

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’

Some teachers and school leaders are keen to get going with BLP; they like the ideas, and all they want to know is how to put BLP ideas into practice in their own situations. But over the years we have encountered a variety of doubts, anxieties, challenges and misapprehensions about what BLP means for a school, and what its likely effects might be. Some teachers are more cautious, and may have quite legitimate questions they need answering before they are willing to try out some of the ideas whole-heartedly. Perhaps they have seen educational fads and fashions come and go, and are naturally a little sceptical of what might turn out to be, as one teacher called it, a JABI—‘just another blooming initiative’ (or words to similar effect).

These questions are of many different kinds. Some are to do with beliefs and values. ‘Does this fit with my own identity as a teacher?’ Some want to know the rationale: ‘How solid are the foundations?’ (These two we have tried to answer in the previous two chapters). Some questions are requests for evidence. Some concern the specifics of implementation. Some reflect more-or-less conscious, more-or-less deep-seated beliefs about teaching and learning—even about the natures and capacities of young minds. In this chapter, we try to articulate some of these FAQs, and sketch our answers to them. (The rest of the book provides much more detailed answers to some of these questions.) We hope that this overview will be useful to individuals, as they figure out whether BLP is something for them, and seek to understand just what is being asked of them.

We also hope this chapter will be helpful to senior leadership teams, as they travel the inevitably rocky road to culture change in their schools. It is obviously essential to allow these questions to surface, and to treat them with respect. Most of them are not born out of knee-jerk cynicism or entrenchment. They deserve time and attention. The research of Michael Fullan and others shows that time allowed for discussion, argument and the expression of misgivings is almost always time well spent. Where dissent and challenge are suppressed, polarisation and even subversion are much more likely to emerge.



Here are some of the common ‘Yes, Buts’—or even just plain ‘Buts’.

‘It sounds interesting, but we just can’t risk the examination results.’

When pupils are helped to become more confident and independent as learners, and more articulate about the process of learning itself, their results go up, not down. Under test conditions, they are less likely to ‘go to pieces’; they are more resilient in the face of difficulty—they don’t give

up so easily; they are more resourceful—if it doesn't work one way, they are better at finding other strategies or avenues to try. And so they do better. BLP depends on this 'AND' philosophy: better preparation for life AND better examination performance.

However, some people seem to want to keep surreptitiously replacing that AND with an OR. It's as if they can't quite let themselves believe that AND is a real possibility. But the evidence says it is. The real choice is not between 'results' and some risky, new-fangled stuff called 'key competencies' or 'character capabilities'; it is between results achieved through cramming and spoon-feeding, and results achieved through the development of initiative and self-reliance. This EITHER / OR mindset can be countered through reading and discussion of what the research actually says—a discussion in which parents and governors (as well as students themselves) can fruitfully be involved.

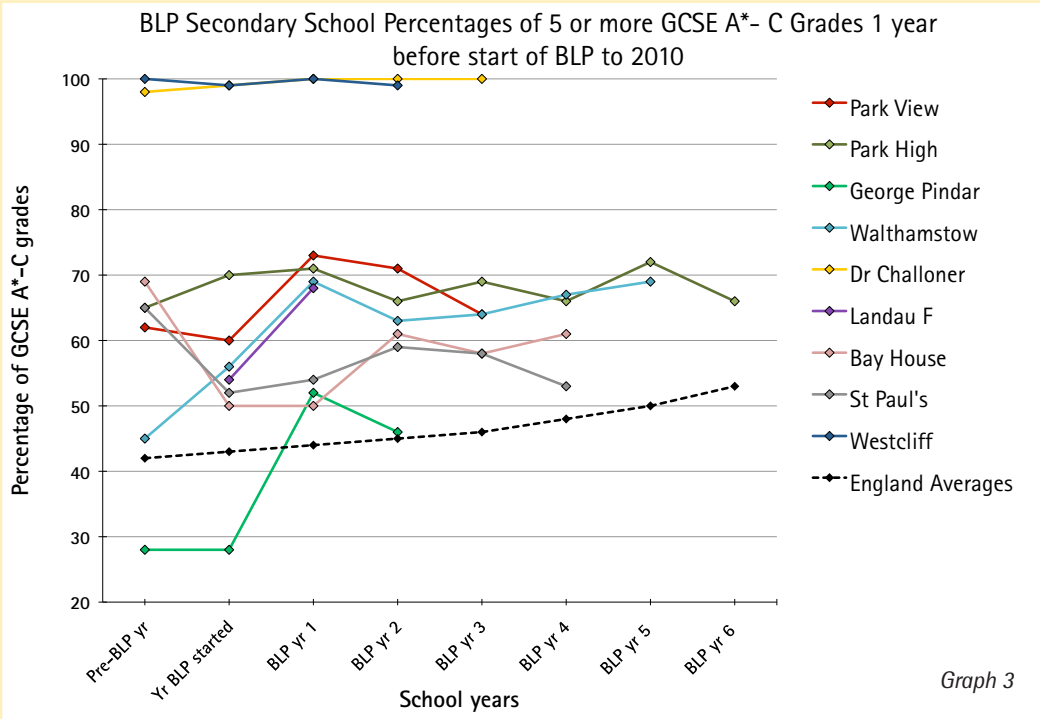
'There might well be a wobble in the results while we are getting used to new ways of working—for which we might be clobbered.'

This concern is a perfectly reasonable variation of the previous one. It is not the worry that there is a deep incompatibility between the two goals; it is more that the implementation of BLP might destabilise the pupils' learning (for a while), and the results might go down in the short term, before they go up in the longer term. The worry is that the 'powers that be'—the local authority, Ofsted—might not have the patience or the faith to wait for the recovery, and penalise the school in the meantime.

The extent to which this is a real risk depends on circumstances. Some schools have to work with local authorities that are in highly draconian mode, demanding short-term improvements in test scores at any cost. The moment might indeed not be right to take on a new approach. And results do wobble even at the best of times, without the attempt to install a learning-to-learn culture. It would be much more supportive and intelligent if schools were judged on a rolling three- or five-year average of their results, say, not solely year by year. The extent of these wobbles can be seen in the 'multiple baseline' graph on the next page. (The bulk of our data is presented in Chapter 11.) This graph charts the GCSE performance of our group of BLP secondary research schools from two years before they introduced BLP, until the present. This gives us some idea about the variability in GCSE results from year to year before and after BLP was introduced. As you can see, the 'wobbles' occur just as much on both sides of the BLP start year.

'AND' philosophy





Perhaps the most reassuring thing to remember here is that BLP involves not a quick revolution but a gradual evolution. It offers a clear direction of travel for a school, and then a whole variety of ways in which progress in that direction can be made in small steps. Every teacher can start to make small adjustments to the way they plan lessons, or talk to students, that do not threaten or overwhelm anyone. Every school can experiment with small changes to the way they write reports or organise assemblies that won't jeopardise hard-won league table positions. Many of the changes that BLP involves are quite small-scale, and are not destabilising in the least. Yet these small shifts very often seem to make a tangible difference to levels of curiosity and engagement in all concerned. BLP's 'slow and steady' approach minimises the risk that there will be any sudden shocks to the system of a school which might impact adversely on results.

'It's all very well, but we just can't afford all the time it would take.'

Yes, BLP takes time to embed in a school, and effort by individual teachers before it becomes second nature. It isn't a quick fix or a glossy veneer, and we make no apology for that. But, as we have just said, the gradual, long-haul nature of BLP means you can take it slowly and by degrees. The

guiding principles translate into a smorgasbord of small suggestions and possibilities, each one of which is not too demanding, and which build cumulatively into a significant shift in atmosphere and focus.

'Something hit me very hard once, thinking about what one little man could do. Think of the Queen Mary—the whole ship goes by and then comes the rudder. And there's a tiny thing at the edge of the rudder called a trim tab. It's a miniature rudder. Just moving the little trim tab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. Takes almost no effort at all. So I said that the little individual can be a trim tab. Society thinks it's going right by you, that it's left you altogether. But if you're doing dynamic things mentally, the fact is that you can just put your foot out like that and the whole big ship of state is going to go. So I said, call me Trim Tab.'

Buckminster Fuller

BLP is not a whole new initiative or technology at all; it doesn't require mastery of a complex set of procedures, and there isn't a fat manual to be memorised. It is a set of small adjustments to 'the way we do things round here' that set the big, complicated entity that is a school off on a different course. Buckminster Fuller used the idea of a trim tab—the tiny 'rudder within a rudder' that makes it easier for a big ship to change course—as a metaphor for the effect that one individual can have on his or her society. BLP is constantly on the look-out for small changes that can have big effects in schools. BLP is more about trim tabs than grand revolutions.

'Ofsted won't like it. We've got an inspection coming up, so we will need to 'revert to type' when the inspectors come in.'

Again, the risk of such judgements is real, but we have found it to be much smaller than many schools fear. Though the inspection framework does not explicitly value the development of students' independent learning habits, overwhelmingly we find that inspectors love it when they see it. From the reports we have gathered from inspections of BLP schools, their overwhelming reaction is to congratulate schools where they find the pupils are self-aware and articulate about their learning, happy to take responsibility for their own learning, good at collaborating, and so on. And if the results in high-performing schools hold up, and those in lower-performing schools increase...what's not to like?

Actually, we have found that reverting to type, when the inspectors come to call, can be counter-productive. One academy nearly lost its 'outstanding' assessment, because the teachers tried to 'play it safe', and it was the pupils themselves who saved the day—as the Principal explains:

Take it slowly

Small changes,
big levers.

A cautionary tale

'[The children] spoke about learning in a way that could not have been shaped by the lessons the inspectors were seeing. The inspectors said, "Hang on a minute: there's a mismatch here. We're seeing predominantly quite defensive lessons, not much risk-taking. But your children are talking a completely different game! The teaching we are seeing can't be representative of what the children are getting!" And that got them [the inspectors] looking more deeply at the culture of the school as a whole.'

'I suspect that BLP is just "good teaching" wrapped up in fancy words. It is what good teachers have always done.'

Well, that depends on your definition of 'good teaching', and the outcomes by which you judge it. There is plenty of evidence that some schools and teachers consistently get good exam results, but they do it by spoon-feeding, and their students do not develop high levels of emotional resilience, cognitive resourcefulness, sociability, and self-awareness along the way. If you don't notice, or don't care, that a good many of them become anxious and lost during their first year at university—if you don't think it is any of your business—then you could call what you do 'good teaching'—but we don't.

There are many schools and teachers that adopt an in-between position. 'We make our students think and stretch their minds', they say, and they do. But it is a rare school that, without the benefit of BLP (or similar approaches such as Habits of Mind) has thought through exactly what learning habits they are trying to develop, and how, systematically, they are going about it. 'Today, class, we are going to learn about electromagnetism, AND we are going to stretch our ability to use visualisation productively in a scientific context', is not something you hear as often as 'Explain carefully your reasons for thinking that'. In other words, many schools do aim to train students' powers of reasoning and argument—but they often miss out many of the other elements that go to make up a powerful learner, and they leave learners in the dark about what's going on in their learning.

BLP brings a new degree of rigour and precision to the venerable view of education as a 'training of the mind'. It broadens and makes more explicit what that intention involves. So, yes, BLP is about 'good teaching', but it is a rare school, when it realises what BLP actually involves, that can honestly say 'We are doing all this already'. Usually, on closer inspection, what they are doing is somewhat patchy and partial. In our experience, it is the schools that have taken BLP most seriously, and made the most innovative uses of it, that are always the first to say, 'And we are still only doing a fraction of what we now see is possible'.

What learning habits do we want to develop?

A new rigour for 'training of the mind'

'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



as many children who flounder as who flourish. BLP owes nothing to the romantic conception of Rousseau's Emile, and everything to a cold, hard appraisal of the psychological and social qualities today's young people are going to need as adults.

BLP suggests we look for ways to give pupils more and more responsibility for organising and evaluating their own learning, not because telling them what to do and how well they did it damages their development, but because—pretty obviously—you learn to be independent and self-disciplined by being given opportunities to exercise independence and self-discipline! Within weeks, four-year-olds can, given the chance, strengthen their ability to choose and manage aspects of their own learning. And the BLP teacher is constantly on the look-out for opportunities, not to abandon children to their own devices, but to stretch their ability to 'do it for themselves'.

Learn to be independent by practising being independent

'We've got a stand-alone Learning to Learn course in Year 7 already; we don't need another initiative, thank you.'

The trouble with stand-alone courses in Thinking Skills or Learning to Learn is that they don't have much impact beyond the particular setting in which they happen. Evaluations of such courses tend to find, disappointingly, that any benefits don't last, and they don't generalise to other contexts.² Transferable benefits are much more likely to result from an 'infusion' approach, in which the cultivation of thinking and learning habits is addressed and promoted across the curriculum and beyond. As David Perkins's work has shown, skills that are taught or trained directly, in only one kind of situation, tend to remain tied to the content, context and purposes that obtained in that situation. If the skills are to turn into flexible, generalisable habits of mind, they have to be used in a range of contexts, especially those where their use is not explicitly prompted.

The problem of transfer

'We've done learning to learn, thinking skills and so on. We've moved on to much more cutting edge developments such as X, Y or Z.'

Following on from the previous question, schools and teachers have to help that process of generalisation to occur, and that won't happen just in a lesson or two a week of playing with logical puzzles, or sitting in a circle discussing philosophical chestnuts. If there is an infused culture of learning in a school already, then we find that some time explicitly talking about the learning habits can help students deepen their grasp of them. But if that broad culture is missing, then lessons on thinking or learning by themselves are unlikely to lead to any benefits that last and spread. That is why BLP, as

it has evolved, has expanded its focus from the design of lessons to include the background culture of the classroom, and, beyond the classroom, to include many different aspects of the ethos and fabric of the school as a whole.

Schools that see BLP as a time-limited initiative that you 'do', and then you have 'done it', simply haven't understood it. BLP is a creative journey, not a quick fix. It is not a package that you implement; it is an ever-deepening exploration of how to build a culture that breeds confident, intelligent, powerful lifelong learners. Andrea Curtis, Head of Bushfield School in Milton Keynes, says, *'When I first came across BLP, what I didn't realise was the depth of it. I didn't realise how challenging it was going to be.'* Bushfield has been working with BLP for three years, and has made huge strides. It is one of the most innovative and successful BLP primary schools. And yet at one point they felt the need to apologise for achieving less than they now know they could achieve. Not all schools are ready to think as deeply and explore as creatively as Bushfield have done. But it is important to understand that changing a culture is not a quick and easy thing to do.

A creative journey

'We think BLP looks OK for the more able students, but what about the less able?'

Our review shows that there is a degree of truth in this concern, but that it is far from being the whole picture. It is true that students who are already confident learners can catch on to the BLP language more readily than those whose learning confidence and capacity have been limited or stunted. Students who have more or less given up on learning may be harder to enthuse with the idea that, with effort, they can build their confidence and capacity back up. But it is not impossible. You may have to start at a lower level than you hoped, and cajole them more persistently, but lower-achieving students soon latch on to BLP and find it useful.

Take George Pindar Community Sports College, which serves a very deprived area of Scarborough, and with many low-achieving students. As in many schools in similarly demanding areas, we have found that currently lower-achieving students thrive on learning experiences that stretch their learning muscles. For example, a group of lower ability Year 9 students at George Pindar were challenged to investigate a painting. Given pieces of the picture bit by bit, they were required to pose questions, make links, reason and imagine. As one student said to her teacher, *'You're making my brain hurt—in a good way; I want to work this out for myself.'* Although these students had little experience away from their Scarborough council estate, their perceptions became increasingly astute and their capacity to develop greater collaboration, and to keep an open mind to new ideas, was impressive. Even when they had assembled the whole picture, the students, egged on by their teacher, were still full of questions, and sought



out internet resources that would enable them to check and refine their ideas still further.

In the thousands of hours that we collectively have spent in lessons, we have noticed that lower attaining students are often given experiences that are well within their capabilities. They are not challenged by what they are given to do, and do not yet know how to make it more challenging, and therefore interesting, for themselves. But when provided with an intriguing and well-orchestrated learning stretch, and encouraged to take more control of their learning, such students very often show greater engagement, and surprise both their teachers and themselves. At Simpson School in Milton Keynes, for example, Charlie, a seven-year-old tearaway, describes his changing experience of school very clearly:



'Until I got my learning muscles, I used to kick off; but now I know that I've got a good imagination, and my teacher helps me use it, I don't kick off no more.'

**'We think BLP looks OK for our less able students—
but what about the high achievers and the gifted
and talented?'**

This is the exact reverse of the previous worry. Some schools think that, while the low-achievers can use a bit of help, their 'high-fliers' are fine as they are. They must already be powerful learners, right, or they wouldn't be high-achievers? However, BLP draws a sharp distinction between students who have mastered a narrow set of learning techniques that they have found to deliver examination success, and students who have developed a broader, deeper capacity for learning in all its forms, in school and out. We sometimes ask teachers: 'Do you think it is possible to be a successful student, and not a very powerful learner?' After a few seconds thought, the vast majority say 'Yes'. They can easily think of students who do well on tests, but who are anxious and conservative in their approach to learning more generally. They also agree with the converse: that it is possible to be a powerful learner, and not a very successful student.

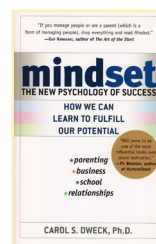


So BLP can indeed be of value to high-achieving students and high-achieving schools. Take Dr Challoner's Grammar School, a very high-achieving secondary school in the leafy Home Counties town of Amersham, for example. In Mark Sturgeon's A2 geography class, as in many other lessons, the students had got used to their teachers providing them with prescribed ways of answering examination questions. They had become rather passive and 'instrumental' in their approach to learning—and Mark wanted to do something about it. He wanted his 18-year-olds to pose more questions for themselves, to explore issues from a variety of angles, and to venture their own ideas and solutions. So in a unit on the developing world,

he reversed his normal teaching strategy, and asked them to raise their own questions about agriculture, trade and international relations before showing them a video about Tanzania. He wanted them to be prepped with their own interests, so that, when they watched the film, they would do so with greater curiosity and discernment. Nor did he simply let the film run its course: he constantly stopped the film, quizzing the students about how their ideas and questions were developing, and getting them to pool their thoughts on mini-whiteboards. After a few weeks of such teaching, Mark's students have moved from being passive recipients to active interrogators of information and ideas. Such a shift is hardly revolutionary, and it is certainly not unique to BLP. But it does illustrate how a small change in a teacher's habits can quickly produce a concomitant change in the learning habits of his or her students—even the high-achievers. And no prizes for guessing whether the A-level results went up or down as a result.

'By the time we get them, it is really too late to try to shift their attitudes to learning.'

This is a concern that is sometimes expressed by sixth forms, sixth form colleges or further education colleges. And yes, as with many other traits, as people get older, so their beliefs and attitudes towards learning may become more fixed and resistant to change. But all is not lost. Carol Dweck, in her book *Mindset*, describes research with teenagers, undergraduates and working adults, which shows, as Dweck puts it, that 'it is never too late to develop a growth mindset'. Many high school students changed their attitudes towards learning after even a relatively brief intervention.



Luton Sixth Form College

Luton Sixth Form College had been using the BLP framework for some years. In 2008 they commissioned a project, funded by the National Association for Gifted and Talented Youth and carried out by the Villiers Park Educational Trust, to explore students' experience of the use of the BLP capacities in their lessons. The project was planned jointly with a group of students, who decided to focus on a subset of the capacities:

- absorption, managing distractions
- questioning, making links, capitalising
- planning, revising, distilling
- collaboration, empathy and listening

Students kept logs of the frequency and utility of these capacities in about 50 lessons in eight subjects over a period of four weeks. All the capacities were used with empathy and listening topping the list. The scoring scales indicated that all the capacities were felt to be useful and effective overall. Variations between students' judgements indicate the significant



differences that they bring to bear on their learning. High-achieving A-level students found it both plausible and useful to think about their approaches to and methods of learning.

Overall, we are encouraged by such examples to believe that older students can indeed benefit from the explicitness of the BLP approach.

'We've tried it and the pupils don't like it. They want to be spoon-fed.'

There is an old Polish proverb which says, *'One who sleeps on the floor need not fear falling out of bed'*, and there are indeed some students like that. They prefer to be passive passengers rather than active 'crew' as far as their education is concerned, because that way they do not have to take any risks or be held responsible. And the more we tow them through the curriculum, rather than making them learn how to use their own muscles to swim, the more likely they are to develop that passive attitude. We should not be surprised—and certainly not defeated—if at first some of them resist our efforts to get them to think for themselves. But we have found that, for the vast majority of pupils, this is just a habit that, with a bit of persistence and persuasion, they can get over; and when they do, they discover that school is more engaging and more rewarding. They become more keen to be proactive and independent.

The Golden Rules, when you start to push students towards taking more responsibility for their own learning, are:

- start small: make just one or two small shifts to 'the way we do things round here'
- but be persistent and consistent in reminding pupils what your expectations are, and in noticing and commenting approvingly when they meet those expectations.

Don't try to get them to run before they can walk, and don't back down in the face of any resistance. Remember: BLP is not *laissez-faire*. You are coaching and training your students in a positive attitude towards learning.

'What about the parents? They may be suspicious, and many of them mainly want their children to 'make the grades', and will get upset if it looks like we are going to jeopardise that.'

BLP does focus on an aspect of education that many parents will find unfamiliar. Some may take a while to grasp what it is you are up to, and some may indeed be sceptical. They may well think that school is mostly about examination results (and 'good behaviour'), because that is what they experienced when they were at school. If they did badly, in those

**Start small
Be persistent**

**Another game
afoot—another
way of winning**

terms, they may have decided that 'school isn't for people like us', and tacitly collude in their child's passivity or disengagement. If they themselves enjoyed what school had to offer, and did well at it, they are more likely to be pushing their child to succeed in the same ways. Either way, they may take some persuading that there is another game afoot—another way of 'winning' at school, regardless of the exam results.

And they may take some reassuring that this other game, the game of building their child's confidence and capacity for real-life learning, will boost rather than risk their examination performance. As we will see in Chapter 10, explaining and demonstrating to parents what BLP means for their child, so that they will support your efforts, is an important layer of the culture change process that schools need to attend to. It may take a year or two of gentle persuasion before the bulk of them are on board; or it may happen sooner. We have found that, if school leaders and teachers take the time to discuss what they are doing, and why, the vast majority of parents understand it, support it, and want to know how they can help.

'What can you do with our local kids? It's their background that determines their attitudes to learning. That's just how they are, and there's no point trying to change it.'

The final two concerns are cries of fatalism. The first one suggests there is no point in trying to develop students' capacity as learners because their home background—usually presumed to be one of disaffection with education—will overwhelm any attempts to do so. It is fair to say that this objection is much less common now than it was ten years ago. We now know that young people's attitudes are not fixed by their early experience, but remain quite malleable. Some youngsters may be very hard to change, but the majority, our schools tell us, respond well to the idea that their minds can get fitter, stronger and more supple—just as their bodies can.

Learning habits are amenable to coaching. If your pupils are not very good at listening to each other, or justifying their opinions, or concentrating in the face of distractions—set up a training programme and coach it. Over the course of a term (or even just a few weeks) these habits of mind can be developed. Scatty children can become more able to concentrate. Dreamy children can learn to think more carefully. Solitary children can learn to collaborate effectively with other children who they may not know, or even like. Dependent children can learn to enjoy evaluating and improving their own work. Children with brittle self-esteem can discover the pleasure to be had in choosing and struggling with difficult things. That is the BLP teacher's mindset: 'If you want it, coach it!'

Attitudes remain malleable

'If you want it, coach it!'

'It's all very well, but at the end of the day it's mostly down to a child's ability—and there's not much you can do about that. '

It is belief in ability that counts

The second kind of fatalism is the one that attributes most of a child's success or failure to their 'ability' or 'intelligence', which is seen as fixed, and therefore beyond the teachers' power to influence. This can be quite a 'sticky' idea in some teachers' minds, but we saw in the last chapter that it is false. It is not a child's 'ability' that sets a ceiling on what they can do, it is their (and their teachers') *belief* in their ability that is much more potent. And these beliefs can be changed. As Henry Ford is reputed to have said, 'The person who believes they can, and the one who believes they can't, are both right.' The evidence is overwhelming, in BLP schools as well as in the research literature, that small, smart practical shifts in the way teachers talk and act can either unleash, or dam up, students' learning power.

As part of its journey, a school may have to address some or all of these Frequently Asked Questions for discussion. It will probably take more than these short paragraphs to convince a sceptical colleague or parent; but this chapter should at least help to get the conversation going. The rest of the book provides much more detailed advice about how to implement the BLP philosophy successfully.