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Humanism in Education

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ABSTRACT This is the text of Michael Armstrong's address to the Brian Simon Centenary conference, held at the Institute of Education on 26 March 2015. Michael Armstrong celebrates the humanism that underlay Brian's belief in a common system of education, democratic and non-selective, and finds its counterpart in the creative practice of schoolchildren.

> As all men are alike in
> outward form, So (and
> with the same infinite
> variety) all are alike in
> the Poetic Genius
> (William Blake, *All Religions are One, Principle 2*)

I want to talk about humanism in education, about Brian Simon's humanism as a teacher and thinker, and about the reciprocal humanism of children. I don't suppose that Brian would have agreed with all that I have to say but he would certainly have welcomed the argument.

In the final chapter of his book, *Intelligence Testing and the Comprehensive School*, first published in 1953, Brian sets out the principles around which a common system of education, democratic and non-selective, might be built. He argues that such a system could be established immediately 'if we have the courage and conviction'. Sixty years on, it would seem that we have lacked both. There may have been sporadic progress, here and there, but the ultimate goal seems as far away as ever. Yet Brian's vision is as exemplary now as when he first outlined it and it is high time to reaffirm it. A good place to start is with the first two paragraphs of chapter five of Brian's book. They read as follows:

> The teacher who sets out to *educate* the children under his care, meets them as human beings. He first searches for ways of welding his class together into a group, knowing that learning is not a purely individual affair which takes place in a vacuum, but rather *a social*

> *activity*, and that the progress of each child will be conditioned largely by the progress of the group as a whole. He begins, then, by concentrating on the interests children have in common, rather than by underlining their individual differences. As the work of the class takes shape, however, individual children make varying contributions; some may draw well, others may be good readers, others may be good with figures. The teacher's task is not, of course, to see that the children who are good at some particular activity shine to the detriment of their companions, but rather to see that each child contributes to and enlivens the work of the class as a whole, and that all encompass the necessary basic skills. There is no better way of ensuring this than the stimulus given by other children in a cohesive group:
>
> The teacher who approaches his task in this way starts from a point of view diametrically opposed to mental testing. His attitude is essentially humanist. He recognizes that learning is a process of human change, not merely the formal acquisition of knowledge. Above all he starts out with the conviction that all the children under his care are *educable*. (Simon, 1953)

The opening sentence of this extract holds the key to Brian's humanism: 'The teacher who sets out to *educate* the children under his care, meets them as human beings'. The word 'educate' is italicized, to distinguish it from training or instruction. To meet students as human beings implies a recognition of what Tolstoy called their 'conscious creativity', and what Brian, in a review of Tolstoy's educational writings, described as their 'power of creative and critical judgement'.

The teacher, as Brian envisages her, acknowledges, from the outset, her students' interests, cares, enthusiasms, aims and desires; their outlooks on life and learning, their ways of being. Education – so Brian is saying – is a meeting of minds, the exchange of experience between children and their teachers. Children come to the exchange not as novices to be initiated into culture by their teachers, but as cultural participants with something of value to say as well as much to learn. The teacher's responsibility is to promote an engagement with culture that is already well established by the time that children arrive at school.

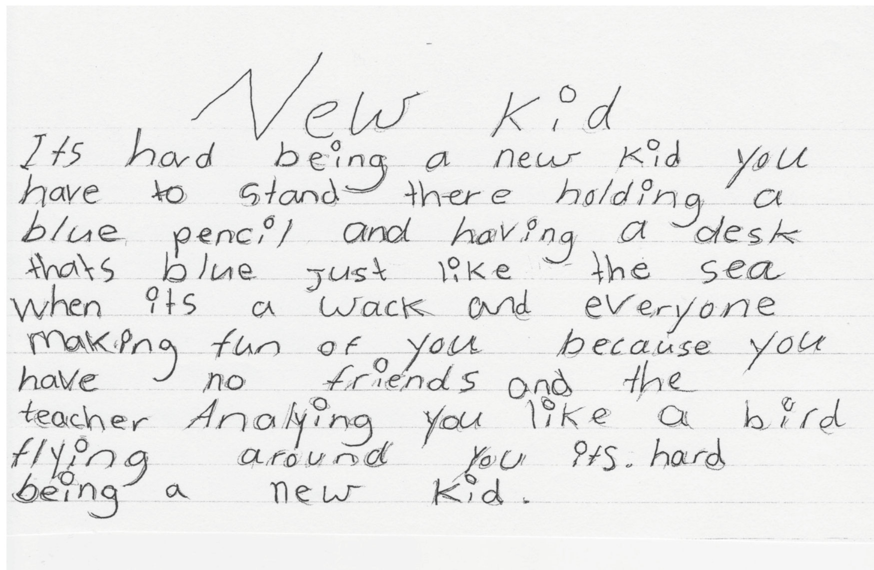
To think of education as an exchange is to acknowledge the social character of learning. 'Education is *a social activity*', Brian insists, and once again the words are italicized for emphasis. The fundamental figure in the classroom is not the isolated individual but the class group as a whole, for it is the group, with its common interests, that conditions the progress of its individual members. Learning is a collaborative adventure. It is in the exchange of experience *from* one person to another within the group, child to child and child to teacher, that knowledge is acquired and appropriated. The classroom is a collective, in which the teacher's task is, as Brian puts it, 'to see that each child contributes to and enlivens the work of the class as a whole'. Under the

guidance of a sympathetic teacher, the classroom becomes a miniature cultural world, with its own distinctive character. Every child partakes and every child has something to say. Carla Rinaldi, writing about pre-school education in Reggio Emilia, puts it like this:

> [School] is a place where values and knowledge are transmitted; and above all a place where values and knowledge are constructed. School is a place of culture – that is, a place where a personal and collective culture is developed that influences the social, political and values context and, in turn, is influenced by this context in a relationship of deep and authentic reciprocity. (Reggio Children, 2001, p. 38)

Brian speaks of the teacher as one who 'recognizes that learning is a process of human change, not merely the formal acquisition of knowledge'. His words echo John Dewey's description of the educational process as 'one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, and transforming' (Dewey, [1916] 1980 p. 54). Traditionally minded teachers think of education as the handing down of a body of knowledge from teacher to student, hence the metaphor of delivery so beloved by governments of left and right in recent years. But that is to ignore the student's agency. Children do not passively appreciate the culture to which they are exposed. The culture of the classroom challenges the wider culture. The children's works, their studies or projects – to use a much misused term – are an expression of culture, rather than a preparation for it. Cultural expression lies at the heart of educational practice.

So here is an example of one young child's humanistic practice, an example of childhood wonder, of children's curiosity in the face of life. Such a practice is the necessary and sufficient counterpart of Brian's vision (Figure 1). Chris was eight years old when he wrote 'New Kid'. He was a third grader at the Henry K. Oliver school in downtown Lawrence, an impoverished old mill town some 25 miles north of Boston, Massachusetts. Like many of his classmates, he was born in the Dominican Republic. He was a large, quiet, soft-spoken boy, thoughtful, even dreamy. When he read his work to the class at the end of the day, he read shyly but with evident pleasure, smiling as he came to an end. 'New Kid' was not written in response to an assignment; it was Chris's own choice of subject. He wrote it in a single session and although he made a copy later, he changed no more than a word or two, replacing the words 'not good' by the word 'hard' in the final line, a choice of considerable significance, as we will see. The title is large and eye-catching, twice the size of the rest of the text, which begins immediately below and takes up 10 lines, the individual words widely spaced, the letters distinct, every letter i surmounted by a tiny circle. Only two words are misspelt; 'awake' is written as 'a wack' and 'analyzing' becomes 'analying'. There is just one full stop after the last word but no further punctuation.



New Kid

Its hard being a new Kid you
have to stand there holding a
blue pencil and having a desk
thats blue just like the sea
when its a wack and everyone
making fun of you because you
have no friends and the
teacher Analying you like a bird
flying around you its. hard
being a new Kid.

Figure 1.

The absence of punctuation encourages a breathless reading as image after image pours out in response to the opening generalization. Chris explained that he was thinking of his own entry into first grade. He recalled his blue pencil and his blue desk and he remembered how he was often thinking of the sea. But his poetic meditation is not strictly autobiographical. His own particular experience becomes the pretext for a universal lament. The poem invites us to a shared vision. Its subject is not 'I' but 'you', as the unpunctuated introduction makes clear: 'It's hard being a *new kid you* have to stand there'. That 'you' stands for anyone, writer, reader, child, adult, who has experienced, or imagined, themselves as the object of other people's scornful scrutiny. Wasn't it always so, the poem insists, isn't this just the way it is? The kid is you and you are compelled: 'you have to stand there'. Remember! Imagine!

On first reading Chris's meditation, almost every reader will call to mind a memory, or a mental image. Its evocative visibility is irresistible. The scene that is set before us is overwhelmingly blue. Pencil and desk, twin symbols of the classroom, are both blue, as blue as the morning sea which they suggest to the poet. Among the many meanings of the word blue, as cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we find 'the colour of sorrow or anguish', 'the clear sky, the desert, the indefinite distance: the unknown'; 'depressed, low spirited, dismayed, downcast'. All these shades of meaning are implicit in Chris's meditation, as if he is playing on the meaning of blue, both the colour and the word. The poem speaks of the sea when it's awake, suggesting activity, energy, renewed life, but immediately the word 'awake' recalls the child who awakens to a world that is

filled with blue, which seems as all-embracing as the sea itself, perilous, remorseless, lonely. The colour that heralds the day serves only to threaten its promise.

In one of his late essays, Mikhail Bakhtin describes the exceptional significance of visibility in the work of Goethe in the following terms:

> Even the very basis of a philosophical world view can be revealed in a simple and clear visual image. When traveling from Naples to Sicily, Goethe found himself on the open sea for the first time, encircled by the line of the horizon. He said, 'No-one who has never seen himself surrounded on all sides by nothing but the sea can have a true conception of the world and of his own relation to it.' (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 28)

The simile of the sea in 'New Kid' has the same philosophical resonance. Here too the truth of the world is represented in visible form, the child's isolation mirrored in the blueness of the sea. It is as if the poet has caught a glimpse of the Ancient Mariner, 'Alone, alone, all all alone, Alone on the wide wide sea'.

But the child in the classroom is not alone, or rather, his loneliness is despite, or even because of, the crowded presence of those around him, his classmates and his teacher. As the text leads us back from the sea to the classroom, the child's isolation is reinforced by the clamour of those around him, his classmates making fun of him and his teacher analyzing him 'like a bird flying around you'. Under the influence of the image of the sea, that circling bird brings to mind, if not Coleridge's albatross, then perhaps a seagull, screaming as it circles the boat. It would be hard to imagine a harsher construal of the word that evokes the simile, the word 'analyzing.

Around the word 'analyzing' there hangs another story. I was surprised when I first came across the word in Chris's poem. It wasn't a word that I would have expected to find him using. Then I noticed, on the classroom wall, a strip of paper on which were written the words 'Analyze: to look at closely'. A day or two later came an announcement on the loudspeaker, after the morning pledge of allegiance: 'our MCAS word of the week is analyze; analyze means to break into parts and look at closely'. Two children repeated the definition after the teacher. It seems likely that this was how Chris had first encountered the word. The authors of MCAS, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, might be gratified to find a child so freely making use of their word of the week. But in appropriating the word Chris has dramatically extended its emotional range. The impersonal MCAS definition has been transformed into a nightmare. So this is what it means, for Chris, 'to break into parts and look at closely'. In a single flourish of the literary imagination, he has bestowed on the word 'analyze' a poetical sense far removed from the blandness of the MCAS word list.

This colourful extension of a word's connotation brings to mind some remarks of Leo Tolstoy on the perils of comprehension exercises, such as those which he himself had given to children at the peasant school which he founded

on his family estate at Yasnaya Polyana in the 1860s. At the end of a devastating critique of one of his own lessons he writes as follows:

> We must give the pupil opportunities to acquire new concepts and words from the general sense of what is said. He will hear or read an incomprehensible word in an incomprehensible sentence once, then again in another sentence, and a new concept will begin dimly to present itself to him, and at length he will, by chance, feel the necessity of using that word, he will use it once, and the word and concept become his property. And there are thousands of other paths. But deliberately to present a pupil with new concepts and forms of language is, according to my conviction, as unnecessary and pointless as to teach a child to walk by means of the laws of equilibrium. Any such attempt carries a pupil not nearer to the appointed goal but further away from it, as if a man should wish to help a flower to open out with his crude hand, should begin to unfold the petals and crush everything round about. (Tolstoy, [1861] 1981, p. 125)

It is in such a way that Chris has made the word 'analyze' his property and in the process has enlarged the word's significance. It will be hard to think of word or concept in quite the same way again. The blandness has vanished and in its place word and concept have taken on a revolutionary new life.

The meditation ends as it began, 'it's hard being **A** new kid', and the self-consciousness of this ending is made clear by Chris's cancellation of the words 'not good' in favour of the original 'hard'. But the poem's argument is not at all circular. To encounter these words once more as the poem ends is to understand them quite differently. The poem has reconfigured their meaning, just as the final simile reconfigures the word 'analyze'. And now we can see the literary value in the absence of punctuation. By binding the central vision so seamlessly to the dogmatic beginning and ending, the poem makes visible its own intention to recreate imaginatively the new kid's hard experience. 'This is how we are to interpret the plight of the newcomer, now do you understand', the poem asks us, and as if to confirm its argument the opening words are repeated, transformed by the vision which they frame. So the parable of the new kid has become at the same time a parable of poetic form, of the way in which the written word makes all things new. We may hesitate to say that its author was directly aware of this effect of his poem's lack of punctuation, while acknowledging its significance by observing how the poem suffers if we attempt to correct the punctuation by adding full stops after the opening five words and before the closing five.

In an essay on 'Visibility', in his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, *Six Memos for the next Millennium*, the Italian novelist Italo Calvino distinguishes between two modes of imaginative thought, 'imagination as an instrument of knowledge' and 'imagination as participation in the truth of the world' or as 'a communication with the world soul' (Calvino, 1988, p. 88) 'New Kid' serves

both purposes. If literature is an instrument of knowledge, then what is it that Chris knows? The experience of being a new kid is common enough in Chris's school. Almost every week there will be a newcomer in his own or a neighbouring class. His poem brings that experience to imaginative life. It shows us what it means to be the newcomer, the outsider, the other. But his poem is not evidence of his knowledge so much as its embodiment. It is the unique form that his knowledge takes; it constitutes that knowledge. In writing his poem he has come to understand for himself what it is that his words make us, his readers, understand. The poem is what he knows. More than that, Chris's poem, like so much of children's imaginative work, reconstructs the knowledge which it represents. The word 'analyze' acquires a new shade of meaning; the blue of the morning sea begins to seem more of a threat than a promise; the absence of punctuation becomes a merit rather than a defect.

If, on the other hand, we think of imagination as 'participation in the truth of the world', we might cite Chris's evocation of the sea as the measure of his participation. It lifts the meditation above the local and particular setting of the small child in the classroom, into the universal experience of loneliness and isolation.

Chris's achievement is not to be seen as exceptional. On the contrary, it is characteristic of children's writing from their earliest attempts to express the power of creative and critical judgement in written form. Works such as 'New Kid' represent the early life of the literary imagination, and demonstrate its vitality from the outset of literacy. The educational value of imaginative life can scarcely be exaggerated. In as much as children's creativity embodies their knowledge and represents their engagement with the truth of the world, it is fundamental to the educational process. Chris is no stranger to culture, nor simply a spectator; he is a maker, a player, a composer, whose works reinvent the world even as they discover it. Children have experience to exchange as they enter the conversation of humanity. It is the teacher's obligation, as Brian so well understood, to listen and respond, and in responding to point the way ahead.

It is at this point that Brian Simon's educational vision recalls the thought of Vygotsky, always Brian's favourite psychologist. In his formidable essay on 'Imagination and Creativity in Childhood', Vygotsky speaks of 'awakening in the child what already exists within him, helping him to develop it, and directing this development in a particular direction. 'This', he insists, 'is education in the precise meaning of the word' (Vygotsky, 2004 p. 51), which brings me back to where I began, with Brian's insistence on the teacher meeting her students as human beings, that is to say, with education as the meeting of minds within a common school in which all children are educable, and all have something to say. It is a vision that we have lost sight of. It finds no settled place in contemporary educational discourse. All the more reason to reclaim it.

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