps unsurprisingly it is those schools that use HPL fully that gain most. While all schools see an impact on students, the level of impact is directly related to the degree to which the school takes the concept seriously and makes it the DNA of their school. Fidelity matters. This finding is important for many reasons but particularly because, unless the school is embracing HPL fully, then it is the 'hard to reach' students who will miss out. 'Hard to reach' is an accurate term, and so a school must use High Performance Learning systematically if they are to optimise its impact and ensure students from disadvantaged backgrounds and with SEND benefit fully.

Secondly, precision. Where schools create a community of practice with teachers investigating – in research and in practice – how each individual ACP and VAA can be optimised in their teaching, then the power of each is enhanced. Unleashed teachers working within the HPL framework create magic. Awesome practice is the result. By contrast, schools that choose to make changes to the research-derived terminology because they find it too demanding, or pay only lip service to use of the language in teaching see a reduced impact. It becomes yet another initiative, used well by some but not all.

Thirdly, longevity. The most successful schools are those that have used this over time. The impact of HPL is cumulative. The longer a child is exposed to this, the greater their chance of becoming a successful learner. It is the schools that have made HPL the DNA of the school that are now reaping extraordinary rewards. Outstanding exam results, post-school destinations and inspection reports. MAT excellence awards, International Principal of the Year, letter from the Secretary of State conveying congratulations on pupil outcomes, Parent Power rankings, etc., etc. Well done all of you! Fantastic. I look forward very much to seeing where you go next with HPL. You are breaking new ground in terms of the possible.

So we have established overall proof of concept. The HPL approach works. Not only that, it works in different contexts. It is curriculum and context neutral. It can be used successfully anywhere with any curriculum or educational tradition and with schools at any stage of their development. We have worked in twenty three countries. What it requires is interpretation to make it context suitable. No school in any education system is starting from scratch, and an audit against current practice and an identification of areas to be developed is an essential part of the adoption process.

It has also been established that HPL impacts in positive and unexpected ways. This is most encouraging.

At the student level, the quest to create more successful, high-performing learners has particular impact on traditionally under-performing groups. In the case of children from low-income and disadvantaged backgrounds, HPL changes expectations. These are the students with low aspiration and low intellectual capital. They do not acquire the relevant cognitive and learner skills at home and hence they benefit disproportionately when they are systematically well taught in school. If everyone is expected to do well then that includes them. Family background is not seen as a reason for lower attainment.

Equally, students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). When introducing HPL to the first schools, I was concerned that this might not be relevant to SEND students. But, on the contrary, it has been immensely empowering. They and their parents say that teachers talking about what they could do, and how, instead of focusing only on their deficit, is truly a step-change. High Performance Learning causes teachers to raise their expectations of students with SEND and provides them with the mechanism to assist these students in their learning. More generally, seeing differences in learning as natural rather than as a deficiency changes everything. This focus on removing barriers has been a significant change and makes classrooms properly inclusive.

The #EveryoneCan agenda creates a positive and optimistic school culture and that in turn has an impact on student well-being. In the latest impact survey 91% of students in HPL schools enjoyed attending school, 98% are engaged and confident in their learning and 79% of students have few worries about their academic performance. This includes those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with SEND. These schools are bucking national and international trends.

For teachers accustomed to working within a deficit focused model, HPL has provided a pedagogy of possibility and this has proved professionally rewarding. With the freedom to innovate within a coherent framework, focused on a clear goal that resonates with everyone, teachers are free to develop their professionalism to ever greater levels. 86% of staff in HPL schools think their career in education is fulfilling and enjoy going to work. Again this is against a national and international backdrop of teacher dissatisfaction. In England only 59% of teachers remain in the profession after 10 years (Education Policy Institute, 2023). So something is clearly working. It seems that teaching is also easier when you are co-educating because the students are playing a greater role.

Also mentioned is the breaking down of barriers between the pastoral and academic domains. The VAAs have sometimes been seen as part of the pastoral domain and the ACPs as academic. Seeing them both as inter-connected and crucial to effective learning breaks down that barrier and the results are impressive. HPL has provided a universal language for learning in a way that I did not anticipate and it turns out this this is really useful in enabling professional dialogue across subjects and age-groups.

So where next? In the 2016 edition of the Red book I reflected on the then current research into school improvement and school effectiveness. It was clear at that point that whilst the prevailing School Improvement model – with its template definition of what a good school would look like and

associated inspection systems – had been successful in bringing consistency and acceptable schooling across the system, it is not the vehicle for creating system excellence. That needs a different approach. It requires a move away from a deficit and compliance based model and nstead a move towards a trust based model that is actively building success and where accountability is at the institutional level with light-touch external validation.

Researchers and policy makers were, in 2016, in alignment regarding the limitations of the School Improvement model and researchers were advocating possible solutions. Yet nothing changed. The same model was maintained and strengthened and the result has been incremental gains on the standard measurement data, e.g. PISA rankings, but persistent and systemic issues on the broader agenda of inclusivity, wellbeing, high attainment for everyone (not just some), and a more rounded education that makes students life-ready and work-ready. Now, in 2026, the limitations really are outweighing the benefits. We have reached the stage where 90% of schools in England are judged 'good' or 'outstanding' and so could be said to be School Improvement compliant. By maintaining this model as it currently stands we stop the system from taking a next step towards world-class. Creating 'good schools' that work for some but not all and which are judged against a narrow set of objectives is now inadequate. The system needs to evolve or it will fail to further improve.

This agenda might at first glance seem irrelevant to High Performance Learning but it is not. High Performance Learning thrives best in a post-standardised, high trust model where accountability for success lies first and foremost with the individual institutions or groups of schools. It is possible for schools working within the School Improvement model to implement the HPL approach but it is not ideal. The School Improvement model is too restrictive. This is one reason why the growth in HPL schools has so far been more significant in international and independent schools than in UK state schools. They have more freedom. HPL schools in the UK state sector are few and although they are performing very well it has proved difficult to encourage more schools to adopt. Yet, it is disadvantaged students who stand to benefit most from the HPL approach as they are most at risk of underperformance in school. A conundrum.

When I set out in 2016 to bring new thinking to the educational world based on well attested research in the learning sciences, I thought that once we had some leading schools using High Performance Learning and exemplifying the approach, it would be possible to leverage these schools to be a model and a resource for the system and profession. The concept would take off and start to change the education landscape. As usual I was overly optimistic. We have green shoots but we are certainly not there yet and the policy landscape is a key factor.

As HPL moves to its next stage I believe it will be important to try to influence the policy makers globally and persuade them loosen the reins. This will not be easy and we need to build a community of allies as well as highlight the success of HPL in schools. It is important in this context to remember that sometimes in the past, schemes that were focused on school or system improvement have come across as 'cults' or 'movements'. High Performance Learning is not one of those. It is not a belief system. You do not have to have faith. It is a summation of the evidence. You are merely following the evidence.

In summary, the last ten years has demonstrated comprehensively that the HPL approach, when implemented well, has very significant benefits and few drawbacks. It solves many of the systematic problems that beset education and have done for the last century. We have schools, teachers and leaders who understand how to make this work in school, who can anticipate implementation issues and provide solutions. We have an entire organisation working to support teachers through relevant schemes and support. There is a world-wide community of experts in how to make HPL the DNA of your school. So the stage is set for the next phase of development.

For me, it is immensely rewarding to be drawing closer to the answer of how to help the Rhonas of this world to become successful learners. The High Performance Learning concept will continue to evolve over time in line with emerging research but, right now, to know that it has already excited the students themselves, their teachers and their parents is reward enough. Its progress to date has been a joy to see and hear.

Now I need you to pick up the baton and be ambassadors – and don't be shy about it.

We need to get many more people to understand.

We need to emancipate children from the false narratives of the past that trapped their futures in their previous performance or conditions of their birth.

As the world moves apparently into more turbulent times, we need to equip them better to cope with it and that includes children who people believed, and still believe, couldn't get there.

You have done that. You know it can be done because you're doing it already.

You are already ambassadors! And I look forward to seeing how you'll all be getting on with that.

The work is very urgent.

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