
Michael Armstrong, 2 September 1934 to 7 March 2016

The Guardian carried the following obituary of Michael on 23 May 2016, which we are grateful to be able to reprint.

Michael Armstrong ... challenged received opinion on teaching throughout his life. A radical educationalist and teacher researcher, he held that progressive methods were more rigorous, more exacting, and more intellectually demanding than any traditional ways of formal teaching.

His work described a 'pedagogy of the imagination' to which respect for the child's thought and creativity was central – 'creativity is the highway to skill'. In the remarkable range of his writing and in innovative practice he broke new ground in both primary and secondary school education.

Michael saw the classroom as a collaborative workshop in which children share their intellectual curiosity. His classic book *Closely Observed Children: The Diary of a Primary Classroom* (1980) charted the year of a primary school class as children worked on writing, art, mathematics and the sciences. The lead author of *Tolstoy on Education* (1982), a collection of the novelist's revolutionary essays on education, he relished Tolstoy's arresting question, 'Should we teach the peasants, or should they teach us?'

But for Michael it was through teaching that the child enters culture and re-makes it, becoming an independent thinker. The teacher's interactive role as attentive and imaginative interpreter was crucial. 'I see the school as potentially one of society's central cultural spaces.'

He was instinctively a practitioner, and *Closely Observed Children* grew from a year's work in the classroom of Sherard school, Leicestershire. It is a vividly meticulous study of a class of 32 eight- to nine-year-old children and the way they learned. Its life is in its detail. It studies individual children's often frustrating struggles with learning and their breakthroughs, such as Paul's triumphant drawing of a waterboatman, down to its fringed oars, after days of early failed attempts, microscope study and research into sources on pond life.

Michael cherished a video from those days made by Mary Brown, the headteacher, a study of the nearby river, where the children made a scale model of the river bank, bringing into play mathematical skills, ecological understanding, botanical drawing and research into flora and fauna.

The son of a Methodist minister and missionary ... Michael was born in Walpole St Peter, Norfolk, attending the Methodist Culford school ... and went on to study classics and philosophy at Wadham College, Oxford. His first teaching post was at Wandsworth school for boys, a pioneer London comprehensive, after which he undertook two important pieces of educational research.

The first began in 1964 with Michael Young at the Institute of Community Studies, in Bethnal Green, where he researched the early days of comprehensive education. He and Michael collaborated on an iconoclastic pamphlet on the small comprehensive school. After this he worked on a Nuffield Foundation Resources for Learning project, addressing the curriculum and teaching methods. But in 1970 the urge to return to teaching was irresistible, and he joined the staff of Countesthorpe community college, an experimental comprehensive school in Leicestershire.

It took him some time to see that the primary school was the real focus of his life. At first his interest was in the burgeoning comprehensive schools movement. He wrote on education for the newly formed *Universities and Left Review* (which later became the *New Left Review*) and worked with Caroline Benn as Chairman of the Comprehensive Schools Committee from 1965 to 1970. The deep influence of Brian Simon, whom he knew from his time on the postgraduate education course at Leicester University, and whose commitment to comprehensive schools was formative, was especially important.

After taking research leave to work at Sherard school from 1976 to 1979, Michael realised the full importance of early years and primary education. He worked until retirement as headteacher of Harwell primary school, Oxfordshire, combining this with an annual lecturing post at the summer programme of Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English, an MA for teachers taught at a mountain campus in Vermont.

Always profoundly influenced by what he had learned about children's intellectual and imaginative lives at Sherard, he continued this tradition at Harwell school, increasingly concentrating on music, and producing an opera, *The Buried Moon* (1995, scripted by him, with music by his son Tom), in which the whole school participated. 'The education at Harwell was the only true education I feel I ever had', the architect William Smalley wrote. Michael also continued to teach courses at Bread Loaf such as Describing the Imagination. The effects were often profound. One student wrote of his 'inspiring sense of wonder at the human gift of creativity'; another, 'It changed the way I thought'.

In retirement he wrote two more books, *Children Writing Stories* (2006) and *What Children Know: Essays on children's literary and visual art* (2010). Invited by Robin Alexander to contribute to his formidable Cambridge Primary Review, Michael gave the 2012 Brian Simon lecture on 'Education as Reconstruction' and wrote many articles for the educational journal *FORUM*, whose editorial board he chaired. He delighted in the ritual pre-meeting lunch in Bloomsbury where gossip and thinking alternated.

Throughout his life, his inspirations were Tolstoy on education, Italo Calvino on the imagination, the American educator John Dewey and the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. He was working on a long essay on the latter two when he died. He responded heroically to a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease in 2000, and amazed friends and family by his capacity to work and travel normally.

His wife, Isobel, a literary critic and nineteenth-century scholar, three children – Thomas, Ursula and Stephen – and five grandchildren survive him.

Michael Fielding, Emeritus Professor of Education at the Institute of Education, London, and Chair of the Editorial Board of *FORUM*.

