



The Natural Curriculum

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Peter Woods and **Theresa Whistler** on how a whole school philosophy for English led to an award-winning novel.

Last November, just before the publication of the Cox report, we heard that **Rushavenn Time**, written by Theresa Whistler working with a group of children from Brixworth Primary School, had won the Smarties Prize in the 9-11 category.

The collaborative project which produced the book was a natural extension of the school's philosophy and approach to the curriculum. This account is a timely reminder of a route to the National Curriculum's Attainment Targets that has no need to go via pointless drills and rigid segregation.

Peter Woods begins the story

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In the summer of 1980 I found myself acting Headteacher of Brixworth Primary School. The school had for many years been run on traditional lines. The children were seated in very formal arrangements. The teacher's desk was larger and at a remove from the children's. This seemed to emphasise the gap - the chasm - which existed between the staff and the children. The teaching approach was wholly didactic and there was little movement across subject boundaries. The children were rarely, if ever, invited to make an oral contribution - except as a brief response to a teacher's question. Moreover, that response was expected to reflect, not the child's own ideas, but the teacher's earlier instruction. There was little recognition of the fact that education is a two-way process and that at one moment we are teacher and at another we are learner. There was little recognition of the fact that children should be helped towards an independence which derives from verbal and intellectual assurance. The children were mostly seen as empty baskets to be filled with the fruits of the teacher's greater experience and superior intellect. This was what was being passed off as education at Brixworth Primary School. I don't want to sound too critical. There was a great deal of honest endeavour - and a little good work - going on. But nobody had stopped to think about, to question, what they were doing and why, some for as long as 25 years. There is a beautiful poem, written in AD 820 by the Chinese poet Po-Chu-I, which suggests that what we were experiencing at Brixworth was an age-old problem. The poem is entitled 'The Red Cockatoo':

'Sent as a present from Annam ?

A red cockatoo

Coloured like the peach-tree blossom,

Speaking with the speech of men.

And they did to it what is always done

To the learned and eloquent.

They took a cage with stout bars

And shut it up inside.'

Well, what did we do? Sitting down as a staff, and talking about our beliefs, we made several important policy decisions:

1. That we would move away from a largely teacher-directed to a largely child-centred approach to teaching and learning.

In so doing we were attempting to recognise the autonomy of our children - that through such personal freedom they would all be able to give expression to those special and individual gifts which they all have, but which are so little understood despite the great increase in educational research in recent years.

2. That we would spend less time talking to and at our children and spend more time listening to them, believing that it is only in this way that we can even begin to understand the uniqueness - the genuineness and creativeness - of their thought processes and their true potential.

3. That we would seek to recognise and elevate those special skills which many children have, but which, sadly, are often relegated to a double period on Friday afternoon and then only 'if you behave yourselves and finish all your other work!' I refer, of course, to drawing and painting and modelling and drama and other forms of movement.

At Brixworth Art and Craft is no longer timetabled. A wide range of Art and Craft materials is located in every classroom. They are always available to the children irrespective of whether the work they are involved in has a literary or mathematical or scientific or historical or geographical basis. If the child feels that the work could be enhanced or extended then he (or she) is encouraged to make use of the alternative media. As a result of this particular policy change we have minimised our use of the depressingly boring, stereotyped and unimaginative exercise book and we now create our own plain paper books which we make in their entirety from the preparation of the paper, perhaps with a marbling or stippled effect, through the process of sewing and binding to the end-paper and cover decoration.

4. That for the rigidly subject-based structure we would substitute an interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum.

5. That we would endeavour to acknowledge the important role which narrative and oracy plays in a child's development, that we would use story not only as a way into the curriculum, but as a focus for much of our work right across the board. Here we were seeking to re-establish language and literature, not merely as the cornerstone of the curriculum, but as its pillars and flying-buttresses. Remove these and the whole fabric will be reduced to piles of rubble.

This last area was my particular interest and over the next several years I sought to make use of the marvellous opportunities offered by the Writers in Schools (now Book a Writer) scheme.

I believe that there is a need to regard literature as a dynamic process, having to do with readers and writers and what they do, and not being primarily concerned with books. Together with the children I wanted to look at the way in which writers make a world through their story and how they invite readers to enter that world and explore it with them. As well as that I wanted to examine the very complex relationship between fiction and reality. Writers like Fleur Adcock, Stan Barstow, Kevin Crossley-Holland, Charles Keeping, Edward Storey and Brian Wildsmith have come to work with our children.

Wanting to make not only a mental, but a physical, separation from what had gone before I began to cast my eyes around for a different location for the work which we were to undertake. About a mile distant, in the older part of the village and lying in the very shadow of the famous Saxon church at Brixworth, was a large room which had been the former Infants' classroom. It was now officially designated as the Rural Schools Project Centre. This room had a great deal of character. It had a high ceiling and windows that let in a lot of light. There were few desks, but plenty of comfortable armchairs. There was also an abundance of Art and Craft materials which could be used as an alternative means of expression for those children who - initially - found it difficult to articulate their thoughts. And it was here that we came regularly with our texts - to act and to draw and to paint, but above all to talk. What occurred during the following months is almost impossible to describe. The children's development - linguistic, curricular and social - was quite exceptional - so much so that there were numerous occasions when we had to go away and rethink how we were going to handle the potential we had unleashed. The children's level of response was such that we were made to realise

that, as far as understanding children's true abilities is concerned, educational research has only just begun to uncover the tip of the iceberg. And all this had occurred because we had released the children from their educational and environmental strait-jackets.

It was at this point that Theresa Whistler was invited to come and join us in a project to produce a full-length children's book of publishable standard. There were 15 volunteers, mostly aged between eight and eleven years, in the group. These children turned up regularly, on at least one Saturday each month, for a whole school year, to work with Theresa.

Over months a unique partnership evolved between the experienced writer and this group of children. At the beginning of each session they would talk over their ideas for the development of the story. They would then go off in twos and threes to begin writing up their ideas. Later in the day they came together again to discuss with Theresa what they had written. She would sometimes help the children to make improvements. Such changes were mostly concerned with style and technique rather than content. Over the next few days the children would undertake further work at home. Then the scripts would be bundled up and sent to Theresa to work into a coherent story. Each new chapter was debated at length.

The story which emerged concerns two cousins, Sam and Rebecca, who go to stay with their uncles on a large estate somewhere in the West Country. Shortly after their arrival they meet up with a solitary character called Fady who tells them about a derelict farmhouse (Rushavenn). They learn that its former owners had moved to London during the Second World War where they had all been killed in a bombing, raid. As the children play round the house they witness and eavesdrop on family conversations and make special friends of two of the five children who lived there. A whole series of unpredictable meetings occur and with each encounter, and increased knowledge of the family and its circumstances, an additional part of the house is restored in the cousins' imaginations. At the very end of the story, on the occasion of their final visit to Rushavenn Field, the house is momentarily seen in its entirety. The story's theme is the persistence and accessibility of the past.

Theresa Whistler takes up the narrative .

It was hard work for us all. The earlier sessions took up a whole Saturday, 9.30 to 4.00, and these children, naturally, had had no experience in developing a theme beyond a few pages. Some who came to do best had not, they confessed later, enjoyed writing hitherto, nor believed they had the capacity. Some 'hated' the whole thing - but stuck to it, not saying so, till happy finish day.

The children were not at all passive; they came to meet any idea I put forward. They talked easily, confidently and expressively. They listened intently and remembered very accurately. They were also far less shy than most school children of revealing private and romantic feelings in front of their peers. There was a welcome absence of a pecking-order of seniority. Instead, they listened to each other with the respect of equals - which was what their teachers gave them. Nor did I ever find the two or three who had a much greater natural talent than the rest treated as stars.

I knew that, for my own part, I could only teach them anything worthwhile if our story was one of those I would write anyway - one where atmosphere and setting matter above story-line, and 'the place where' is the main 'character'.

My family's North Devon holiday home, burnt down by accident in the war, had been the centre of my own first 15 years. The 'seed' of the whole thing was my sharp recollection of coming home from boarding school in early March 1942, standing underneath the gap of air where my bedroom had been, struck by the realisation that no human eye would ever see again the faces and forms which had peopled for me the bare elm tree opposite. For no one would ever again lie looking across from that exact angle at which those unique branches traced these pictures against the western sky. I came to the first session full of this notion. I wanted to celebrate my lost home, and share it with children so like what I had been. I brought a box of old photographs and sketches from 40 years ago, to bring it into romantic focus as I talked.

The lost home might re-arise from its ruins, I thought, in mysterious episodes, window by window: its bygone household appearing to two visiting children of nowadays. By the end, in some climax, they might glimpse the whole farmhouse once, complete and clear, before it vanished forever. (The Brixworth children had already read or heard

classics of this genre - Alison Uttley's *A Traveller in Time* and Tom's *Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce.)

I hoped, if I involved as many as seven main young characters, aged from eight to sixteen, that each of my volunteers might find one or other they cared to identify with. A year seemed a good time-span to pick for the action, as this would mean that nature description could come fresh from our year of work together (roughly Autumn to the end of July).

At our first session, besides describing the setting, I sketched the main lines of each character in the story - the lively girl who wrote poetry secretly, the small boy with seafaring fantasies and a cat for companion, and so on. But above all I tried to impress on the group that what I chiefly wanted us to establish was 'a world you could go into', since this was what I had most valued myself in stories, at their age - and still do! I sketched out some possible encounters and incidents for the early chapters.

I expected that the setting up of our own project would take several introductory sessions before the children began themselves to invent. Instead, the volunteers seized on my first proposals as if this was the most natural enterprise in the world! They made the world of Rushavenn, as I conceived it, their own at once. Small groups went aside to discuss amongst themselves the boy or girl character of their special choice and to make up episodes and pieces of dialogue relevant to him or her - returning from time to time to question me further or show their work. By the end of that day Rushavenn already had its own impetus and stamp.

I wrote three opening chapters to read at the second session. By then the children had tried their hand at several 'incidental' stories. But it rapidly became plain that what really interested them was Rushavenn itself. They tried to reproduce its own atmosphere in their incidental stories, and kept on duplicating mysterious companions and appearances. So, since Rushavenn seemed to be enough on its own, we let the frame become the whole picture. But the children continued, whenever the spirit moved them, to produce miscellaneous stories of their own at a tangent - comic, fantastic, adventurous, in whatever style they pleased. I think this was an important aid in avoiding monotony and helping them to find, from personal impulse, what line of storytelling suited each - what range, and what styles.

I purposely did not correct their work much, except for a suggestion here and there of a word or so. But I did try to help them find their own sense of 'consistency'. I wanted to avoid interfering in their subject matter -and' all 'marking'. Some of the girls missed such comment on 'good' or 'bad', but it was against my instinct. They would get plenty of this kind of criticism elsewhere - too much, for some, even from within themselves! Our Saturdays were for something much more elusive - to identify and set free the individual fruitful impulse. I wanted to foster in each the very pressure to write itself - which is the adult artist's lifelong central quest, after all.

They soon noticed that my own written contributions consisted a good deal more of description and less of dialogue than they were used to. I offered to adapt, but they did not wish me to alter this, nor seemed to mind that a vocabulary and style natural to me made demands on them. It was 'different', they said, and the turns the story took were not what they expected, but this attracted them. Above all, they kindled to the mood of the story, which we were generating together out of my childhood memories and their own experiences of life. I thought they grasped the need for 'unity of feeling' with marvellous quickness - shaping character and atmosphere to that with a rapidly growing feeling for artistic 'rightness'. If any invention of their own jarred on this consistency, I found, they would usually discard the result, themselves, as unsatisfactory.

I brought to show the children whatever I could of authentic visual origins for the characters (nearly all only recognised by me as sources after I had begun writing). The surfacing of such sub-conscious material can be odd and surprising. There are two Vermeer portraits of a girl, looking over her left shoulder (possibly from the same model). In one, 'The Studio', she holds up a wind-instrument and wears a wreath; in the other, she wears a greenish-gold, turban-style head-dress. These I realised had given rise to Carlie - together with my memories of a particular Devon neighbour, a beautiful country girl of 17. It was Millais' 'Boyhood of Raleigh' - painted from his own sons - which started the idea of Vidal. Pin had grown from a brief glimpse of an actual Venetian child who had teased me years before, across a wide piazza, with her scrap of looking-glass. The children were eager for more 'origins', but I could not at the time supply them. They had to accept the fact that the impressions which set a writer off are inconsequent in the extreme - and likely to

remain mostly buried in unconscious memory.

We did incorporate, in the end, three 'incidental' tales made up by groups of the children working with Peter Woods, and I used the most sustained piece produced by the children in the course of the year - the entire episode of the Green Man play, from its planning to performance. Peter had helped them put it together - all I did was to break up this complete composition a little, just enough to embed it into the action of the main story. All Pin's poems and leaf-riddles are by the children. So are Glory's knitting jingle and Carlie's Spring Song - and its tune. These child-written pieces are verbatim, and include another sustained piece describing sunset achieved by one boy quite on his own.

By the end I was able, as I had so hoped, to include some item from everybody - only to find them singularly unconcerned. Their own words in print were a matter of small prestige to most, it seemed. They had usually forgotten, in fact, that they had written them! What did matter, I found, was any niche achieved for some treasured personal memory of someone, or personal 'talisman'. Wherever I had found a place for these, a comment of satisfaction and gratitude followed. Above all, and pervading everything we did, was the mysterious communion of imagination any close group of collaborating friends create in discussing such work, however humble.

At first the most expressive writing came from the girls and the best ideas, on the other hand, from boys. As time went by, this difference evened out and the capacity for sustained description, and for dialogue which could present quite subtle or complex materials, developed a great deal in both.

At each session Peter Woods used to establish by recapitulation and questions that everyone had fully grasped the point of all I had read to them and its relation to earlier passages. He would often propose some new angle or activity to vary things and so open a fresh vein of invention. One very successful scheme was to get each child to choose and bring, if feasible, some favourite possession - whatever he or she would choose to save if they must abandon everything else in a disaster. Their choices - and reasons for them - gave me many insights and led to other 'talisman' objects which found a place in the story.

Many of our talks, naturally, were about Time and inevitability and what laws a fantasy must observe in order to convince. Towards the close, the children grew reluctant to give the story's end absolute finality. They wanted some loophole left for a sequel - or at any rate the possibility that the children divided by Time might yet meet again. Some felt specially concerned for Vidal, still a small boy, never to see again so close a companion as Sam had become. I pointed out that by the conventions we had set up for ourselves, it was only the children of the present that were aware of losing those of the past, not the other way round. For the Rushavenn children lost in the Blitz had met death suddenly, without foreseeing farewells. One of the older boys broke in thoughtfully pointing out that, in any case, Sam and Rebecca must lose the relationship they had with these others. For these two would go on growing up and changing (as they had already begun to do in recent chapters) whereas the children of the past must stay fixed at the same age for ever and so be left behind inevitably. Artistic sense - and these arguments - prevailed. The group accepted finality. It was a practical demonstration of the force - and risk - for a writer, in nostalgia.

By debating such questions of construction throughout, as each arose, we formulated gradually for the story the laws of its being. We had to be clear how the Rushavenn children, for instance, experienced the presence of Sam and Rebecca - to Pin and Vidal not perceived as part of the future, but as wish-fulfillments, 'secret companions', almost part of their own fantasies. We decided that the older children of the past, Christen and Carlie, being nearly adult, would never see them at all. Also it seemed important to emphasise remoteness by such devices as the fact that Sam and Rebecca mostly see the inhabitants of Rushavenn through a window, or in some other way elusively, and that they themselves never set foot inside the bygone Rushavenn rooms.

These discussions of ours vitally affected the course of the story for I purposely never wrote ahead, beyond each session to hand. I kept of course a general notion of how it would all end, but I wanted to stay quite open to the children's inventions, chapter by chapter. So nothing was written by me until after their discussions and suggestions were complete.

I think they made their best discoveries in the arts of storytelling for themselves. Dawne mentioned Fady as a character

different from all the rest. 'In what way?' we asked. I wrote down the exact words of her reply. 'He's more mythical. He's half real, half story-like. He's like something that's come out from the depths of a castle - like a narrator springing up from somewhere and saying if it's right or not. It's like he's a link between.'

This perception was entirely her own, for I had read without commenting on Fady's part, leaving the children to make whatever they would of him. Perhaps for that reason he intrigued them, and of course what Dawne had just said exactly expressed my aim. (This is not a claim that he succeeds artistically - he may be a rather obvious chorus.)

At the last session Peter Woods asked each in turn what personal effect the project had had. Several said they had liked it for some quality they felt was 'more adult' than their usual reading - though they agreed that this would not have held them so much if they had not been helpers in writing it.

Andrew was the one who volunteered that he used to dread writing and had, in fact, hated the first sessions, but now wrote for pleasure. One of the younger and quieter members, Rachel, had found the confidence and enterprise to go in for a public short-story competition. (I hear that she has been writing ever since.) Several said that they did much better in school subjects now because of the project, and others that they now *read* a great deal more for pleasure. One honest fellow said that what it had taught him was to get up on a Saturday morning!

I cannot tell how many of these benefits were really due to the year of creation we had shared; much would have flowered anyway at this 'prime of childhood stage'. But one very stimulating pleasure, at least, I know the project gave them - a lively sense of achievement.

The story must stand or fall now, for any outside reader, on its own merits - not on this account of how it came about, which is written only for those it might encourage to try such an enterprise for themselves..

Theresa Whistler has been writing for many years. In 1954 she edited **The Collected Poems of Mary Coleridge**. This was followed by *The River Boy*, a fantasy for children set in North Devon. For the past 25 years she has been working on the official biography of the de la Mare family. This account of her work with Brixworth School is taken from her Afterword to **Rushavenn Time**.

Anne Jope, who produced the intricate wood engravings for **Rushavenn Time**, is a freelance painter and printmaker. She met Theresa Whistler two years ago. By a curious coincidence she was given a Box tree trunk from the garden of the house which became *Rushavenn* long before the book was even thought of. Anne used one of the wood blocks from this trunk for the cover design.

Peter Woods is Headteacher of Brixworth VC Primary School in Northamptonshire. With 350 pupils it is one of the largest primary schools in the county. This account is extracted from an address given to the English Speaking Board's annual conference in 1985.

Rushavenn Time, illustrated by Anne Jope, is available in two editions: 0 9513213 0 7, £9.95 (non-net hbk) and 0 9513213 1 5, £3.95 (non-net pbk), from Brixworth VC Primary School, Froxhill Crescent, Brixworth, Northampton NN6 9BG (tel: 0604 880457).

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