
Book Review

**The Revolutionary Baby:
an adventure in two year olds' story making**

LAURA MAGNAVACCHI & DEBORAH WILENSKI, 2015
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If we believe that children possess their own theories, interpretations and questions and that they are protagonists in the knowledge-building processes, then the most important verb in educational practice is no longer to talk, to explain, or to transmit, but to listen. (Rinaldi, 1999)

Current education policy makers don't believe what Carlina Rinaldi believes. For them, the most important verb in educational practice is to measure. So they bring to bear from the earliest moment of formal schooling a battery of norms and expectations against which they can measure the child, and impose a succession of tests by which to generate numbers. One aim of such 'datafication' would seem to be to harry practitioners until, against their better judgement, they work at readying the young people in their charge for the performative pressures to be faced.

This policy drive to quantify, whose most recent manifestation was the Reception Baseline assessment, presents itself in the language of social justice. It claims to be a means to help narrow the attainment gap between the children of the poorest and the rest. Its consequence is indeed a narrowing, but of the child's educational experience and the practitioner's room for manoeuvre and decision making. So the policy's effects are most malign precisely for those whose interests the policy masquerades as defending. By defining educational development as progress made against a set of norms or a scale of expectations, the individual learner is displaced from the centre of pedagogical attention and concern. What comes to matter most is not the learner as such, but the learner in relation to the scale. It might be likened to the difference between listening to someone, and listening to someone just in order to hear a predetermined something.

The Revolutionary Baby is full of the words of children who have been listened to as someone, rather than for something. The book presents stories derived from a year-long project focused on the use of narrative in nursery

children's play and investigation. More precisely, as the text inside the front cover explains, it 'documents a story that developed amongst two to three year old children in the Atelier – a studio for creative expression and investigation'. The Atelier is part of Reflections Nursery and Forest School in Worthing. In this setting 'children have opportunities to follow their own lines of enquiry and are supported to develop these into long-term project work'. The most recent Ofsted report, from 2014, indicates that children who attend come from a wide catchment area. The names of the 44 children whose words and artwork make up the text are listed inside the back cover. The book's authors, Laura Magnavacchi and Deborah Wilenski, are respectively the Atelierista and the pedagogical consultant at Reflections. The existence of these roles indicates that the work of the nursery is informed by an approach developed in the pre-schools of northern Italy's Reggio Emilia region over the past seven decades. Carlina Rinaldi is closely associated with this approach.

The authors explain that their project began with 'the stories children create in their everyday play and explorations' (p. 8). This implies a more general stance, one that recognises any child as always worth listening to because he or she is articulating their meaning-making or its results. Listening in this way is important in itself, and as a way to learn more about the child's engagement with the world. Such listening may also establish a reciprocity, a relationship of sharing, which can be conducive to learning. The authors write:

It wasn't long before we heard 'small' stories of babies and families, and 'massive' stories of monsters and giants. At first these stories sat well within conventional narratives ... When we decided to introduce an inch-long model of a baby ... something fascinating happened. This 'teeny tiny baby' travelled between stories ... [and] mixed up not only the two worlds, but the ideas they represented.
(p. 8)

The inch-long baby, whose photograph perks up the front cover, becomes a catalyst for the two-year-olds to mix and re-order ideas and understandings which they are already engaged with, and to explore new concepts. The children articulate their thinking and feeling through the medium of story, and through paintings, drawings, sculptures, collages, constructions and assemblages. In conjunction with the words of their stories, photographs of their artwork appear on almost every page. In some of these the inch-long baby features strikingly: reached for by a child's giant hand; covered in icing at a party; stretching towards the light at the end of a tunnel.

The texts of the stories are introduced by short passages of authorial contextualisation. These explain key moments in the project's slowly unfolding drama. The inch-long baby arrives, and some time later mysteriously vanishes. The baby returns, and soon after is found to have a broken arm. And so on. The children respond to each new circumstance in and through their stories. Many are the work of individual children, but several are collaborations. I assume that the educators listened, and then transcribed what the children said, capturing

their words so as to re-present them sentence by sentence here, laid out like poems, in a clear, bold font, one or two sentences per line, generally one story to a page. I would have been interested to read more about the ways the stories arose and were captured and framed. They are all given titles, but it's not clear who made these up.

The stories reveal a heartening linguistic variety as well as imaginative fecundity. The children deploy questions and exclamations as well as plain statements. They describe actions and events, objects and places, feelings, colours and sounds. Some include counting, in ones and thousands. Within their stories children speculate and predict, sum up and recap. They make use of past, present and future tenses. They include direct speech by different characters. They consciously use the term 'character' (pp. 37, 54). They empathise and admonish. They outline a moral order. They play with form, for example by using repetition and contrast. They incorporate close observation of the world, and elements from stories they have heard. In one story a child quotes a nursery rhyme (p. 16). In another, a child considers the nature of fiction in relation to 'real life' (p. 67).

The stories show how ideas are developed – and abandoned – in addition to simply being stated. That is, they reveal a sense of narrative purpose and integrity sustained to a greater or lesser degree. Sometimes internally inconsistent, sometimes subject to seemingly ad hoc reversals or startling revisions ('And he is not dead any more'; 'They don't want to be superheroes now, they want to be cats'), the stories seem to indicate the commitment of any child primarily to carry on with the act of narrative utterance, notwithstanding contradictions, in spite of inconsistency. The space opened and sanctioned by the story permits an idea to be put into words and in the next breath deleted with ruthless decision. A seemingly central idea can lose its hold on the way the narrative is shaped, its grip broken in an instant as the storyline takes a new turn. There's always a new idea, a new perspective, a new element, a new intention towards the story-world being created in words and time. Nothing is impossible, or beyond admittance, in these creations, whose logic and self-consciousness is of a different order than that likely to be expected under a 'school readying' regime.

The authors reflect on how this storying happens, but sparingly. The main work of the book is to offer the stories, and artwork, to the reader. In their framing or commentary the authors tend not to analyse; instead they notice, consider and suggest. For example, when some of the children discover the baby has suffered an injury, they work together to build in clay a hospital. The authors write:

And as the work grows, so does the story the children tell together. *The baby's thing* (p. 36) seems to revisit many of the children's previous stories. There are monsters and babies. There are doors and walls to keep things separate. Perhaps because the baby really did go missing in the Atelier, and was actually injured this time, the children's sense of danger is startlingly vivid. (p. 33)

Later, a second inch-long baby is introduced. This is not done gratuitously. It's a decision which arises out of what the educators have noticed about the children's interest in opposing forces. Should the introduction of the second baby be deemed a practitioner-led intervention? Is it to be understood as a response to a perceived need on the part of the children? I don't think such language is commensurate with what is going on in the work of the Atelier. Like the irruption into the setting of the original tiny baby, the arrival of a second seems more akin to a benign provocation, advanced in a spirit of caring interest, pedagogically gauged to reconfigure the educative space so as to offer other perspectives and invite new thinking.

The quality of the children's story-making evolves, or develops itself, across the months of the project, as the authors note:

When we decide to focus on children's storying it is like tuning in to a radio station that has always been broadcasting. The children's stories don't begin because we are listening, but we hear them more clearly and in finer detail. We spend time looking for connections between stories, forming hypotheses about the ideas children are exploring ... And the children's storying deepens through our focus. Compare one of the first stories ... with [one] six months later. The first is a series of fleeting glimpses. The second weaves all the children's ideas together in a story with unforgettable detail. (p. 65)

A radio-station that has always been broadcasting. It might be an image of the child's power (whether we acknowledge it or not) as meaning maker and cultural agent. A power towards which, if we so choose, we can turn our attentiveness. To attend is to tune in, to sharpen our ears, to scan for the frequency we think is there and which we desire to hear, and then to listen, to receive, to stay tuned. This in itself would seem to contribute to what I will call 'learning', though the authors do not. They speak of 'deepening': 'And the children's storying deepens through our focus' (p. 65). Elsewhere they speak of children who become fascinated by, and explore, ideas; who think clearly; who 'work as many authors do; synthesising, adapting, borrowing, re-telling' (p. 41). Perhaps it is to be taken for granted that the children are learning in many ways through the opportunity afforded by storying.

For narrative has been seen as a fundamental means by which we each construe reality and make ourselves, as well as make meaning. The stories collected in *The Revolutionary Baby* show how their very young narrators are beginning to wield power as meaning-makers through narrative, and in relation to the vast web of narrative, always being spun, which is our culture. The book would have delighted the late Michael Armstrong, whose reading of children's written stories reveals the intellectual significance of the stories themselves, and illuminates the profound merit of the educational practice which makes them possible. It was a theme Michael Armstrong returned to when he addressed a conference held to mark Brian Simon's centenary:

The children's works, their studies or projects ... are an expression of culture, rather than a preparation for it. Cultural expression lies at the heart of educational practice ... 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. (Armstrong, 2015, pp. 319, 323)

If each spoken story presented in *The Revolutionary Baby* can be heard as embodying knowledge and representing an engagement with truth, how vital to document it! Firstly, as valuable in itself. Secondly, as another way to help an educator be where the child is, and know what the child's current beliefs or ideas are. And thirdly, as making it possible for the child to see again, or hear again, what they were thinking, and so move on from there.

The distinguished American novelist Ursula Le Guin has endorsed the view that we tell stories 'because we are so organised as to take actions that prevent our dissolution into the surroundings' (Meek, 1996, p. 22). In a year or two the children whose stories live in this book will find themselves surrounded by an assessment regime in thrall to quantitative data. Policy has created a context whereby the child is more and more often reduced to a score, and increasingly thought of, and documented, as a number. How else to understand educational 'datafication' but as the dissolution of individuals into the surroundings which policy has landscaped? This compact, sturdily produced, glossy-paged, invitingly designed and colourful book, vivid with imaginative life, makes public what two-year-olds can do, and hence may change minds about two-year-olds. With the words 'adventure' and 'revolutionary' in its title, and with its testimony to worlds turned upside down, the appearance of *The Revolutionary Baby* might be seen as a provocation in the same responsibly playful, carefully wondering spirit which prompted the arrival of the 'teeny tiny baby' in the Atelier. Something is being said in these pages about educational possibility. Those with ears to hear might like to listen.

Patrick Yarker

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