

Alma Primary School, London, UK.

The Beginning of a Journey, 20/June/2014

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There is a conundrum at the heart of schooling, to do with conformity and independence. Learning is ultimately an individual process, but schools have conformity built into them. From the organisation of lessons and the school day, through to eating and toilet breaks, schools enforce and encourage conformity in all sorts of ways. This isn't, of itself, something

negative: most of us probably accept that society requires a degree of conformity, however an excessive amount of conformity can be harmful to children, especially if we are interested, as I am, in nurturing imagination, independence and reflection. But I don't think it needs to be this way. A school



can be a place where children are independent learners and schools can allow children the opportunity to nurture imagination and reflection, and to become deep learners.

Today we launched the Learning in Depth (LiD) programme at Alma. It is something that I have been talking to parents, governors and staff about for over a year, something I passionately believe in. The simple idea behind Learning in Depth is that each child is given the opportunity, time and support to become an expert, but an expert in something unique, something different from everyone else in their class. LiD means that children can become individually immersed in something meaningful, and in doing so can gain the knowledge and understanding which allows the imagination to flourish. Kieran Egan, the founder of the Learning in Depth project, identifies an additional benefit: by becoming an expert a child can develop their own self-esteem and can learn to see the difference between opinion and knowledge, something too often confused in our society. Egan also suggests that by developing deep understanding of a specific topic, a child can come to appreciate what knowledge is and how to organise learning. In our ceremony today, each child was given a sheet with their name, their topic and a single fact to start them on their journey, which they have taken home to read with their family.

It is the task of educators and schools to recognise what is unique and wonderful about each child, to celebrate that individuality and to help each child to acquire the skills to become the best person they can be. Launching the Learning in Depth project today felt like that exciting first step on a journey, a journey you know is going to take you to some exciting places and which has the potential to change the way you see the world. The famous Chinese proverb says that a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step. When our ceremony finished, Gilad, one of our children rushed up to his mum, asking if he could go home to start finding out about his topic. That is what learning is about: like Gilad, I'm excited to see where the journey leads.