

EDITORIAL

For Michael Armstrong

Knowledge is not independent of the means by which it is transmitted. Every significant educational moment is reconstructive to however small an extent, adding to and altering life in ways which no educator can foretell. (Michael Armstrong)

Michael Armstrong, who died in spring 2016, chaired *FORUM*'s Editorial Board for two decades. His association with the journal spanned half a century. This Special Issue remembers Michael's life and work. It celebrates his deeply considered and powerfully defended commitment to teaching and learning within a progressive tradition, and to the comprehensive ideal in education for which he tirelessly campaigned. It celebrates his vision of human educability, a vision informed by his close observation of children as they learn, and by his extraordinarily revealing consideration of that learning and the works it gives rise to. Michael brought to bear on these works all his resources as a reader and interpreter. In so doing, he made apparent more of what the child had learned or was learning. He disclosed the fruits of the seriousness of the child's endeavour, of what he called the child's 'high intent'. In a *FORUM* article from 1987 (volume 29, number 1) he says this:

[T]he exercise of judgement is embedded within children's experience of art or science, literature or mathematics, or any other characteristic intellectual pursuit, right from the start. Experience is at once engagement, and the child's earliest engagement is for real; it is neither a pretence nor any kind of drill. A child who paints or writes or speculates is already, however crudely, artist, poet or philosopher. Part of what this means is that children, even young children, show a deep concern for the constraints implicit within different modes of thought, for their grammar and syntax as it were. Another part of its meaning is that the rudimentary character of children's skill, knowledge and experience is more than a liability, a barrier to intellectual expression. It is also an opportunity, presenting children with a distinctive intellectual challenge which they exploit in characteristically distinctive ways.

Michael recognises the child as a power engaging in the world and in culture 'for real'. Thus seen, the child is not hamstrung by his or her inabilities merely, and left bereft in the face of the intellectual challenge. He or she is prompted by these very difficulties and inadequacies to try to find some solution. To create. In this, the child fosters his or her own intellectual growth. Michael's article continues:

intellectual growth is the outcome of practice, where practice means, not drill or training in technique, but rather the sustained engagement in successive enterprises ... in which the exercise of judgement is embedded as a condition of performance. It is the continuing effort to practise the arts and sciences in this sense that leads children to new levels of mastery, while failure to practise brings intellectual development to a premature close. Of special significance, it seems to me, though hard to detect and to describe, is the critical moment of reconstruction when children, having achieved a certain success within a given set of limitations and opportunities, become dissatisfied with their present achievement and begin to attempt to incorporate new experience and more advanced techniques into their intellectual enterprises ... It is the moment at which the teacher's intervention carries most weight and most risk.

Michael's sustained reflection on the actuality of learning, and on children's lived experience in the classroom, gives warrant to his argument. Such reflection informs understanding of what is at stake for the intervening teacher too. Michael understood this at first hand, for he taught at all levels, in New England as well as the old country: in London and Leicestershire, Oxfordshire, Vermont and Massachusetts. All these places, the pedagogical geography of Michael's working life, are revisited in this issue via the words of friends and colleagues, and in Michael's own words.

Clyde Chitty, his compeer in advancing and defending the case for comprehensive education, remembers Michael's fifty-year association with *FORUM*, and mourns the loss of a friend. Michael Fielding, who has succeeded Michael as Chair of the *FORUM* Editorial Board, wrote the obituary published in the *Guardian*. We reprint it by permission. Stephen Rowland recalls the inexhaustible enquiry into the processes of children's learning which he and Michael undertook in the classroom, processes which are 'fundamentally open, dynamic and ambiguous', as Stephen puts it, and resistant to categorisation. Courtney Cazden illuminates how Michael's independence of mind and consistency of thought taught others to reconsider how they saw education and children. The power of Michael's interpretations of children's writing, says Cazden, 'forced me to confront the individuality I had learned to ignore'. Joseph Featherstone's synoptic account demonstrates Michael's importance to the tradition of progressive educational work and thought in the USA as well as in Britain. Laura Benton and Sarah Getchell, graduate students at the Bread Loaf

School of English in Vermont, spoke at the memorial event held there for Michael last year. We are glad to publish their words.

Back in England, John Coe tells the story of Michael's appointment as head teacher at Harwell Community Primary School. Michael's deputy at Harwell, Jenny Giles, attests to the importance for the school community of exploration, discovery and creativity in its widest sense, from painting to building go-karts, during Michael's time. Her article includes a selection of comments made by parents, contemporaries, and past pupils at an event the school held in September 2016 to remember Michael. David Cox, storyteller, filmmaker and sculptor, remembers working with Harwell pupils in the mid 1990s, and making a gift for Michael's retirement. Peter Cansell, who succeeded Michael as head teacher, reflects on how the baton of headship was passed, and an ethos sustained.

Five of Michael's fellow teachers at Countesthorpe Community College remember his time there. Jeni Smith explores Michael's engagement with the work of US educationalist David Hawkins. She links Michael's compelling regard for others with his 'conceptualisation of a "pedagogy of the imagination" [which] places creativity at the centre of the curriculum; "it is neither the end nor a decorative accompaniment ... Creativity is the highway to skill"'. Michael influenced the organisation as well as the pedagogy of Countesthorpe, as Peter Hollis shows. Liz Fletcher remembers Michael's dynamism, and his debt to Tolstoy. The great novelist's writings on education Michael knew well; he kept in mind Tolstoy's revolutionary question: who should teach whom? Barry Dufour, recalling a disagreement, bears witness to the level of committed debate about curriculum and pedagogy in the Countesthorpe staff room. Michael's sensitivity as a mentor, and the spread of his ideas, are highlighted by Lesley King.

John Morgan and Mary Jane Drummond re-read Michael's first book, *Closely Observed Children*, published in 1980. For John Morgan, it is a text of cultural modernism. He sets it alongside classic work produced at the turn of the 1960s by Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson, and in the context of debate about working-class education in the journal *Universities and Left Review*, to which Michael contributed. He reads Michael's text against Carolyn Steedman's contemporaneous book about primary pupils, *The Tidy House*. Mary Jane Drummond considers how *Closely Observed Children* embodies Michael's injunction to take children seriously enough, and his advocacy of 'profound observation' as a way of doing so. She explores Michael's commitment to the importance (and potency) of description in coming to an understanding of children's intellectual growth, and this takes her, unexpectedly, to the work of the photographer August Sander. The interrelationship of knowing, describing and interpreting, and how interpretation might inform the act of teaching, occupy Steve Seidel as he remembers Michael's work and writing, and in particular Michael's last book, still unpublished here: *What Children Know: essays on children's literary and visual art*.

Mary Guerrero's article allows us a glimpse of Michael in the classroom, talking and thinking with children about what they create. Such thinking about, and looking into, and imagining back through the process of creation is necessary, according to Michael, to understand how education can be not only a process of cultural transmission but of cultural transformation. The educational task is to promote 'the simultaneous absorption and transformation of tradition'. Courtney Cazden quotes Michael's profound definition in her article; Mary Guerrero shows Michael working to bring it about.

Many contributors to this Special Issue reach for the word 'conversation' to describe their sense of engaging with Michael, and of being engaged by him. Teaching and learning could be for Michael akin to a conversation. He says as much in a *FORUM* article from 1976 (volume 18, number 2) co-authored with Lesley King about what was being undertaken at Countesthorpe:

We began to see that the context we needed in order to make a success of student autonomy was one in which teachers and students could take part in a kind of continual conversation with each other – not a dialogue, discussion or argument but something more free-ranging, intimate, expressive and egalitarian, that is to say a conversation. Only through conversation, so we felt, could a teacher learn to identify and value the intellectual demands and interests of his students and a student those of his teacher. Only such a context seemed to offer us a realistic hope of reconciling the students' and the teacher's experience and concern.

At Michael's funeral, his wife Isobel found the same image. She spoke of Michael as companion, thinker and critical questioner, and of what she called 'our long conversation'. Michael and Isobel met as students at Oxford and were married soon after graduation. On honeymoon in Fiesole they picked one day a bay leaf from an orchard near the town. Recounting this at the culmination of her eulogy, Isobel paused to hold up something in a stoppered glass jar. 'And here is that bay leaf', she said. 'Browned, but still here.'

Impelled by a welter of reactionary ideas, the tide of education policy today runs strongly counter to the commitments which Michael furthered, and to his vision. So this Special Issue is 'for Michael Armstrong' in a double sense. It is the gift of a tribute to Michael the man, for every contributor recalls his kindness and generosity, exuberance and humanity, the originality and reach of his thought. Truly, what a teacher teaches first is his or her personhood. And it is the reaffirmation of those educational ideals for which he stood.

Michael ends *Closely Observed Children* with a quotation from Wordsworth, the poet of the growth of the human mind: 'The way to knowledge shall be long, difficult, winding, and often times returning to itself. Time and again, through the pages of *FORUM* and elsewhere, and in campaigning for comprehensive education, Michael, as if returning to himself, reanimated his vision of education and view of children. In a pamphlet from 1969, *Verdict on the Facts*, responding to the first Black Paper, he writes: 'Selection dies hard. We

are reluctant to give up the convenient fiction that children come in kinds, academic and non-academic, able and less able, grammar and modern (that quaintly insulting euphemism). Perhaps it is too demanding to accept them for their own unique individuality’.

In his address to the 2015 Brian Simon Centenary conference, Michael restated that vision of a common, non-selective, democratic system of education predicated on the conviction that all are educable, that education is best understood as a meeting of minds between cultural participants, and that the classroom is a place of cultural expression which challenges the wider culture. This view of the classroom holds true because children are not novices ‘to be initiated into culture by their teachers, but [have] something of value to say as well as much to learn’.

The convenient fiction of which Michael spoke is once again trumpeted by a government in pursuit of further educational segregation. Michael’s writing remains a powerful counterblast. The *FORUM* Editorial Board intends to publish as a collection all the articles Michael wrote for the journal. We close this celebration and commemoration of our friend and colleague with three such texts: a dispatch from the classroom, a speech at a conference, and an address to a public body. Through the rhythms of his words Michael Armstrong’s ebullient intellectual acuity continues to live, and to display his commitments: to teaching based on the understanding of experience, to the unsurpassed value of description in generating a better conception of children’s learning, and to the absolute importance in teaching and learning of the imagination’s place and power.

We are grateful to our publisher, Roger Osborn-King, for making freely available online all the content of this Special Issue, for which, exceptionally, each article is presented without an abstract.

Tribute to Michael Armstrong

CLYDE CHITTY

The first time I met Michael socially, so to speak, we actually had an argument (albeit conducted in a civilised fashion) about the true purpose of comprehensive schooling. Michael, like me, had been a student of Brian Simon’s in the Leicester University School of Education; but he was 10 years older than me, and we hadn’t met at university. I knew Michael because I joined the Comprehensive Schools Committee (CSC) in 1966, and he used to chair our meetings, which were held in Caroline Benn’s house in Holland Park Avenue.

So to return to the ‘argument’ to which I referred at the beginning: this took place at a dinner party in the early 1970s at Michael and Isobel’s home, to which Joan and Brian Simon had also been invited. Michael used to believe that the comprehensive reform was partly about ‘social mixing’: the creation of a more cohesive society. In 1965, he had written a *Where* supplement on *Streaming*

with the then prominent Fabian Michael Young, in which it was argued that comprehensive education had two linked purposes:

These were to end selection, at any rate at the early ages at which it has been practised in England and Wales, and thereby to raise the standard of education of the great majority of children; and to bring about more social mixing between people of different abilities, in different occupations, and in different social classes.

I argued that comprehensive education was all about education and was not a social experiment, which Brian also believed. And to be fair to Michael, being a modest man, he was also prepared to admit that he had been wrong about this, and he very much regretted the use of the phrase 'people of different abilities'!

On a lighter note, Michael and Isobel kept us amused with tales of their wedding, which had taken place at a church in Thaxted in Essex. The church had a tradition of employing radical and unorthodox ministers, beginning with Conrad Noel. The person who conducted Michael's wedding was, I think, Jack Putterill.

Michael was one of the greatest educationists and teachers of his generation. He worked at Wandsworth School in London, then at Countesthorpe College in Leicester where he was Head of Department, and then, following a period of research at Sherard Primary School which resulted in his first book, *Closely Observed Children*, as head teacher of Harwell County Primary School in Oxfordshire. He did not believe that the teacher and the child were on opposite sides of a great divide; both were in the process of exploring the world and trying to make sense of it. As a passionate opponent of the Government's 1988 National Curriculum, he regarded the Government's simplistic framework as a cynical rejection of the primary school approach to curriculum planning, an approach which refused to endorse the secondary school's obsession with subject boundaries.

In a speech delivered to the *FORUM* 'Unite for Education' Conference held in London in March 1988, Michael argued that primary teachers' philosophical objection to a subject-based curriculum was not simply a matter of the need to find room for the ubiquitous primary school 'topic':

It is rather that most of the really fruitful classroom enquiries whether on the part of an individual child, a small group of children, or an entire class, have a way of moving in and out of subjects, conflating traditions, confusing boundaries, eliminating distinctions, and creating new ones. So a study of the life of a frog becomes an exercise in philosophical speculation, literary fantasy and artistic method. So designing a new set of ear-rings turns into an investigation of the psychology of faces. So an examination of mathematical powers embraces the geography of the universe and the mythical origins of the game of chess ... In learning, ... all the significant insights tend to come to those, teachers and pupils alike, who refuse to be bounded by subjects, who are prepared to move

freely *between* traditions and *beyond* traditions, from science to philosophy to art to some new field of enquiry without embarrassment. For every significant curriculum rewrites to some degree the history of *Knowledge*.

Michael was an excellent chair of *FORUM*, bringing a sharp intelligence and a ready wit to all our discussions. I shall miss him dreadfully – more than I can express in words.

