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Book Reviews

Children Writing Stories
MICHAEL ARMSTRONG, 2006
Maidenhead: Open University Press
208 pages, ISBN 978-0335219766, £19.99

Children Writing Stories has as its centre stories written by six children. The simplicity of its title belies the richness and complexity of a text which draws upon a lifetime of experience, thought and conversations shared with children and adults; nor does it convey the ambition of the project or of the challenge it sets for educators. The book has its origins in the thinking that gave rise to *Closely Observed Children* (1980) in which Michael Armstrong set out to document the intellectual life of a class of eight and nine year-olds. He was particularly interested in children's seriousness of purpose, which he characterised as their 'high intent'. He came to understand that as children encounter the various traditions of human thought in science and the arts they engage with them 'to examine, extend and express in a fitting form their own experience and understanding' (1980, p. 129). On reading and rereading both these books I am prompted to think of the debt that many of us owe to Michael Armstrong for his articulation of an attitude of mind that acknowledges that 'high intent' and engages with children's works and with their intellectual lives in a way that is at once serious and hugely exciting.

The book is framed by a reading of one of Leo Tolstoy's essays, written at the time he was running a small village school for peasant children, in which he explores the art of children's writing and the ways in which they shape their writing with conscious intent. Michael Armstrong takes on Tolstoy's project to examine the complexity of children's creative thought revealed through narrative, and pursues it through successive close readings of the narratives of six children aged between five and 16. Through five chapters he shows how we might read children's writing and what we can learn from it. In so doing, he builds his argument so that the final chapter, where Michael sets forth the

challenging and exciting task of what it is to be a teacher, fully engaged with the works of the child, is set on solid foundations.

One of the pleasures of this book is that it is constructed so that the reader is allowed space to respond and reflect for themselves. The stories stand alone at the beginning of each chapter and, where the combination of handwritten text and drawings are essential to their reading, these have been reproduced beautifully by the publisher. It is only once the reader has engaged with the stories for themselves that Michael Armstrong begins his meditative reflections on each text or collection of texts. Each set of stories has its distinctive qualities, but running through all the writing is the evidence of children's seriousness of purpose, their intellectual engagement with the narratives they create. None of these young writers, whatever their age, is content to be a passive recipient of given traditions; rather they appropriate the forms of narrative that they encounter to make them their own; they use them to say important things about their lives and about their understandings of themselves and the world they live in. Each chapter may be read alone; together they convey a sense of how children's engagement with narrative develops over time in a context which allows for children to make choices about what and how they write.

Whilst Michael Armstrong reads the works of these writers with intense care, he hardly draws attention to the fact that he was the teacher of all except three of them. He was responsible for the classroom where the conditions were created for children to choose significant questions and experiences about which to write and it was he who engaged with them to create a community of readers, writers, and thinkers. I am aware that there are many classrooms where what children write is so circumscribed by adults' rules and plans that they may never fully know the power of writing, although many do so against the odds.

I have come to regard *Children Writing Stories* as a masterclass for anyone interested in children's intellectual life. In writing about children's narratives Michael Armstrong enacts the project he proposes for teachers who work in classrooms where the productive imagination is placed at their centre; where 'children's works, the products of their imagination, become the focus of educational interest and attention' (p 180). The final chapter celebrates teaching as an interpretative art and the act of reading as signally important. Michael Armstrong suggests four aspects of scrutiny which are integral to a teacher's reading of children's narrative works. The first is to enter the child's narrative, to acknowledge its authority, however rudimentary it may at first appear. The second is the drawing out of the work's narrative intention, both explicit and implicit within the text. Thirdly, there is the responsibility to re-present to the author the reader's understanding and, finally, to look to the future, paying such attention to the work that allows the teacher to consider what can best contribute to the writer's next steps. There is an emphasis throughout on the importance of the community of readers and writers who share in the making, the readings and in the interpretations. Not only is this true of the classroom, it is also true of the way that Michael Armstrong has read these texts. He has shared them with children, colleagues, students, friends. He has, indeed, dwelt

in these stories and his writing about them reveals the attention he has paid to them, the seriousness with which he approaches them. He writes, 'No knowledge is too rarefied to be of value in interpreting young children's narrative thought just as no intuition, on the part of the young writer, is too elementary to challenge the teacher, as a reader, to think again' (p. 180). In *Children Writing Stories*, Michael Armstrong engages with the nature of children's narrative thought, their intellectual growth and their bold entry into culture. The evidence of the children's writing affirms his view that thought and making and the development of skill are inextricably entwined; that creativity is central to the curriculum and that children and adults can engage together in the companionship of learning. His vision for education, the curriculum and for teaching and learning is an inspiring one, cogently argued and firmly founded on the close scrutiny of children writing about things that are important to them. This is a very fine book which embodies a challenge to much current practice and celebrates the value of the intellectual life of children and their teachers. It has all the hallmarks of a classic.

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Children are at the heart of this book because it is their stories and sometimes their reflections on their stories that provide the material for discussion and analysis. 'I believe there is no child who does not have a good story to tell' (p. xi) the author tells us. But just like the stories themselves, the title of this book hints at so much more.

Michael Armstrong continues the themes developed in his seminal work *Closely Observed Children* (1980), which offered an interpretation of children's intellectual growth and argued for the need to take children's intentions seriously. Drawing on his experiences as teacher and head teacher of an Oxfordshire primary school from 1981 to 1999, this later book has as its central thesis that children should be celebrated for their artistry and agency in developing their own understanding of narrative, while coming to terms with the chaos that is life, or as Clifford Geertz so aptly puts it, 'to understand what the devil is going on' (p. 174).

The book is the story of children learning through writing and the story of Armstrong's gift as a teacher. It is carefully crafted like a good story, so that

patterns and themes emerge to be drawn together in the final chapter. It begins and ends with Tolstoy, himself a great storyteller, and in particular one of his essays on Education, *Should the Peasant Children Learn to Write from Us or Should We Learn to Write From Them,* which is intriguingly echoed by one of the young authors when she asks Armstrong in a letter, 'Do you think that children have the same ideas as adults but just can't express them as well? Or maybe their naivety helps them express them better?' Armstrong leaves the reader to decide.

In particular, this book is about six children aged between five and 16. Each of the five child-focused chapters opens with a story or series of stories. We are told of the context in which the stories were composed and given time to respond to them personally before Armstrong offers his critical interpretation and sensitive scrutiny. The first writer is the five year-old eponymous hero of Vivian Gussin Paley's book, *Wally's Stories;* he is the only boy featured and the only child not taught by the author. It would have been interesting to know why no other boys' writing is represented. Nine of Wally's short dictated stories are reproduced, and the reader is invited to examine their depth and intricacy and the precision with which settings, characters and familiar themes are explored within the traditions of classic mythic tales. Wally's conscious intention is clear in both exploring the possibilities of narrative and revisiting themes that are concerning him and his classmates such as loneliness and companionship, loss and recovery and independence and autonomy.

The significance of each child's writing is developed throughout the following chapters, each of which considers a different child's work and has a distinct focus. The stories are interpreted and scrutinised for their individual qualities and linked back to the context of their creation and the young authors' preoccupations with form and meaning. For example, Jessica and Melissa's work focuses on family themes and relationships, but is also significant in the way it reveals the children's knowledge of the picture book genre. In handmade books the two six year-olds expertly integrate text and pictures to create a depth of meaning that relies on both elements working together smoothly.

It was at this point in particular that the period in which these stories were written becomes evident. If they had been more recent, one would have expected to find, despite the traditional genres of the pieces, some hybridity that demonstrated the children's knowledge and experience of multimedia. Armstrong clearly recognises the importance of visual elements and Rebecca, an ex-pupil who in chapter six provides a fascinating commentary on her own writing, asks her ex-teacher whether her message might have been more effectively communicated through the medium of film. But it is this lack of awareness of digital technology, so evident in children's writing today, that dates the book, while not of course, detracting from its overall message.

In each of the chapters Armstrong skilfully draws out the central theme of the book: the development of children's narrative imagination and practice, and their creativity in appropriating and reworking traditional tales to explore childhood preoccupations. For example, in chapter four we are introduced to six stories composed by Lydia, aged eight.

Over the course of a year she writes a series of stories where she is clearly circling around a theme of adult authority and the tension between the prosaic everyday life and the magical world. By considering the depth and intricacy of each story and the ways in which she appropriates the form to suit her purposes, we can see what Armstrong terms her 'narrative identity' emerging as she becomes more experienced at both creating the action and drawing away from it for reflection or to address the reader.

We are told that Lydia spent two to three weeks working on one particularly problematic story, as befits a serious problem-solving enterprise. And it is through these occasional comments that we have glimpses of the classroom and the practice that supported the children's experimentations with form and meaning. The book is as much about teaching as learning. These confident stories did not emerge despite the teacher but because of him. However, it is not until the final chapter that Armstrong explicitly, albeit briefly, discusses his pedagogy.

Throughout the book, the social nature of the children's learning is clear. They shared their drafts, read them aloud, discussed and reworked them and had audiences for final pieces in the class, the school and beyond (we are told, as an aside, that some work was displayed in the village church and local museum). They were, to apply that seldom-used but no less important phrase these days, 'a community of writers'. Stories, particularly folk and fairy tales, were read and told, discussed, dramatised and enjoyed, and visitors were invited to share their enthusiasms. A storyteller who visited the classroom for three days told Trickster tales, made artefacts to accompany them and encouraged the children (and the teachers) to do the same for a performance. Inspired by the workshop and the storyteller's craft, nine year-old Laura wrote her own Trickster tale but playfully made the narrator a trickster too, which necessitated many daring and amusing twists and asides, resulting in a work of real originality.

Armstrong argues strongly that teachers need to show respect for children and understand the seriousness of their intentions, their creativity and artfulness. To what extent is this possible in today's world of literacy hours, narrow targets, and a tight curriculum? The Primary Strategy does put more emphasis on creativity than its predecessor and primary school teachers are being discouraged from planning in narrow one-week blocks, so the possibilities are beginning to emerge.

Armstrong's argument takes us back to professional debates about genre theory (Barrs, 1991) and the need to explicitly teach children structure and rules that conform to adult norms. He argues that children become detached from the process of writing if it is not focused on their own purposes and interests and, in support, quotes Vygotsky, who likens this situation to children learning to strike the keys of a piano while reading music, but lacking involvement in the essence of the music itself. I am reminded of Graham Frater's (2000) comments on the fragmented approach to teaching English he found visiting schools as an HMI. He reported that the teaching of discrete technical skills 'displaced the

practice of written composition for which they were intended as preparation' (p. 109).

Transgressions of spelling, punctuation and grammar are referred to by Armstrong as 'faulty' or 'wayward' and in the manner of reading miscues, are interrogated as windows into the child's thinking. For example, he shows how irregularity of tense, while challenging convention, may have been intentionally applied as a means of shifting perspective or moving action on. Trusting children seems to be the message here, not a custom or attitude that has been fostered in the current high-stakes culture of testing and league tables. Interestingly, this is not an issue that Armstrong chooses to address head-on.

The final chapter is a powerful one. Armstrong adopts philosopher Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative as mimesis, 'the creative imitation, by means of plot, of lived temporal experience' (p. 165), as an analytical framework for pulling together his comments about individual children's stories in previous chapters. In doing so he demonstrates that, far from waiting to be initiated into cultural understandings of what constitutes a story, children are already, even at five, skilled, if inexperienced participants. Through the lens of mimesis he is able to identify the cultural knowledge required by a young writer to enable a reader to make sense of a story, both in terms of its internal construction and its reference to wider, more personal meanings.

And so back to the modest title of the book, a misnomer because it is, as Armstrong acknowledges, as much about reading as writing. The children in each chapter implicitly understood narrative conventions by hearing and reading stories, by talking about them and being readers of their own and each other's work. This is what gave them the confidence to creatively experiment with the form and to appropriate tradition to engage with their own concerns and preoccupations about the world.

It seems no coincidence that the book should be published at this time, when external demands on schools to meet narrow targets are higher than ever. Many young, hard-pressed teachers may not yet feel able to trust children's agency as problem-solvers or look beyond superficial aspects of story writing to see what is really involved. However, the meticulous analysis of the children's stories, supported by theory and the insights offered by Michael Armstrong, a consummate teacher and educator, provide valuable material for reflection and fruitful discussion with teachers, student teachers and others about a different way of thinking about children's literacy learning.

This book deserves to be read widely by all those interested in children and learning. Its inspiring message is that teaching and learning are exciting and rewarding processes and that there are real alternatives to mechanistic approaches to children's development as writers.

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Fair Enough? School Admissions: the next steps
Comprehensive Future, 2007
London. 48 pages, available at http://www.comprehensivefuture.org.uk

This pamphlet restates and updates arguments against selective schooling. It proposes reform of schools admissions procedures predicated on strengthening the role of the local authority (LA). Building on work by the reformist think-tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), it argues that the power of certain kinds of schools (Academies, 'faith' schools) to set their own admissions policies independently and in isolation from other local schools must be removed. That is, it prioritises the significance of education as a public and communal good above the claims made for private individual choice of school, and calls for action on this basis. In Melissa Benn's words, to ensure parents and students have access to a good local school, 'choice may have to play second fiddle to fairness'.

David Chaytor MP introduces the pamphlet as Chair of Comprehensive Future, a non-party political group set up in 2003 to challenge the anti-comprehensive school lobby emergent in New Labour and entrenched elsewhere. He welcomes the strengthening of the Admissions Code contained in the 2006 Education Act, and detects the possibility of a new cross-party consensus on school admissions. Comprehensive Future collectively argues not only for strengthening the role of the LA in determining admissions but also for extending the role of the local Admissions Adjudicator, so that this person monitors and intervenes proactively rather than only after a complaint. The group argues that challenging the unfairness of local admissions arrangements should become obligatory for schools and local admissions forums, as it already is for LAs.

The extent of selectivity resurgent within the English secondary school system is indicated by facts and figures collected at the end of the pamphlet. Fifteen out of 150 English LAs have fully selective systems where places in selective schools make up around 20 per cent of the total number of school places. Another 21 LAs 'boast' one or more selective schools. All 'specialist' schools in England are entitled to select up to 10 per cent of their intake on a given 'aptitude'. How many do so is unknown; the figure remains uncollected by government. The question of how to incorporate independent fee-paying schools within a fully comprehensive education system free at the point of use is

avoided in the pamphlet, even though almost eight per cent of children nationally attend private selective schools. In one-third of (mostly urban) LAs the proportion of children attending is 10 per cent.

That the continuation of a selective (that is, exclusionary) school system detrimentally affects the educational opportunities and offers available to huge numbers of students year on year is made very clear in several of the brief and readable contributions which make up the bulk of the text. Margaret Tulloch points out that discussion of selective as against comprehensive schooling all too often focuses on institutions and structures rather than on the people in them, thereby evading proper recognition of the damage done to individual children who, through failing the 11+, are selected for what are understood to be inferior schools. The subsequent educational aspirations of such children (of course the majority within the areas operating selection) are likely to be marked by this experience. They may carry a sense of 'failure' through their lives.

Sarah Tough, an IPPR researcher, looks at the extent of covert selection. She also considers international comparisons of school achievement and points out that 'Countries that overtly segregate pupils do not have a higher average student performance, but they do show larger variation, and the more selective schooling systems are, the more important the socio-economic background of the pupil is to their outcome'.

Under an economic system pitting each against all, 'diversity' of school provision coupled with increased selection means a more petrified, less porous, stratification of schools. Francis Beckett is sharp and amusing on the rhetoric of misrepresentation employed by those who proffer New Labour's education policies, one consequence of which has been an intensification of the sense among parents of their own inadequacy and powerlessness in the face of the new hierarchy of provision. Which of the various local schools is now the better, and which the worse? How can I make sure my child doesn't end up in the 'worst' school? Policies which generate local school-ranking serve and perpetuate an individualistic and competitive as opposed to communal and cooperative mindset. This in turn can lead to ambivalence about removing school selection for the few even when, as Professor Sally Tomlinson shows, the presence of selective schooling is detrimental to the overall improvement in attainment of the many who go, unselected, to surrounding schools.

Campaigners continue to work for a better way. The pamphlet contains accounts from parents and activists in Kent, Medway, Buckinghamshire, Calderdale and Ripon of the continuing drive for comprehensive education. Space is given to John Dunford to defend as an ex-head teacher the success of a truly comprehensive school, and Jacob Stewart is articulate and positive about his experiences at the local non-selective school he recently attended.

David Laws MP, who shadows the Department for Children, Schools and Families for the Liberal Democrats, looks at the 100 top-performing schools in England and notes that only 1.4 per cent of their students receive free meals compared to a national average of some 15 per cent. For the Liberal Democrats, the remedy for reducing inequality of school opportunity is the Pupil Premium:

additional monies directed to schools teaching the poorest students. Eventually such funding will rise to match that resourcing students at private schools. The Lib-Dems are happy to see fee-paying schools maintained. They also appear opposed only to selection 'by ability' *into* state schools; a governing body's decision to set or stream students within a comprehensive school is acceptable.

Such a policy aligns them all too closely, in my view, to the proponents of out-and-out selective schooling, who argue as ever the old apartheid: different schools for different types of children. Clyde Chitty reminds that the roots of such thinking lie in racist, classist and eugenicist perspectives which construct notions of 'fixed innate ability' or assigned 'quotients of intelligence'. He suggests that the way to break the stranglehold of such a discourse is to reconfigure how teachers and parents see students and children (and indeed themselves), not as falling into one or other of these predetermined categories but as always potentially educable given the right conditions. The first of these would be the resolute removal of all selectivity which constructs the child as a given category even as it purports merely to reveal them as such.

The link between the construction of a student in this way and the student's social class is long established. The role which selectivity of schooling plays in the reproduction (albeit contestedly) of social inequalities and our class-divided social order is equally well researched. Was it cheeky, then, or just overly-generous of Comprehensive Future to include in its pamphlet extracts from a speech given by Tory front-bencher David Willetts MP to the CBI in which he acknowledges that poor children mostly don't get into grammar schools? The logic of a language which identifies some children unreflexively as 'bright', or which speaks of a child being able to fulfil her 'potential' (as if these qualities exist independent of the contexts for their demonstration) sustains the school segregationists. This language peppers Willetts's speech. Even so, the backlash caused by his telling a simple truth to the Party-faithful cost him the education portfolio and provoked a rapid about-face by David Cameron in relation to Tory schools admissions policy. The Conservatives are now intent on further undermining the power of LAs to regulate the admissions procedure, for example, by promising to enable more Academy-style independent state-funded schools built without the need to obtain local planning permission. In Buckinghamshire the County's Conservative cabinet member for education announced plans to build the first new grammar schools in half a century, in order not to 'deprive children of a selective education'. Who says Tories don't have a sense of humour?

Contributions from the General Secretaries of the three biggest teaching unions round off the pamphlet. For the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, Dr Mary Bousted, with Alison Ryan, points out the divisive rather than cohesive role being played by 'faith' schools. Chris Keates of the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers, compromised by her union's position as one of New Labour's social partners, criticises the Academies programme. The late Steve Sinnott of the National Union of Teachers argued that promoting what he termed social cohesion should be the overarching

principle, and to this end LAs should allocate school places. All schools in an area should reach agreement on admissions criteria and report to the LA, which must then have regard to this report before determining the final admissions arrangements and adjudicating appeals made by parents over particular cases.

'Fair enough?' outlines what supporters of Comprehensive Future regard as first steps towards the creation of a fully-comprehensive education system with a fair admissions procedure. It remains to be seen whether the political consensus David Chaytor claims for these proposals can mobilise to bring them about.

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