
Following Michael

PETER CANSELL

In 1999 I visited a school as a precursor to applying for the headship. I was met with courtesy, kindness and understanding, by children who had been empowered by the vision of their head teacher and the actions of their teachers. The school was Harwell Community Primary School and that head teacher was Michael Armstrong. I'm pleased to say that a little later I was offered the headship and thus started the most rewarding period of my school career.

When I took up the reins I was full of the enthusiasm of the new, with many ideas about how I wanted to move forward, but also conscious, like any new head teacher, of the enormous responsibility suddenly descended upon my shoulders, a responsibility not only for the education of these children, but for the community in which we sat and for the history of all that the school stood for. My vision would be built on that of those who had gone before. My eventual realisation was that the job was even wider and that we all bear a responsibility for education in its widest sense. We owe it to the children in our care that they are part of a system and society that cares for them and develops them until they are able to take our place.

This passing on of the baton is exactly what Michael knew he was doing. I know that he found it difficult to let go, but that he also knew the illness with which he had been diagnosed would make it more difficult to do the job he loved so much. His answer was to take me under his wing and to help shape my vision without ever imposing his own. Or perhaps he saw a kindred spirit who believed that children were important in their own learning, that they were able to go beyond the limits of adult thinking, and that children in primary schools in particular are the most valuable resource we have in education, if not society.

Michael left an inheritance at Harwell that included many things which have lasted beyond my time there: a respect for children and their families, a respect for the power of learning, an appreciation of the value of the creative arts, an understanding of the positive power of happiness. He was a frequent visitor who I'm glad continued to feel at home and welcomed by all who knew him. His detailed understanding of and passion for children's writing meant that for several years he continued to discuss aspects of this with children whose

work he eventually used in his books, and with adults who were always keen to deepen their knowledge by listening to someone they greatly respected. He also left me responsibilities beyond the school, as his commitment to the life of the village had become the expected and accepted role of the head teacher. Not many would have been so determined to be deeply embedded in the local community that they would choose to live away from home and family for over half the week, but a daily commute of over 50 miles each way was not for Michael.

Harwell village has begun to change, with significant house building in the area bringing many new families, but Michael will be forever remembered by those whose lives he touched as a star which passed that way, lighting the path of education for those who wished to follow it.

PETER CANSELL is Founding Director of the educational charity the Oxford School of Thought, and Chair of Oxfordshire Primary Head Teachers' Association. *Correspondence:* petercansell@gmail.com