

# **Transforming the discourse of positive risk taking in special and inclusive education**

Jane Seale, School of Education, University of Plymouth

Melanie Nind, School of Education, University of Southampton

Ben Simmons, Department of Primary Health Care, University of Oxford

Keywords: positive risk taking, learning disabilities, special education, inclusive  
education,

Running Title: Transforming the discourse of positive risk taking

Address for correspondence:

Professor Jane Seale

School of Education

University of Plymouth

Drake Circus

Plymouth

PL4 8AA

United Kingdom

[jane.seale@plymouth](mailto:jane.seale@plymouth)

+44 1752 585455

# **Transforming the discourse of positive risk taking in special and inclusive education**

Jane Seale, Melanie Nind, Ben Simmons

## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper we examine how positive risk taking for or by people with learning disabilities is talked about, conceptualised and enacted. We identify tensions and contradictions in positive risk taking discourses which we suggest is unhelpful in terms of clarifying for educational practitioners how positive risk taking might be implemented. We suggest that a conceptual framework that incorporates creativity and resilience might be helpful in terms of linking talk to practice. We then use this conceptual framework to offer two 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 pedagogical tools that emphasise professional judgement, offer one way to problematise and challenge current risk averse practices in education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The focus of this article is positive risk-taking in education, particularly the practice of those who are supporting people with learning disabilities to take risks or who take positive risks themselves which have impact on the lives of people with learning disabilities. In this paper 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. We do this by comparing the policy, practice and research literature in health and social care to that of education.

The literature and examples used in this examination are drawn primarily, although not exclusively, from the United Kingdom. However they are positioned in a wider international context in which the need to understand how the risk society and associated risk awareness cultures are mediating the practices of teachers and other professionals has been acknowledged (for example, Lindqvist *et al.* (2009) and Lofgren-Martenson (2008) in Sweden and Dowse (2009) in Australia).

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 terms of 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 & Alaszewski, 2002). Central to the conceptualisation and implementation of positive risk-taking is a decision-making and negotiation process where people with learning disabilities are supported in weighing the risks against the benefits. 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 plans and actions (McConkey & 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 normal 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 policy goals for an ‘ordinary life’ which one might assume to be a life involving risks, positive risk taking does not have a strong history of being embedded in the culture and practice of learning

disability services in the UK. We argue that a key reason for this is the dominance of an ‘at-risk’ discourse, which has emphasised the vulnerabilities of people with learning disabilities (Seale & Nind, 2010). This has led to a ‘discourse of protection’ and the adoption of risk averse policies and practices that prioritise preventing bad things from happening to people with learning disabilities as opposed to embracing the good things that might happen if risk is tolerated. There has been a call for an alternative vision of people such as those with learning disabilities as ‘at-promise’ rather than ‘at-risk’ (see Roaf, 2002; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995), 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 & Alaszewski, 2002: 56).

In this paper we argue that there are tensions and contradictions in the discourses of health and social care and of education which are unhelpful because they hinder practitioners who work with people with learning disabilities from gaining a clear sense of how exactly their positive risk practices might be developed. We argue that conceptual frameworks may play a vital role in offering some clarity to educational practitioners by linking positive risk taking talk to practice. We suggest that a framework which incorporates notions of creativity and resilience may be particularly useful. We then use this framework as a stimulus to re-examine the special and inclusive education literature and identify two examples of implicit positive risk taking.

## **POSITIVE RISK TAKING DISCOURSES IN TWO CONTEXTS**

To understand why the practice of supporting the positive risk-taking of people with learning disabilities is not yet strongly embedded in learning disability services it is

helpful to examine in more detail the discourses surrounding positive risk-taking in the two contexts of health and social care and education.

### **Positive risk taking discourses in health and social care**

In the UK a change in the way risk is potentially understood was signalled by a series of governmental consultation and policy documents between 2005 and 2007. In these documents, the importance of creative and innovative positive risk-taking practice was accepted and underpinned by a requirement to think more positively about the abilities and capacities of people with learning disabilities. Although not specific to learning disabilities, The White paper, 'Our health, our care, our say' (Department of Health, 2006) announced new government policy in relation to developing a risk management framework to enable people using services to take greater control over decisions about the way they want to live their lives. The strategy document, 'Valuing People Now' (Department of Health, 2007) 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, 2007: 77).

In the consultation document, 'Independence, Well-being and Choice', (Department of Health, 2005: 10) there were statements about empowering the social care workforce to be more creative and to take the risk of enabling people to make their own life choices, where it is appropriate to do so. The document was vague however in terms of defining or illustrating what is understood by a creative or innovative positive risk-taking practice. This vagueness was repeated in 2007, when the Department of Health issued a guide to best practice in what it called 'supported decision-making'. This 72 page document made just three references to 'creative solutions' and the one illustrative example that is given of a creative solution did not

involve a person with a learning disability. The best practice document also fails to significantly reinforce belief in the potential of people with learning disabilities.

Only three learning disability examples are given and of these only one has a positive outcome (a man with behavioural problems being supported to go on holiday).

The document offers a supported decision making tool, which offers 21 questions for service users to discuss with people in positions of responsibility who have the power to change the circumstances of the service user. Such questions may be categorised in the following way: questions about what is (or is not) valued in a service-user's life; questions about potential barriers and risks preventing the realisation of a desired activity; questions about what others could do to remove such risks and barriers; and questions about what others think about the service user's desired activity. The aim of the tool is to support service user choice by assessing the potential impact that risks arising from such choice may pose. Once risk has been identified, staff are said to be in a better position to think creatively about ways of reducing such risk thus paving the way for support staff to honour the service user's desired activity or lifestyle choice. As extensive as this questioning process is, the emphasis is very much on reducing risk to the service user rather than on allowing service users to experience risk themselves. Risk is framed negatively, as a barrier preventing desired activities. At the end of the questioning tool is the statement: 'Agreed next steps – who will do what' (p. 51) and yet the document is void of information about how such steps are to be taken.

### *Weaknesses in translating government policy into local guidance and practice frameworks*

With the lack of detail and specificity about how policy should be enacted and potentially conflicting messages about what is central to positive risk-taking

practices, it is perhaps not surprising that the speed and ease with which this high level governmental talk has been translated into everyday practice, embedded within local authority services has been slow. There has been some activity, with the publication of policy or guidance documents. Within these documents it is difficult to find passages that conceptualise risk in a positive manner. Where these do exist, the passages present positive risk taking as a secondary concern to the topic of risk reduction (safeguarding) and/or fail to offer a detailed contextualised framework for enacting positive risk taking activities. Even when the title of the document contains the phrase ‘positive risk taking’ there is no guarantee that guidance is given as to how positive risk can be managed and executed. For example, in their twenty-four page document entitled: ‘*Positive Risk Taking – A Good Practice Guide for Supported Housing Providers*’ the charitable housing association, Look Ahead Housing and Care (2006), refer to positive risk taking only five times. On the whole, the document is more concerned with discussing safe practice and the ways staff can manage adverse risks to themselves and others, such as harm through abuse and violence. The authors acknowledge that positive risk taking can empower service users to ‘pursue a greater quality of life’, but they also encourage them to reflect on risk by answering several questions as part of a ‘risk control process’ (p. 17):

What risks are involved in your activity or life choice?

What might you gain from engaging in the activity or life choice?

What risks are involved if you do not engage in the activity or life choice?

What might you gain from not engaging in the activity or life choice?

What actions can we agree to minimise harm?

How will we monitor the actions we have agreed? (pp. 17-18)

One element that is missing here is how service user quality of life is to be increased by asking such questions, nor is there a framework offered for service users to enact and manage risk in the moment.

Cumbria Learning Disability Services (2006) has published an 'easy read' policy document that aims to disseminate information regarding the right of people with learning disabilities to take risks. Arguably, this document takes the notion of service users engaging in positive risk taking more seriously in that the service users themselves are the key audience of the documents rather than the staff. The documents provide a simple, four-question framework to support service users in their evaluation of potential risk and whether such risk is worthwhile or not.

Cumbria Learning Disability Services state that:

Positive Risk Taking is about you taking control over your own life by thinking about

What is the good thing about doing this?

What will I get out of it?

What could go wrong if I don't do it?

What could go wrong if I do this?

You think about the good things, you think about what could go wrong and you make a decision (with help if you need it) about what you want to do [...] (Cumbria Learning Disability Services, 2006: 4).

The simplicity of these questions contrast to the more extensive *Supported Decision Tool* offered by the Department of Health's (2007) document: *Independence, choice and risk: a guide to best practice in supported decision making*. Risk is at least



conceptualised as a positive endeavour, even if to the authors do not go on to suggest how risk might be managed and realised.

### *Weaknesses in translating policy and guidance into transformative illuminations*

The lack of clarity regarding how positive risk taking is understood and therefore how it should be enacted in health and social care settings 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, exactly how risks are negotiated, what the impact of certain positive risk-taking decisions are 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 & 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.

### **Positive risk taking discourse in special and inclusive education**

An initial inspection of the risk-taking discourses within special and inclusive education reveals very few explicit examples, though Power-de Fur & Orelove (1997) do comment that children with special educational needs require opportunities to take risks in schools. The lack of explicit examples (even fewer than in the health

and social care context) suggests that risk-taking might be more implicitly embedded in special and inclusive education discourses. Despite variable conceptualisations of inclusion, one might argue that inclusive education in its very essence is an embodiment of positive risk-taking. Dedicated inclusive educators are 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 promise of teaching diverse learners together which can bring rich learning opportunities. They focus on how pupils and teachers can support each other in mediating participation and engagement with the subject matter (see for example Salisbury *et al.* (1995) and Palinscar *et al.* (2001)). Influential commentators such as Ainscow (1999) and Slee (2007) are rare though in explicitly articulating 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'. Slee (2007:163) though, recognises that pressures on school performativity (such as in league tables) makes schools 'become more risk averse, more selective, more exclusive', which can deny access for students with learning difficulties.

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 for example Thomas & 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 who 'have traditionally been regarded as difficult to reach and teach'. 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 *et al* (2000) on schools that have much lower levels of exclusions, and of Parsons (2010) on local authorities that work towards this, illustrate professional positive risk-taking in action, though again without the concept being used explicitly. Strategies, cultures, changes are all introduced based on 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 won't work and the young people and staff won't cooperate.

Just as contradictions and tensions were observed in the health and social care discourse surrounding positive risk-taking, they can also be observed in special and inclusive education discourses. Although positive risk-taking appears to be implicitly embedded in notions of inclusive education, we have also identified an 'at-risk' discourse that appears to deny the agency and potential of people with learning disabilities and a protection discourse which highlights the lack of support for people with learning disabilities and their parents have in making what feels to them like risky decisions, but which could result in positive outcomes.

*The at-risk discourse- intervening when learners are deemed at risk of educational failure*

Within ‘at-risk’ discourses, students with learning disabilities are deemed vulnerable to educational failure. Whilst this 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 deemed to be at-risk of experiencing overrepresentation in special education (e.g. Donovan & Cross 2002, O’Conner & DeLuca 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 (Richardson, 2002; Powell, 2004; 2006). Conversely, there is novel, critical work on the ways in which the *inclusive* education movement has acted as a strategic mechanism that aims to remediate social inequalities through mainstreaming (Armstrong, Armstrong & Spandagou 2010). This latter work discusses how educational policy aims to identify at-risk populations and provide intensive educational input to individuals at an early stage as opposed to tackling the wider causes of educational disadvantages such as poverty.

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. An agent is a person who takes an active role or produces a specific effect – whose interaction makes a difference (Mayall, 2002). 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. We advocate that risk can be positive: positive risk taking brings the focus back to individuals and interactions and offers strategies for people to take risks. Through positive risk taking individuals can transform their existing circumstances or shape future circumstance albeit within structurally imposed limitations.

### *A protection discourse*

One area where supported decision-making could have a potentially huge impact is the choice that parents and young people with learning disabilities make about where to go to school and in particular whether to attend a mainstream or a special school. There is evidence to suggest however that decisions can be motivated more by a desire for protection than a desire for a better learning outcome. Connor (1997) for example writes of his concern regarding the stress some parents are under when making school-choice decisions and observes that some parents demand places in a special school more out of a desire to protect their child, than to help them learn. Connor concludes that professionals need to give parents more meaningful advice and information. Flewitt & 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 and 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 in order to escape bullying. Their preference for a safer, protective environment often came at a price however, in terms of experiencing an undemanding educational experience.

The contradictions of the explicit at risk and protections discourses compared to the implicit risk taking discourse may explain why positive risk taking practice is currently underdeveloped in special and inclusive education.

## **CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF POSITIVE RISK-TAKING**

The contradictions and tensions in the positive risk taking discourse are probably unhelpful in terms of offering a sense of clarity to practitioners about how their positive risk taking practices might be developed. 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.

### **Conceptual frameworks for developing future positive risk taking practice**

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 framed. Taking risks however can take practitioners outside of their comfort zone, which they might find stressful. How practitioners who work with people with learning disabilities respond to this stress might influence their ability to maintain and develop long-term successful positive risk-taking practices. Arguing that government 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 & Nind, 2010) which focuses on creativity and resilience.

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; Cremin *et al.* 2006; Burnard *et al.* 2006; Jeffrey & 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?’ In the context of supporting positive risk taking by 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. Possibility thinking through the use of positively framed ‘what if’ questions might therefore be the catalyst for change that Lindqvist *et al.* (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.

We also draw on the work of Goodley (2005) who offers a socio-cultural (contextual) framework for understanding resilience. 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. Goodley argues that resilience is contextualised; complicating; optimistic and an indicator of disablement. Resilience is complicating because it challenges medicalised concepts of impairment and adds ‘some notion of resistance and challenge to commonly held views of learning difficulties’ (Goodley, 2005: 334). Resilience is optimistic because it encourages supporters, professionals, researchers and policy makers to assume that people with learning difficulties have the potential for resilient lives. Resilience is an indicator of disablement because ‘displays of resilience’ 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.

## **EXAMPLES OF POSITIVE RISK TAKING IN PRACTICE**

Although there are few examples of positive risk-taking being explicitly or deliberately enacted in special or inclusive education, we recognise that lack of explicit use of the concept of positive risk-taking does not mean that education is devoid of professionals and learners 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 inclusive education and then from special education. In both of these examples, we argue that creativity and resilience are at play.

### **Intensive Interaction**

In much of the work referred to so far, the risks are being managed at more macro levels of community response to a shared need. We now turn to the micro level as we explore examples of positive risk-taking in special education. Bakhtin (cited by Bell & Gardiner, 1998) 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.

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 out in the cold when it comes to enjoying social participation in classrooms (Ware & Evans, 1987). 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. Special educators, however, like the family members and carers of these individuals, on a daily, even minute-by-minute basis take a chance on what, potentially, they might be wanting to communicate. With these learners every behaviour interpreted 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, & Caswell, 1990) and thereby supporting early intentional communication (Carter & Iacono, 2002:178). Compared with speech pathologists, Carter & Iacono (2002) found teachers more willing to take risks with interpreting behaviours as communicative.

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 & Hewett, 1994) and the See What I Mean guidance (Grove *et al* 1999, 2000). As Theodorou & Nind (2010) have argued in relation to teachers supporting the playfulness of children with autism, this is facilitated by curricular frameworks that value play and provide practical strategies for encouraging it. For children with profound impairment, Intensive Interaction provides a curricular framework and pedagogical guidance that supports teachers' self-belief in their judgements (Nind & Thomas, 2005) and the risks they take and benefits they accrue in treating apparently non-communicative behaviours as if they are communicative (Nind & 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.

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 (so-called SMART targets); 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, in press).

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. The benefits of doing so were what mattered - and so in hindsight this was positive risk-taking work. 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 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. Anne, for example, combines clear planning *and* flexibility, a structure *and* gaps. Yahi risks sharing with his learners bits about his own life as part of building trust, and Julie sets up activities in which 'they can just go about it in whatever way they want' (p.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. There are echoes here of the work of Craft and colleagues 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 both health and 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 and specificity 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 the UK in systematic reviews of educational interventions has been about identifying and disseminating answers to educational problems using the best evidence, but without consensus in the educational community about what form best evidence might take. In policy terms though, 'best' practice moves are about minimizing the risk of getting it wrong or wasting time and maximising the chances of getting good learning 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, the Department of Health (2007) 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 might be more helpful than policy oriented best practice guidelines as they work better with diverse contexts. The most supportive frameworks for facilitating positive risk-taking and creative responses are those in which the guiding principles value the judgements of those involved. Principles offer aide-memoires to draw upon but do not constrain options for moving forward. In mainstream education, curriculum frameworks associated with drama (e.g. Conrad, 2004;2005), play and outdoor education (Waters & Begley, 2007; Borradaile, 2006; Sandseter & Hansen, 2007; Little & Wyver, 2010; Little *et al.* 2011) have enabled teachers to explore learners’ experiences of risk and to highlight the positive dimensions of risky behaviour such as learning new skills and making sensible informed decisions about how to deal with novel situations. In this paper we have offered two other examples of curriculum/pedagogical frameworks that are being used in special education or inclusive education settings and which could also be tools to initiate debate about

positive risk taking. It would be helpful to identify other tools that might give teachers the language and the confidence to embrace risk.

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 that is emphasising safety and risk minimisation. Safeguarding has become the more familiar concept. There is a need to challenge this, to problematise the familiar. It is our contention that more open dialogue about positive risk-taking in education could transform this discourse and open up new ways of thinking.

Educators could be using the concept of positive risk-taking more as a theoretical device in the way Ball (1995: 79) describes, to disrupt and problematise the familiar, as a ‘vehicle for ‘thinking otherwise’... for challenge... to open up spaces’.

In order to engage in supported, shared or negotiated decision-making that is inherent in positive risk taking, we need to find a language for talking about risk that brings students with learning disabilities and their teachers together. Cremin *et al.* (2006) argued that possibility thinking is an inclusive language that brings learners and teachers together. In contrast, policy discourse dominated by notions of safeguarding and supported decision-making may not be the right language to unite learners and teachers in special and inclusive education. Concepts of creativity and resilience might, however, provide a common inclusive language. For example, when researching issues of access with people with learning disabilities and their support workers (Seale & Nind, 2010) we found that phrases such as ‘trust’, ‘letting go’ and ‘taking a leap of faith’ were used to characterise risk embracing approaches to access and that this language was generally meaningful to everyone. This work also provided powerful examples of this language being used by people with learning disabilities to provide convincing arguments for a different approach to risk:

They were also worried about problems they thought two people with learning disabilities might have, living together for the first time. I said: ‘OK, let’s turn this the other way around. What if none of the problems happen?’ (Butler, 2010)

Finally, we need now to find detailed stories exemplifying the possibility thinking of ‘what if’ questions in special and inclusive education contexts, which can serve to increase the spread and impact of the language of positive risk-taking. We need to turn the ‘what if’ questions away from the negative ‘what if something bad happens’ (the objective is not met, the lesson is wasted and so on) to the ‘what if something good happens’ and we find out more about ourselves and our relationship to learners and learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

The policy shifts that illuminate a need for positive-risk taking to enhance the lives of people with learning disabilities among others offer a powerful rhetoric. In this paper we have explored this rhetoric and the ways in which it has only partially reached practice and educational practice in particular. By probing some illustrative examples we have shown that risk-taking by practitioners is as important as risk-taking by learners for bringing about the kinds of opportunities that are being called for. Moreover, we have shown that risk-taking practices, risk-taking thinking, and risk-taking language only partially overlap. By bringing these closer together, education could, we argue, be richer. Positive-risk taking could be a useful conceptual tool for educationalists if used judiciously and creatively rather than prescriptively.

## REFERENCES

Alaszewski, A. and Alaszewski, H. 2002. Towards the creative management of risk: perceptions, practices and policies, *British Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 30: 56-62.

Ainscow, M. 1999. *Understanding the Development of Inclusive Schools*. London: Falmer.

Arthur-Kelly, Michael, Foreman, Phil, Bennett, Deone, Pascoe, Sue. 2008.

Interaction, inclusion and students with profound and multiple disabilities: Towards an agenda for research and practice. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*. 8: 161-66.

Armstrong, Ann Cheryl, Armstrong, Derrick and Spandagou, Ilektra. 2010. *Inclusive Education – International Policy and Practice*. London: SAGE Publications.

Ball, S. 1995. Intellectuals or technicians? The urgent role of theory in educational studies. *British Journal of Educational Studies*. 43: 255-71.

Bell, M.M. & Gardiner, M. 1998. *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No last words*. California: Sage.

Bjarnason, D.S. 2001. Students' Voices: How Does Education in Iceland Prepare Young Disabled People for Adulthood?, *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*. 7: 109-28.

Borradaile, L. 2006. *Forest School Scotland: An Evaluation, Report to Forestry Commission Scotland and Forest Education Initiative Scotland*.

Burnard, P., Craft, A., Cremin, T., Duffy, B., Hanson, R., Keene, J., Haynes, L. and Burns, D. 2006. Documenting 'possibility thinking': a journey of collaborative enquiry. *International Journal of Early Years Education*. 14: 243- 62.

Carter, M. & Iacono, T. 2002. Professional judgements of the intentionality of communicative acts. *Augmentative & Alternative Communication*. 18: 177-91.



- Conrad, D. 2004. *'Life in the sticks': youth experiences, risk & popular theatre process*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Alberta.
- Conrad, D. 2005. Rethinking 'at risk' in drama education: beyond prescribed roles. *Research in Drama Education*. 10: 27-41.
- Connor, M.J. 1997. Parental motivation for specialist or mainstream placement, *Support for Learning*, 12: 104-110.
- Craft, A. 2002. *Creativity and Early Years Education: A Lifewide Foundation*. London: Continuum.
- Cremin, T., Burnard, P. & Craft, A. 2006. Pedagogy and possibility thinking in the early years, *Thinking Skills and Creativity*. 1: 108-119.
- Cumbria County Council (2006) *Cumbria Learning Disabilities Services Positive Risk Taking Policy: from risk aversion to risk management*. Online. Available HTTP: <<http://www.in-control.org.uk/site/INCO/Templates/Library.aspx?pageid=224&andcc=GB>> (accessed 4 December 2008).
- Department of Health. 2005. *Independence, Well-being and Choice: Our vision for the future of social care for adults in England*. London: HMSO.
- Department of Health. 2007. Need Independence Choice and Risk, a guide to best practice in supported decision making: [http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_074775.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_074775.pdf)
- Donovan, M. S & Cross, C. T. (Eds.) 2002. *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education, National Research Council Report*. Washington: National Academic Press.
- Dowdy, C.A. 1996. Vocational rehabilitation and special education: partners in transition for individuals with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 29: 137-47.

- Dowse, L. 2009. Some people are never going to be able to do that: Challenges for people with intellectual disability in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *Disability & Society* 24: 571-584.
- Flewitt, R. & Nind, M. 2007. Parents choosing to combine special and inclusive early years setting: the best of both worlds. *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 22: 425-441.
- Grove, N., Bunning, K., Porter, J. & Morgan, M. 2000. *See what I mean: Guidelines to aid understanding of communication by people with profound learning disabilities*. Kidderminster: BILD.
- Grove, N., Bunning, K., Porter, J. & Olsson, C. 1999. *See what I mean: Interpreting the meaning of communication by people with severe & profound intellectual disabilities*. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 12: 190-203.
- Goodley, D. 2005. Empowerment, self-advocacy and resilience, *Journal Intellectual Disabilities* 9: 333-43.
- Hammersley, M. 2004 Some questions about research and evidence-based practice in education, in Thomas, G. & Pring, R. (Eds.) *Evidence-Based Practice in Education*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hart, S., Dixon, A., Drummond, M.J and McIntyre, D. 2005. *Learning Without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Jay, P. 1979 *Report of the Committee Enquiry into Mental Handicap Nursing and Care*. London: HMSO.
- Jeffrey, B. and Craft, A. 2006. Creative learning and possibility thinking. in B. Jeffrey (Ed.), *Creative Learning Practices: European Experiences*. London: The Tufnell Press.
- Johnson, K. & Walmsley, J. 2010. *People with Intellectual Disabilities: Towards a Good Life*. Bristol: Polity Press.

- Kam, Chi-Ming, Greenberg, Mark T., and Kusché, Carol A. 2004. Sustained Effects of the PATHS Curriculum on the Social and Psychological Adjustment of Children in Special Education, in *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 12: 66-79.
- Lindqvist, P., Nordanger, U.K & Landahl, J. 2009. Insurance and assurance: teachers' strategies in the regimes of risk and audit. *European Educational Research Journal* 8: 508-519.
- Little, H. and Wyver, S. 2010. Individual differences in children's risk perception and appraisals in outdoor play environments, *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 18: 297-313.
- Little, H. Wyver, S. Gibson, Fr 2011. The influence of play context and adult attitudes on young children's physical risk-taking during outdoor play, in *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 19: 113-131.
- Lofgren-Martenson, L. 2008. Love in cyberspace: Swedish young people with intellectual disabilities and the Internet. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 10: 125-138.
- Look Ahead Housing and Care 2006. Positive Risk Taking – A Good Practice Guide for Supported Housing Providers, retrieved 05.07.2011 from: [http://www.lookahead.org.uk/Site/23/Documents/Publications/LA\\_Positive\\_Risk\\_Taking.pdf](http://www.lookahead.org.uk/Site/23/Documents/Publications/LA_Positive_Risk_Taking.pdf)
- Manthorpe, J., Walsh, M., Alaszewski, A. and Harrison, L. 1997. Issues of risk practice and welfare in learning disability services, *Disability and Society*, 12: 69-82.
- McConkey, R. and Smyth, M., 2003. Parental perceptions of risks with older teenagers who have severe learning difficulties contrasted with the young people's views and experiences. *Children and society* 17: 18–31.
- Munn, P., Lloyd, G. & Cullen, A.M. 2000. *Alternatives to Exclusion from School*. London: Sage.
- Nind, M. 2011. Adventures in Positive Risk-Taking: Intensive Interaction and Creativity, Keynote lecture, Intensive Interaction Annual Conference, 21 June 2011 Oxford.

Nind, M. (in press), Intensive Interaction, emotional *development and emotional well-being*, In: Hewett, D. (ed) (in press) Theories of Intensive Interaction. London: Sage.

Nind, M. & Hewett, D. 1994. *Access to Communication: Developing the Basics of Communication with People with Severe Learning Difficulties through Intensive Interaction*. London: David Fulton.

Nind, M. & Thomas, G. 2005 Reinstating the value of teachers' tacit knowledge for the benefit of learners: using 'Intensive Interaction', *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*. 5: 97 - 100.

O'Connor, C. and DeLuca Fernandez, S. 2006. Race, Class, and Disproportionality: Reevaluating the Relationship Between Poverty and Special Education Placement, *Educational Researcher* 35: 6-11.

Palincsar, A.S., Magnusson, K.M.C. and Cutter, J. 2001. Making science accessible to all: results of a design experiment in inclusive classrooms. *Learning Disability Quarterly* 24: 15-32.

Parsons, C. 2010 *Strategic Alternatives to Exclusion from School*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Perske, R. 1972. The dignity of risk. in: W. Wolfensberger., B. Nirje., S. Olansky., R. Perske and P. Roos (Eds.) *The Principles of Normalization in Human Services*. Toronto: National Institute on Mental Retardation through Leonard Crainford.

Power-deFur, L, Orelove, F. 1997. *Inclusive Education: Practical Implementation of the Least Restrictive Environment*. Gaithersburg: Aspen Publishers.

Powel, J. 2004 Special education and the risk of becoming less educated in Germany and the United States, paper presented at *CES Berlin Dialogue, Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB) on December 13, 2004*, and retrieved from: <http://www.ces.fas.harvard.edu/publications/docs/pdfs/Powell2.pdf> 03.05.2011

Powel, Justin 2006. Special education and the risk of becoming less educated, in *European Societies* 8: 577-599.

- Richardson, J. G. 2002. Historical Context, Professional Authority, and Discourses of Risk: Child Guidance and Special Education, in *Teachers College Record* 104: 563-585.
- Roaf, C. 2002. *Coordinating Services for Included Children: Joined up Action*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Salisbury C.L., Gallucci, C., Palombard, M.M., Peck, C.A. 1995. Strategies that promote social relations among elementary students with and without severe disabilities in inclusive schools. *Exceptional Children* 62: 125–137.
- Sandseter, E & Hansen, B 2007. Categorising risky play - how can we identify risk-taking in children's play? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 15: 237-252.
- Seale, J. & Nind, M. 2010. *Understanding and promoting access for people with learning difficulties: seeing the opportunities and challenges of risk*. London: Routledge.
- Slee, R. 2007. Inclusive schooling as a means and end of education? In, L.Florian (Ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Special Education*. London: Sage.
- Taggart, B., Sammons, P., Smees, R., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Eliot, K & Lunt, I 2006. Early identification of special educational needs and the definition of 'at risk'. *British Journal of Special Education* 33: 40-45.
- Theodorou, F. & Nind, M. 2010 Inclusion in play: a case study of a child with autism in an inclusive nursery. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 10: 99-106.
- Thomas, G. 1997. Inclusive schools for an inclusive society. *British Journal of Special Education* 24: 103-107.
- Thomas, G. & Tarr, J. 1999. Ideology and Inclusion: A Reply to Croll and Moses, *British Journal of Educational Studies* 47: 17-27.
- Ware, J. and Evans, P. 1987. Room Management Is Not Enough? *British Journal of Special Education* 14: 78-80.

Waters, J & Begley, S 2007. Supporting the development of risk-taking behaviours in the early years: an exploratory study. *Education 3-13* 35: 365 – 377.

Wilcox, M. J., Kouri, T. A., & Caswell, S. 1990. Partner sensitivity to communication behavior of young children with developmental disabilities. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Disorders* 55: 679–693.