

An Inspirational Head Teacher and Friend

JENNY GILES

I worked with Michael as his deputy throughout his 18 years as head teacher at Harwell Primary School. During that time Michael's impact on me, on the other members of staff and on the development of the school as a whole was incalculable.

Through his own teaching example he encouraged all of the staff to put the child at the heart of everything we did, both in and out of the classroom. Children led the way and loved working with him, whether writing, painting, solving problems, making go-karts, an Archimedes screw or a child-sized pinhole camera. Pupils who worked with Michael, now adults and parents themselves, still recall the joy of exploration and discovery, of talking to someone who fully appreciated the seriousness of their writings, the creativity of their thinking and who always had time to listen to them. Under his leadership Harwell School became a vibrant and exciting place to learn, for adults as well as for children.

On a personal level Michael encouraged me to discover and explore my passions in teaching. He gently persuaded me into a four-year B.Phil course studying Children's Literature and Storytelling, Drama and Dance. These passions mirrored some of his many enthusiasms and we spent much time discussing them and the best way to inspire and enthuse children to learn using these passions. I asked him to look at one of the assignments I had to write connected with the Dance segment of the course. I'm sure his comments ran to far more than the 3000 words I was required to write. And as was his way with anything he read, he asked so many relevant and soul-searching questions. Questioning was a huge part of Michael's teaching, making us all think more carefully about what we meant to say or write.

He arranged for experts to visit the school on a regular basis to encourage our endeavours. There were memorable visits from mathematicians, musicians, dancers, storytellers, poets and puppet makers. A visit from David Cox, a storyteller, puppet maker and sculptor, was one such that made a huge and lasting impact on many of the children involved.

Michael was keen that every teacher felt empowered to explore teaching philosophies that fostered creative thinking, with children being encouraged to take control over their learning. Hence we had integrated weeks, days during which learning sprang from a central theme and which were led by the children, and days on which children took responsibility for the teaching and learning of the class. Children became teachers in the truest sense of the words.

During his time at Harwell Michael shared his love of music, and the school became rich in the performing arts. Music became a central part of school life with choirs, orchestras and lessons in violin and woodwind. The choirs and orchestras performed at school concerts for parents, and at local concerts and festivals as well as at national events. I remember so well the choir's annual visits to the Wembley Conference Centre to sing along with over one thousand other children in the Festival of Voices. As this was a whole day's event we all took along our picnic lunches. Michael and I ate particularly well, with Michael providing French bread, a selection of delicious cheeses and a bottle of fine red wine, while I provided smoked salmon and strawberries.

The musical dimension culminated in the performing of 'The Buried Moon', an opera which Michael and his son Tom wrote together. A large number of children were involved in various roles within the drama – singing, acting, dancing, making props, painting the backdrops – it really was a whole school endeavour which in Michael's own words 'became almost a way of life'.

Writing in all its forms, but especially story writing, became another vital part of school life. Michael, again through his own teaching example, inspired us all to take children's writing much more seriously, to read stories more closely, to talk to children about them and to try to understand the thought processes behind them. Stories were shared, published and celebrated every Friday in assembly. Some of these stories, including some of those inspired by the visit of David Cox, were celebrated and analysed in one of Michael's books: *Children Writing Stories*.

Harwell village was then, and is still, a socially and economically diverse community with the school at its heart. Michael had that rare gift of being able to communicate meaningfully with everyone with whom he came into contact. All of the parents knew that he would listen and respond to their concerns; he was there for everyone at any time. He started a closer involvement with the Harwell Feast in the form of school entries in the float competition and the running of races for children and adults. He also took part in various races himself, and the donkey chariot racing brought his competitive spirit to the fore. He initiated the practice of the choir going out around the village during the Christmas season to sing to various groups, to entertain at Christmas lunches and to sing in Harwell Church.

The last time I saw Michael he was enthusing about a primary school he'd recently visited, Wroxham School in Potters Bar run by Dame Alison Peacock. He still got excited and energised by good educational practice wherever he saw it.

In September 2016 we held an afternoon at Harwell School celebrating Michael's time there which was attended by a large number of ex pupils and parents. Below are some of the comments from the event:

The Birkinshaws (ex parents):

With loving thanks for a great educator and a dear man whose kindness and compassion has made a difference to many young lives.

Lucy Ryan (ex pupil):

Thank you, Mr Armstrong, for making my childhood so magical.

The Ryans (ex parents):

You helped each of our different children tell their stories and develop themselves as unique individuals.

Charlotte Orr (ex pupil):

Mr Armstrong was a true inspiration and so full of innovative ideas and new approaches to classroom life.

Nicola Wood (ex pupil):

He clearly thought the best of all children and as a result he brought out the best in us all.

Mary Carney (ex governor):

Michael was impressive in absolutely every way – gifted, inspirational, warm, humble and passionate about the development of young children. He was a delight.

Richard Jones (ex head teacher and contemporary of Michael):

He was such a good head and a real enthusiast in Education. He could stage an argument with such panache and speak with a background of knowledge which was respected by all.

After leaving full-time teaching, most of which was spent teaching with Michael Armstrong at Harwell School, **JENNY GILES** became involved in teacher education as a tutor and training coordinator. In this role she endeavours to carry on some of the philosophies and practices learned from Michael. Correspondence: jennygiles@tiscali.co.uk

