

Appointment to Harwell: a close run thing

JOHN COE

It was in the summer of 1980 that out of the blue I received a letter from Michael Armstrong. In it he described his work on attachment to Sherard Primary School in Leicestershire, which provided his first experience of primary teaching and led to his book, *Closely Observed Children*. Michael and I had never met but I had heard of him through mutual friends in the county which, like my own Oxfordshire, had pioneered the development of teaching which put children at the centre of their schools. We must count it as fortunate that Mary Brown, the Sherard head, had been the head of the infant school before the school was amalgamated with the juniors, and it was natural enough that the teaching approaches so successful with the youngest children were implemented as the children grew older. Michael not only observed what was happening but was an integral part of it, so that this former head of a department in a secondary school learned almost for the first time what child-centred teaching really meant.

The letter asked if there was any possibility at all that the writer could be considered for the headship of a small school. Three classes would be ideal because the firm intention was to lead a school through teaching and not through sitting in the head's study sending notes to everyone. I was intrigued and decided to explore the offer further, even though, on paper at least, Michael was virtually unqualified in the primary field. I should explain that at that time I was the senior adviser for primary education in the county and so had the duty of representing the CEO when the school managers drew up the shortlist for headships, and subsequently when they held interviews at which they made their choice.

I invited Michael to come to Oxford for a chat and soon we met for the first time. Everyone who has known Michael and worked with him can guess the outcome of that first meeting, which I still remember because it lasted a couple of hours. He spoke with passion about the children at Sherard and what he had learned from them. It would never be allowed in these bureaucratic days but I took a deep breath and decided to take a risk. I agreed to put his name

forward for the headships which interested him but I had to warn him that there would be keen competition because there was a queue of highly trained and experienced young teachers keen to lead small schools in Oxfordshire.

A pattern emerged. There was no problem in getting him shortlisted and at the interviews his attractive twinkly-eyed personality conveyed professional awareness and caring for the lives and learning of young children. The problem came when the choice had to be made. 'He's too good for us', said the managers, 'look at his qualifications. He'll be off to bigger things in a couple of years and we want someone who will take an interest in the village!' In vain I deployed my persuasive powers but it must have added up to five rejections in succession.

After the fifth rejection, each one for precisely the same reason, Michael asked for a quiet word. He was appreciative of my support but had decided to give up the search in Oxfordshire. The last thing I wanted was to lose him, and I asked him to try for just one more time. I knew that the Harwell Primary School headship was coming up and I knew also that the Harwell managing body, drawn from the atomic research community, was stuffed with PhDs.

At Harwell Michael was the first to be seen. The interview went as well as always and the moment Michael had walked out of the room the chairman turned to me and said, 'He's the one for us'. I even had a job to persuade them to interview the other candidates! And Michael did stay. He wasn't off to a bigger job in a couple of years. He was a fully committed primary head, yelling encouragement to his netball and football teams, singing lustily with the choir at Christmas and running a superbly successful school strongly supported by the village. For 18 years he taught the children, and more than that he drew insights out of his experience with them which have contributed so much to all of us. He helped us understand the children we teach and the crucial importance of their creativity. I thank my lucky stars that Oxfordshire didn't lose him and that Michael and Harwell came together at the same, wonderfully fortuitous, moment in time.

JOHN COE began teaching in Essex. After primary headships, first of a small rural school and then of an urban school serving an underprivileged community, he joined the West Riding of Yorkshire authority as Inspector of Schools. His second local authority appointment extended over 16 years as Senior Adviser to Oxfordshire. In 1984 he moved into higher education as Course Leader of the PGCE Primary Course at the London Institute of Education. A later move to Oxford Brookes University involved him in research and both initial and in-service education. He is a Fellow of the University. *Correspondence:* nape@onetel.com