

# 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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## 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 **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.

**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.

The tests of life

A spirit of resourcefulness and resilience

**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.

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.

BLP is vital, difficult  
and do-able

### **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.

more likely to 'screw down' the classroom, being more directive, giving the students less choice, and passing on their pressure to the students. When this happened, students' achievement went down. It did so because the students were learning less resiliently and resourcefully; they were trying to perform rather than to learn. As a result, the authors found that 'the effects of a performance orientation include greater helplessness, reduced help-seeking, less strategy use, more maladaptive strategies, and a greater focus on grade feedback'.<sup>14</sup>

A second finding is that helping students learn how to be better learners is one of the most effective ways of raising their achievement (never mind its role in preparing them for life). The more curious, adventurous, resilient and independent they become, the better are their grades. When students are encouraged to help each other learn, for example, there is a substantial effect on their achievement, and the size of the effect increases the more control and responsibility they are allowed to take.<sup>15</sup> When they are encouraged to keep a diary recording their experiences of and reflections on their own learning, secondary science students, for example, show dramatic improvements on a number of indicators. The authors of this study report that 'the learning journals helped students to develop more sophisticated conceptions of learning, showing an understanding of the purpose and processes of learning'.<sup>16</sup> And, as Chris Watkins notes, we have known for more than 25 years that 'students with more elaborated conceptions of learning perform better in public examinations at age 16'.



### The third dimension of teaching

#### The languages of learning power

In general our attitude is that any list of learning dispositions—ours, Costa's, Richhart's—serves the very useful purpose of getting teachers into the right territory—we all share a general sense of what 'right' means. Many schools are not used to focusing on the habits and processes of learning itself. Teachers are used to thinking about their lessons in terms of two dimensions: the subject-matter they are trying to get across (the 'syllabus') and the effectiveness with which they have done so ('assessment'). How to teach *Macbeth* or Atomic Weight, for example, and how to check students' understanding, are familiar issues, and teachers think and talk fluently about these aspects of what they do. But there is a third dimension which is at the core of learning power: the learning habits and attitudes which are being exercised *by the way those subjects are being presented, taught and assessed*. You can teach *Macbeth*, and get good exam results, in a way that stretches students' abilities to imagine, collaborate, and question. And you can also teach *Macbeth*, and get good results, in a way that makes students more passive, docile, and dependent. For BLP, it is this difference that is crucial.

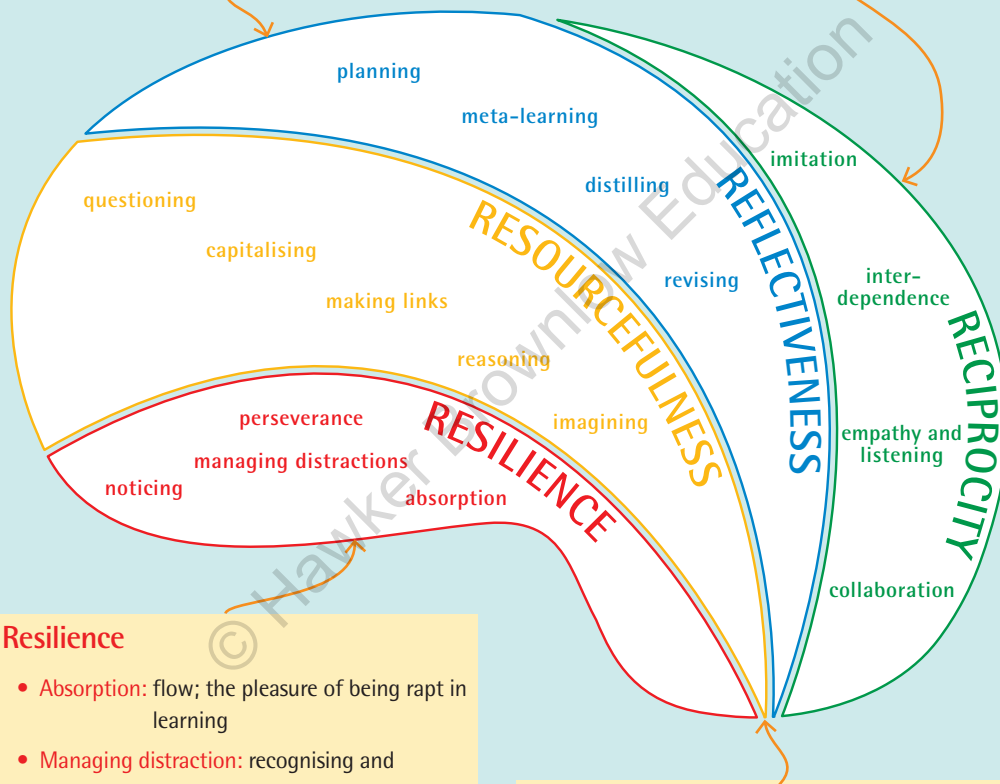
## The Supple Learning Mind

### Reflectiveness

- **Planning:** working learning out in advance
- **Revising:** monitoring and adapting along the way
- **Distilling:** drawing out the lessons from experience
- **Meta-learning:** understanding learning, and yourself as a learner

### Reciprocity

- **Interdependence:** balancing self-reliance and sociability
- **Collaboration:** the skills of learning with others
- **Listening/Empathy:** getting inside others' minds
- **Imitation:** picking up others' habits and values



### Resilience

- **Absorption:** flow; the pleasure of being rapt in learning
- **Managing distraction:** recognising and reducing interruptions
- **Noticing:** really sensing what's out there
- **Perseverance:** stickability; tolerating the feelings of learning

### Resourcefulness

- **Questioning:** getting below the surface; playing with situations
- **Making links:** seeking coherence, relevance and meaning
- **Imagining:** using the mind's eye as a learning theatre
- **Reasoning:** thinking rigorously and methodically
- **Capitalising:** making good use of resources

## Building interpersonal interaction

**Reciprocity** covers the **social** and interpersonal side of learning: being able both to argue your corner and keep an open mind in discussion; listening carefully and seeing other sides to the question; being a collaborative team member and team-leader; and being open to positive skills and attitudes that are being modelled by those around you.

## Building responsibility for learning

**Reflectiveness** covers the **strategic** and **self-managing** sides of learning. It includes planning and anticipating needs and obstacles; taking stock and flexibly revising your approach as you go along; distilling out lessons and applications for the future; and honest self-appraisal of yourself as a learner.

On page 41 you can see the vocabulary we used to capture these complementary aspects of what we called 'the supple learning mind'.

Many schools clearly like this way of giving structure and meaning to the dispositions. Others, however, can either get stuck at the 'coarse grain' level, or dive down into the 'fine grain' level too fast, and get confused.

## An accessible language

**Third**, if the language of learning is to have the pragmatic function we want—if it is to become part of the everyday lingo of a school—we think that it must be couched in terms that are accessible to students and their parents, as well as to teachers. This has meant resisting the temptation, all too strong in educational circles, to use language that is designed to look academic or abstruse. We have already mentioned 'reflectiveness', for example, which is an important facet of powerful learning. But the concept can perfectly well be brought to life through everyday phrases such as 'thinking about what you are doing', 'standing back and taking stock', or 'checking your approach'. We have almost had to become bilingual, using one kind of language to convince officials or academic colleagues of the legitimacy of the BLP approach, and another to get the ideas across to students, parents and teachers.

## Optimising the positive

The need for accessibility also means looking for ways of designing and presenting ideas to schools that are attractive and appealing. We don't see any merit in perpetuating the idea that if something is to be taken seriously, it has to look dull. In our view, such an attitude is merely self-defeating. This is not a matter of 'dumbing down' the concepts, nor of 'being patronising' (both accusations have been levelled at BLP, mostly by academics). It is a matter of trying to optimise the positive impact of what we are doing, and what we care about.

Since 2002, schools have helped us learn a lot about getting the language right—though the feedback has not always been what we would have expected. Take the word 'reciprocity', for example. When we were putting the framework together, we were looking for a fourth word beginning with R to cover the social side of being a powerful learner.



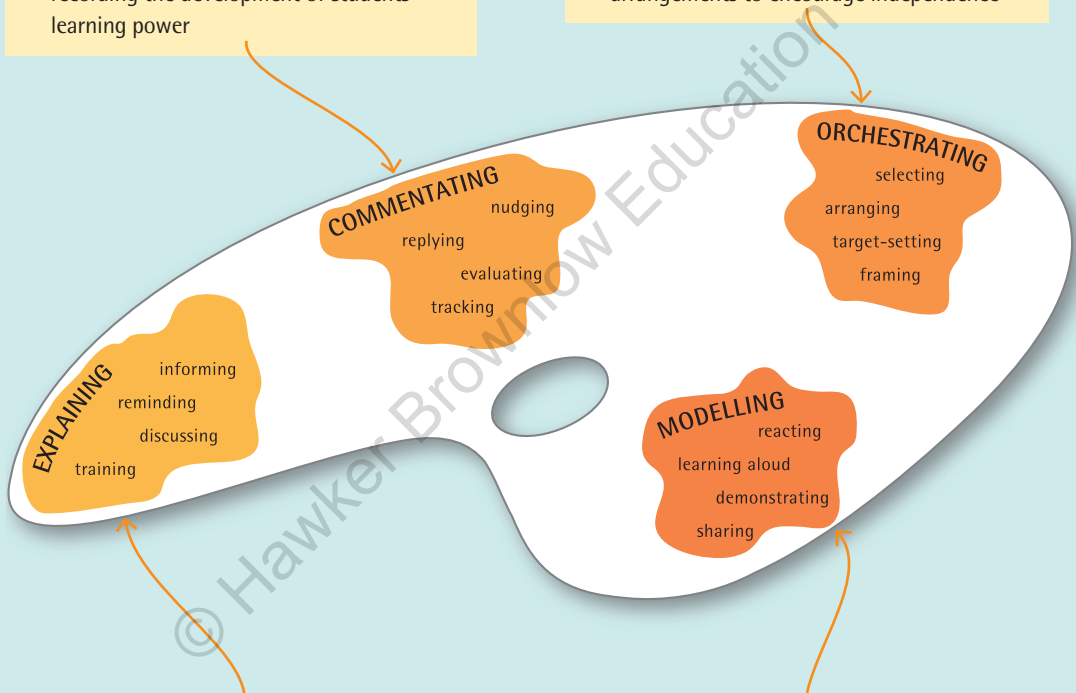
## The Teachers' Palette

### Commentating

- drawing individual students' attention towards their own learning
- responding to students' comments and questions in ways that encourage learning-to-learn
- commenting on difficulties and achievements in learning-positive ways
- recording the development of students' learning power

### Orchestrating

- choosing activities that develop the learning habits
- clarifying the learning intentions behind specific activities
- helping students set and monitor their own learning power targets
- making use of displays and physical arrangements to encourage independence



### Explaining

- making clear the overall purpose of the classroom
- offering ongoing reminders and prompts about learning power
- inviting students' own ideas and opinions about learning
- giving direct information and practice in learning: tips and techniques

### Modelling

- responding to unforeseen events, questions, etc. in ways that model good learning
- externalising the thinking, feeling and decision making of a learner-in-action
- having learning projects that are visible in the classroom
- talking about their own learning careers and histories

'best practice' or 'next practice', because, unless you specify very clearly what the goal actually is, it is all too easy to think that you are merely talking about schools that get better results (as conventionally defined). BLP is not primarily about improving a school's position in the league tables, whether they be local authority tables, or the OECD tables of international comparison. For those fancy phrases to mean anything, you have to spell out 'world-class *at what?*', 'transformational *to what?*', and 'next practice *for what?*' That's why the first chapter of this book stressed the clarity and the validity of the BLP vision.

## The lenses of the BLP leader

School leaders who have embarked on the BLP journey see the world through a specific set of lenses.

- Their vision of building powerful real-world learners needs to be compelling enough to attract a wide following, even when it is different from what the school down the road, the local authority, or the current government are saying. You need to make strenuous and persistent efforts to win the hearts and minds of colleagues, governors, parents, and local advisers. This takes courage and conviction.
- Their approach to innovation will tend to echo the values and approaches to learning advocated in BLP. Creating a learning-powered school is a learning journey. You cannot just buy the BLP manual and implement it. To create the kind of culture change that is necessary, you have to read, and think, and argue, and experiment, and adjust, and try again. A BLP school needs to be growing in its collective resilience, resourcefulness, reflection, and relationships, at the same time as it is trying to cultivate those qualities in its pupils. In short, they create a dialogue about learning, they actively encourage experimentation, and they involve everyone in monitoring improvements that are not always measurable in the traditional ways of measuring attainment.
- Their leadership style involves modelling these learning virtues to the best of their ability. Leaders in BLP schools tend to be passionate learners themselves, interested in learning processes, keeping up with research, and able and willing to talk about their own learning lives to staff and pupils alike. Learning-powered leaders tend to see themselves as leaders of learning, encouraging everyone in the community to be less afraid of risk or uncertainty by their own example.
- Their model of leadership tends to be a distributed one. They usually encourage others to manifest and model learning qualities in their own professional lives. This will include students, especially in their dealings with those younger or 'newer' than themselves.
- Their approach to professional development for staff centres on growing their confidence and expertise in BLP. This usually means

A compelling vision

Involving everyone in discussing, trying things out and seeing what works

A passionate learner

Enabling others to lead