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On Re-reading *Closely Observed Children*

MARY JANE DRUMMOND

The Way We Live Now

According to the *Guardian*'s education correspondent, who quotes recent government figures, almost one-third of those who started teaching in 2010 had left the profession within five years (25 October 2016). Explanations for this sorry state of affairs include excessive workload, a dysfunctional assessment regime, and constant changes in official structures and expectations. Kevin Courtney, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, is quoted as saying: 'Schools have become more difficult and less rewarding places in which to work. Intense workload and the demands of high-stakes testing create an environment where job satisfaction is becoming rarer'.

There is Another Way

Consider these brief extracts from a book, written well within living memory, with the modest subtitle *The Diary of a Primary Classroom.*

> Wednesday, May 4th
> [Mark and Robert] sat down opposite the swan's nest and watched, and Robert decided ... to sketch the nest and the swans, finding a rough piece of lined paper on which to draw. Mark wrote again while Robert sketched, describing the scene before him ... As I put it in my notes 'they spent the afternoon sketching and writing but also teasing each other and lying down and enjoying the sun and the warmth of the river bank'. It was that kind of day, an easeful afternoon in early summer. (p. 71)

> Monday, May 23rd
> Thirteen of us had gone down to the river on Thursday afternoon, each person, on this occasion, with a clear aim in view ... Some had been drawing or writing, others making bark rubbings, or looking for wood insects, or reading ... Paul stuck in one spot, just across the

> bridge, almost all afternoon ... fishing with his net for whatever water creatures he could find. He caught mayfly larvae, as he had hoped, together with snails, prawns, waterboatmen and shiny black beetles that chased each other madly across the water among the lily leaves, as later they did across the surface of the water tank. Towards the end of the afternoon, as Debra and I, followed by Sarah, Louise and Gwynneth, were exploring the meadow across the river, we looked back towards the bridge to see Paul stretched out in the sun by the river, dozing. (pp. 144-145)

> Thursday, May 26th
> Paul, Debra, Sarah, Louise, Mark, Robert, David and Simon came down to the river with Gilly and me this afternoon. It was even warmer than in the morning despite a stiff breeze, and we had a quiet afternoon, fishing, sketching, reading, chatting, writing. Paul and Louise caught three exceptionally large waterboatmen, quite a different species from those which we have netted before. (p. 155)

The diarist is, of course, Michael Armstrong, and the book, his first, the incomparable *Closely Observed Children,* published in 1981. It is, as many *FORUM* readers will recall, Michael's first-hand account of the school year (1976-77) that he spent at Sherard Primary School in Leicestershire, observing and teaching a class of eight-year-olds, alongside the regular class teacher, Stephen Rowland. It is almost entirely made up of observations, every bit as vivid and alluring as the three above, all reeking of a recent past when both teachers and children in so-called 'informal classrooms' assumed everyday responsibility for the direction and purposes of their teaching and learning. 'Intense workload' was not a cause for dread, since the teacher's work was to be with children, living and learning alongside them, in the intensity of their interests in the world and everything and everyone in it.

It is important not to be seduced by the idyllic quality of those long sleepy afternoons by the river. Paul did not doze for long: back in the classroom, with his tankful of new material, he was swiftly re-engaged in his long-term project of representing his fascination with the animals he had been observing, learning about them through his rapidly developing skill in capturing their key characteristics on paper – his drawings are simply stunning – and sharing his new understanding with his friends in the classroom community: 'A small sign of how well Paul knew what he was about came when he glanced at another boy's drawing of the same waterboatman, and was at once able to show him that he had placed the legs at the wrong side of the oars' (p. 156).

Nor should we mistake Michael's calm reflections, and sunny reminiscences, for a 'dolce far niente' resignation from the tasks of the teacher. His purpose in documenting these 'easeful afternoons' was never less than

rigorous, deeply serious, and formidably comprehensive. As early as the fifth page of the book, he sets out his programme:

> The object of my enquiry was limited and tentative. I did not intend to assess in detail the children's attainment, nor to judge the effectiveness of particular teaching methods, or to compare informal and formal classrooms. I wanted to study, within the context of one particular school, the character and quality of children's understanding: the insights which they display and the problems which they encounter, their inventiveness and originality. (p. 5)

And for his success in carrying out this wide-ranging enquiry, and writing down what he saw in all its lived reality, we are eternally grateful. By the end of the book, as we shall see, when he looks back at the argument he has been developing from his close and attentive observations, his field of interest has widened significantly to include the relationship between knowledge and the purposes to which it is put, the centrality of the desire to understand, and the drive to represent and express that understanding.

Re-reading – Challenges and Rewards

Re-reading *Closely Observed Children* for this commemorative issue has been both challenging and deeply rewarding. If I read it shortly after it appeared, as I think I remember doing, how come I apparently learned so little from it at a time when I was still working face-to-face with children, teachers and parents? For one small example, why didn't I learn anything about the amazing provision that Michael and Stephen made for children's fascination with pattern making? The whole of chapter 4 is devoted to the topic of 'The Language of Pattern' (an early incarnation of one of Malaguzzi's '100 languages of children', perhaps). It describes in utterly convincing detail how the provision of a rich variety of open-ended – but not sophisticated – materials, such as gummed paper stars, peg-boards and coloured pegs, magnets and ball bearings, triggered astonishing feats of invention and exploration, hypothesis and problem-solving, that spread through the intellectual community of the classroom like wildfire.

I was reminded of this generous and enriching provision at a recent *Learning without Limits* seminar, at which Professor Simone Seitz of the University of Paderborn presented a fascinating pedagogical model that she and her colleagues are developing in their work towards a truly inclusive curriculum, based on the educability of everybody. In one part of this model, her English audience was startled to see the arresting phrase: 'differentiation as enrichment'. What an intriguing possibility! As we discussed it, we began to see that if we could uncouple the deeply problematic concept of 'differentiation' from its one-time closest companions, in particular 'fixed ability' thinking in all its guises, we might regain the power to see the opportunities that open up when curriculum provision allows for individual selection, interest and desire, just as it did in Stephen and Michael's classroom.

The chapter on 'The Language of Pattern' concludes with a review of how it contributes to the argument that Michael has been building up in the preceding chapters, which meticulously analyse copious examples of children's literary exploits, their practices in the graphic arts and model making, and in certain aspects of science and mathematics. At this point, Michael now forcefully argues: 'a predominant feature of [all] these investigations is their expressive purpose'. In other words, from their earliest acquaintance with the traditions of human thought, children use the materials and opportunities they are offered to 'examine, extend and express in a fitting form their own experience and understanding' (p. 129).

I must honestly confess that I did not come away from my early encounter with this text with an appropriate or useful estimate of the significance of what is being proposed here. Reading Gordon Wells's 'big book', *The Meaning Makers* (1987), and, later, Dewey (especially *Art as Experience,* 1934) helped me along the road, and by the time I came into the orbit of the Reggio educators and their emphasis on children's intellectual powers, and the strength of their creativity and self-expression, I was ready to see the error of my ways. Children's sketches, patterns, paintings, observational drawings, models, stories and other writings are never decorative, never aimless or unconsidered, but always part of their relentless desire and determination to make sense of the world. Michael was fond of quoting Clifford Geertz on this very subject:

> [Education] is not so much a matter of providing something the child lacks, as enabling something the child already has: the desire to make sense of self and others, the drive to understand what the devil is going on. (Quoted in Armstrong 2006, p. 174)

The chapter that follows, 'The Practice of Art and the Growth of Understanding', is devoted to an extended analysis of 'one particular episode in the life of one particular child ... a thread of activity stretching over several weeks in which it is possible to discern the growth of understanding and competence that comes from sustained intellectual scrutiny' (p. 131). The episode concerns Paul, he of the waterboatmen, and his continuing absorption with the exploration of the natural world, and how to represent it in art. Michael helps us to see how Paul's *practice,* in art and writing, is worthy of respectful attention: it is nothing less than 'the sustained exercise of skill, judgement and imagination in successive intellectual tasks', tasks which were set by himself, for himself. Over the 40 pages of this chapter, Michael describes, in compelling detail, the growing successes and occasional failures in Paul's work, culminating in a magnificent painting of a dead moth. He calls on Dewey (1934) to join him in celebrating Paul's achievement, characterising it as 'complete absorption in subject matter that is fresh, the freshness of which holds and sustains emotion' – a process made possible by 'any amount of labour' (p. 157). The challenge for readers here is to grasp that Michael is writing about Paul, and all the other people in the classroom, not as eight-year-old children, or pupils, but as accomplished artists.

And this challenge is a comprehensively daunting one, for all teachers, now and for the rest of our professional lives: how to accept the enormity of the essential requirement for a teacher, to take children seriously enough – not just in their individual flashes of brilliance, but all of the time, in the daily intellectual life of the classroom as a whole. Can any of us claim to have taken children seriously enough? The great Polish-Jewish champion of children and progressive educator Janusz Korczak (1878-1942) has some stern words on this subject in his short book *The Child's Right to Respect* (1929); on the very first page we read:

> We learn very early in life that big is more important than little ... Respect and admiration go to what is big, what takes up more room. Small stands for common and uninteresting. Little people mean little wants, little joys, little sorrows. A big city, high mountains, a tall tree – these are impressive. We say 'A big deed, a great man.' A child is small and doesn't weigh much. We must bend down, reach down to him. Even worse, the child is weak.

But not in the primary classroom where Paul and his fellow artists, writers and natural scientists were living and learning. I'm not sure whether Michael knew this text of Korczak's – but I am certain he would concur with its final words: 'It is precisely the children who are the princes of feeling, the poets and thinkers'.

Rewards – and a Surprise

There are also, happily, many rewards for the returning reader – not least in Paul's moth painting, which I discovered I had never entirely forgotten. It is good to be reminded how much respect Michael explicitly extends to the children he is working alongside. He often refers to their paintings and drawings, especially those from real-life subjects, as 'studies'. This is to 'draw attention to the depth of their content and to the manner of their composition. The careful curiosity they exhibit is as much that of the naturalist as of the artist' (p. 74). Referring to Robert's studies of the natural world, he concludes, 'each of them is evidently the work of a passionate observer' – a generous epithet, from one observer to another.

A further pleasure has been to note Michael's willingness to catch himself playing the-kind-teacher-who-knows-what-is-best-for-you – and, in the nick of time, graciously withdrawing. The young people in his classroom know enough about their kind teacher to be sure they can speak their minds, without fear of reprisals. In February, for example, Neil is writing about his father's birthday party, and Michael is not quite impressed enough:

> My first, unregenerate, teacher's reaction was to think that this was hardly enough for a morning's writing. It had taken no more than a quarter of an hour or so, was no longer than a dozen lines, surely there was more to be said. I asked Neil whether he couldn't add a

> bit about the coming birthday, the cake that was being prepared ... and so on. 'I don't want to do that' Neil replied and his tone, though friendly and uncomplaining, had that decisive edge to it which alerts one to the fact that there's little point in pressing the matter further. Which after all, was just as well. The piece was complete, addition was superfluous, the day's writing was done. (pp. 24-25)

And in May, Michael starts work with a boy called Simon, whom he doesn't know vey well, though he learns he is sometimes dubbed Professor W. He is a master of invented spelling, but, in Michael's view, writes very, very slowly. 'After almost every sentence or incident in the story, he would stop and say that he didn't know how to go on. I kept on making suggestions, hoping I might be helping. Eventually, Simon turned to me and said, in a gentle, matter of fact tone, "I can think better if somebody's not helping me"' (p. 30).

Any other teacher might be tempted to suppress this candid comment – but not Michael. He adds, in brackets, 'I wrote his exact words down at the time to be sure of remembering them'. And his final judgement on the completed story is scrupulously generous: 'I do not wish to overstate Simon's achievement. The story was slight, yet it was also skilful and its skill was not accidental or unaccountable. Simon pondered the story as he wrote; its form and its language reflect the care with which he composed it'.

One other surprise and unexpected enrichment has resulted not from my re-reading of the book itself, but from reading, for the first time, an interview Michael gave sometime in 1984, to Brenda S. Engel, an American academic, interested in Michael's methodology. This interview led me to another intellectual giant, for whom observation was more or less a way of life, rather than an occasional hobby. After reading the interview, my writing table was permanently occupied by two books, which I was studying simultaneously. One was the well-thumbed library paperback of *Closely Observed Children*, 'A smashing book', as the *New Statesman* quaintly informs us on the back cover. The other is a large, glossy volume from the National Portrait Gallery in London, published in connection with an exhibit of photography shown there between February and June 1997, which I visited and greatly appreciated. The magnificent photographs, nearly all of closely observed adults, children and families, were taken by the German photographer, August Sander (1876-1964). What possible connection can there be between him and Michael Armstrong? I shall explain.

That there is a connection, we can be certain, thanks to the text of the interview itself, published in the *Elementary School Journal*, vol. 84, no. 5. The interviewer is mainly interested in how Michael sees the relationship between 'descriptive research', such as the case studies in *Closely Observed Children*, and the theory or theories that might arise from such research. Michael roundly rejects such a distinction:

> It seems to me that descriptive research should be of such a kind that the theory of intellectual growth which arises from the description

> doesn't mean that you could then separate a body of theory for which the description offered you case studies. The case studies are the theory. (p. 355)

He is passionate in his defence of what a powerful research tool description can be:

> I have become convinced that the thing that holds up progress in developing any sort of satisfying theory of childhood, or of intellectual growth, is the inability, our inability, to understand the idea of description at a sufficiently profound level. (p. 356)

At this point in the interview, only two paragraphs from its close, Michael sets himself the task of defining his descriptive methodology. He does so by drawing, at some length, on an essay by John Berger – the subject of which is the photographer August Sander! Berger's essay, it appears, quotes Walter Benjamin, who in turn was quoting Goethe (number 565 of his *Maxims and Reflections*). I need to know more: I don't have Berger's writing on photography on my shelves, nor any Walter Benjamin – but I do own the fat catalogue of the retrospective exhibition in London, to which I promptly turned. And discovered the essential connection between Sander and Armstrong, these two masters of their respective professions.

August Sander began his working life as a pit boy in the mine where his father was a carpenter. By the age of 16, he had acquired a camera, and persuaded his father to help him build a darkroom at home. After military service, and a period as a photographer's apprentice, he became a professional photographer, and by 1903 had won the first of many prizes for his work, mainly as a portraitist. The story gets exciting in the mid 1920s, when he conceived the plan of photographing every sort of human being, making a composite portrait of the age in which he lived. The project came to be called 'People of the 20th Century' and its inaugural exhibition opened in Cologne in 1927. To introduce this event, Sander wrote a few hundred words, headed 'My Confession of Faith in Photography', which begins with these lines:

I am often asked how I came upon the idea of creating this work:
Look, Observe and Think
And the question is answered.
Nothing seemed more appropriate to me than to render through photography a picture of our times which is absolutely true to nature.
The exhibition in the Cologne Kunstverein is the result of my quest and I hope I am on the right path. I hate nothing more than sugary photographs with tricks, poses and effects.
So allow me to be honest and tell the truth about our age and its people.

All of which brings us back, as I hope you will agree, to Michael Armstrong's achievement in *Closely Observed Children.* What else did he do, in that crucial year at Sherard, but Look, Observe and Think?

In the last lines of the interview, Michael returns to Goethe, quoting from his introduction to the *Theory of Colours,* which acts as an illuminating gloss on both Sander's 'Confession of Faith' and Michael's advocacy of 'profound observation':

> Merely looking at an object goes over into an observing, all observing into a reflecting, all reflecting into a connecting; and so one can say that with every attentive look we cast into the world we are already theorising.

And Michael follows Goethe's words with an almost audible fanfare, celebrating his faith in his own achievement: 'I'd say it's observation of such an order as this that is the essential condition of understanding children's understanding'. What a fine way to rest his case: we are all in his debt.

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MARY JANE DRUMMOND is a long-standing member of the *FORUM* Editorial Board; she has taught in infant schools in London and Sheffield, and at what is now the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. She is a co-author of *Learning without Limits* (2004) and *Creating Learning without Limits* (2012). In 2011 Routledge reissued her book *Assessing Children's Learning*, originally published in 1993. *Correspondence*: maryjdrummond@yahoo.co.uk