
‘The Human Side Takes Priority’: remembering Kathleen Mitchell

MADELEINE HOLT

ABSTRACT This article is an extended version of the obituary for Kathleen Mitchell, innovative headteacher, which appeared in the *Guardian*.

Kathleen Mitchell, who died in May 2017 at the age of 100, was a pioneering figure in the early years of comprehensive education in England. A radical thinker, as head of Pimlico School in the 1970s she created in effect the first state specialist music school. She was equally innovative in developing pastoral care and social education at Starcross School in North London.

Mitchell was from a generation of strong, articulate women who dominated state education in London in the '60s and '70s. She believed in the power of education to change lives – and saw access to the arts as crucial to achieving her goal.

When she became headteacher at Pimlico in 1974 she inherited a big school with some discipline problems. In response, she developed a broad, rich curriculum to engage students from all backgrounds. The school had its own symphony orchestra and a chamber orchestra, and had close links to the London Schools Symphony Orchestra. Every year fifteen students were picked by the Inner London Education Authority to become part of the school's 'Special Course' for musicians.

William Miller, son of opera director Sir Jonathan Miller, was one of her music students. 'It was fantastic in many ways. The quality of music was unbelievable. That was where Kathleen Mitchell's heart lay. She took on running one of the biggest London state schools and created this centre of excellence. Many of her music students went on to become professional musicians.'

Mitchell's private life revolved around music: her husband Donald Mitchell was a well-known music critic. Donald went on to set up the

publishing house Faber Music with Benjamin Britten. The Mitchells became lifelong friends with Britten and his partner Peter Pears.

Her musical connections infused the life of Pimlico. Britten wrote an opera for the school which sadly was never performed. Miller remembers starring in a production of Britten's *Noye's Fludde* in original costumes at the Aldeburgh Festival with Pears playing God. 'All of the most fun and interesting things I did at school were because of the relationship Kathleen and Donald had with Britten and Pears.'

The highly educated world which Mitchell inhabited was a huge contrast to her beginnings – and thus she was living proof of her belief in personal empowerment. Kathleen Gertrude Burbidge was born in London on 26 November 1916 and grew up in West Norwood. She was always close to her mother, Trudy, who ran a café. Her father, Charles Burbidge, was a post officer worker. Fond of the local pub, he was a less than constant presence in her life. Her brother Reg, an RAF pilot, was killed in the Second World War.

Mitchell loved her grammar school, in particular the study of literature and art, but university was out of the question until she earned some money. She worked at London County Council as a secretary, then enrolled in evening classes at Birkbeck College to study history. It was here that she met her husband David Livingston.

He had always wanted to start his own school and Mitchell was enthused. In 1939 they set up Oakfield School in Dulwich in South East London. The couple married in 1940, with Mitchell already pregnant with her son Mark. Her family remembers that Mitchell didn't care much for convention, and what would have been considered scandalous in peacetime went unnoticed during the war.

The school flourished, becoming a draw for talented teachers. Among them was Donald Mitchell, a militant socialist who was younger than Kathleen, and had been a conscientious objector during the war. They began a passionate affair and around 1950 she walked out on her marriage.

The couple moved to West London and Mitchell began teaching at Hammersmith Comprehensive. She was talent-spotted by a school inspector and became deputy head at Dick Shepherd Comprehensive in West Norwood. While there she and her husband adopted two boys, Bernie and Keith.

In 1964 Mitchell became head of Starcross Girls' School in Camden. In 1965, Risinghill, one of the most controversial comprehensives, was closed and the two schools merged to create a 1200-girls' comprehensive, now the acclaimed Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in Islington.

Gladys West joined Starcross as a teacher in 1967, 'and so began one of the most exciting periods in my career in education. Kathleen was an inspirational headteacher. After she addressed us at the beginning of the year we walked out feeling that we could conquer the world! We felt empowered and enabled. Kath was small in stature but a giant in the development of education.'

Starcross was to become a laboratory for Mitchell's myriad ideas. Many of the girls came from extremely deprived backgrounds and she was empathetic and supportive. Arts was embedded in the curriculum, including dance. Sir Peter Newsam, who became chief education officer for the Inner London Education Authority in 1975, vividly remembers his first visit to the school:

'I went to her school and there were two enormously overweight girls dancing to "I am a Rock" and they were bloody good. And I thought: most people would not have done that. But they were absolutely determined and they did it very well. What impressed me was there was not a single snigger in the audience. I still remember the look on the faces of those two girls when the audience of children and parents applauded them. It was about letting every level of performer do their best. It was a school that valued people.'

This was Mitchell's trademark: everyone mattered. To that end she developed strong pastoral support for the girls, and for the most challenging she devised an alternative curriculum covering sex education, citizenship and community service. It was so successful that the number of girls leaving school at 15 dwindled, so Mitchell extended the programme to the whole school. Thus Personal, Social and Health Education – now known as PHSE – was born.

Mitchell would explore many ways to motivate difficult students rather than exclude them. Some girls could attend college for part of the week, and she established an off-site unit staffed by experts in behaviour management. At the same time she introduced programmes for high-achieving girls and established a link with Sussex University. They came from homes where no one had been to university so Mitchell ensured they had extra support as students.

Mitchell recognised that behaviour management skills were just as important as academic skills when hiring staff. Gladys West, who had a track record of dealing with difficult students, was given huge freedom to innovate. When West arrived, there were still students following the mainstream curriculum who were causing problems. Mitchell extracted these girls and gave West the challenge of creating a whole course for them for their last term. Using ILEA funding she developed numerous off-site activities and outside visits.

'I had free range to do anything. I went on to run the whole alternative curriculum course. Kath asked me to develop a course which would integrate Social Studies, which was just coming in, with Science, and be relevant for these disaffected pupils! The mind boggles but we did it! We had a team of three teachers and we were responsible for the bulk of their teaching. As well as this we had a purpose-built flat and each week two girls spent a week there. They were given a budget and they created menus for lunch and were able to invite friends, parents and younger siblings. It was a bit stereotypical but an interesting experiment.'

The *Evening Standard* described Mitchell's vision: 'The right sort of education is a liberal and creative one in which children can learn to care about other people and take a critical look at the world around them. And she's quite convinced you can't do this by authoritarian methods.'

But that didn't mean discipline was lax. As Mitchell said herself in a rare interview: 'Structures are important for children... My job as head is to set up an organisation that works. I don't think it would be any good having marvellous ideas if one couldn't be efficient in a school. But it's no good organising it so that the humanity is out of it ... the human side is important and takes priority on every occasion.'

Mitchell became a magnet for ambitious teachers, many of whom went on to become heads themselves. She set up a pioneering workplace nursery to encourage teachers who had had children to return to work. She attracted staff who had made their names in other fields, among them the feminist historian Sheila Rowbotham and the cartoonist Glen Baxter.

By 1973 she had left Starcross for Pimlico School. She still had fresh ideas in abundance. She built on her concept of bringing into the school people with 'proper jobs', with all the street cred that means for students. One memorable scheme was the Front Door project. With the help of local architects she encouraged pupils to draw their journey to school and to think about how the built environment they passed through could be improved, and then to set about creating their visions. The project motivated students to look really closely at the texture and decoration on buildings, ranging from high-rise flats to the Royal Hospital in Chelsea.

Dame Tamsyn Imison, who taught under Mitchell before becoming a headteacher herself at Hampstead Comprehensive, was involved in the scheme. 'The whole thing really excited me. Architecture and the fabric of our environment was a very important area of knowledge and for youngsters to be aware of it mattered in lots of ways. The work they produced was turned into an exhibition at ILEA headquarters, which was fantastic.'

In the same vein, Mitchell created the Pimlico Connection, inviting students from Imperial College to work with students in science lessons. Another innovation for the time was ensuring that form tutors stayed with their class for a full five years.

Imison sums up Mitchell: 'She was a marvellous person. You could just go and talk to her, she was always interested in ideas, and instead of saying no she would always say 'Go for it!', which I found really wonderful. Kath was the future as well as the past. Her school was flowering in all directions because she believed every student could share and give something to others. She believed in the miracle of a proper comprehensive school. Yet she has gone unrecognised. If anyone should have had honours it was her, not me.'

During Kathleen's time at Pimlico her arthritis worsened. John Bancroft's Grade II listed building was full of stairs and very difficult for her. She struggled on but retired as a head in 1979. She continued to develop a sixth-form enrichment programme across London.

It was not until the late '80s that her activities were curtailed by her loss of sight following a bout of shingles. Rod Usher, who took over as head of Pimlico, recalls: 'It was terribly sad because she had a very lively mind. It was very difficult for her.' After 50 years of living in Bloomsbury, she and Donald

moved to a nursing home in Camden earlier this year, where Kathleen died on 22 May.

MADELEINE HOLT is an education campaigner. She co-founded 'Rescue Our Schools', a parent-led campaign against dogma-driven education policies, and helped set up the 'More Than a Score' alliance for alternatives to SATs. She runs the 'Meet the Parents' social enterprise, which encourages all parents to support their local comprehensive. Madeleine was previously Culture Correspondent on BBC *Newsnight*. Correspondence: mh@madeleineholt.com

