
Michael Armstrong's Pedagogy of the Imagination

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Six-year-old Jessica at Michael Armstrong's Harwell Primary School in Oxfordshire writes 'The Poorly Mouse', a story that begins with an ominous drawing of a happy mouse, oblivious to the wolf's head, looming with sharp fangs. Wounded by the wolf, the mouse gets taken home by a mother and child and magically restored, but finally and sadly exiled back to the forest when the father of the family returns. In the back and forth between Armstrong and Jessica, a writer has emerged who is already making use of fairy tale conventions and traditions, the strains in a family, questions of sickness and health, the borders between make-believe and fact, the vicissitudes of luck and intention. From the first drawing and first sentence, Jessica is a sure-footed poet of terror, sickness, loss, surprise. Her ending is not the happy ending we expect in a fairy tale. There is much that is exploratory and even subversive about Jessica's relationship to the literary traditions she has apprenticed herself to.

Years later and three thousand miles away, Armstrong works with Chris, eight years old, an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, in the third grade at the Henry K. Oliver School in Lawrence, MA:

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 it is 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.

'You' in this meditation or poem is both the reader and the writer; the piece is addressed to any one of us forced to be a stranger. One meaning of blue in the *Oxford English Dictionary* calls up the color of sorrow or anguish, or, Chris

maintains, the sea when it is awake – and restless. A lost soul – Armstrong thinks of the Ancient Mariner – faces classmates making fun of him, the teacher analyzing him like a strange bird.

'Analyzing', Armstrong notes, was the word of the week at Chris's school, chosen in preparation for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, the looming standardized state test. In an act of purposeful linguistic appropriation that Armstrong finds common in young children's culture-making, Chris turns the guns of the test makers on the system itself: far from being positive or impersonal, the word 'analyzing' is now part of the new kid's nightmare. Chris's last sentence seems to repeat the beginning, but now, Armstrong urges, a writer's purposeful repetition doubles the force and dramatizes a transformation in our understanding and the author's. We and Chris know more than when we started.

A good teacher will, Armstrong suggests, surely move forward with Chris on such matters as spelling and punctuation, and assign him and the other students works that deal with the sea, perhaps, or the immigrant experience. But not, we hope, before she asks if Chris's neglected periods (what British readers would call full stops) may represent what Armstrong strongly suspects: a writer's move. The absence of periods adds breathless drama, a sense of being drowned and swept into the fate of the newcomer.

Children are not usually thought of as serious practitioners of literary or visual art. Throughout a long career combining teaching and writing – including 18 years as head teacher of a primary school, Armstrong establishes that children are the poets and artists of their own lives, as well as creators of richly imagined alternative existences. He outlines a progressive approach to teaching that brings this important fact about children to light and builds on it – an approach that makes respect for children and their thinking manifest: in conversation, acts of empathy, close reading, careful attention, and the fostering of an intellectual community in the classroom. Borrowing a term from a favorite Italian writer, Italo Calvino, he calls this 'the pedagogy of the imagination'.

The achievements of Jessica and Chris are not exceptions. In a variety of media, Armstrong reveals purposeful artistry on the part of many children in all the school subjects – but mostly in writing and art. A regular classroom practice of imaginative expression allows children to participate in the kind of ambitious culture-making a good school can offer. Chris may come to school already perhaps a player in one or even two home cultures. A welcome school environment can enlist him in the various literacies school offers; he is, we see, already a composer of words whose works reinvent the world even as they discover it. Immigrant children like Chris who find such a welcome can make a home in a new place. They may even escape the fate of being 'analyzed', divided and splintered into small parts to be looked at as a deficit or a problem – or judged and recorded as a test score. (US readers, used to the psychologizing of children common among teachers, will note how rarely Armstrong's vivid portraits of children speculate on their lives outside of school.)

The art made by Jessica and Chris embodies knowledge and is also a means to its advancement – thinking and making are inextricable. Imaginative work provides an appropriate context for deepening knowledge and the development of skill. Armstrong wants to give teachers room to arrange curriculum, pedagogy, and timetable to strike a balance between active and expressive work and other kinds of teaching and learning. (He leaves open the question of what the balance should be, and how it gets struck.) Not that young children should determine the curriculum, or that expressive media should consume the schedule, but children need rich opportunities to turn subject matter into works that express their learning and can be interpreted by the teachers.

Armstrong is not out to show that the children are geniuses, or that they have great talent, or that they will have careers in the arts. He knows they are ignorant of a great deal they need to know. Aiming at fruitful practice, he sidesteps the standard educational hierarchies of bright and slow, or smart and dumb. What children do will not necessarily meet the standards of an artistic elite, but they can learn to participate in a broad community of daily aesthetic and intellectual practice that is the heritage of all humans.

Sites Where Children Make Culture

A first book, *Closely Observed Children: the diary of a primary classroom* (1980), draws a portrait of such a community throughout one year in the lives of 32 eight- to nine-year-old children in the Sherard School in Leicestershire. There are chapters on writing and reading, art and representation, patterns and math, and art. (Armstrong cherished a film made by the school's celebrated head teacher, Mary Brown, documenting a long-term project to study and make a scale model of a nearby river and its landscape.[1]) The foreground is always children's work, but he provides enough detail to show the way that in each subject the methods are those of conversation, collaboration, and constant interpretive effort.

Thinking and making go together. Children build on and riff off each other's efforts; teachers are listening as much as they are talking. Participation and absorption result from such teaching. The reader, like Armstrong, is moved by the children's seriousness of purpose, the 'high intent' that marks their busy intellectual life.

He draws on the US philosopher David Hawkins' triangular concept of I, Thou, and It, to represent the classroom as a collaborative workshop in which the child, the teacher, and some portion of the world interact. One difference between a parent and a teacher is that the latter has a particular responsibility to explore a piece of the world –the 'it'– that needs exploring. In Armstrong's account of this exploration, the children emerge in their own works as vivid individuals; it is, however, the strong classroom community that allows them to exhibit their uniqueness out loud and on paper and in drawings. The social vision of learning in *Closely Observed Children* draws on such eclectic influences as

John Dewey, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, the Italian writer Gianni Rodari, the work of Italian teachers in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, and the British historian and educator Brian Simon, one of Armstrong's early mentors. Armstrong sums up a complex social approach by saying that good classrooms are sites where children make culture. Children's imaginative works can be a true expression of the culture they are learning – in math and science, as well as the humanities – rather than simply a preparation for it. The creations he points to are characteristic of what children can do when they are immersed in a subject and part of a group led by a teacher who invites them to play, to invent and speculate. A classroom where such play is taking place becomes a cultural site, a setting in which culture is both absorbed and created, acquired and exchanged. The communal and cultural theme – grounded in respect for children, a love of deep learning in school subjects and an awareness of the central role of the teacher – threads its way through all of Armstrong.

A second work, *Children Writing Stories* (2006), draws on years of practice at the school where he was head teacher. (Armstrong also managed the music program: he wrote the libretto for an opera put on by the entire school, with music written by his son, Tom.) Separate chapters offer intimate and precise portraits of individual children – Jessica, for instance – as they enter and shape a classroom culture of writing and literary form. Armstrong looks at the challenges faced by children from 5 to 12 as they move from spoken to written language, as they tackle different genres and kinds of stories, and as they extend their mastery and struggle to write. Watching these children explore aspects of narrative at different ages, the reader enjoys the unique experience of taking part in the formation of the literary imagination. Armstrong always insists on children as knowers, as well as learners. They are, he shows us, facing large themes about art and life as they create their stories; many also build on a fund of literary and craft and cultural knowledge that they have acquired before school even starts, and add to it continuously. Thus Jessica's deceptively simple story draws on a toolbox of literary and artistic conventions and tropes: from fairy tales, family stories, comic books, animal stories, illustrated books, films – a wide and eclectic set of resources. In Armstrong's pages, she is not unique.

Tolstoy and the Romantics

This path-breaking work on children and writing stands in dialogue with Leo Tolstoy's famous challenge to himself and teachers everywhere: should the peasant children learn to write from us or we from them? In 1982 Armstrong edited and wrote a brilliant introduction to an anthology of the Russian novelist's writings about the village school on his estate. In it he argues that Tolstoy's big question poses a false choice – in the end teacher and student should teach each other. Tolstoy's profoundly moving account of how he and two peasant boys, Fyedka and Syomka, learn to write together is actually a hymn of praise to collaborative teaching and learning, and the complex back and forth between teacher, child, and subject. Here Armstrong taps deep into

the well of Romanticism, at the same time that he undercuts its perennial sentimentality. Armstrong's children are never spontaneous song birds, or flowers, blooming if left to themselves; they do not produce work without struggle, blind alleys, frustration, and much help from a knowledgeable and attentive adult guide. His careful examination of Tolstoy's practice opens up the complicated, nearly impossible, yet endlessly rewarding role of the progressive teacher. In rescuing Tolstoy, Armstrong saves the big Romantic insight – children as creators – and also reveals his own profound underlying loyalty to the English Romantics, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake and Keats. Armstrong's entire career might be described as a teacher's homage to Blake's view of the poet in each of us, and Keats's stirring faith that humanity, now too often kept to low and stunted growth, can one day rise as a democracy of forest trees.

In reviving the Romantics and grounding their visions in ink and pencil and chalk in the hands of actual young children, Armstrong often makes use of the Dewey who insists on the central role of the imagination in his most generative book on teaching, *Art as Experience* (1934). Armstrong read Greats and studied philosophy at Oxford; his writings reflect the intellectual habits of a cultivated omnivore passionate about books, music, and the arts. He loves Tolstoy's image of the teacher going forth to meet the people, and being instructed himself by them in turn. He celebrates the vital and necessary authority of the teacher in the classroom. He also cherishes the intimacy in the exchanges between teacher and child over a piece of writing – the little commonwealth of shared experience that arises from a mutual interest. After a long, far-ranging conversation with a group of boys on art, death, and the nature of beauty, truth, and goodness, Fyedka says farewell to Tolstoy: 'we must always walk this way'. This sentence to a teacher, spoken by a child, lies at the core of Armstrong's vision. Reading him today is, among other rewards, a way for teachers to encounter the great Romantics as educational thinkers who can help us create a democratic humanism worthy of the children we teach.

Britain's Primary School Revolution

Closely Observed Children and *Children Writing Stories* are works of radical importance to classroom teachers and all students of children's thinking. The two books also sum up a movement in recent British educational history. Armstrong was the beneficiary of several generations of work on the part of thousands of British teachers and head teachers who demonstrated that a well-thought-out progressive approach cuts deep intellectually and emotionally, and often meets the needs of a large range of children better than more conventional methods. They and Armstrong and I would argue that such teaching, done competently, suits the nature of primary age children better than more traditional teaching. A progressive approach may require more from teachers; in my observation, it is also more satisfying and renewing for teachers over the long haul.

It is a fair question to ask whether ordinary teachers are capable of this kind of work. Thoughtful scholars such as David Cohen and Mary Kennedy register skepticism: progressive values fly in the face of standard practices and constraints in US schools today. Britain in the 1960s and 1970s offers one of the best examples in history of well-supported progressive practice on a large, national scale. In 1967, the Plowden Report, *Children and their Primary Schools*, celebrated and documented some of the main changes in a progressive revolution in many of Britain's primary schools. The report estimated that about a third of the schools had adapted well to what it called a 'less formal' approach, that a third were struggling, and a third were making no changes. Leicestershire and Oxfordshire, the two settings for Armstrong's research and teaching, were among the leading local authorities in the movement to bring egalitarian values, children's expression and active, intellectual learning into schools. Mary Brown, the head teacher in the Sherard School, where Armstrong did his research for the first book, wrote an important and valuable work on what was for a time the accepted approach, *The Integrated Day in the Primary School* (1970). As an editor of the *New Republic* I visited many British classrooms and wrote about them. The British example was a catalyst for much reform in the USA in the 1960s and 70s and beyond.

In the USA as in Britain, the great and terrible pendulum of education and politics has now for some time swung heavily against equality and the imagination in schools, but work in a progressive vein is taking place at the local level in many places. Inequality frames all such efforts in the USA: more schools in affluent districts, for example, feel free to adopt progressive approaches and values; schools with high enrollments of poor children are often narrowing matters down to scripted lessons and teaching to commercial standardized tests. The USA is on a path to becoming two educational nations. President Obama and his Republican predecessor have been alike in emphasizing high-stakes testing, the privatization of public schools in the form of charters, and the deprofessionalization of teaching. In the long, tedious ideological tug of war between progressive and conservative versions of teaching, most US parents and teachers generally stand somewhere in the middle, even as national policy and 'reform' continue to be dominated by a conservative emphasis on standardized testing. Elementary teachers in the USA, for example, sometimes develop a hybrid practice, progressive when it comes to literacy and art, conventional when it comes to math. (Such local hybridization on the part of teachers has long been a bulwark against ill-conceived reform.) Strong progressive advocacy, such as mine and Armstrong's, will rise or fall in US schools on the power of concrete example in local settings and a shift at both state and national levels to a different approach to the two key areas of assessment and teacher education.

The Third R and the Progressives

Scattered work in the USA in recent decades has cultivated more active and participatory styles of learning in a wide range of subjects. We have more examples now in many subjects of ways to involve children more deeply – see, for example, the work of Magdalene Lampert and Deborah Ball in math [2] – but the examples are thin on the ground. Armstrong's great passion, children's writing, is one area where US progressives can take pride. From the 1960s on, several generations of US progressive teachers have led an effort to make room for more intelligent and authentic children's expression – beginning with Herb Kohl's classroom in 1960s Harlem. It would be quite wrong to say that writing is flourishing in the schools of the USA, but it well may be that in recent decades more US children have been writing in varied ways on interesting and demanding topics – creating stories, essays, non-fiction and even science writing – than in the past we idealize so much. National and local writing projects, and teachers and writers, have popularized the possibility, range, and variety of children's expressive work, even as the growing shadow of the 'bubble tests' (so-called because students shade in a bubble to indicate their chosen answer) reduces the actual opportunities for children to have time to write – and reverses some of this progress. Similarly, but less widely, progressive teachers across the country have chimed with Armstrong's values by bringing the varied arts into classrooms, despite slashed budgets after the 2007-08 recession – and despite today's pressure to discard any subject not important enough to warrant an expensive computerized test. Where teachers are pushing bravely on with such work, Armstrong may find new audiences.

As he may in some universities. For many years I was a faculty leader of one of the teams in the teacher education program at Michigan State University. Besides courses in subject matter, a centerpiece of our three-year program was a final full year of well-supervised student teaching in the classroom of a veteran teacher. En route, every student new to our team took an introductory course my colleagues and I designed and taught that involved among other things spending a semester working with and getting to know one child through tutoring in a city classroom. The Lansing city schools teach many children of color and many from immigrant families. The idea was for our students to do a study of the child that involved finding her strengths and then as a teacher to design an expressive learning occasion tailored to the child. The students found models in Armstrong, as well as other giants of child study – Vivian Paley, Patricia Carini, the work in the preschools of Reggio Emilia in Italy. We profited from the collaborative assessment models and protocols put out by the Prospect Center and Steve Seidel at Harvard's Project Zero. My students ventured out to find the artist and poet or scientist in each child they tutored. They were, I am happy to say, rarely disappointed. One literate MSU undergraduate did a superb child study and went on to become a creative classroom teacher. Yet the minute grain of Armstrong's elaborate analysis of 'The Poorly Mouse' exasperated her; she accused him of breaking a butterfly on the wheel of analysis. He is, she said, 'just like Henry James at his worst'.

(Armstrong laughed when he heard this; for him James's fictional portraits of children set a high standard.)

Still, across the curriculum, American and British readers of Armstrong today will find fewer examples of the kind of teaching and learning he points to. Doing imaginative work with children requires time and freedom that teachers, not only but especially in US schools enrolling the children of the poor, increasingly lack – to say nothing of skill and knowledge. There is an urgent necessity to improve US teacher education. To some in beleaguered schools, Armstrong's accounts of children's high intellectual intent will read like fantasy. Progressives in England, as in the USA, are fighting back against narrow neo-liberal and illiberal versions of school reform, arguing the case for a rounded and humane curriculum that embraces physical education, the arts, and children's expression, as well as a respect for teaching as a profession.

The Case for Humane Schools

Armstrong and others contributed to an eloquent and well-documented report in 2009 pleading for richer educational values. *Children, Their World, their Education: the Cambridge Primary Review* is a forceful progressive response to decades of conservative reform. The Review holds that British parents entertain a more generous vision of the purposes of schooling than the narrow jobs, skills, and sorting focus of policy makers and politicians. This is also probably true in the USA, where a mutiny against a curriculum of splinter skills, standardized testing and corporate versions of schooling is mounting. The general public in the USA may be tiring of the long utilitarian reform cycle that has gone on for too many years, eating away not only at the schools but at the universities – producing few benefits, not even in the reformers' hallowed standard, test results. (Scores on the one US national test that remains honest and cannot be fiddled with politically, the NAEP, have gone nowhere.)

Among many others, the US literary critic Helen Vendler recently made a plea to place the arts – the products of aesthetic endeavour – at the center of anything we call the humanities at all levels of education. Vendler may have in mind the academic study of poetry and literature and art – not necessarily the kind of active making Armstrong insists on as young children's birthright. But her profound close readings of poetry texts in her writings and with her students model intellectual and pedagogical values close to Armstrong's pedagogy of the imagination. Both are asking for a curriculum willing to spend more time on behalf of intellectual and artistic values: slow educational food, rather than fast. Both condemn the solemn Gradgrindism and Philistinism of current educational discourse, where words like 'pleasure' are seldom heard. Armstrong would applaud Vendler as she quotes Wallace Stevens: 'art helps us to live our lives'.

What Children Know

Armstrong's third book, *What Children Know: essays on children's literary and visual art* (2010), may be the best introduction to him for a general reader. Beautifully illustrated, it's a collection of essays published and available online in the USA. The handsome displays of children's art and texts constitute an argument for a new complete edition of Armstrong, whose books are growing impossible to locate. Here he presents new work, as well as drawing on lessons from the old. In his late decades and in retirement, Armstrong taught at the Bread Loaf graduate program for teachers at Middlebury College in Vermont, and worked in classrooms with teachers in elementary schools in Lawrence, Massachusetts, an aging industrial town north of Boston with a large immigrant population. The dedication to 'the children of Lawrence and their teachers' sharpens Armstrong's challenge to conventional education on both sides of the Atlantic. He lays out his claims for children as artists and writers, and spells out in greater detail and with more theoretical clarity the truly radical implications of children's creativity for teaching and learning and the role of the teacher and the school. He writes of the values necessary for such an approach. He stresses the importance and variety of the kind of careful documentation of work that is needed. He explains what he means when he says that interpretation remains key in the entire process of learning and teaching. 'In Chris' classroom, it was within the circle of children sitting on the carpet with their teacher that the work of interpretation would usually begin, as children read their work aloud to the rest of the class and the class responded with questions and comments of their own'. The examples of children's art and writing are stunning; the close readings are deep, revelatory, and often surprising. Improvisational methods beget unpredictable results. A focus on children's imaginative work defies the false certainties, as well as the deficit assumptions, about children of the reigning educational orthodoxy on both sides of the Atlantic. Armstrong admits that his approach is incompatible with a heavily prescribed curriculum. He attacks the utilitarianism of official educational language. The lingo of targets, levels, standards, high stakes, or a race to the top, is at best unimaginative and at the worst damaging. With such a minimalist framework, education becomes preparation for culture rather than what it needs to be, a distinctive expression and enactment of vital culture – the real deal that is found on nearly every page of Armstrong's books.

It sounds odd to call a modest lifelong British civil servant our Tolstoy, but Armstrong is another exuberant poet of the delights and sorrows of children's lives and their many ways of telling them. As a thinker he offers an antidote to a low time when the dominant discourse in education ignores children, let alone the wealth that each child brings to the educational transaction. Unlike Tolstoy, an aristocratic amateur who ended his visionary village school experiment short of two years, Armstrong kept school and met the payroll for 18 years – he speaks not only as a profound theorist but with the well-seasoned professional assurance of a life spent with children and teachers.

The earnest, subversive, playful children perform so brightly on his stage that some readers may miss the depth of moral and political passion behind these reports. Armstrong is no guide to overthrowing the mounting political, social, and institutional barriers to better teaching, but he offers us a primer of the democratic values that are the true basics in education. Against the superstition of human inequality that powers school machines busily sorting out young children all over the planet, Armstrong's pedagogy of the imagination rests on the radical conviction that children, however unique, are equal in their potential for growth. Each, whatever his or her strengths and weaknesses, shares the human capacity to take part in and make culture as thinkers, creators, and citizens. This, all his work insists, can be the starting point for improving teaching and changing today's misguided educational policies. The growth in Jessica and Chris and the others shines with the routine magic that takes place in a classroom where every child takes part and has a say, and where teachers listen and interpret and pay attention. Such teaching begins, day by day, with patient protocol and steady routine, to open the staggering claim once made by that beautiful wild man, William Blake:

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*)

Notes

- [1] 'Look in on Learning: a film portrait of Sherard Primary School 1974-5'.
[2] M. Lampert & D.L. Ball (1999) *Aligning Teacher Education with Contemporary K-12 Reform Visions*, in L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (Eds) *Teaching as the Learning Profession: handbook of policy and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.15730/forum.2015.57.3.317>
Blake, William 'All Religions are One,' Plate 5, Principle 2, quoted in Armstrong (2015), p. 317.

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