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Education as Reconstruction: another way of looking at primary education

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I met Brian Simon for the first time in the autumn of 1958. He was to be my tutor for the Post Graduate Certificate in Education at Leicester University. It was a time when the movement for comprehensive education was gaining strength, and Brian was its leading theorist and advocate, together with Robin Pedley who also taught at Leicester. The first issue of *FORUM* had just been published. I was a committed supporter of comprehensive education and had written about it in the *Universities and Left Review*, which later became the *New Left Review*. But my understanding of its significance was weak. I saw comprehensive education in terms of the movement for social equality rather than the case for academic advance and cultural renewal. It was Brian who taught me that the case for comprehensive education was essentially intellectual rather than social. Throughout a long and distinguished career, his commitment to comprehensive education never faltered, commitment to an education system which recognises the excellence that is common to all. On his retirement as Editor of *FORUM*, 30 years later, I wrote that 'Brian Simon's insistence on rigour in argument and adventurousness in thought has never been needed more'. That was in the summer of 1989. How much more, still, do we need it now? I feel deeply honoured to be giving this lecture in Brian's memory.

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In the autumn of 1973, in one of the most provocative essays ever published in *FORUM* (Volume 16, Number 1), David Hawkins, scientist, mathematician, educationalist and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Colorado, argued that a truly democratic education required not so much a revolution in teaching methods as 'the radical reconstruction of subject matter itself'. As an

example of what this might mean for public education Hawkins turned to the English infant school. This is what he wrote:

> In the scholastic tradition the organization of accrued knowledge has been characteristically linear and sequential. The metaphor of the course, as a glance at the dictionary will prove, is overwhelming. Formal discourses uttered in real time are unavoidably one-dimensional. These line up in the endless march, trunk to tail – a march which dominates the tempo and rhythm of traditional schooling.
>
> Fluent human understanding, by contrast, implies a richly interconnected network of ideas and stored knowledge evolved by abstraction from many passages of experience. Any node of this network has the indispensable virtue of random access. It can be reached from many other parts of the network without long marches.
>
> What the best traditions of early education have done in this regard amounts to a major reorganisation of subject matter into a common and coherent framework. The sand and water and clay, the painting and writing and reading, the cooking and building and calculation, the observing and nurture of plants and animals, are woven together into a complex social pattern which sustains romance as it extends a concern for detail and for generalisation. The organized discourse and the text do not disappear but they do not dominate. This reorganisation, though incomplete and still mostly inadequate even for the early years, represents at least the beginning of a major practical intellectual achievement. (p. 9)

Over the course of the last 40 years we have lost sight of that achievement. The organised discourse has prevailed, fed by the remorseless insistence of successive governments on a narrowly didactic conception of education. Pre-schools, primary schools, secondary schools, all seem in thrall to a deep-seated academic conservatism which no longer recognises education as a critical and creative practice whereby culture is not only assimilated but challenged, revised, appropriated, and remade.

I have no wish to waste time mourning this loss, painful as it is. What I want to do is to reclaim David Hawkins's vision of a democratic education – a vision which principally derives from John Dewey – and to explore it further by examining one particular young child's creative practice and noting its far-reaching implications for teaching and learning.

I should say at the outset that the argument which I shall advance represents my own personal gloss on the principles, values and aims of that dense but definitive document, *The Cambridge Primary Review* (2010). When the Review first appeared, it seemed reasonable to expect that the government might pay careful attention to its critique of present policy and its recommendations as to the future of primary education in the twenty-first

century. It is by far the most authoritative review of primary education in England since the Plowden Report (1967), possibly the most authoritative ever, and has the added advantage of being entirely independent of government. But in the event, the incoming coalition chose to ignore its recommendations and to advance its own repressive agenda. So now the responsibility rests with individual schools or clusters of schools to challenge the dominant political consensus. What I want to propose is a radically alternative approach to primary education, an approach that is founded on the centrality of children's agency, their independent, imaginative thought and action.

My starting point is John Dewey's, *Democracy and Education* (1916/1980), which was first published at the turn of the twentieth century and is still without equal as a philosophy of education worthy of our time. Dewey argues that:

> education is a constant reorganizing or reconstructing of experience. It has all the time an immediate end, and so far as activity is educative, it reaches that end –the direct transformation of the quality of experience. Infancy, youth, adult life – all stand on the same educative level in the sense that what is really learned at any and every stage of experience constitutes the value of that experience, and in the sense that it is the chief business of life at every point to make living thus contribute to an enrichment of its own perceptible meaning. (p. 82)

There could hardly be a more ambitious definition of education than to see it, in infancy no less than adulthood, as the transformation of experience, a teasing out of its meaning, an act of redescribing, remaking or reshaping the world. But what in terms of young children's daily practice does reconstruction imply? What might count as an example?

I will try to answer that question by looking at how one particular six year old child entered the literary world, and, in doing so, reconstructed her own experience and that of her readers, including her teachers. Her name was Brendalee and she was a first grade student in Lawrence, Massachusetts, USA whose classroom I worked in and whose work I was privileged to read in the autumn of 2010. This is her story, or more precisely, the story of her stories. I do not present her work as extraordinary. Indeed it is significant of any and every child's practice precisely because it is commonplace. It is the extraordinariness of the ordinary which concerns me. I see it as the only secure foundation on which a democratic education can be built.

At the start of the school year, Brendalee's teacher had given all the children in her class a daybook, as the teacher called it, in which to write and draw as they wished. It was to be, she told them, their 'collector of thoughts'. Brendalee filled her daybook with stories, the first that she had ever written. The first of these stories, written with the help of invented spelling, and completed before the daybooks were in use, was later cut out and pasted into

the front of her new book. The story reads simply 'I went to the park with my friends'.

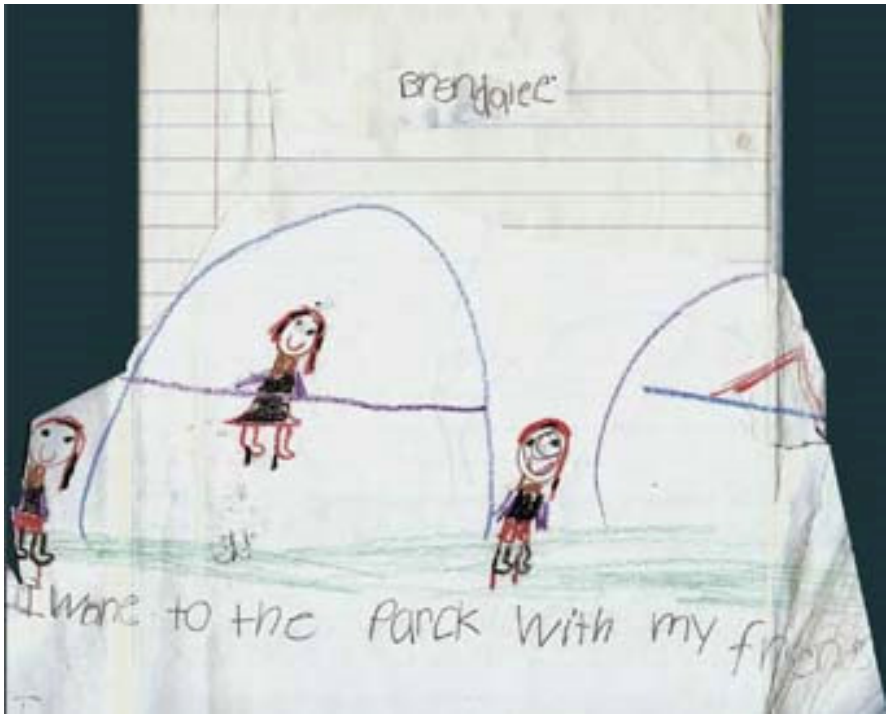

Figure 1. 'I went to the park with my friends'.

Above the written words there is a drawing. Two girls, in red shorts and black boots, are standing at either end of what appears to represent a skipping rope, while a third figure, in a black dress with red boots, is drawn across the centre of the line of the rope as if skipping. The verbal text and the visual image are complementary. Together they compose a rudimentary narrative. Or we might prefer to say that they hint at a possible narrative; they name a theme. The story may be rudimentary but it is far from insignificant. The image of three girls playing with a skipping rope celebrates the park as a companionable place, the site of shared activity in play. Implicitly the fragment pays tribute to the collective imagination and to the site that evokes it: the park.

This meagre tale can best be seen as a prototype. Although Brendalee was used to telling stories and listening to stories, she had never before tried to write one. The problem which she faced was how to order her experience in words on the page. Her teacher had encouraged her to select her own subject, to invent spelling wherever necessary, and to supplement her writing with drawing. The story represents her initial response. The words name the

adventure while the drawing visualises it. Taken together, words and images hint at what it means to go to the park. With this fragment of narrative, Brendalee enters the literary world.

So began a process of composition that was to preoccupy Brendalee for the whole of the autumn of her first school year. Between the beginning of September and the end of November she wrote some 30 stories, almost all of which are variations on the prototype. She begins by introducing home as counterpart to the park, and family as counterpart to friends.

The first variation introduces dad, although he features rarely in the stories that follow.

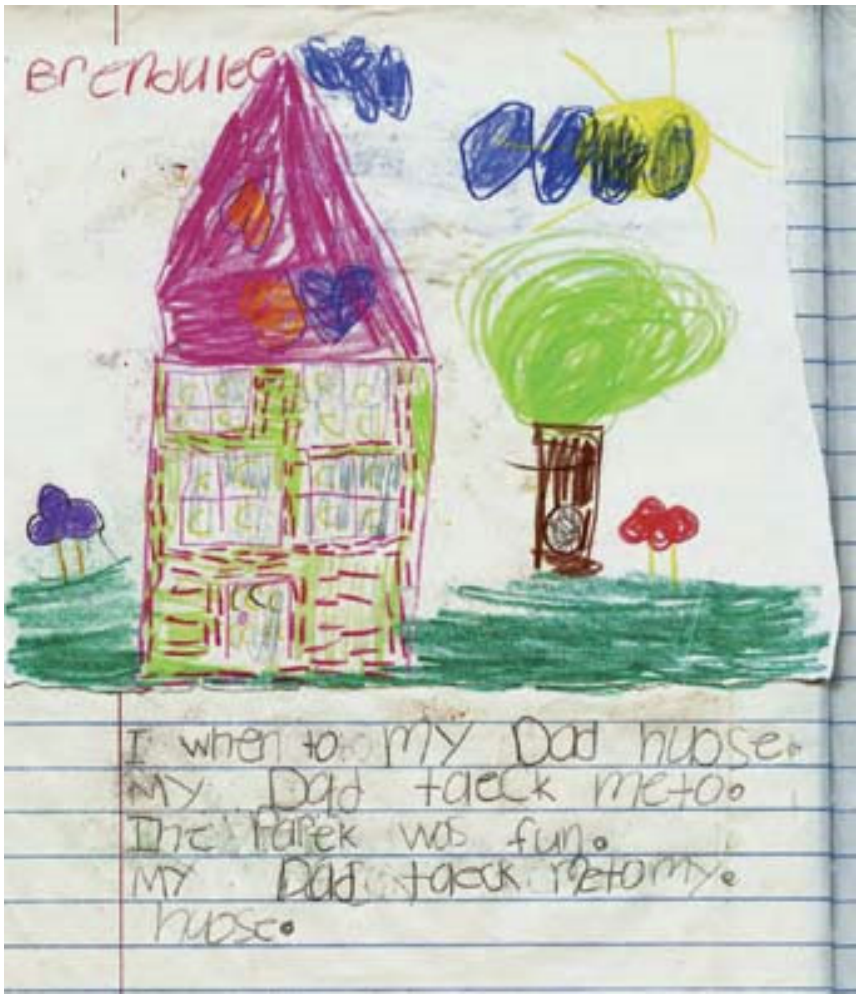

Figure 2. 'I went to my dad's house'.

> I went to my dad's house. My dad take me to the park. The park was fun. My dad take me to my house.

The second variation introduces mom, both the narrator's mom and her friend's mom.

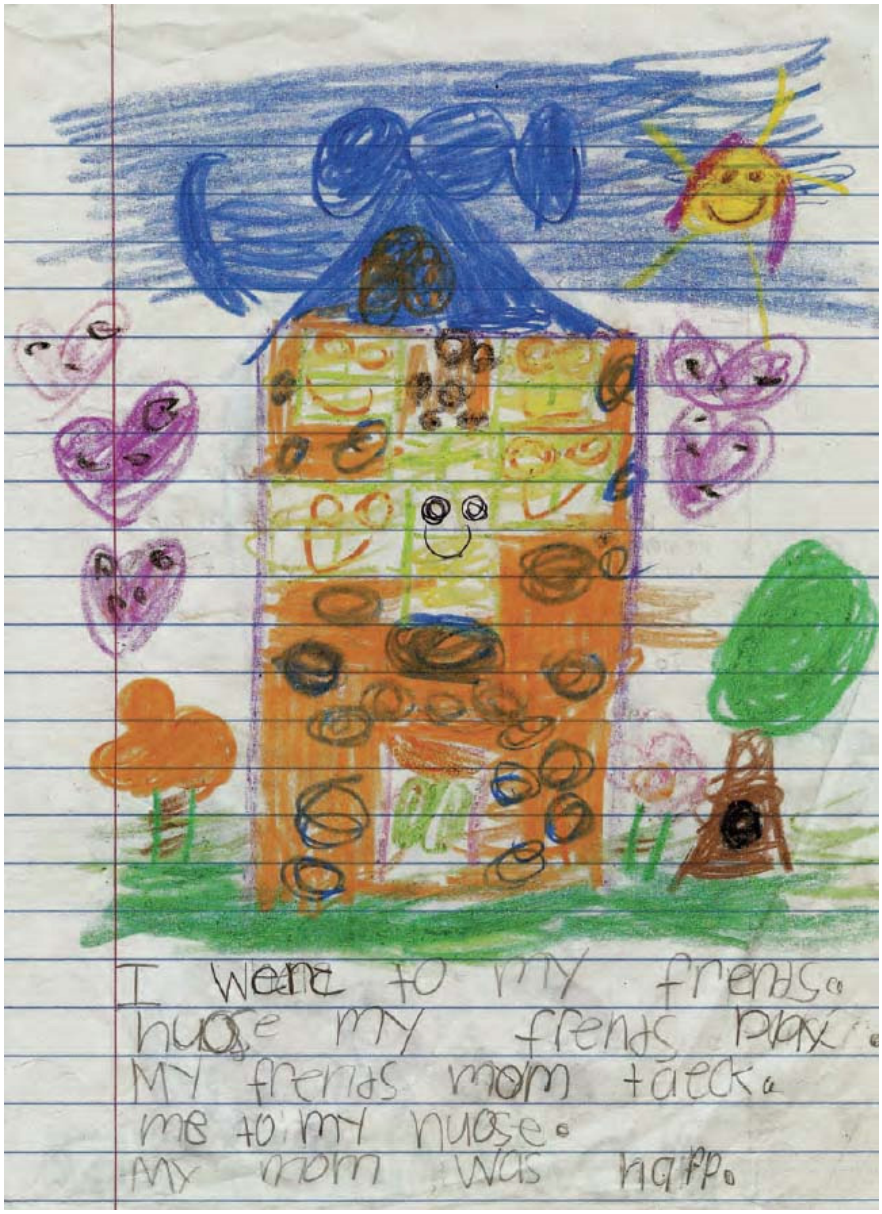

Figure 3. 'I went to my friend's house'.

> I went to my friend's house. My friends play. My friend's mom took me to my house. My mom was happy.

Both texts emphasise contentment –'the park was fun', 'my mom was happy' – and contentment is reinforced by the imposing drawings of the parents' houses which accompany the two stories. The roof of the dad's house is decorated with hearts, the windows of the mom's with smiling faces. The mom's house is particularly bold. It is a tall building, possibly an apartment block, and it seems to have been drawn to reflect the mother's happiness at her daughter's return. The front of the house is richly decorated, orange and green, beneath a blue roof. Three blue clouds, one of Brendalee's favourite motifs, perch on the peak of the roof while to right and left she has drawn the sun and the moon, as if to mark the passing of the day. The sun shines down with a smiling face and purple hair; the crescent moon is blue. There is a large tree on the lawn to one side of the house, and on the other side a yellow bush. Huge purple butterflies flutter above them, echoing the colour of the hair of the sun. From the windows of the house a host of smiling faces greet the returning child. The note of welcome is irresistible.

Together these first three stories chart the extent of the narrative world that Brendalee has both discovered and invented. It is a sunny world, bounded by park and home, peopled with children, parents, relatives and friends, where children go out to play without constraint and are accompanied home by willing parents when play comes to an end. Occasionally a new place or a new figure enters the narrative – a sister, a shopping mall, a pet shop, a dog, a cat, just once a school. There is even a visit to New York, for Thanksgiving, although it is quickly turned into just another adventure in the park. But these are exceptions. Park and home remain, throughout, the twin poles of attraction.

The tone is almost entirely untroubled, that is until the 28th story which suddenly takes what, in the circumstances, is an unexpected turn:

> I play with my dogs and my sister. My sister fell in the mud. She dirtied her new clothes. My mom was mad at my sister. She got grounded. I did not get grounded, My sister was mad at me. I said what's happening? She said Mom grounded me because I dirtied my new clothes. That is so sad I said to my sister.

This was easily the longest and most elaborate story that Brendalee had as yet written and the first to introduce a troubled note into the narrative. The confrontation between mother and child, sister and sister, is all the sadder because it is unique. As the mud makes the mother mad at the sister, and the sister mad at the narrator, so, for the first and only time, the narrative moves into a minor key. But the crisis, however serious, is short-lived. Trouble is allowed no more than this single entry into Brendalee's carefree world. The unexpectedly dark variation is followed by a brief pause, as if Brendalee is hesitating where to go next. For a moment the park is abandoned in favour of

Halloween and the outcome is the tiniest of all Brendalee's stories. Its title is 'My Halloween Party', and it consists of just four words: 'I am a rabbit'.

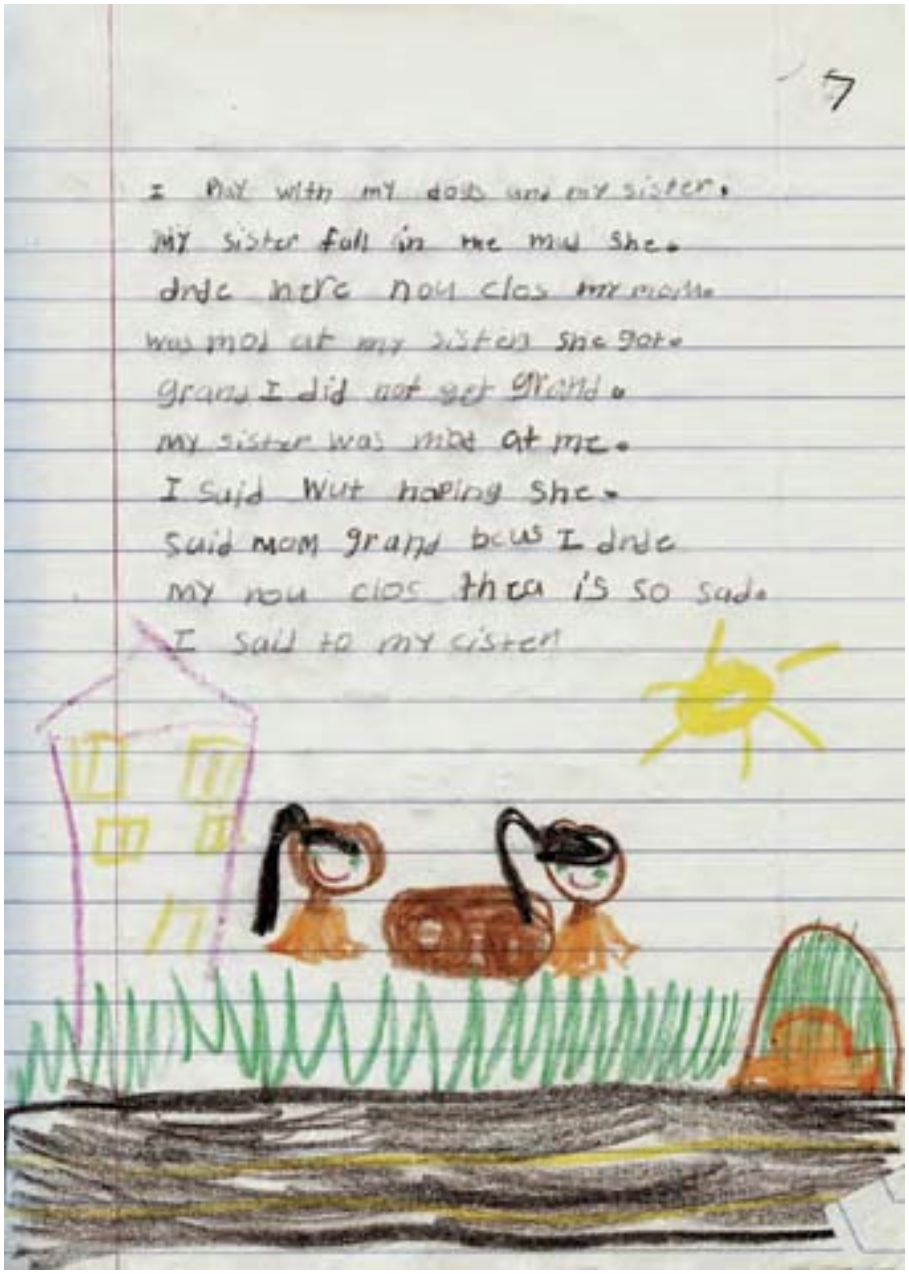

Figure 4. 'I play with my dogs and my sister'.

Figure 5. 'My Halloween Party'.

A lively drawing depicts the narrator with rabbit's ears, standing beside a friend, the two of them holding hands, surrounded by balloons, while above them the familiar trio of blue clouds and a radiant sun look down on the party.

Intriguing though it is, this story, like Halloween itself, is no more than a temporary distraction while Brendalee prepares to take up the challenge of responding to her minor key variation. The next story, her 13th, returns to her main theme and re-establishes the unruffled ease that has characterised all but one of her variations. But now she writes with new authority. The momentary contemplation of trouble seems to have strengthened her assurance. The new story is even longer than the tale of the mud and perhaps to mark the occasion Brendalee chose, after the piece was finished, to number each line, 14 in all. The story is set out on the page like a poem and the numbering of the lines may have been partly in recognition of the story's poetic form. The beginnings and endings of lines seem contrived and it is tempting to think of the story as assuming the form of a sonnet. The story reads as follows:

1. I went to the park with my mom and my sister.
2. I run and run then I was sick of running.
3. I told mom can we go she said yes.
4. I said okokokok mom said lets go home.
5. My mom drive home.
6. We went to sleep in the morning
7. my mom drove me to school.
8. I gave a kiss in the cheek.
9. She went to work.
I0. I was glad because today is.
11. the last day my mom said have.
12. a good day.
13. Before I went school I said
14. Mom I have friends.

Below the text Brendalee has drawn mother and daughter on either side of what she said was a slide down which her younger sister is disappearing. Above the faceless, stick-like figures, who appear to be dancing or leaping on the thick green grass of the park, the familiar all-seeing, yellow sun looks down, a watchful guardian. On this occasion, however, the drawing is given less prominence than usual, perhaps in recognition of the greater narrative scope of the text itself.

The story opens with the prototype: 'I went to the park'. On this occasion, however, family replace friends as the narrator's companions, and this turns out to be a choice of considerable importance. The sister immediately drops out of the story but her fleeting presence in the opening line is significant in that it acknowledges that she is no longer grounded. Harmony has been restored, and the carefree mood characteristic of all but one of Brendalee's variations can be resumed. The trouble is over; the family is reunited in play. But there is more to

a young child's life than play and the new story sets out to imagine a more inclusive scenario.

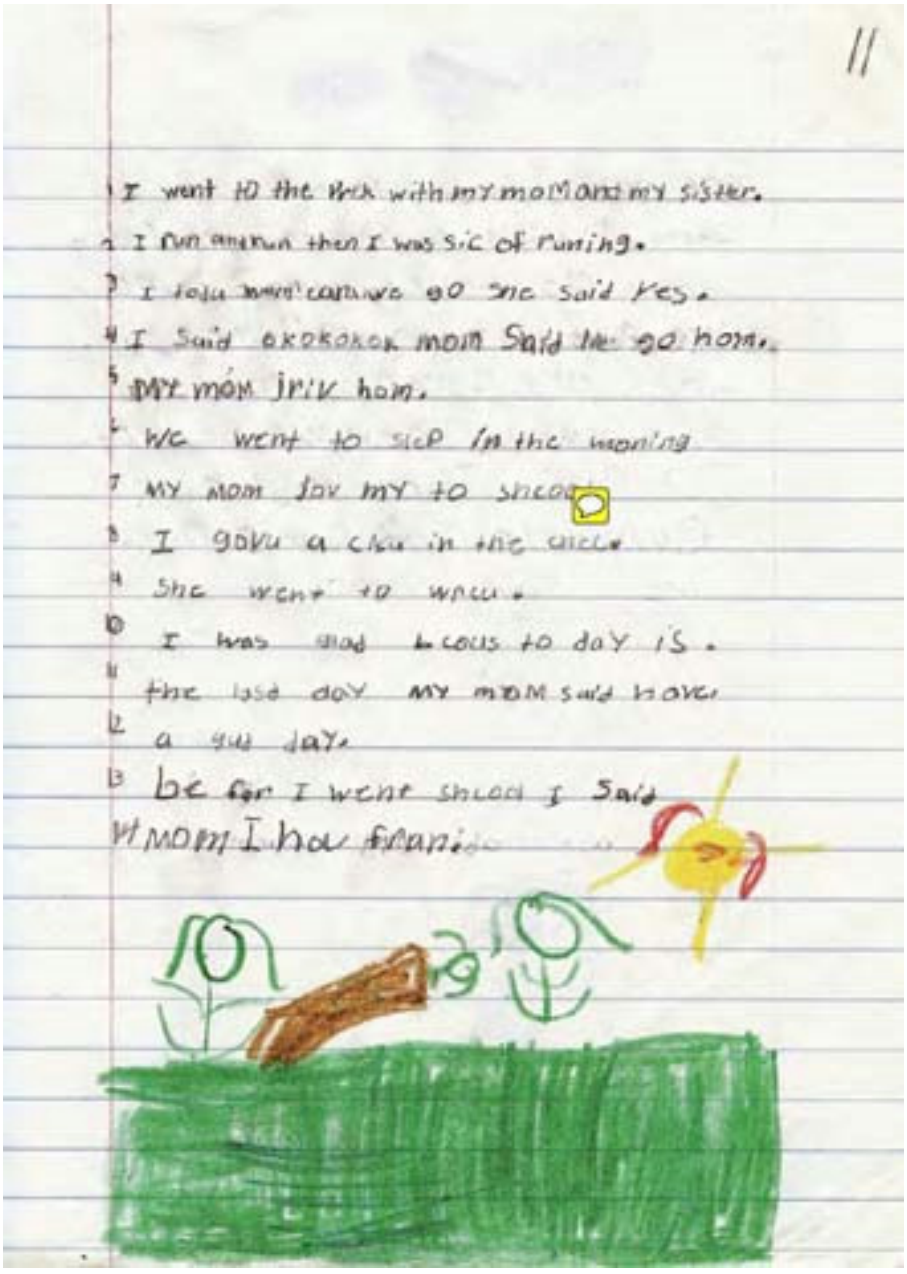

Figure 6. 'I went to the park with my mom and my sister'.

The story opens with the ending of play as exhilaration gives way to exhaustion. Brendalee represents this transition by means of the image of running: 'I run and run then I was sick of running'. The exact moment of transition occurs mid-way through the line, in the unpunctuated space between the words 'run' and 'then'. The absence of any form of punctuation, which might be seen as a defect by readers in thrall to standard punctuation, is vital to the meaning of this line. It dramatises the distance between exhilaration and exhaustion while acknowledging how continuous the one is with the other, how unpredictable the reversal of emotion. Suddenly, unaccountably, play is no longer what it was. Its moment has passed; it is time to go home.

Every word in this line is significant. The repetition of the word 'run' suggests the breathless repetitiveness of life in the park; the word 'then' catches the sudden change of mood; the word 'sick' conveys the combination of physical and emotional distress which puts an end to play. The words, however simple, and just because of their simplicity, convey a wealth of meaning. Here is that 'chaste compactness' which Walter Benjamin so greatly admired within the oral tradition, reconstructed within a written narrative; the capacity to make the familiar strange.

The joy of running is now replaced by the pleasure of going home. The child asks, or rather, demands to leave. Her question is imperative rather than inquisitive, 'I told mom can we go', and her mother's immediate 'yes' is received with a combination of enthusiasm and relief. 'Okokokok', cries the narrator and we can almost hear, as we read, the note of expectation, coupled with anxiety, in her voice. The mother senses her daughter's mood and hurries to make it mutual. 'Let's go home', she responds and with these words play comes to an end. The fifth line, 'my mom drive home', is short and unequivocal. Its significance lies in its contrast to lines two, three and four, in each of which an opening assertion is matched by an equivalent response. Each of these earlier lines is divided into two parts by a caesura which, as we have seen, draws all the more attention to itself because it is unpunctuated. It is in the verbal device of matching one half of a line to the other without pausing for breath, that the mutuality of mother and child is conveyed. Once mutuality is established, the words 'my mom drive home' can be left without response since now we know that mother and child are as one. Their viewpoints have fused.

These opening lines call to mind William Blake's poem, *Nurses's Song*. They might be read as a young child's revisionary variation on Blake's great *Song of Innocence*, even though she has yet to read it. In *Nurse's Song* the watching nurse calls the children home but the children protest:

> No no let us play, for it is yet day
> And we cannot go to sleep
> Besides in the sky, the little birds fly
> And the hills are all coverd with sheep.

The nurse promptly concedes and leaves the children to themselves, amid the echoing hills:

Well well go & play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed
The little ones leaped and shouted and laugh'd
And all the hills echoed. (Blake, 1970, plate 24)

By contrast, in Brendalee's story, where nurse is replaced by mother, it is the child who announces an end to play with the words 'then I was sick of running', and the mother who willingly endorses her daughter's demand to return home. The mental space that separates sympathetic nurse from excited children in Blake's poem is abandoned. The imperative words of the nurse, 'And then go home to bed' are replaced by the mother's collaborative 'let's go home'. Mother and daughter will go home together, united whether in play or the ending of play. The mother drives home and mother and child go to sleep. Their mutuality is complete.

The sixth line of the story brings the opening scene to a close and looks forward to the following day. Once more there is no pause for breath at the mid-line break, no hint of punctuation between the words 'we went to sleep' and 'in the morning', and the effect is to emphasise that work and play, the delights of the past evening and the obligations of the following morning, form a continuum.

What happens in the morning is a parting of the ways as daughter is driven to school and mother goes to work. Line 7, 'my mom drove me to school', marks the story's critical moment. The unqualified directness of the line recalls line 5 but now there is a separation of mother from daughter. 'My mom drive home' becomes 'my mom drove me to school'. The separation implied in casting 'mom' as the subject and 'me' as the object of this sentence, and the mention of 'school', with its potential for disappointment and boredom, calls to mind another of William Blake's Songs, *The School Boy*:

But to go to school in a summer morn,
O! it drives all joy away
Under a cruel eye outworn,
The little ones spend the day,
In sighing and dismay. (Blake, 1970, plate 53)

Blake's poem ends on a questioning note, its dismay unresolved. By contrast Brendalee, here as everywhere it seems, is sure of herself. Reassurance comes immediately, forestalling any hint of doubt. With the words of line 8, 'I gave a kiss in the cheek', the separation of mother from daughter is mitigated. The kiss is the pledge of love and security that transforms the occasion. The daughter offers it as a gift, a gesture which is highlighted by the absence of the indirect object and by the force of the preposition 'in' rather than the more familiar 'on'. 'I gave a kiss in the cheek': the power of the kiss could not be suggested more succinctly. Reassured by the kiss that she has so simply bestowed, the daughter can go happily in to school, and the mother can leave for work without anxiety, wishing her daughter 'a good day'. The words 'a good day' are detached from

the word 'have' on the previous line, and placed, for greater emphasis, on a line of their own. It is as if 'a good day' is the mother's promise in return for the kiss her daughter gave. Meanwhile the daughter is secure in the knowledge that this is the 'last day', whether of the week or the term, and that in the evening mutuality will be restored and play time resumed.

But the story has one final twist. The last two lines form a valedictory couplet:

> Before I went school I said
> Mom I have friends.

What does this ending mean? Does the child detect a trace of anxiety behind her mother's wishing her a good day? Is she seeking to reassure her mother, or herself? Or is she telling her mother of friendships newly formed, or reminding her mother that it is at school that she makes friends? It is left to readers to decide for themselves; we are not told. Whichever interpretation we prefer, what stands out in the final couplet is the pride with which Brendalee draws her mother's attention to her friends. There is a triumphant verbal rhetoric to this conclusion, in which the three principal subjects of Brendalee's narrative variations, 'mom', 'I', and 'friends', are placed alongside each other in close order, bound each to each through the power of a single word, the affirmative 'have'. The mother has already used the word, in saying to her daughter, 'have/a good day'. Brendalee picks up the word and claims it for herself. She will have a good day because she has friends to keep her company when mom goes off to work. To have is to hold in relationship, and the relationship of mother, daughter and friends is just what the story has been about. Brendalee's earlier stories have already, implicitly, drawn attention to this relationship. Now, in this final linguistic and literary flourish, we find the key to the meaning not just of this particular story but of all 30 stories. Brendalee's classmates seemed to have recognised this, to judge from their responses to the story when it was discussed in circle time. Asked to select one word in the story which they thought especially significant the most common choices were 'mom' and 'friends'.

It is intriguing to note that the 30th story, which begins with the first five words of the first story, 'I went to the park', closes with the last word of that same story, 'friends'. So the definitive story, having opened out and enriched the plot, returns to its point of departure in what is a virtuous, rather than a vicious, circle. The return of friends, here at the end of the story, rounds off the grand narrative of childhood. Mutuality between mother and daughter, family mutuality, is not sufficient in itself. Children need the companionship of friends also: friends to play with on their own, as the children play in 'Nurse's Song', independently of their parents; friends to meet up with in the park; friends who assemble outside the school gates, ready for whatever school may bring. The narrator is asserting her own independence as the complement of the care her mother shows her. What Brendalee has done is to enlarge the narrative space, as

hinted in the prototype, and transform it into the exemplary tale of a young child's way of being in the world.

I regard the story of Brendalee's stories as a paradigm case of literary reconstruction. The reconstructing of experience dates from the moment that Brendalee begins to write. In order to compose her first story, as we saw, she had to reorder her experience in terms of the written word and the drawn image. She did so with a naive economy, forced on her by the limitations of her literary means but turned to her advantage. Thus the park stands for play, which is the theme of the story, the written text names the occasion for adventure, and the drawing depicts it in the form of a dance. Slender as it is, her first story served her well. During the weeks that followed, as she rewrote, revised and extended the story, it began to assume a larger meaning. Finally, in her 30th variation, the narrative gained its definitive form. The successive elaborations and emendations were drawn together into an enlarged tale that reconstructs both the original story and the experience to which that story refers. The miniature prototype, which barely hints at a narrative about play, turns into a 14 line epic of childhood, where play is set alongside work, family alongside friends, autonomy alongside dependence, the park alongside home. The drawing below the text, with its leaping or sliding figures, shows us that the park with its play is still to be conceived as a dance, but it is a dance the meaning of which has been transformed by the extended narrative context in which it is now set.

The transformation that has taken place in the quality of Brendalee's experience, and which we, as her readers, have been privileged to witness and to share, is both literary and existential. As regards its literariness, Brendalee has found in the connotation of simple words, in an invented exclamation such as 'okokokok', in the absence of standard forms of punctuation, in the variable length of the written lines, and in the open-ended conclusion to the story, so many ways of redescribing the sequence of events. As for its existential reference, that is to say, its application to children's way of being, the continual interchange of mutuality and difference throughout the story leads back eventually, though not without anxiety, to a reaffirmation of the original tale on a new level of understanding that takes account of the obligations of work alongside the delights of play and of the tension between the child's growing autonomy and the mother's protective care.

It is this 'transformation of the quality of experience', which defines the ultimate value of Brendalee's story. The story is not to be read as a preparatory exercise in the writing of narrative, the function of which is to initiate her into a cultural practice which is as yet foreign to her. Nor is it to be read as evidence of technical achievement, or as progress towards some predetermined standard of literacy. It must be read as what Vygotsky called 'a complex cultural activity'. The story is a vital expression of her creativity. It signals her entry into the culture of written narrative, and her active participation, from the start, within that cultural world. It is her first sustained attempt to make sense of life through

the medium of written narrative. It asks to be read and valued as literature; it lays claim to our critical attention; we cannot remain indifferent to its assertion.

But to read a story like Brendalee's as literature requires us to reconfigure the relationship between writers, readers, and texts – the I, Thou, It of the curriculum, as David Hawkins called it. Here is how Dewey puts it in his late masterpiece, *Art as Experience*. He is not thinking specifically of children's art work, but his remarks are as relevant to Brendalee's story as to a painting by Matisse.

> Language exists only when it is listened to as well as spoken. The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of others than the one who created it. Thus language involves what logicians call a triadic relation. There is the speaker, the thing said, and the one spoken to. The external object, the product of art, is the connecting link between artist and audience. Even when the artist works in solitude all three terms are present. The work is there in progress, and the artist has to become vicariously the audience. He can speak only as his work appeals to him as one spoken to through what he perceives. He observes and understands as a third person might note and interpret. Matisse is reported to have said: 'When a painting is finished, it is like a new born child. The artist himself must have time for understanding it.' It must be lived with as a child is lived with, if we are to grasp the meaning of his being. (Dewey, 1934/1987, p. 111)

What Dewey describes as the 'triadic relation' between writer, reader, and text, holds the key to the observation, interpretation and evaluation of children's stories, as indeed of many other aspects of their work: their poetry, their art, their enquiries into the world of nature, their investigations of space and time, their mathematical thought. As for literature, their fragile tales are the means by which young writers exchange experience with their readers, whether their fellow students, their teachers, their family and friends, or, as Dewey insists, themselves as readers. To 'note and interpret' a work such as Brendalee's 14 line story we have to allow ourselves to be led by the text, to live within its imagined world, to explore its meaning, to respond to its insight, critically and creatively, and to look ahead to the next story, the next theme, the next form. The text is our guide and it is up to both writer and readers together, classmates and teachers, to follow its promptings, wherever they may lead, in literature or in other areas of experience. This is how the story becomes one more part of the 'complex social pattern', which, as David Hawkins writes, 'sustains romance as it extends a concern for detail and for generalization'.

In the present climate of educational opinion, such a response to children's texts is bound to seem far-fetched. The current fashion for curriculum prescription pays no more than lip-service to children's imaginative agency. It is worth noting that the word 'imagination' itself is nowhere to be found in the draft outline of the revised English Curriculum for Key Stages 1 and 2. The

government declares its intention that, in future the National Curriculum will 'focus on the essential knowledge in key subjects that all children need to acquire in order to progress in their education and take their place as educated members of society'. The emphasis is almost exclusively on organised discourse, the mastery of a predetermined body of knowledge and skill which gives access to social membership. Education is treated as a rite of passage, a long drawn out initiation into culture. There is no interest in education as a 'process of living' rather than 'a preparation for future living'; no appreciation of children's creative engagement with culture; no understanding of the multiplicity of ways in which they play with knowledge, as Brendalee plays, renewing it as they relate it to their own particular conceptions and concerns. In its obsession with correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and the orthodoxies of composition, the government has chosen to disregard the high intent of children's work, that is to say, to disregard all that gives significance to a story such as Brendalee's. As Dewey notes in an impassioned aside in another of his educational essays, *Experience and Education*:

> What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul; loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur. (Dewey, 1938-1939/1988, p. 19)

What kind of curriculum is it that can accommodate Brendalee's imaginative agency and that of her classmates? It is a curriculum in which the organised discourse and the text lose their unilateral authority. As David Hawkins suggests, 'they do not disappear, but they do not dominate'. A vibrant interchange takes place between organised experience as formulated within the cultural tradition and the organised innocence of children, as given in the stories of Brendalee and her classmates, that freshness of insight, born of a sense of wonder, with which young children playfully appropriate tradition and make their own critical and creative contribution to culture. I call it organised innocence to draw attention to its intentionality. 'Unorganiz'd Innocence: An Impossibility', wrote William Blake in the margin of his epic poem, *The Four Zoas*, 'Innocence dwells with Wisdom, but never with Ignorance' (Blake, 1969, p. 380). For children are neither the passive recipients of the wisdom of their elders, nor as it were accidental artists whose achievements owe more to instinct than to intellect. They have their own wisdom to convey as, from the very beginning of their schooling, and indeed before they ever go to school, they set out in search of a world made new, assimilating and appropriating knowledge in the wake of their own developing experience. That is the story that Brendalee's story has to tell us. The ultimate success of education depends on putting organised knowledge at the service of fresh insight, matching skill with vision, tradition with innovation – the very opposite of the Core Knowledge

Curriculum devised by E.D. Hirsch, Jnr, and greatly admired by Michael Gove, so we are told.

It is almost 50 years since I first came across what I still consider to be the most exacting of all definitions of education. It comes in the form of a single lengthy sentence from an essay by Coleridge about Plato and education, one of a series of what he called *Essays on the Principles of Method*, published in the three volumes of his journal *The Friend* in 1813. This is what he writes:

> We see that to open anew a well of springing water, not to cleanse the stagnant tank, or fill, bucket by bucket, the broken cistern; that the Education of the Intellect, by awakening the principle and method of self-development, was (Plato's) proposed object, not any specific information that can be conveyed into it from without: not to assist in storing the passive mind with the various sorts of knowledge most in request, as if the human soul were a mere repository or banqueting room, but to place it in such relations of circumstance as should gradually excite the germinal power that craves no knowledge but what it can take up into itself, what it can appropriate and re-produce in fruits of its own. (Coleridge, 1969, p. 473)

Interestingly, but perhaps surprisingly, Brian Simon cites this same passage in an arresting essay entitled *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: the education of the intellect*, published in 1985 in his book of essays, *Does Education Matter?* He argues as follows:

> [Coleridge's] historic importance for English education remains his stress on human self-activity as central, and, related to this, on the autonomy and potential creativity of the individual ... It is for this reason that, today, it is important to remind ourselves of Coleridge's contribution to educational thought. For this stands in uncompromising opposition to existing, and perhaps increasingly dominant conceptions relating to the imposition of highly structured external restraints on teachers and, through them, on children, delimiting very precisely the scope for their own independent, autonomous activity, and reducing education to the assimilation of an externally determined, largely empirical content. Such an education, universally imposed, can hardly excite the 'germinal power' that Coleridge stressed as its true function. Nor can it awaken the principle and method of self-development. Certainly it signals the end of any serious attempt at 'the Education of the Intellect'. (Simon, 1985, p. 147)

(So much for Michael Gove's preposterous claim to be putting rigour back into the curriculum.)

It is a precious moment in the history of educational thought in the late twentieth century, when the century's foremost Marxist historian of education

and theorist of the comprehensive school, while himself no great friend of child-centred education, acknowledges the humanism that underlies his Marxist philosophy in terms that are more familiar to us in the philosophy of John Dewey and David Hawkins, the poetry of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Blake.

'Can we derive from Coleridge', Brian asks, 'a convincing rationale for educational procedures which reject the "mechanical" and focus on the development of the inner powers of the child? Does Coleridge provide a justification for the concept of the appropriation of knowledge rather than its assimilation?'. 'The conclusion must be positive', he answers. 'It is in this area that the humanist educator of our times must seek his or her rationale' (p. 148).

Brian Simon's essay was published three years before the introduction, by a Conservative government, of the first National Curriculum. Over time, it has acquired the force of prophecy. The subsequent history of the National Curriculum represents the apparent triumph of the mechanical, never more so than at the present moment. Meanwhile, humanism has lain dormant and defensive. To regain the initiative we have to learn to look at children's learning in another way, to value it for its significance as cultural expression, its wealth, variety and novelty of meaning. That is what I have tried to do through the example of Brendalee's stories. The transformation in the quality of experience that Brendalee achieves by way of her 30 variations on the theme of play is a demonstration of the 'germinal power' of childhood. She has taken up knowledge into herself, appropriated it, and re-produced it in fruits of her own. Her definitive 30th story redescribes the world. The story has no title but, with apologies to Stephen Sondheim and Georges Seurat, I like to think of it as the story of Brendalee in the Park with Friends.

One last thought on the subject of friends, the final word in Brendalee's story. In closing her story with her friends, Brendalee indirectly affirms the centrality of friendship in the process of reconstruction. My example has been concerned with the work of just one child. But reconstruction, within a classroom setting, is essentially cooperative and collective even when the work under review is that of an individual. As we have seen, it is writers and readers or children and teachers, together, who draw out the meaning of the work, through observation, interpretation and response. Democratic education is necessarily dialogic, to use Robin Alexander's term. It takes its form from that of a conversation rather than a lecture. It conceives of the classroom as a workshop at the centre of which we find both the works which are central to the culture that children inherit, and those which children create and exchange themselves, with the guiding support of their teachers. As David Hawkins puts it in the essay with which I began, education as reconstruction requires teachers who 'are able to see order and number, geography and history, moral testing grounds and aesthetic qualities in all the encounters of children with the furniture of a rich environment' (Hawkins, 1973, p. 9). That is to say, it requires 'teachers who have learned to be ready for anything', as Mary Jane Drummond suggests in her seminal book *Assessing Children's Learning*, a book which,

incidentally, is full of fascinating examples of reconstruction in practice (Drummond, 2012).

It is apparent that the National Curriculum, in the form which it has taken under the coalition government, is incapable of rising to the challenge of educating the intellect. The free play of the imagination, on which the education of the intellect is founded, finds no hint of recognition in the Curriculum's aims and values. The trouble is not that the National Curriculum is overambitious but that it is nowhere near ambitious enough. By ignoring children's critical and creative practice, it demeans their achievement. It misses the whole point of education. There is another way of looking at children's work, another way of learning and teaching, if only we have the nerve and the talent to embrace it.

I started this lecture by suggesting that over the past 40 years we have lost sight of the prospect of a democratic education, modelled on the best traditions of the infant school as celebrated by David Hawkins in his *FORUM* article. But that is an exaggeration. Shortly after I had written the lecture I read a remarkable book published by the Open University Press, *Creating Learning without Limits*, by Mandy Swann, Alison Peacock, Susan Hart and Mary Jane Drummond (2012). It is a book which examines in compelling detail how one particular primary school, the Wroxham School in Hertfordshire, put into practise an alternative vision to that of the mechanical standards agenda, based upon 'inclusive, egalitarian principles, including an unshakeable bedrock belief in everybody's capacity to learn'. I read the book with growing excitement. It was as if I was watching David Hawkins's vision suddenly come alive again. There are, for sure, other schools and teachers, who knows how many, here and there across the country that are committed to similar values. The task ahead is demanding but easily stated: to find the time, the space, and the resources to enable these schools to survive, to watch them flourish, to give them voice.

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