FORUM
Volume 56, Number 3, 2014
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

'To Value Every Child in the Moment'

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ABSTRACT This article takes as its starting point the assertion that the purpose of primary education is to value every child in the moment. The author examines one particular story by a six-year-old girl as an example of what this assertion implies, and of its significance for teaching and learning within the primary school.

At the launch of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust in September 2013, a panel of experts in education were asked by John Coe of the National Association of Primary Education (NAPE) whether they agreed with the government that the primary purpose of primary education is to prepare children for secondary school. In reply Alison Peacock, head teacher of Wroxham School in Hertfordshire, declared that the primary purpose of primary education is not to prepare children for secondary school, but, rather, 'to value every child in the moment'.

What does it mean to 'value every child in the moment'? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word 'moment', among other things, as 'the instant that is appropriate or decisive for something or someone'. As I wondered to myself what Alison's provocative definition amounted to, one particular moment kept on coming back to mind, a decisive instant in one young child's classroom life. An American friend and fellow teacher had sent me a parcel of stories written by the children in her first grade class. One of the stories had especially impressed me for what Walter Benjamin, in his essay 'The Storyteller', called 'that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis' (Benjamin, 1968, p. 91) but I think that the story itself knows more than Klamely, her teacher, or myself appreciated on a first reading. The writing of the story, and the conversation that Klamely and her teacher had after the story was finished, make up Klamely's moment and suggest at least the beginning of an answer to

my opening question. This, at any rate, is how I want to interpret Alison's transcendent claim.

Here is the story:

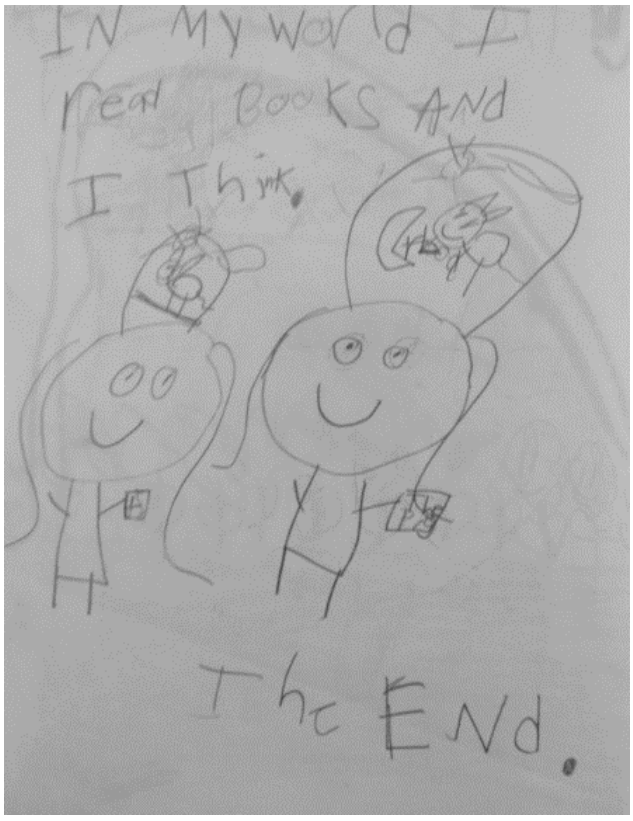

Figure 1. In my world.

The first thing that impressed me about this story – for that is what Klamely called it – was its physical presence on the page. The story fits neatly, as if by design, onto a single sheet of paper. It is as much a picture to be viewed as a story to be read. Word and image are interdependent; neither has priority, and neither is illustrative of the other. However, in talking about her story with her teacher, Klamely spoke of the opening sentence as being written 'on top of the sky', suggesting that she saw the drawing as taking up the entire page and the writing as superimposed on the picture. It would not be surprising if she should attach more weight to the drawing than to the writing. Young children are, for the most part, confident at drawing stories a while before they begin to write and, on reflection, Klamely's story might well be described as an annotated drawing. As such, the story fits into no obvious received tradition or genre, although William Blake's etching of *The Laocoon* might be a very distant

parallel, as might the mythological canvases of Cy Twombly. In any case, the integral combination of image and word offered Klamely the opportunity to say more than she could have managed with words or images alone. She was inventing her own form to match her present capacity.

The sheet of paper is divided into three parts; we might as well call them three visual paragraphs. At the top edge of the page, above the drawing of two flamboyant figures holding books, Klamely has written a nine word sentence which announces the story's subject, while at the bottom of the page, towards the right hand corner, she has added the words 'The End' to signify the narrative status of the work. Between these two texts the central drawing hints at a plot, the details of which are left open for the reader to determine in the act of reading. The overall effect is Aristotelian, a visual enactment of the tripartite narrative form as defined in Aristotle's *Poetics*, a beginning, a middle, and an end, assembled into a formal whole.

The opening sentence is superimposed across the sky in words composed of a mixture of upper and lower case letters. All of the words are correctly spelt, although the final 'think' has been corrected. The letters are large and bold, and each detached letter has its own character. There is a certain rigidity in the lettering though which suggests that the drawing of letters and their arrangement into words is still a preoccupation of Klamely's, by comparison with the free flowing fluency of her drawing, the elegant and expressive curves of which contrast sharply with the stiff uprights of the letters.

'In my world I read books and I think'. This apparently simple sentence bears a wealth of meaning. On the one hand, 'my world' stands for the common world, the world of the here and now, in which the narrator lives from day to day. On the other hand, 'my world' stands for the narrator's personal and private world, that imaginary time and space into which the act of reading draws her, the world of the imagination, 'once upon a time'. The world, that is to say, is both the world in which she finds herself by accident of birth, and the world which she enters and imagines as her own in the act of reading. There is a similar richness in the word 'and': 'I read books and I think'. Thinking is both the accompaniment of reading and its consequence, as the unfolding story enlists and sustains the reader's imagination. The imagined world sets the reader thinking, thinking about the story and thinking about life.

At this point, a heavily drawn full stop brings the written text to a close and opens the way for the drawing. This drawing both embodies and enriches the story's plot. It is the tale of two readers, happily at ease in the act of reading together. As I have suggested in thinking about the handwriting, the drawing reflects the fluency of children's visual narratives by comparison with their more constrained written work. The two figures float freely within the pictorial space. They have slipped out of the real world and into the imaginary world of narrative which allows them to view the real world from a new perspective They are almost identical in appearance, with their elegant wisps of hair, the deep curves of their smiles, their buttoned eyes, and the thought bubbles bursting from the top of their heads like ornate hats. The charm of these

figures, whose identity in appearance is the sign of their fellow feeling, lies in their expressive faces, the faces of friends in love with books, and eager to enjoy them together. By comparison, their bodies are sketchy rectangles with short stick-like arms and legs. It is in their minds rather than their bodies that the action lies. In their hands the figures are each carrying a book, holding it out on display, like a magical or sacred object, for the reader to note, and directing the reader's attention upwards to the thought bubbles perched on top of their heads. One of the books, we can see, is called 'The Pig' and it is this title that helps us to interpret the thought bubbles above the girls' heads. In the bubble on the smaller girl's head we see a pig standing under the rays of a sun, while in the bubble above the larger girl's head the pig looks to be eating from its trough. The rising sun, which can be seen in both bubbles, hints at the pleasure of the text which the two children are reading, the tale of a pig whose adventures have evidently caught the girls' imagination.

The entry of a second reader, here in the drawing, enlarges the narrative, as presented in the opening text. 'My world' is redefined as 'our' world, shared between the narrator and her companion. Klamely had more to say about this relationship in a conversation which took place a few days after the story was written, between Klamely and her teacher, Mary, a conversation which revealed how self-consciously the story had been written. Their conversation went like this:

> Mary (M.) What is going on this story Klamely?
> Klamely (K.) In my world I read books and think. And ...
> M. What is it a picture of?
> K. Two people are thinking the same book. About the same pig. But it doesn't have the same title. But it has the same pig. But the pig is just standing up at the sun and the other one is, I think it's eating food at the farm. The two people are happy because they always wanted to have the same book and the same brain connected.
> M. The same brain connected. So what are they holding in their hands?
> K. Books.
> M. Those are the books themselves? Are they reading together or talking about the books?
> K. Thinking.
> M. How are they connecting their two brains?
> K. By reading the same books about pigs.
> M. How did you get an idea for making this? Is it a picture or a story?
> K. Story
> M. It's a story? And are the two people sharing?
> K. They're sharing their brains while they are thinking it.
> M. The two brains are being shared. How does that happen?
> K. By connecting books and brains.
> M. Do you like connecting books and brains?

K. Kind of.
M. Why?
K. Cause I love reading. Reading is important in your life. And your brain likes books.
M. True, my brain likes books too.
M. Why did you write these words here?
K. The End?
M. Mmm
K. Because it was kind of me in the book, in the pig book, well I read the end of the story that they were making.
M. Those words are in the story and then they become part of your story cause you're in the story.
K. Then those words I read, on top of the sky and I kind of – I don't know where I am.
M. Cause you're in the book at the same time that you're here?
K. Yeah. And I put 'The End'. Then we jump out again. That was the end.

This conversation provides an interpretive key to Klamely's story. It is a story made up of three stories embedded in each other: the narrator's story, the story of the two companions, and the story of the pig. The narrator's story tells of the private pleasure of reading, the emotional and intellectual engagement with the text, whether verbal or visual. The story of the two floating figures celebrates the companionship that is part of the pleasure of reading, the exchange of experience with fellow readers and, no less, in thought at least, with the writer. The story of the pig suggests the power of narrative to engage the reader with the magic of the natural world. Underlying these three narratives is a still larger story, the story of what it means to read and write and the story of the power and pleasure of literature. It shows us that reading transports us into another world, the world of the imagination, from which we can reconsider our way of being in the real world. The jump that Klamely refers to at the end of the conversation with her teacher is the jump from one world to another, from the world of the story back into the reconsidered world of everyday which can now be experienced more richly, in the light of the tale. Such is the power that lies within the verbal and visual text, the power to set one not so much talking as thinking. If the story were to be given a title, 'Brains like Books' would seem the ideal choice.

Klamely's story represents a moment of inspiration, that visionary moment when the spontaneity of a young child's thought and action reveals an unrecognised wisdom. Short and apparently simple as it is, her tale captures the essence of literature as perhaps only a young child could. She shows us, in words and images, just what she knows of narrative: how to construct a story in ordered prose; how to combine word and image in the interests of a plot. She understands that reading is a companionable art, and that stories, though read in private, ask to be shared. Above all, her story demonstrates the richness of

thought and language that a young child, at the outset of literacy, can achieve with the slenderest of means. It reminds me of Tolstoy's comment about the language of his 11-year-old peasant pupil, Fedka, in his extraordinary essay, 'Should We Teach the Peasant Children to Write, or Should They Teach Us?': 'Every word of a work of art, whether it belongs to Goethe or to Fedka, differs from the non-artistic in that it calls forth a countless multitude of ideas, images, and interpretations' (Tolstoy, 1982, p. 228). The multiplicity of meaning to be found in Klamely's miniature story places her in the same company.

To value children in the particular moment is to value their agency, that is to say, their active determination to make sense of the world and of their own being within that world. Klamely's story is a decisive instant in that it makes fresh sense of a fundamental aspect of cultural life, the act of reading. Her story is not to be seen as a preliminary cultural exercise, one kind of training for participation in a culture which is as yet beyond her comprehension. On the contrary, it is the product of her present and past experience, of literature and of life, the artistic expression of what she knows. It marks a young child's willing and eager entry into literary culture.

The Cambridge Primary Review lists agency as the third of its twelve aims for primary education. The aim is set out as follows:

> Empowerment: To excite, promote, and sustain children's agency, empowering them through knowledge, understanding, skill, and personal qualities to profit from their present and later learning, to discover and lead rewarding lives, and to manage life and find new meaning in a changing world. (Alexander, 2010, p. 197)

For the Review, the fostering of agency is one aim among many. I prefer to think of empowerment not so much as one aim among many, but as an aim of a higher order, underlying everything that primary education aims to achieve. The purpose of primary education is not, however, to enable children to acquire an agency that they do not as yet possess, but, rather, to excite, promote and sustain an agency which they bring with them from their earliest experience, at home and in the neighbourhood, among their brothers and sisters, their parents and friends. It is this active agency that primary school teachers seek to value in the moment, day by day, for example in moments such as that in which Klamely wrote her story.

But we should remain cautious of the word 'value'. To value may mean either to evaluate or to esteem. Over the past 30 years we have become all too familiar with evaluation in the form of levels of attainment, standardised measures of performance, and the ideology of testing. We have paid far less attention to esteem, which depends on recognition of the individual achievement of children through the closest observation, description and interpretation of their thought and action. Esteem resists standardisation and is incompatible with measurement. It acknowledges the common intelligence, however various, of every child.

Teaching is more than anything an art of interpretation. The Director of the Municipal Infant-Toddler Centres and Preschools of Reggio Emilia put it best in his introduction to what is one of the finest of all records of valuing the moment, the dual language monograph, *Scarpa e Metro/ Shoe and Metre*, published by Reggio Children in 1997. The book documents the story of a group of five-year-old children who are trying to give shape and meaning to the concepts of measurement and number. The descriptive account of the children's work is the product of exceptionally close reading, but the Director is eager to point out that description by itself is not enough:

> If we are interested in exploring the genesis and development of meaning that children construct in their encounters with reality, if we want to know more about the procedures of thought and action used by individual children in their learning processes, then we must document not only that which took place AROUND the child, but above all that which we think has taken place WITHIN the child ... We must have the courage to interpret.
> (Reggio Children, 1997, p. 3)

To value is to describe and to describe is to interpret. The courage to interpret is the primary school teacher's greatest challenge. This is what it means to value the child in the moment. We have become unfamiliar with the practice of interpretation under the pressures of a deeply flawed examination system. To hear that challenge embraced with such confidence in present circumstances, where children are more often expected to be passive listeners to authority, rather than active participants in learning, gives us renewed grounds for hope in the future of primary education.

Postscript

Glancing through *Scarpa e Metro* after I had finished this article, I noticed a drawing by a pupil of the Diana School which forms a forward to the text (Figure 2). It would be fascinating to explore the possible sources of this particular visual device. Meanwhile it is intriguing to find children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and Lawence, MA in the USA, discovering the same visual image for representing the sharing of ideas.

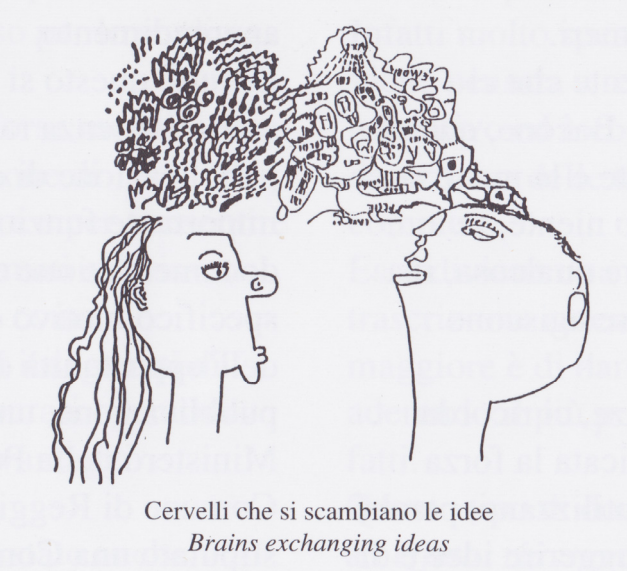

Figure 2. Brains exchanging ideas.

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