Transforming positive risk-taking practices: the possibilities of creativity and resilience in learning disability contexts

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In this article we examine discourses, conceptualisations and practices of positive risk-taking for or by children and adults with learning disabilities. We identify tensions and contradictions in positive risk-taking discourses that are unhelpful for clarifying for practitioners how positive risk-taking might be implemented. We suggest a conceptual framework that incorporates creativity and resilience and use this to offer examples from special and inclusive education (Intensive Interaction and Learning without Limits) that illustrate how positive risk-taking can be found in education practices. We conclude by arguing that conceptual frameworks such as the one proposed, when linked to supportive frameworks and guiding principles that emphasise professional judgement, offer one way to problematise and challenge current risk-averse practices in education, health and social care settings.

Keywords: positive risk-taking; learning disabilities; special education; inclusive education; creativity; resilience

Introduction

The focus of this article is positive risk-taking, particularly the practice of those who are supporting children and adults with learning disabilities to take risks or who take positive risks themselves which impact on the lives of children and adults with learning disabilities. We examine how positive risk-taking is talked about, conceptualised, and implicitly understood along with the implications this has for the development of positive risk-taking practices.

Our examination is informed by our previous research and a review of international research literature that makes reference to risk or safety (and related terms such as safeguarding) in the context of the health, social care or education of children and adults with learning disabilities. Learning disability/disabilities is a UK term, interchangeable with intellectual disability internationally and with learning difficulties as preferred by some self-advocacy organisations. In this article we use the term 'learning disabilities' because it is terminologically consistent with most of the risk literature we reviewed. Whilst the definition of learning disabilities varies from paper to paper, we note a general trend towards three ideas common to the literature. Firstly, people with learning disabilities are deemed to have some form of difficulty

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with experiencing and acquiring new information. Secondly, this difficulty is described as starting in childhood. Thirdly, the difficulty is said to impact on people's ability to cope independently. We acknowledge the role of the environment in further disabling or enabling the individual.

Positive risk-taking is generally understood as enabling people with learning disabilities (among others) to have greater control over the way they live their lives, which may bring benefits in independence and well-being, but may also involve an element of risk either in terms of health and safety or in a potential failure to achieve the intended goal (Manthorpe et al. 1997; Alaszewski and Alaszewski 2002). Positive risk-taking stresses managing risk not ignoring it; taking positive risks because the potential benefits outweigh the potential harm. Such an approach requires a change in practice for those who support people with learning disabilities. For example, the UK strategy document, 'Valuing People Now' referred to services getting the balance wrong between protecting vulnerable people and helping people have a life and argues that 'positive risk-taking should be a part of everyone's life' (Department of Health 2007a, 77).

Also central to the conceptualisation and implementation of positive risk-taking is a decision-making and negotiation process whereby people with learning disabilities are supported in weighing risks against benefits. This supported decision-making is significantly different to the practice of substitute decision-making that is more commonly described in the practice literature in which professionals weigh up the risks and benefits of decisions (see for example Carlson and Wilson 1998). In supported decision-making the 'risks of independence for individuals are shared with them and balanced openly against benefits' (Department of Health 2005, 10). The success of positive risk-taking therefore relies on 'shared risk-taking' where professionals, carers, parents and people with learning disabilities work together to agree actions (McConkey and Smyth 2003).

The idea that risk-taking can be beneficial for people with learning disabilities is not new. Perske (1972, 195) for example, argued that experiencing 'the risk-taking of ordinary life' is necessary for human growth and development. The Jay Committee Report on Mental Handicap Nursing and Care in England argued back in 1979 that 'mentally handicapped people' needed to assume a 'fair and prudent share of risk (Jay 1979, para. 121). Despite this, and despite recent policy goals for an 'ordinary life' which one might assume to be a life involving risks, positive risk-taking is not strongly embedded in the culture and practice of learning disability services. Alongside this there is a lack of clarity about how positive risk-taking might be enacted. For example, the UK consultation document, 'Independence, Well-being and Choice' (Department of Health 2005, 10), discusses empowering the social care workforce to be more creative and take the risk of enabling people to make their own life choices, where it is appropriate to do so without defining or illustrating what is understood by a creative positive risk-taking practice. Further, when the same department issued a guide to best practice in 'supported decision-making' the 72 page document made just three references to 'creative solutions' and gave just one illustrative example, which did not involve a person with a learning disability.

In this article we discuss how the contradictions resulting from rhetorical moves towards positive risk-taking combined with powerful factors hindering positive risk-taking are producing tensions in current risk practices. We give examples of these tensions at the macro institutional level and the micro individual level and we go on to argue that conceptual frameworks can play a vital role in guiding practice by

linking positive risk-taking talk to practice and informing professional judgement. We then use this framework, incorporating creativity and resilience, as a stimulus to identify examples of implicit positive risk-taking within special and inclusive education. Each example demonstrates a transactional relationship between the macro and the micro and illuminates the value of supporting frameworks and guiding principles as opposed to best practice guidelines derived from risk management policies.

Factors hindering the development of positive risk-taking practices

Drawing on concepts of governmentality, surveillance and technologies of performance, Morgan (2005) and Dowse (2009) argue that our current society is underpinned by a culture that individualises risk, where those who are considered incapable of managing their own risk become objects of surveillance and treatment. However, institutions and professionals charged with the responsibility of undertaking such surveillance and treatment are also objects of scrutiny, judged against performance indicators and accountability measures. This risk culture means that issues of perceived vulnerability, safeguarding and performance are paramount in the way learning disability organisations think about and enact risk management. In health and social care settings, concerns regarding the abuse and exploitation of children and adults with learning disabilities and fears regarding litigation over client and employee safety influence risk practices. In educational settings, pressures relating to school performativity and perceived risk of educational failure shape approaches to risk.

Concerns regarding abuse and exploitation

The research literature offers several examples of professional guardians or advocates working to safeguard the interests of people with learning disabilities to protect them against the risks of personal or financial abuse. Kwok and Scully (2005) describe the creation of guardianship boards in Hong Kong to safeguard the interests of those considered mentally unable to make decisions about their personal, medical or financial affairs. Fyson and Kitson (2010) argue that abuse can only be minimised by safeguarding policies which reflect an understanding that choice and promotion must necessarily be mediated by effective adult protection measures. The requirement for such mediation (or a balance of risk and safety) is also acknowledged by Jenkins and Davies (2011) who note that there is a fine balance between safeguarding and empowering.

A more specific concern is about people with learning disabilities being sexually exploited or committing a sexual offence. Research shows key factors that influence the decisions that professionals make regarding risk in these contexts. In Sweden, Kuosmanen and Starke (2011) explored the phenomena of men and women with learning disabilities who sold or exchanged sexual services. Focus groups with professionals indicated that those who used sex to create a relationship or gain affirmation were perceived as exploited victims while those who exchanged sex for money were perceived as autonomous agents. Through a 'victim' discourse, the professionals argued that people with learning disabilities needed protection through educative awareness-raising. Kuosmanen and Starke (2011, 147) analyse this discourse from a power perspective and argue that the professionals were presenting themselves

as having the 'preferential right of interpretation' regarding the sexual encounters that people with learning disabilities have. In this case, the notion of shared decision-making does not exist. In the UK, Hutchinson, Lovell, and Mason (2011) show how prescriptive expectations can be perceived to be overriding professional judgement. They conducted semi-structured interviews with community practitioners regarding how they manage risk assessment in relation to people with learning disabilities with a history of sexually offensive or abusive behaviour. Analysis showed real tensions for the practitioners with regards to their decision-making. One source of tension was the expectations for professionals to conduct scientific formal, risk assessments despite the absence of useful assessment tools; another was the perceived requirement to 'contain and maintain' rather than offer therapeutic interventions.

Fears regarding litigation

Regulation of organisational safety is increasing across learning disability services (Oulton and Heyman 2009; Sawyer, Green, and Moran 2007), the dual purpose being to ensure the safety of those involved and to reduce the risk of litigation. The consequences, however, are far-reaching. Oulton and Heyman (2009) argue that the desire to protect employees often means that the responsibility for making decisions about risk in relation to daily care, schooling and health is falling more often on parents. Through their analysis of interviews with senior managers of community based services in Victoria, Australia; Sawyer, Green, and Moran (2007) note that whist the opportunities for positive risk-taking were acknowledged by senior managers, they also gave reasons why positive risk-taking was difficult – including perceived risk to staff and the organisation.

Pressures relating to school performativity

One might argue that inclusive education in its very essence is an embodiment of positive risk-taking, with dedicated inclusive educators working, not on the evidence that inclusive schools are more effective, but in the belief that inclusive schools bring benefits to all and reflect the kind of society we wish to see (Thomas 1997). Inclusive teachers start, not from the cautious premise that teaching diverse learners together brings risk of not meeting everyone's needs, but from the premise that teaching diverse learners together can bring rich learning opportunities. Ainscow (1999) and Slee (2007) explicitly articulate a link between taking risks and developing more inclusive practices in schools (and the converse); Ainscow (1999), 71) argues that risk-taking is 'essential to the creation of more inclusive forms of pedagogy.'

Despite recognition that risk-taking is an inherent aspect of developing inclusive education, Slee (2007) recognises that external pressures such as school performativity (e.g. league tables) make schools 'become more risk-averse, more selective, more exclusive' (163) which in turn can deny access for students with learning disabilities. When schools are required to raise the attainment of pupils and are judged according to how their attainment figures compare to other schools, the temptation to exclude pupils who may not meet nationally prescribed attainment targets in the allotted time can be too great.

An at-risk discourse

Within 'at-risk' discourses in education, students with learning disabilities are deemed vulnerable to educational failure. Whilst the notion of vulnerability is strongly present, the cause of this vulnerability is contested. For example, there is a traditional educational psychology perspective which holds that a lack of appropriate special education is the root cause of educational failure for some students (e.g. Kam, Greenberg, and Kusché 2004). In contrast, there is a sociological perspective that aims to identify why particular minority ethnic groups, for example, are at-risk of experiencing overrepresentation in special education (e.g. O'Connor and Fernandez 2006). There is also an emerging critical perspective that identifies not just those at-risk of being placed in special education, but the ways in which special education itself places children at-risk of educational failure (Powell 2006).

While these perspectives highlight how socio-cultural and economic inequalities place children 'at-risk,' what is often missing from these literatures is an account of individual autonomy or agency. Where risk is conceptualised negatively (i.e. where students are deemed to be 'at-risk'), this risk leads to the conceptualisation of individuals as passive recipients of cultural and/or organisational structures that impair individual's capacity to learn and grow in school. From this perspective, students are positioned as victims of their environments (victims of discrimination, victims of special education, victims missing out on specialist interventions, etc.). Thus, risk here is inherently negative.

The dominance of this 'at-risk' discourse, which emphasises the vulnerabilities of people with learning disabilities (Seale and Nind, 2010), is influencing the adoption of risk-averse policies and practices. There has been a call for an alternative vision of people such as those with learning disabilities as 'at-promise' rather than 'at-risk' (e.g. Roaf 2002), but until recently this has largely been drowned out by the rise of a 'risk management discourse' and resultant policies based on 'a restricted approach to risk' which emphasise hazard assessment and health and safety issues (Alaszewski and Alaszewski 2002, 56).

Tensions in current risk practice: the macro and the micro

A review of the factors hindering a more positive and proactive response to calls for the development of creative positive risk-taking practices reveal real tensions and contradictions. Reactions to risks such as abuse, personal safety and educational failure produce tensions at both the macro level (institution or service) and the micro level (practitioner or parent). At the macro level this tension is exemplified by observed tensions between institutional care and person-centred planning. Sawyer et al. (2007) note, for example, that in Australia the emphasis on the provision of individualised care has introduced a new culture of risk that has created tensions for established approaches to risk management. Such tension also exists in European social care contexts, with Cambridge and Ernst (2006) observing that de-institutionalisation has led to more individualised and person-centred services, which in turn has led to tensions between organisation and professional interests and those of service users.

Tensions at the micro level

Tensions in risk practice are played out at the micro level where practitioners and parents find themselves weighing up issues of empowerment and protection to make judgements about what is in the best interests of people with learning disabilities. Some judgements are influenced by legal frameworks and formal codes of practice; some are influenced more by personal interpretations of risk. Examples are decisions regarding whether to override the decision that an adult with learning disabilities makes, and making decisions about whether a child with a learning disability should attend a mainstream or special school.

Two key elements that influence the decisions that practitioners take about whether or not to intervene and override the decisions that adults with learning disabilities make are the extent to which they think they are making informed decisions or have the mental capacity to make decisions that are in their best interests. Logan and Chung (2001) for example, interviewed social workers in Australia and found that while they felt they had a duty of care to inform clients about the consequences of their actions, ultimate responsibility for destructive behaviours was generally seen as being with their clients. In an analysis of the socio-legal aspects of advocacy for people with disabilities in Ireland, Flynn (2010) noted the requirement for advocates to recognise the clients' 'right to be mistaken, to take risks and to seek outcomes not in their interests.' Advocates are therefore weighing the risk of intervention against non-intervention. When professionals or advocates are given a mandate to intervene, they are charged with the responsibility of weighing up issues of empowerment versus best interests (Watt and Brazier 2009). Such mandates can produce some potentially unsettling examples, such as authorising the use of restraints to prevent a person with learning disabilities leaving their home (Watt and Brazier 2009) or prescribing contraceptive pills for girls under the age of consent for sexual activity, at the request of parents rather than the girls (McCarthy 2010).

There is evidence to suggest that the decisions parents make about choice of mainstream or special school can be motivated more by a desire for protection than a desire for a better learning outcome (Connor 1997). Flewitt and Nind (2007) found parents of young children choosing to combine special and inclusive preschool options as a kind of insurance, wanting the best of both worlds, not wishing to risk just one kind of experience or setting for their child. In an exploration of disabled youths' experiences of education in Iceland, Bjarnason (2001) found that some had chosen to move from mainstream to special education to escape bullying. Their preference for a safer, protective environment often came at a price however, in terms of experiencing an undemanding educational experience.

Tensions between the macro and the micro

Organisations respond to what might be perceived as 'big risks' such as abuse personal safety or educational failure at a macro level by drawing up pre-planned policies, rules and guidelines. Individuals that work with and alongside these organisations are required to negotiate their response to these risks at a micro level. They do this on a daily basis, often in unplanned ways. This can create tensions between practitioners and their managers. To illustrate, a support worker in research by Dunn, Clare, and Holland (2010, 152) talked about the decision to get out of the

car on a trip to the seaside to get an ice-cream with the person they were supporting. This seemingly 'small risk' was a spontaneous decision, but it contravened the overarching safeguarding policy of the service (probably because getting out of the car put the person with a learning disability at risk of getting lost or hit by traffic). The support worker made a professional judgement in a way that would most likely fall outside of prescribed best practice guidelines. They describe weighing up the pros and cons of the decision in terms of 'living dangerously' and being in trouble with their manager, or breaking free from established routines and taking risks to facilitate what they considered to be the semblance of an ordinary life. 'Living dangerously' in this context could be conceptualised as positive risk-taking.

Developing a conceptual framework for positive risk-taking

The contradictions and tensions in the risk management discourse are probably unhelpful in terms of offering a sense of clarity to practitioners about how their positive risk-taking practices might be developed. Policy drives to increase positive risk-taking sit alongside socio-legal frameworks that place more emphasis on safeguarding and substitute-decision-making as they do on empowerment and advocacy. It is perhaps no wonder if practitioners get confused about the mixed messages and therefore choose to take a position on positive risk-taking that suits their own thinking or level of confidence/anxiety. One way forward is through the potential role of conceptual frameworks in linking talk to practice, which in turn might inform professional judgement. Arguing against the 'moral conservatism' of risk, Stanford (2008) talks about the need to harness both vision and courage.

Arguing that policy discourses are far too vague about what exactly is meant by creative and innovative risk-taking practices and ignore the factors that might influence the development of these practices, we have developed a conceptual framework for thinking about the development of future positive risk-taking practices (Seale and Nind 2010) which focuses on creativity and resilience.

Where Stanford talks of vision, we focus on creativity; where Stanford talks of courage we focus on resilience.

Positive risk-taking involves developing strategies so that the risks of an activity or option are balanced against the benefits. This might require an element of creativity in terms of how risks, problems, possibilities and opportunities are conceptualised or re-framed. Taking risks however can take practitioners and the organisations in which they work, outside of their comfort zone, which might be stressful. Responding to this stress and to maintain and develop long-term successful positive risk-taking practices may require resilience.

A key stimulus for the development of a conceptual framework for positive risk-taking was a seminar series organised by two of the authors (Nind and Seale 2009) in which people with learning disabilities, support workers, practitioners and researchers came together to discuss and develop a shared understanding of the concept of access across various contexts. One major outcome was the identification of characteristics of what seminar participants identified as 'risk-averse' or 'risk embracing' (positive risk-taking) approaches These characteristics were drawn from a collective analysis of the access experiences of the seminar participants and reflected how risk might be approached at the macro level (learning disability support service) or micro level (by either a person with a learning disability and/or their support workers). In this original conceptualisation of risk embracing

approaches to risk, concepts such as trust,' letting go' and flexibility emerged, which could be interpreted as indicators of resilience, whilst concepts such as 'taking a leap of faith' and building bonds and bridges (making connections) could be interpreted as indicators of creativity.

In developing a conceptual framework for positive risk-taking built on concepts of creativity and resilience we also draw heavily on our experience and knowledge of inclusive education. For those who oppose inclusion as a move into the unknown without evidence, inclusive education is too risky – reckless even – putting young people's educational lives at risk because of ideology (see Thomas and Tarr 1999). The concept of positive risk-taking is useful here, however, as it stresses managing risk not ignoring it; taking positive risks because the potential benefits outweigh the potential harm. Arthur-Kelly et al. (2008, 163) advocate exploring under what circumstances young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities can participate in inclusive classrooms and the potential of these to 'scaffold and maximise the communicative and social engagement' of such students. We argue that such exploration can be viewed as a creative activity. In positive risk-taking one can do such exploratory work and the risk is managed in part by the culture that is created. This places the people taking the risks within an environment in which their new ventures are supported and monitored in ways that are reflective and constructive. Getting it wrong, whether you are a teacher or a learner, matters much less if this becomes a learning experience on which you can then build. The work of Munn, Lloyd, and Cullen (2000) on schools that have much lower levels of exclusions, and of Parsons (2010) on local authorities that work towards this, illustrate implicit professional positive risk-taking in action. Strategies, cultures, changes are all introduced based on an idea of the good that come out of these for the young people who matter – who are worth taking a chance on – rather than assuming that the strategies will not work and the young people and staff will not cooperate. We argue that such environments, strategies and cultures contribute to both an institutional and individual resilience.

In this article we offer a conceptual framework of positive risk-taking that uses the concepts of creativity and resilience to illuminate institutional and individual responses to risks: the macro and the micro. It is our contention that this framework can be used to illuminate the decision-making process associated with balancing the potential benefits (e.g. choice, independence, personal relationships, inclusion) with potential risks (e.g. physical harm, personal abuse, or failure).

Positive risk-taking and creativity

Looking to the literature on creativity and creative thinking we draw on the work of Craft and colleagues and their concept of possibility thinking (Craft 2002; Jeffrey and Craft 2006). Possibility thinking is a particular part of the process of creative thinking and is defined as refusing to give up when circumstances seem impossible and using imagination, with intention, to either identify or solve a problem. Burnard et al. (2006) propose that problem finding and problem solving involves the posing, in many different ways, of the question 'What if?' Freshly applying this idea in the context of supporting positive risk-taking by and for people with learning disabilities we argue that practitioners need to balance the '*what if* something goes wrong' questions with '*what if* something goes right' questions. Here possibility thinking is not about ignoring the big risks associated with something going wrong; but about

giving space to consider the big benefits, if the proposed action goes right. Possibility thinking through the use of positively framed 'what if' questions might, in this model, be the catalyst for change that Lindqvist, Nordanger, and Landahl (2009) call for in terms of prompting practitioners to explore the possibility of doing something new or different which would have been previously considered impossible or unthinkable. Our conceptualisation of positive risk-taking is bound up with possibilities for good things to happen. Possibility thinking therefore is helpfully linked with resilience thinking.

Positive risk-taking and resilience

Concepts of risks are bound up with concepts of chances of survival, yet our ability to survive, and indeed thrive, is dependent less on avoiding being involved in risky situations and more on being resilient. Resilience is about good outcomes in spite of various threats (Masten 2001), sometimes seen as resulting from a self-righting capacity (Bernard and Marshall 1997). Resilience, like positive risk-taking, is focused on the capacity for good to happen.

We prefer Goodley's (2005) socio-cultural (contextual) framework in which resilience is viewed less as a personal characteristic and more as a political response to disabling and disempowering circumstances. For Goodley, it does not make sense to talk about nurturing the resilience of people with learning difficulties as resilience is contextualised. Moreover, it challenges medicalised concepts of impairment and adds 'some notion of resistance and challenge to commonly held views of learning difficulties' (Goodley 2005, 334). It optimistically encourages supporters, professionals, researchers and policymakers to assume that people with learning difficulties have the potential for resilient lives. 'Displays of resilience' importantly capture the wider exclusionary environment in which they have to be made. Goodley's notion of resilience is attractive because it suggests that those that work in learning disability services may develop a resilience that enables them to take positive risks, not because new government policy requires them to, but because they see the injustice and inequality inherent in learning disability services and wish to change things. The support worker who stopped the car to get ice-cream would have recognised the inequality in the lives of the people receiving support compared to their own lives. If they had been working in a resilient environment, their decision to 'live dangerously' would have been influenced less by concern over getting in trouble with the manager, and more by mutual trust and optimism between all concerned.

Our conceptualisation of positive risk-taking relies on risk being both beneficial and necessary, and of resilience residing in individuals and contexts. Use of possibility thinking in resilient contexts may offer the best potential for positive risk-taking.

Examples of positive risk-taking in practice

The lack of clarity regarding how positive risk-taking could be enacted means that for professionals working in the field (individually or collectively) there is a lack of rich, illuminative accounts of positive risk-taking in action. There are therefore no triggers for reflexive discussions regarding the dynamics of shared decision-making, how risks are negotiated, the impact of certain positive risk-taking decisions on people with learning disabilities, and how they personally respond to and evaluate

these consequences. Furthermore, there are no success (and failure) stories of positive risk-taking from which practice can be developed and enhanced. The talk of positive risk-taking, therefore, is not producing obvious benefits for people with learning disabilities. As Johnson and Walmsley (2010) have recently argued, despite apparent policy emphases on the role of 'independence, rights, choice and inclusion,' policy shifts have often not amounted to a good life for people who continue to experience restrictions, abuse, harassment, lack of value, poverty and loneliness. Rhetoric is easy, but living a life with a good balance of risk and comfort requires negotiating and illustrating for the benefit of others.

Although there are few examples of positive risk-taking being explicitly or deliberately enacted, we recognise that lack of explicit use of the concept of positive risk-taking does not mean that the field is devoid of professionals and people with learning disabilities doing something akin to positive risk-taking, albeit implicitly. Risk-embracing approaches are to be found and here we turn to some illustrative examples, first from special education and then from inclusive education. Both illuminate the value of supportive frameworks with guiding principles and in both creativity and resilience are at work.

Intensive Interaction

Bakhtin (cited by Bell and Gardiner 1998, 184) argues that 'the most important events in life are not the grand, dramatic or catastrophic but the apparently small and prosaic ones of everyday life.' In this spirit, exploring risk practices in education is not all about big risk events, but about the small but vital ways in which risks are negotiated on a daily basis in classrooms. It is at the level of dyadic and small group interactions that risk-taking can be played out. For learners with the most profound intellectual impairments this is perhaps at its most evident. Nonetheless as the following examples illustrate, there is a transactional relationship between the macro and the micro, and the minutiae of everyday risk-taking is set within, and in a dynamic exchange with, the wider risk and other cultures.

Children and young people with profound and multiple impairments experience significant communication difficulties. These difficulties arise when communication partners lack awareness of the meaning of individualised behaviours performed by those with profound and multiple impairments. This can, and frequently has in the past, left profoundly disabled children socially and educationally excluded. It can leave them without agency in terms of influencing what goes on around them or even unable to initiate interactions with others if those others are unable to interpret or 'read' their idiosyncratic communications. People around them, on a daily, even minute-by-minute basis take a chance on what, potentially; they might be wishing to communicate. With these learners every interpretation of behaviour as a communication is an act of positive risk-taking for their communication partner. We might have the interpretation wrong, but the benefits of having a go at interpreting and thereby forging a communicative relationship preoccupy us over the potential dangers. This is vital for establishing in the learner the notion of communicative effect (Wilcox, Kouri, and Caswell 1990) and thereby supporting early intentional communication (Carter and Iacono 2002, 178).

With less evidence base to worry about, and no stress of test performance, taking risks in this arena of profound disabilities may be more culturally acceptable. But another reason why teachers have gained the confidence to do this risk work

throughout their daily interactions in schools is that they are increasingly supported to do so by educational frameworks. Particularly influential have been the Intensive Interaction approach (Nind and Hewett 1994) and the 'See What I Mean' guidance (Grove et al. 1999, 2000). For children with profound impairment, Intensive Interaction provides a curricular framework and pedagogical guidance that supports teachers' self-belief in their judgements (Nind and Thomas 2005) and the risks they take and benefits they accrue in treating apparently non-communicative behaviours as if they are communicative (Nind and Hewett 1994). 'See What I Mean' provides similar support by providing structure and information around decisions and interpretations at different levels of seriousness. Both create a supportive environment around the dyad, thus bringing resilience to militate against potential dangers. Here we see everyday risk-taking influenced by the immediate context in which individuals operate as active agents.

Special education approaches like Intensive Interaction, in which the teacher works with guiding principles informed by theory and evidence, but without a prescribed plan or tight objectives require the teacher to venture into the unknown. This is an adventure in creative listening – hearing the potential 'voice' of learners with profound impairment – and creative responding – working in the moment to decide where to take the interactive turn. For the learners too, engaging in such interactions is venturing into something new. They too are taking risks by opening themselves up and not knowing what will happen next. Again, there is nothing reckless about this because the dyad is immersed in a whole framework which is about sensitivity, emotional attunement, and mutual enjoyment (Nind and Hewett 1994).

What we have offered here is somewhat of a post-hoc analysis. One of us (Nind) has been working on Intensive Interaction for over two decades without intellectually engaging with this as being about risk. In the early stages of developing the approach the risks of moving away from the behavioural approaches of the time were keenly felt, as were the risks of advocating teaching that might involve touch and working against age-appropriate norms. These were risks of a different order than those undertaken within specific interactions with learners, but at both levels the benefits of making the changes were what mattered. In hindsight the seeking of a paradigm shift was major positive risk-taking work. This work is on-going and by introducing the concept of positive risk-taking to a new generation of Intensive Interaction practitioners (Nind 2011) we are providing them with new conceptual tools and we wait to see whether this is helpful.

Learning without Limits

The practical value of conceptual tools and principled positions is exemplified in the work of Hart et al. (2005) on 'Learning without Limits,' that is, research that explores the work of teachers who reject ideas of fixed ability and teach without ability labelling. If the potential risks of the option to work without the limiting concept of matching education to assessed ability are balanced against the potential benefits, an element of creativity is required in terms of how risks, problems, possibilities and opportunities are conceptualised or framed. This is exactly the kind of creativity demonstrated by the teachers in part two of Hart et al.'s book where we find helpful exemplifications.

For example, one teacher, Anne, combines clear planning *and* flexibility, a structure *and* gaps. With her infant school children 'the immediate context of children's lives is where their learning starts' (Hart et al. 2005, 61), this allows Anne to plan from her pedagogical principled position but enter new territory that the children may know better than her, such as the sheep and hens of the Yorkshire Dales! She is not resistant to the planning required in her school but not afraid to abandon it either. Hart et al. (2005, 63) reflect on Anne's comment in relation to a maths activity 'It's not on the plan, but they are fascinated. Why not let them be fascinated.'

Another teacher, Yahi, risks sharing with his learners bits about his own life as part of building trust, and another, Julie, sets up activities in which 'they can just go about it in whatever way they want' (Hart et al. 2005, 139). In seeking to teach in ways that don't limit the expectations of the teachers or young people there is considerable experimentation at work, albeit guided by strong principles for action. For Julie these principles are accessibility for everyone, enabling everyone to feel emotionally safe, and trying to ensure everyone enjoys worthwhile achievement. Hart et al. are clear that the result is that 'the teacher's task is not a technical one of matching tasks and learners, but a creative one' (Hart et al. 2005, 140). Julie acknowledges that sometimes she likes to invite open-ended responses 'just to see what happens' (142). The suggestion is that her workplace provides some institutional resilience, which allows and supports this. More obviously though, there are echoes here of the work of Craft and colleagues (Craft 2002; Burnard et al. 2006) on possibility thinking. As with possibility thinking, teachers who are comfortable with pedagogical risk-taking move into original and creative thinking spaces. Inclusive educators can be conceptualised as explorers or adventurers who are pushing boundaries as they move beyond the comfort of educating learners separately according to their pre-defined needs.

How can positive risk-taking practices be further developed?

In our review of positive risk-taking discourses in health, social care and educational settings we have attempted to show that there is a lack of clarity about how positive risk-taking is understood, which has led to a lack of detail about how positive risk-taking practices should be enacted. It is our contention that positive risk-taking practices need to be further developed and better understood. In considering the mechanisms for promoting positive risk-taking in educational contexts we suggest that attempts to promote 'best practice' in positive risk-taking can be counter-productive. There is a growing discourse of evidence-based practice in education and a certain desire to ensure that the 'best' methods are used rather than leaving matters to professional judgement or creative exploration (Hammersley 2004). The whole growth of interest in systematic reviews of interventions has been about identifying and disseminating answers to problems using the best evidence, but without consensus in the relevant communities about what form best evidence might take. In policy terms though, 'best' practice moves are about minimising the risk of getting it wrong or wasting time and maximising the chances of getting good outcomes efficiently. The reality is that these moves often over-emphasise risk minimisation at the expense of detailing diverse, rich ways in which potential can be maximised.

One of the most common methods for disseminating 'best practice' is to produce guidelines. These run the risk of restricting how practice is conceptualised and

enacted. For example, in the UK the Department of Health (2007b) best practice guidelines for 'supported decision-making' focus exclusively on processes dominated by formal documentation and meetings: needs assessment, person-centred planning; accurate recording of discussions, risk assessment, using a supported decision-making tool. All these activities that are meant to comprise best practice are bureaucratic and pre-planned. They involve multiple stakeholders having a say in the big things in life such as where to live and who to live with. This implies that positive risk-taking does not and should not happen spontaneously. Yet as we have argued through our examples, a good creative practitioner in contrast negotiates risk with a person with a learning disability/learner in the moment. The support comes not from the formalities of written guidelines and records, but from supportive frameworks with strong guiding principles. If risk is dynamic, then to a certain extent positive risk-taking needs to be dynamic too.

Building on the illustrative examples of Intensive Interaction and Learning without Limits that we have presented we suggest that curriculum frameworks and pedagogic guidance or their equivalent might be more helpful than policy-oriented best practice guidelines as they work better with diverse contexts. This requires teachers to develop capacity for professional judgement and organisational mechanisms to be in place to support this. The most supportive frameworks for facilitating positive risk-taking and creative responses are those in which the guiding principles are explicit and shared, such as Intensive Interaction and See What I Mean. Principles offer aide-memoires to draw upon but do not constrain options for moving forward. Our examples could equally be tools to initiate debate about positive risk-taking. It would be helpful to identify other tools that might give practitioners the language and the confidence to embrace risk.

Conclusion

Our review of current positive risk-taking discourses suggests that the idea that risk can be positive is being lost or subverted in a wave of policy and guidance documents emphasising safety and risk minimisation. Safeguarding has become the more familiar concept. There is a need to challenge this and it is our contention that more open dialogue about positive risk-taking could transform this discourse and open up new ways of thinking. Practitioners could be using the concept of positive risk-taking (and associated concepts of creativity, possibility-thinking and resilience) more as a theoretical device in the way Ball (1995, 265–6) describes, to disrupt and problematise the familiar, as a 'vehicle for "thinking otherwise,"' offering 'a language for challenge, and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others,' and opening up new spaces.

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