
Introduction to Robin Alexander

MICHAEL ARMSTRONG

THE THIRD BRIAN SIMON MEMORIAL LECTURE

Robin Alexander: *Legacies, Policies and Prospects:
one year on from the Cambridge Primary Review*

Brian Simon was one of the great educational historians of the 20th century. He was also a founder, and the leading theorist, of the comprehensive school, or the common school, as he would have preferred to call it. In 1958, with Robin Pedley and Jack Walton, he founded the journal *FORUM*, which he conceived as a campaigning journal, designed to promote comprehensive education from infancy to adulthood. For fifty years *FORUM* has remained faithful to Brian's vision. After Brian's death in 2002, the editorial board resolved to establish a lecture, to be held from time to time, in his honour and in pursuit of the comprehensive goal which he held so dear. This is the third Brian Simon Memorial Lecture, and the first to be devoted to the cause of comprehensive primary education.

It is my great pleasure and privilege to introduce Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, Director of the *Cambridge Primary Review*. It would be no exaggeration to describe Robin as the world's foremost authority on primary education. When his magnum opus, *Culture and Pedagogy*, was published, in 2001, Brian Simon hailed it as 'an astonishing achievement.' 'The book has a pioneering character,' Brian wrote, 'the reader feels inducted into whole new areas of educational and pedagogical discourse. It is certainly the most detailed depth study of primary education ever yet undertaken.' One of the most remarkable aspects of Robin's remarkable book is its sheer range, from far reaching philosophical and historical analysis to fascinating minute by minute accounts of classroom lessons in five contrasted cultures. The particular and the general have rarely been so richly interwoven in educational literature.

Since the publication of *Culture and Pedagogy*, Robin has spent much of his extraordinary energy on developing the concept of dialogic pedagogy, which sets out to place classroom talk at the centre of educational experience. Dialogic

pedagogy owes much, not just to innovative teachers and educationalists, but to the work of philosophers, psychologists, and literary theorists such as Mikhail Bakhtin. In a sequel to *Culture and Pedagogy*, entitled *Towards Dialogic Teaching*, Robin cites Bakhtin's axiom that 'if an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue.' Robin comments:

The imperative of dialogue, in Bakhtin's view, pervades all forms of discourse, whether in philosophy, science, aesthetics, literary criticism, the novel, history and society. But applied in the more specific contexts of educational discourse and classroom talk, the axiom about questions and answers should give us particular cause for thought. For to Bakhtin dialogue is essential to discourses – to a world – where meanings are neither fixed nor absolute, and where the exchange, acquisition and refinement of meaning is what education is centrally about. Indeed (to link Bakhtin to his compatriot Vygotsky) dialogue is about helping children to locate themselves within the unending conversations of culture and history. With dialogue comes identity.

The thought of children as partners and participants in the unending conversations of culture and history is deeply embedded within the *Cambridge Primary Review*, which has preoccupied Robin over the course of the last five or six years. The Review's final report is, as I have already argued in *FORUM* [Volume 52, Number 1, 2010], a revolutionary document. Backed up by a huge mass of evidence -28 surveys of published research and a remarkable array of submissions and soundings – it is far more than a successor to the Plowden Report of 1967. It is the most thorough, authoritative, and radical, review of primary education ever to have been carried out in this country, all the more so because of its independence of Government. Its recommendations cover every aspect of children's and teachers' educational experience: the kinds of knowledge that teachers and children bring to the classroom; the structure of the curriculum and its guiding values, aims and principles; the methods of teaching and their pedagogical justification; the values of documentation, assessment and critique; the quality of the relationship of pupils to teachers and of pupils to each other; the cultural role of the school within society. If its recommendations were to be carried out in full, primary education in this country would be transformed.

Unsurprisingly, the Review has been largely ignored or rejected by Government and Opposition alike. The intentions of the present Government, insofar as they possess any kind of consistency whatsoever, are depressingly conventional not to say banal. Their world is the barren world of the monologue, in which the teacher's voice is not to be challenged. But the banality of the official response to the Review presents an opportunity as well as a constraint. It is now left to individual schools or groups of schools to seize the initiative offered by the carefully argued radicalism of the Review and to begin to put into effect as many of the Review's recommendations as they find that

they usefully can, inviting the Government to take note. Both Government and Opposition claim to favour local initiative. We should take them at their word.

As I read through the 24 chapters of the *Cambridge Primary Review's* final report, *Children, Their World, Their Education* – itself a thought provoking title – I couldn't help wishing that I was twenty years younger and able to play a more active part in the classroom revolution which the Review calls for, a revolution in thought which starts, not in the lecture halls of the university, but in pre-school and infant classrooms, where dialogic teaching, as Robin puts it, 'challenges not only children's understanding but also our own;' where the acquisition of knowledge becomes a matter of reconstruction no less than of assimilation; where culture is renewed as it is absorbed. I can think of no more exciting intellectual and emotional challenge for our time.

MICHAEL ARMSTRONG is the author of two studies of children's thinking: *Closely Observed Children* and *Children Writing Stories*. He has written numerous essays for *FORUM* and is chairperson of the Editorial Board. For 19 years he was head teacher of Harwell Primary School in Oxfordshire, and before that he taught at Countesthorpe College in Leicestershire and at Wandsworth Comprehensive School in London. Each summer he teaches courses on narrative and on the imagination at the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in Vermont, USA. *Correspondence:* michael.armstrong@logic-net.co.uk

