

## Annabelle Dixon, 1940-2005



Annabelle Dixon was a really lovely individual: warm, caring and with a marvellous sense of humour. She was the first person to visit me in hospital after I'd had heart by-pass surgery in February this year, and immediately rushed off to buy me a small battery radio when we discovered, to my horror, that the hospital's system was incapable of receiving BBC Radio Four!

We telephoned each other at least once a week, usually on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, and our lengthy laughter-filled conversations ranged over a vast number of issues. Educational and political matters were usually on the agenda, but Annabelle took a keen interest in everything going on in the world, and her observations were always balanced and humane. I really miss those telephone conversations.

Sustained by her Quaker faith, Annabelle accepted all the adverse effects of her three-year struggle against cancer with amazing fortitude and courage. In all that time, she never complained or felt sorry for herself, and her chief concern was always the well-being of others. Her approach to everything was quite inspirational.

As co-editor of this journal, she was, of course, always totally reliable and professional. She had an instinctive understanding of *FORUM*'s rationale and purpose, and the numbers for which she took responsibility were always full of good things – including a splendid and apposite editorial. I knew I would always share her judgment as to the suitability or otherwise of submitted

articles, and working closely with her over the past seven years was a joyful and rewarding experience.

I have lost a wonderful friend and colleague, and I find it very difficult to express that loss in words. She was very special and enriched the lives of everyone she met.

Clyde Chitty

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Annabelle Dixon will be honoured and remembered by her many friends and colleagues for many different reasons; her professional achievements were diverse and manifold and her personal qualities remarkable. I was privileged to work with Annabelle on a variety of projects over the last 20 years and can testify to the boldness and brilliance of her work for *FORUM*, to the wisdom and experience she brought to the research study *Learning without Limits*, and to the publication that was in press at the time of her death, *First Hand Experience: what matters to children*. But the aspect of her professional life that has had the greatest impact on me, and that I treasure most, is her work as a classroom teacher.

During the academic year 1996-7, when Annabelle was the deputy head of a small primary school in Hertfordshire, I spent many hours observing in her classroom, and many more discussing with her the significance of what I had seen there. As a result of these observations and discussions I wrote an account of that extraordinary site of teaching and learning, describing how life in Annabelle's classroom could be read as a lesson in enduring educational values and their steadfast application. The appreciation that follows is adapted from that account: I hope it will help to explain the supremely high esteem in which Annabelle Dixon was held by all who witnessed her pedagogical genius in action – children, parents and colleagues of every kind.

The school where Annabelle taught is in an area of extreme economic and social disadvantage, within sight and sound of the M25. Her classroom is by no means spacious, but large enough for the 20 children, between four and seven years old, who live and learn in this incomparably educative environment, a place of genuine intellectual search.

For example, pinned on the notice board behind a huge, comfortable, dilapidated and embracing sofa is a 'New Words' list. Annabelle explains that here she and the children record words that children have not met before. They are encouraged to mark these occasions, to interrupt the discussion or the story to ask for explanations and definitions, to record the word in question on the list. On one visit the list read thus:

amaryllis	toffee-nose
ferocious	energy
anxious	cauldron
transparent	nocturnal
gasp	series

These are not dead words, such as are found on many infant classroom walls, unread, unremarked, unremarkable. These words enter the children's thinking and expand their understanding. During story-time, a child notices the small print on the book his teacher is holding up: 'Miss, that's a series *there*, on the back of the book'. Another day, at tidying up time, a child calls from the book corner, 'Miss, we're tidying up the series!' One child confided to Annabelle: 'Everything's a series really'. When invited to say more he obliged with a variety of examples – his family (his brothers and sisters, in order of age), the days of the week, the times on the clock. And so on.

On another visit, I recorded another list:

oval	bouquet
environment	identical
S.O.S	impatient
cuboid	saint
nervous	calf

As I copied down the 'New Words' list, and admired the richness of the children's language experience, I remembered the alarming work of Tizard and Hughes (1984), who found that teachers in their small-scale nursery school study asked lower level questions of the children in the working class sample than of those in the middle-class sample. The memory served to emphasise the quality of what I was witnessing: there is little that is low-level in *this* classroom. Incidentally, I had already noticed that Annabelle asks fewer questions than many teachers I have observed, although she did tell me about this exchange:

AD 'Where does a river start?'

Child 'r'

(Her comment to me: '34 years in the classroom and I'm still asking silly questions').

The children, however, ask good questions, and follow them through, in a search for understanding. Adrian (5 years 2 months) to Annabelle:

I think I've found something out (demonstrating with the binoculars he has been examining). There's two bits here (points) and two bits here (the eye-pieces) and when you look, you only see one picture!

Many of the children's questions are recorded in a class book, for future reflection and discussion. (For example: 'Do cats have to chase mice in real life?' 'Why do letters have names as well as sounds?'). There are also individual investigations, led by individual thinkers. I observed Ricky (aged 5) collecting his maths book and settling down to write, on a page already crammed with numbers.

AD Ricky, do you want to carry on?

R Yeah.

AD Really? Are you sure?

R Yeah.

AD (to me) This is the fifth day. He's discovering even numbers.  
(His book shows he has reached 748).

Liam (6 years 2 months), who has different concerns, is working on a different project. The old bulgy and commodious sofa has been replaced by a new one, which is undoubtedly smarter and cleaner, but which only seats three children at a time. Liam is worried that some children are enjoying more than their fair share of this new privilege, so he has collected a printed copy of the class-list and a clip-board, and is keeping a tally of who sits on the sofa and how often. His writing is stiff with inaccuracies, if seen in terms of letter formation, capital letters, or punctuation marks, but none the less effective in his personal project, which is social justice.

On the notice-board next to the New Words list is a quotation from Wittgenstein (himself for a while an elementary teacher, in the 1920s, in small village schools up in the mountains south of Vienna): 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.' Annabelle's response to this apothegm is to structure much of her teaching around what she calls 'tool-words'. The first of these words to become important in her pedagogy was 'problem', when she realised, some years ago, that without this word in their working vocabularies, children did not appreciate what was happening to them when they met a problem. She reasoned that if they could understand what kind of an experience a problem was, they would more readily deploy their intellectual and emotional energies in finding ways of solving it. And so it proved. Once her pupils had grasped that a problem (a disagreement with a friend, a technical difficulty in a building project with the blocks, a puzzling observation of the natural world) could be understood as a challenge to their inventiveness and ingenuity, could be relished, explored and finally resolved, they were much less likely to walk away from problems, to abandon their projects, or to refer their disputes to adult authority.

Building on this discovery, and on the children's appetite for more, Annabelle developed a list of essential 'tool words' for children's thinking, which includes the cluster of concepts *identical*, *similar* and *different*, the verbs *compare*, *remember*, *comment* and *question*, and the nouns *imagination*, *team* and *mystery*. Annabelle showed me the work the class had been doing on the school's behaviour policy document, which had recently been written in consultation with KS2 pupils. Annabelle's response to this policy was to ensure that the words used in the document could be understood by the younger children in her class: she did this by building up working definitions of key words, such as respect, drawn from the children's lives. A large sheet of paper recorded this work in progress:

Keeping secrets from people isn't respectful.  
Swearing at people isn't respectful.

Annabelle overheard a child swearing quietly to himself one day, while searching his tray for a missing treasure. When he saw her, he stopped, with a

guilty flush, but not because his teacher had heard him. 'That's not respecting myself, is it?' he explained. My own notebook records Stephen (aged 6) complaining to the whole class, gathered for a discussion: 'People have been talking about my cold sore. That wasn't respectful'.

In this classroom, respect is a key theme: respect for children's powers, for their emotional and intellectual energy. In Annabelle's teaching this respect translates into a willingness to follow what she calls 'the grain of their thinking', rather than trying to 'teach against the grain'. It is transparently clear, from minute to minute, that in this classroom there is a direct relationship between the lived curriculum, the first-hand experiences of these young learners, and the values of the teacher who provides and organises their experiences. It is the children's strengths that are valued, not their weaknesses; their powers to do, to think, to feel, to understand, to represent and express, are given space and time to grow. The curriculum that these children and Annabelle construct together offers them both nourishing food and challenging exercise; the quality of the children's learning reflects her faith in their limitless capacity to learn.

Observing Annabelle's teaching, one sees these connections daily made manifest; the close and necessary connections between values and classroom practice, between values and schooling, between values and the whole enterprise of education. The defining quality of Annabelle's pedagogy is that it is built on such very firm foundations. She is entirely at home with the searching 'why' questions that can take a considerable toll on a teacher's sense of security and well-being. (Why teach this rather than that? Why teach this way, not the other? Why schools? Why educate?) To ask oneself 'why' is always to risk the Mother Hubbard effect; the cupboard of reason, rationale, justification, first principles, may turn out to be bare.

In Annabelle's philosophy, the cupboard is well stocked. Practices can be justified. Arguments can convincingly be made about the importance of certain kinds of learning, about the power of children's thinking and feeling, about the particular activities and experiences that will strengthen these powers. Annabelle can and does speak out as an articulate advocate for children's learning. She has a strong and energising grasp of what Susan Isaacs (a great educator, with whom Annabelle has much in common) called the most profound problem of mental life; the relation between understanding and purpose.

Annabelle's deep understanding of children and their learning is daily put to good purpose, coupling up her dearly held educational values (respect, justice, integrity, love, freedom) with the routines and rituals of schooling, with moment by moment interactions in the classroom. In other classrooms, there is often a gap, sometimes a narrow chink, sometimes a yawning chasm, between what teachers say and what teachers do; the rhetoric and reality do not match up. In Annabelle's classroom there is no such gap. When Annabelle teaches, she teaches herself.

**Mary Jane Drummond**

### What a Million Looks Like

Annabelle Dixon was a remarkable person and an inspirational and gifted teacher. I first met her in 1978 when I became Leader of Longmore Teachers' Centre in Hertford. At that time Annabelle was the Deputy Head of a local Infants School. We soon established contact through her participation in a wide range of Teachers' Centre activities and through her endless curiosity and desire to learn more about the process of learning and the practice of teaching. Annabelle was responsible for my initial involvement in *FORUM* when she asked me to write an article about the work of teacher groups at the Teachers' Centre. This resulted in an invitation to join the board and work alongside her in that capacity for over 15 years.

Annabelle was a founding member of what became the Longsearch Teachers' Research Group. In an article for *FORUM* in Autumn 1994 [1] she described its genesis:

The group had an unusual start in that it grew out of argument. A number of teachers were attending a course on the Match and Mismatch [2] materials. The discussions arising from these sessions were more than just lively. Many present felt that they were saying things about teaching and learning that they had never vocalised before. Their own experience was considered important by the other course participants and, in the way that the chemistry of these things sometimes works, those taking part were or became, real listeners.

The group went on to investigate their own practice and in 1984 some of their findings were published by the Schools Council in a publication called '*What Learning Looks Like*' [3] This however, was not the end of the story, as the group continued to meet and share their experiences. For over 20 years Annabelle contributed regularly to the group and played a key role in editing a later publication, *Harvesting the Nettle* [4] which set out the experiences of different group members in their search to accommodate the demands of the National Curriculum.

Annabelle's contribution to the group and to the world of education has been immense. Throughout her career she was actively involved in a range of research and publications which reflect her diverse interests and experience. As a young teacher she joined the *FORUM* Editorial Board and in 1967 gave evidence to the Plowden Committee. This commitment to articulating and contributing to the synthesis between theory and practice was a continuing characteristic throughout her life.

My memories of Annabelle as a practitioner are always linked to seeing her in the classroom and to the ways that she was able to share her practice with others. She remained a teacher for many years, choosing not to become an educational psychologist (even though she had the qualification), or headteacher, because of her abiding interest and involvement in the way that children learn. Her classroom was an interesting place – she created an environment which invited young children to learn – and learn they did, in

equally interesting and often unexpected ways. A favourite memory of Annabelle describing 'what learning looked like' in her classroom occurred some time after we had completed the research for the Schools Council. She and I had been asked to share the work of the Longsearch group with teachers who were looking at learning through science in a neighbouring county. Annabelle's case study had focused on the way that the children she taught undertook problem solving – particularly in a scientific context. Annabelle brought along a wooden drawer to illustrate what she wanted to share.

Annabelle worked with very young children and at that time was teaching reception class. During the last fifteen minutes or so of each day she would have a time when the children got together to focus on different things. Sometimes this period was a time for individual children to raise questions, at other times they chose to 'think about thinking'. The results were often quite remarkable and provided amazing insights into the way that children were construing their world and developing their learning. During question time the focus was entirely on the questions that children raised – sometimes the questions were answered – but not always. Value was placed on the importance of framing questions and on thinking about different possibilities and solutions.

One afternoon a child asked 'What does a million look like?' The class looked at each other and shook their heads and Annabelle said – 'Well ...if we filled all the drawer units with Smarties ... that might be what a million looks like'.

In the classroom there were three wooden drawer units, each with 16 drawers or trays. Each drawer had a hole in the front which served as a handle. The children thought about what she said and one child said,

Yes, but you would have a problem, because the Smarties would fall out of the hole in each drawer.

The group agreed, and then another child said,

You could solve that problem by sticking Sellotape over the hole – then the Smarties would not fall out.

This seemed to provide the solution until a third child said,

You'd then have another problem because the Smarties would stick to the Sellotape.

After further consideration a fourth child said,

Well...if you stuck Sellotape on the inside as well as the outside, the Smarties would not stick to it.

The group agreed that this would indeed solve that problem – until a fifth child spoke up and said,

If you do that you wouldn't be able to open the drawer.

The final stage of this problem was for another child to suggest that if they stuck a piece of dowel on to the front of each drawer they would then be able to open it.

What is absolutely fascinating about the above story is that the children (aged between four and five years) were applying hypothetical thinking to an abstract problem and were arriving at 'solutions' without any concrete apparatus. It also illustrates the open and serious way that Annabelle responded to their questions and how she was able to give them time and space for thinking.

These qualities of openness and seriousness were characteristic of Annabelle's approach to the way that she worked, whether she was editing *FORUM*, working with teachers, or contributing to illustrious committees. But above all many of us will remember her imagination, creativity and humour, and reflect upon the enormous gap that her untimely death has created. Perhaps her greatest legacy is that she was able to have contact with a wide range of people through her interests, activities and publications, and in that way she will continue to be a part of us.

**Liz Thomson**

### **Notes**

- [1] Annabelle Dixon (1994) Longsearch: the development of a teacher group, *FORUM*, 36(3).
- [2] Wynne Harlen et al. (1977) *Match & Mismatch: raising questions and finding answers*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd.
- [3] Liz & Alan Thomson (1984) *What Learning Looks Like*. London: Longman/Schools Council.
- [4] Longsearch Group (1994) *Harvesting the Nettle*.