
Book Reviews

Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me

KATE CLANCHY, 2019
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England: poems from a school

KATE CLANCHY (Ed.), 2018
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Engines of Privilege: Britain's private school problem

FRANCIS GREEN & DAVID KYNASTON, 2019
London: Bloomsbury
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In one of her short stories, 'The Book Instead', Kate Clanchy's protagonist writes: 'Rachana is my age and my shape and my cousin. We are short fat Indian girls in West Ham shirts, and we are not in books'. It's easy to spot the likely real-life prototypes for fictional Rachana and her cousin when they surface in Clanchy's latest book, *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me*. These cousins are Year 8 students from Bangladesh and they have written a book which they want Clanchy to read because she is writer-in-residence at their school. The book is about teenagers at a US summer camp, and all its characters are White. When Clanchy asks why the cousins haven't written about teenagers of Bengali heritage in Britain, one of the girls gives her a look. 'Miss', she says, 'we are not in books.'

Clanchy wonders how she would have felt, would still feel, if all the books and stories which fuelled her childhood reading contained not one character who looked or spoke as she did. 'Rachana' and her cousin start to attend the writing group which Clanchy runs at Oxford Spires Academy, 'well

out of sight of the famous spires', as Clanchy puts it when introducing the anthology she has edited, *England: poems from a school*. The writing group confirms two fundamental lessons which, it seems, each generation of teachers must learn anew. Firstly, young people respond powerfully when offered stories and poems which directly address their lives and experiences. Secondly, giving young people permission to write in their own language about their interior landscapes will call forth powerful writing.

The great majority of young people at Oxford Spires are children of recent immigrants and refugees. Only about one in five young people at the school is from a White British background. *Some Kids I Taught...* testifies to the way multicultural education, allied with anti-racism and consciously developed, is an education in human kindness for teachers and students. The school's mixed intake nurtures what Clanchy calls 'a special sort of openness ... an alchemy'.

Clanchy's avowal of a common humanity, and her interest in the ways human beings may change themselves and others through learning, lights up *Some Kids I Taught...* The book's Introduction is followed by 15 sections, some very short. All but one have essay-style titles such as: 'About Exclusion' or 'About Teaching English' or 'About the Hijab'. These titles have subtitles which foreground the names of students along with a possession or an attribute: 'Priti's Canoe'; 'Jez's Joke'; 'The Ineffable Genius of Michael Egbe', for it is young people who occupy Clanchy's interest. Any everyday conversation with a student, any piece of writing proffered, any encounter in or out of a classroom, can spark reflection on 'complex questions ... embodied in children' (p. 4). Clanchy wants to help a lay audience understand more fully the dynamic entanglement which is school: 'us, children and teachers, "Kids" and "Miss" ... so you can see the stuff we have brought with us' (pp. 4-5).

Clanchy worked as a supply teacher in her native Scotland before being forced south (and thereby hangs a tale) to take a full-time post teaching English on the Essex/London border. There followed a stint working in an exclusion unit and then as writer-in-residence in Oxford Spires. Talking and listening to her students, and reading their writing, Clanchy comes to realise how some young people who 'had lost a country and a language before they were ten' (p. 104), might, paradoxically, also gain from so profound and terrible a deprivation. The loss would seem to enhance their sensitivity to the sound as well as the sense of English, and to require them to listen acutely to their inner voice and be motivated always to remember what had been taken from them. 'Isn't that what poetry is for ... A spell to bring things back' (p. 105), Clanchy wonders.

So the book tells Clanchy's story, or a version of it, even as it foregrounds the students and tells stories about them – gripping narratives, statements for the defence, tales cautionary or triumphant – and uses these to illustrate and complicate a 'take' on the world: an intellectual position, a political stance. Clanchy is sharply observant of the young: how they present in word and act, how they dress and sound, how they negotiate the small world of school and

how such negotiation reveals aspects of the larger world beyond. She has blurred people's identities and detached accounts from their original times and places, but teachers will recognise the truth of the depiction of these young people and their schools.

For the most part, Clanchy also looks to lay bare the complexity of what she writes about. Her topics include: managing being gay in school if you are a male student; the profound desire of all young people to feel included; the utter damage inflicted on children by abusive parents and other adults; the issue of school choice; the question of 'ability' grouping (though this is not how she frames it); the importance of writing stories and poems as against merely analysing them; and how vital the imagination is for good teaching.

I don't always agree with what she says. She calls 'ability' grouping 'the best worst system' (p. 185) and describes academic selection, whether in sets or via the grammar/secondary modern divide, as: 'overwhelmingly an emotional issue' (p. 179), suggesting that strength of feeling cannot but overpower any rational consideration of the matter. She makes her own brief case based on the practice at Oxford Spires. More tellingly, the language of fixed 'ability' breaks surface now and again across the book and goes unconsidered. So Clanchy speaks unguardedly of 'all the bright middle class kids' (p. 27) and of 'two bright students actually ready for A Level: a miracle' (pp. 28-29). Elsewhere, certain young people are described as: 'these unpromising children' (p. 53) even as we are told that at GCSE they have dramatically out-scored their lowly predicted grades. Later on, when deciding which secondary school would be right for her first-born child, Clanchy quotes a colleague: 'This isn't a comprehensive ... It doesn't have a top ... We don't get the middle classes. We don't get the brighter kids'. Clanchy's comment? 'She speaks only the truth' (p. 152).

At peace with the fixed 'ability' discourse, she is fiercely hostile to homophobia and to patriarchal oppression, and alive to a teacher's duty to challenge these. In a city where, as she points out, walls were built straight across streets to divide rich from poor, Clanchy is also alert to the injustices attending social class. She opts to enrol her son at the school where she works because 'if I want to show [a harassing working-class student] that I see her as equal to my children, I should send my child to school alongside her, however afraid I might be' (p. 159). Her boy's subsequent success prompts Clanchy to consider what it is that her middle-class peers deprive her son and his classmates of by sending their offspring elsewhere. For, as she says to those same peers (only not out loud), 'you are taking something away from the community when you withdraw your child' (p. 165).

To my mind, Clanchy's presentation of young people, while frequently vivid and clear-eyed, can very occasionally appear reductive. When she sets the commitment to long-term goals and deferred gratification which characterised her own upbringing against the 'loving but chaotic' background of a pair of impoverished White students towards whom she feels sympathy, Clanchy writes, 'Neither of them has had the experience of waiting for things and then

being well rewarded for waiting ... They can't refuse biscuits any more than they can study' (pp. 235-236). But how can she know? Isn't she just bolstering a prejudice? Elsewhere she writes of 'mothers queuing, defeated and harmless, in the Co-op' (p. 51). 'Defeated and harmless': the labels seem unearned in context, blazons of an attitude Clanchy's wider work stands against. These rare moments risk turning the living individual into 'material' and rendering the person an object pressed into service rather than a subject brought to life. At one point Clanchy seems to instrumentalise some of her students entirely. 'I'm in favour of uniform', she writes, 'and here are the children why' (p. 118).

And yet Clanchy is thoughtful, self-aware, subtle and at times gently self-mocking. On her decision to work with young people in an exclusion unit she writes, 'I thought, I fear, that I could do them good' (p. 50). The use of an iambic pentameter to frame the thought quietly intensifies her implication. She re-enacts in words the process of thinking about what's difficult in relation to the questions teachers and students meet every school day: how to talk about growing up, about racism, about terrorism, about poverty, about sexuality, about writing and reading. The voice in her book is arresting, interested, deftly able to recreate a place or moment with a single word or phrase. Steeped in the embodied nature of teaching, Clanchy summons the feel, smell and sound of classroom and school corridor. Her pages are alive with the cadence of actual talk. She catches the note of a certain kind of Senior Leadership Team member: 'Staff are asked to correct her quickly if she becomes obstructive in lessons' (p. 62). She nails the knowing truth spoken by a Year 11 student as he slightly oversteps the mark: 'No problem, Kate, you know you want to be here really. I'm your very favourite student' (p. 24). She relays the blurt of charged utterance: 'Like never mind the airport. I ain't going to a concert. Or a club. I ain't never getting on the bus again' (p. 141).

Perhaps most of all the book is distinguished by the consideration given to the poems written by young people which it contains. Clanchy's work in school – and the work of her colleagues, which she is quick to acknowledge – enables wonderful writing, more of which is showcased in the anthology. Such writing emerges because young people have been seen as poets in the making. As such, they are trusted and resourced and attended to by Clanchy and others who understand that poetic utterance – the making of art in words – is good in itself, whatever other benefits it may also bring anyone. None of the poems Clanchy presents in either book needs special pleading. They need only be read, for the insight and observation framed precisely, for the formal craft which heightens feeling and augments meaning, for the tonal range stretching from wry insight to desolation, and for the lines and images which you will take away. Here's a stanza by 17-year-old Azfa Awad. Nick Gibb might think on it:

I come from school:
the education system
that gives me a pen
only to poke myself blind with.

Of course, England has two education systems. In *Engines of Privilege: Britain's private school problem* Francis Green and David Kynaston anatomise the other one, the system which educates half a handful, 6% or so, of the UK's young in order to foster and maintain an elite, many of whose members also make up a ruling class. Green and Kynaston outline the 'significant positional advantage' (p. 1) in society which private education has been established to provide. They dub private education the golden ticket. It gives entry into the best-paid and most influential jobs and careers available within capitalism's class structure. An early graphic in the book reminds that almost three out of four judges are privately educated, as are the same proportion of generals (2-star and above). At the time of writing nearly two-thirds of the Cabinet attended private school, as did half of all senior civil servants and the same proportion of editors of leading publications, along with almost as many UK educated FTSE CEOs. The figures for merchant bankers and other representatives of finance capital are not given, but who'll bet the proportions aren't very much the same?

As everyone knows, private schools keep out the overwhelming majority by deploying rigorous academic entrance criteria, mainly in the form of high fees. The authors estimate, perhaps conservatively, that the ratio of resourcing between an average private and a state-maintained secondary school is of the order of three to one. That is, 'the fees, the donations, the resources flowing from endowed capital' (p. 104) all combine to fund each individual private school student at a level so significantly greater than is the case in the maintained sector as to make comparison vain. Moreover, students at especially wealthy private schools inherit a patrimony among the most luxurious and well-endowed on the planet. The authors enumerate Eton's facilities over 26 lines of a page, though the school's three museums (open to the public on Sunday afternoons, admission free) aren't listed. Lavish material and financial resources, coupled (say the authors) with the nature of the peer group among whom one finds oneself as a student, and underpinned by the expertise of certain specialised staff, combine to ensure examination success, the best chance of securing a place at a high-ranking university, and the concomitant glittering prizes. Incidentally, Green and Kynaston note that Bristol, Durham, Exeter, Leeds, Nottingham, UCL and Newcastle universities all take more privately educated students than do Oxford and Cambridge (p. 12). Further benefits directly attributable to one's attendance at private school accrue thereafter, thanks to the Old Boy or Old Girl network.

It is suggested reform of the private system was achievable during three particular decades in the past century and a half or so. Firstly in the 1860s, when many private schools were modernised and repurposed for the class they continue to serve. Then again in the 1940s, and a third time in the 1960s. Failure of political will, calculated obstruction by vested interests and the pressures of the immediate political context all combined to thwart significant change. Private schools have adapted, notably by improving their academic offer, the better to retain their social role. Skilful, well-funded lobbying, marketing and public relations enable them to manage impressions favourably.

Backed up by the entrenched power derived from the social position occupied by many alumni, they evade substantive reform, still less dissolution.

Green and Kynaston note the extent to which everyone's taxes continue to services this supposedly 'independent' system: 'One pound in every six of all school expenditure in England is for the benefit of private school pupils' (p. 15). They point out the degree to which private schools exacerbate staff shortages in the maintained sector by poaching its teachers. In 2017/18 'the net annual transfer of full time experienced teachers from the state to the private sector numbered over 1800' (p. 100). Such 'transfer' was the private sector's single largest source of new teachers.

The authors expose the way bursaries and scholarships, purportedly meant to broaden access, in fact work to cement the exclusive status quo. 'Since 2000, 1 in 3 children in private schools has received assistance [with paying fees] ... Yet for the most part the amount of assistance is small' (p. 126). For schools affiliated to the Independent Schools Council (ISC), means-tested bursaries account for a paltry 4% of annual fee income. This money is spread over 8% of pupils, the majority of whom come from families deemed the right sort: clergy, armed forces, the school's own staff. The extent to which the richest families make use of private schools is the same now as it was twenty years ago. Some 70% of private school students come from families whose income places them in the wealthiest quartile; fewer than 1% are from families in the poorest. Only 1% of students in ISC schools pay no fees.

The authors rebut standard arguments to defend educational class-segregation. The assertion that people should be free to spend their money as they choose within the law gives them most pause. Green and Kynaston accept that paying school fees is an expression of individual liberty, and as such to be valued. They counter that education is a special sort of purchase, and that 'the lack of social justice in an exclusive private school system is entrenched across generations in an enduring cycle of privilege' (p. 196). This in turn limits social mobility and ossifies social segregation and inequality: 'If private schooling moves one person up [society's] rank, someone else is moved down' (p. 196). Capacity at high-ranking universities is constrained; top jobs are scarce. By receiving a disproportionate share of these 'goods', private school students dispossess their state-educated peers. The case for 'a suspension or qualification of the freedom to choose, as applied to education' is grounded in an appeal to 'the principles of social efficiency, decent democracy and above all fairness' (p. 197).

Reform being justified, Green and Kynaston would lower demand for private schooling, or raise the cost of its supply, or both. Since stripping charitable status from private schools and imposing VAT on fees would have a very limited financial effect, their route to real change begins elsewhere. They would wrest control of admissions so as to compel the private schools to accept 'a significant proportion of pupils [say, one-third] chosen by the state, after means testing, [and] funded at the same rate as everybody else in the state system' (p. 220). The difference between this funding and the cost of provision

would be made up by the schools themselves. Fees would likely rise as a result (increasing the cost of supply) and the degree of luxury currently enjoyed by those at private school would be pared back (perhaps lowering demand). Green and Kynaston are content to see academic selection continue, but would impose 'a substantial degree of social control over schools' admissions policies' (p. 222) so that the given proportion of school places becomes 'de facto part of the state system' (p. 223). The freedom of private schools to permanently exclude students would also be restricted. Over time, government could 'increase the proportions [of state-funded students], and ... mould the degree of selection as thought best' (p. 223).

Upholders of private education are reassured that: 'while all [reform] options imply less educational inequality, none involve the loss of valued historic institutions or a "levelling down" of educational resources. Rather ... where schools are partially integrated, they would still be *the same recognisable schools*' (p. 231; my emphasis). The authors end by calling for a national debate to create conditions for reform along the lines they propose. Tantalisingly, they hold out 'the possibility that all schools could be made comprehensive in their intake' (p. 223).

But a comprehensive system is not what Green and Kynaston want. They concern themselves with comprehensivisation only as it relates to intake, and not as it must also relate to all aspects of teaching and learning: pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, student voices, resourcing and so on. What's more, they are content to retain a role for private schooling after reform: 'Children's educational needs are both universal and varied; a well-constructed state system respects the need for, and provides, some diversity, but a small amount of private not-for-profit enterprise could help to serve that need' (p. 227). This concession only makes plain what had been half-glimpsed already here and there across the text: the authors' belief that there are different types of young people and so different types of school are needed for them. How do the authors distinguish between types of children? Here's a clue: 'somewhat less able pupils' (p. 21); 'their brightest pupils creamed off' (p. 36); 'bright and high-potential working class children' (p. 94); 'high ability peers' (p. 109); 'lower-ability pupils' (p. 276 note); 'an all-ability private school' (p. 187); 'very able children from low income families' (p. 217); 'children of all abilities' (p. 231). And so on. The fixed 'ability' views of others are relayed approvingly. Up pipes Anthony Seldon on behalf of those 'many bright young people' among the 25% most socially deprived who 'deserve the best opportunities' (p. 170).

Anyone who might question whether private schooling really does offer the best opportunities is an example for Green and Kynaston of 'the private school denier' who refuses 'to accept the reality (unsurprising, given the huge resources gap) that most private schools provide a better education than most state schools' (p. 165). Here again the authors sell the pass. If private schools truly did educate better, their alumni would be first in line to legislate for their abolition. The Old Boys and Old Girls would understand and reject the way these institutions miseducate their students about the nature and reality of life in

capitalist Britain and their historic and current role in upholding a class society whose injustice is everywhere apparent.

Engines of Privilege is informative and detailed, if occasionally repetitious. It is accessibly written, especially engaging in the historical sections, and full of useful material about the development and workings of the private school system, though it has very little to say about girls' private schools. Bourgeois feminist arguments about the value of attending such schools therefore go unaddressed. The authors gird themselves for battle with the right-wing media, anticipating jeers about 'the politics of envy'. But their riposte, that it is 'justified resentment, not envy, [which] lies at the heart of the matter' (p. 248), comes too short. It is neither resentment nor envy which fuels the abiding commitment to expropriate private schools and return not only their classrooms but their rowing lakes and cricket nets, their rugby pitches and tennis courts, their swimming pools and running tracks, their multimillion pound music and arts and language centres, their theatres and libraries and laboratories, and every walled and ring-fenced asset and facility to common use for the benefit of all. It is a proper class consciousness. Call it hatred, if you like. For where wealth is socially produced but privately owned, the assertion by those who possess more wealth than most that they shall spend as they choose is the expression of a class-based and not a common freedom. It is the wielding of class power.

Comprehensive education will express a fuller and more fitting way of thinking about young people and their educability than currently pertains in our class-stratified system. It will reform what it is to teach and learn, and what should be taught and learned. A *sine qua non* for the establishment of such a system, and for its proper resourcing, is that no child be regarded or classified as a type, and that all children be conceived of as desirous to learn given right conditions.

It remains to construct a consensus, a solidarity, strong and deep enough to confront ruling-class power in the field of education and defeat it. Green and Kynaston are right to call for renewed debate. They remind us what we are up against, and what must be done away with. Let the positive demand be for an education in common. For a comprehensive education system in England.

Patrick Yarker

Life Lessons: the case for a National Education Service

MELISSA BENN, 2018

London: Verso

165 pages, paperback, £8.99, ISBN 978-1788732208

Melissa Benn's *Life Lessons: the case for a National Education Service* is a book of possibilities for our education system. Moving on from *School Wars* and her analysis of what is wrong with the education system in England and Wales, in *Life Lessons* Benn offers solutions. Eminently readable, *Life Lessons* is a small book packed with ideas. It serves as a kind of Green Paper for the masses: an invitation to survey the educational landscape and initiate discussion about the shape of a 'cradle to grave' National Education Service.

A lot of ground is covered in the nine discursive chapters which make up *Life Lessons*. Loosely structured into three sections, Benn takes us through the past, present and an imagined better future for education. The 'back story', comprising the first two chapters of the book, opens the debate. Here, Benn takes us on the bumpy ride through the history of compulsory education and our arrival at a market-led system fuelled by social and academic selection. Four middle chapters of *Life Lessons* deal with specific crises in our education system. The failures of academisation and the moral, political and practical justification for providing free education are carefully unpicked. Benn offers important insights too on the impoverishment of adult and vocational education and the damaging impact of educational and social segregation wherever a selective school casts its net. An excellent chapter discusses the dismantling of university-based teacher education and the concomitant erosion of professional autonomy. We learn that there are now no less than 16 routes into teaching, most of which rely on training in the form of skills acquired 'on the job' to produce a one-size-fits-all model of teaching favoured by erstwhile Education Secretary Michael Gove. Another powerfully argued chapter entitled 'If at First You Don't Succeed' outlines proposals for a second or later chance at university by means of a three-year entitlement to higher or further education.

Possibly the most inspiring chapter has Benn offer ideas for a less punitive approach to school accountability. In 'Whose System is it Anyway?' she describes how Alberta, in Canada, mobilised its schools and communities to work collaboratively to dispel the 'intoxicating narrative of parental choice' and bring schools under democratic control. Alberta's progressive model mixes regional oversight with a local inspectorate and school boards of elected parents and students. A rotating system of head teachers reinforces the idea of schools working in collaboration rather than competition. These and many other exciting but eminently workable solutions are offered. As well as reimagined local education authorities with regional support, Benn points out how academies and free schools could be reintegrated into our state education system.

In the final three chapters, Benn points to a future. She starts with the need to reframe the conversation about what education is for. Tackling the pernicious pedalling of education as a passport to social mobility, Benn points out that educational strategies to improve social mobility have failed: the stark truth, she reminds us, is that the attainment gap persists, and it is unrealistic to expect underfunded schools and overworked teachers to act as vehicles for improving pupils' economic chances. Benn is also critical of the political narrative which insists aspiration must mean escaping a working-class background. Far better, for the many young people who want a well-paid job without the anxiety of student debt, would be to offer properly thought-out vocational routes, as advocated by Alison Wolf in her 2011 report.

Having argued for the necessary change in the conversation, Benn's final two chapters introduce ideas for a reformed curriculum and the integration of private schools into the state system. A chapter devoted to ideas for a Modern Baccalaureate is arguably the more urgent and necessary. Drawing on Finnish and Canadian models of comprehensive education, Benn proposes a common curriculum up to age 16 including a skills-based component and 'special projects' to foster independent learning and enquiry. Post-16, students progress to either A levels and university or a vocational route through a 'put together' technical baccalaureate. The future according to Benn is a curriculum which breaks down the harmful class-based divisions of an education system divided into traditional subjects reserved for an 'elite' while steering others towards lower-status 'modern' and vocational subjects.

There is little in *Life Lessons* with which anyone who cares remotely about education could surely disagree. Benn covers extremely well the damage done by the creeping return of traditional practices, the dominance of market-led values and the narrowing of educational experience from early years to university. Nevertheless, some might be surprised by the optimistic view which concludes the first section where Benn argues there is 'little appetite for expanding selection' and that 'the comprehensive principle has taken deeper root than many recognise'. The comprehensive principle around which Benn finds consensus is a sadly etiolated version. The acceleration of ploys to expand grammar schools coupled with the corrosive spread of academies and free schools make the dream of a truly comprehensive education system seem a long way off.

Life Lessons is a highly relevant and necessary book pointing the way to a wholly achievable National Education Service. A deceptively easy read, its arguments are supported by a wealth of reports, interviews and personally conducted observations of school life, as well as solid academic research and reference to an impressive range of commentators. Insights from head teachers from comprehensive and private schools share the page with those from Stefan Collini, Tim Brighouse, Selina Todd, and *Spirit Level* authors Pickett and Wilson, to name just a few. One minor quibble is the lack of a glossary of terms. I would ask that any future edition contains this, and that relevant further reading might be more usefully listed at the end of each chapter.

The crowning glory of *Life Lessons* is tucked modestly into an Appendix. A neatly set out distillation of all that has preceded, it contains 15 proposals to reform our current education system and shape a future National Education Service. Each proposal is a jewel and *Life Lessons* ends with hope.

Nuala Burgess

**ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING:
Michael Armstrong's writing for
*FORUM***

Edited by PATRICK YARKER, SUE COX
& MARY JANE DRUMMOND

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Presented as a free eBook, this collection brings together almost all the articles, speeches, reviews and other writing which Michael Armstrong published in *FORUM: for 3-19 comprehensive education* across fifty-five years of commitment to the journal. It provides conveniently accessible texts in which Michael, whose books include 'Closely Observed Children' and 'Children Writing Stories', formulated and developed important aspects of his thinking and engaged with the work of those who influenced him as a teacher, researcher and independent scholar. Michael explores imagination's essential role in learning, the misguided nature of the National Curriculum and its associated assessment regime, the continuing importance of the Cambridge Primary Review, and the necessity of regarding children not only as cultural recipients but also as cultural creators.

In addition to contextual and reflective material by the editors, the eBook includes an appreciation by Dr Jenifer Smith of Michael as a teacher, an index of all Michael's writing for *FORUM*, and information about his other publications.

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