

Clanchy, K. (2019) *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me*. London: Picador.

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Sometimes you come across a book that is so good you want to share it with as many people as possible. Essentially, that is why I am writing this review. *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* is a wonderfully warm, engagingly authentic account of Kate Clanchy's practice as a teacher, as she introduces her students to English literature and poetry.

I urge anyone interested in education to read it. The honesty and humility implicit in the title shows us that, at heart, it is a book about a teacher learning how to enhance her practice from her reflections on her pedagogical relationships with her students. To do this, however, one needs to possess the qualities that Dewey (1933) said were the characteristics of a reflective practitioner, and that Clanchy demonstrates fully. Examples of wholeheartedness, open-mindedness and intellectual responsibility abound in this book. It is uplifting, funny, heart-breaking and, at times, searingly critical of the education system, particularly in relation to underprivileged teenagers.

Following an Introduction, the book is laid out in 15 sections, each section taking a different theme, and each illustrated with anecdotal accounts involving some of her students, along with extracts from the students' work. In the introduction (p. 4) Clanchy refers to some of these accounts and says: "Parts of this book are a sort of telling-back: long stewed accounts of ... what a demanding, intellectual, highly skilled profession teaching can be." She goes on to say that, instead of providing answers and certainty, her reflections have left her with lots more "complex questions ...about identity, nationality, art and money, but offered very personally: questions embodied in children. These questions and the piercing moments when they were presented to me, make up the bulk of this book." (p. 4).

This resonates with what Schön (1995) said when he reminded us that the hallmark of a good research project is not that it provides answers but, rather, that it raises lots of new questions for us to think about.

The voices of the teenagers bring the book alive and resonate with us long afterwards. A lot of the children are of BAME extraction, but many are white too – "pupils who, statistically, but also in plain sight, come in from primary school as bright and high-achieving, and within a couple of years of secondary become disaffected, badly behaved non-attenders, drowning in the difficulties of their lives" (p. 257). Some are newly arrived refugees – people like Shakila who recalls lyrically her life in Afghanistan, up until she was twelve when the Taliban closed her school and oppressed her people, causing her family to flee. Shakila goes on to mentor students from other groups with whom she would not normally socialise and, in one case, "soon finds her prejudices swept away by the child's sweetness and untrammelled adoration" (p. 262). Several are demotivated by extreme poverty and/or chaotic homelives – children like Elsa and Connor, in particular. In the section entitled 'About Uniform', the encounter with Elsa's mother, during an unplanned visit to Elsa's home, is a stark reminder of the kinds of homes from which school provides a haven and sanctuary. Likewise, the brief description of Connor's attention-seeking reveals a child desperate to seek reassurance that "he is in a boundaried place now, where people care what he wears, and care if he keeps the rules" (p. 121).

These students could have been lost in mainstream education were it not for teachers like Clanchy. Working in an Inclusion Unit, she gave them the opportunity to find their voices and to express their deepest thoughts and selves through their writing. Rather than teaching them 'about' poetry, Clanchy encourages them to 'be' poets. She resists the notion that her classes are a form of therapy, but the students' voices, and Clanchy's responses to them, allow them to reveal their unique personhood and their huge creative talents. Many of these children had hidden their sharp intelligence under masks that made them become what those dominant in society had decided they were. People like Jane and Liam (p. 28) who had "come from one of our roughest feeder schools ... [where] they seemed to have acquired the art of keeping their heads down. ... When I took their first essays in, I learned why they were undercover". It transpired that each was highly intelligent and, in Clanchy's class, both were encouraged to find their voices and their feet. However, her methods – particularly in helping Liam – would most likely raise concerns nowadays.

Clanchy's retelling of Jane's story though, allows her to show us one of the "piercing moments" to which she referred in the introduction. She speaks about how Jane was "clever in the marshalled, exact, mercilessly perceptive way particularly threatening in a girl"; whose "essay was a perfect digest of what she had been taught, plus a few thoughtful observations of her own - the very pattern of an A grade..." In one short extract Clanchy shows that she understands and 'gets' how, often, intelligent girls hide their talents so as to 'survive'. She also takes a scathing swipe at how students, even very clever ones, learn strategies that help them to negotiate the exam system, so as to get the coveted A grade – strategies that are heavily weighted in favour of regurgitation, ticking boxes and playing by the rules.

The various sections in the book examine questions to do with sex education; exclusion; nations, papers and belonging; writing, secrets and being foreign; the wearing of the hijab and the wearing of uniforms; the role of the church and prayer in schools; poverty

and subject choice in schools; rewards and prizes; selection and setting; the teaching of English; about being out of place; being well and, finally, 'what I think I am doing'.

But it is far more than a collection of anecdotes. Each section is deeply and critically reflective and asks hard questions of society and of the kinds of education system we have created, particularly in western developed countries. The book is grounded in strong ontological and epistemological values, underpinned by Clanchy's huge sense of social justice and inclusion. As she asks blindingly critical questions of what the purpose of schooling is, and if schools serve all children equally, she exposes the deep injustices in society that are perpetuated sometimes wittingly or unwittingly in schools.

The little vignettes of students' home lives are a reminder to all of us involved in education, that students are not just heads to be filled with information: they are quirky, funny, glum, goofy, sensitive, and often stubborn *people*, embodied learners who bring their own life experiences to their learning. For some students, just turning up to class each day is a major achievement, as we saw earlier with Elsa and Connor. Clanchy's account of her difficult relationship with a student called Cheyenne is also a remarkable insight into the dilemmas that can confront teachers daily. Her struggle to try to understand why Cheyenne resists all efforts to engage in the teaching-learning contract will resonate with many. Long after Cheyenne has left the school, a possible explanation occurs in a revelation grounded in dialogue with a colleague and Clanchy's reflection on it.

Her critique of her local Catholic school, in the section entitled 'On the Church in Schools' (pp. 123–136), ends with an excoriating paragraph: the school and many like it, she says, "used Christianity to exclude rather than include". Church schools, of course, have a right to protect their distinct ethos. Clanchy argues, however, that "Christ did not impose admission criteria; that is the work of man; and as men, voters, citizens, liberal humanists, people who believe in civic values and human rights, as ethical humans, we should make them fair" (p. 136). However, perhaps her objectivity slips somewhat in this section, especially when she expresses her scorn for the crucifixes on the walls of the school: she is kinder and more balanced in her remarks about Islam and the hijab.

Overall, Clanchy shows that children matter, that teachers matter, that discourse matters, that the foundations of teaching and learning are grounded in care, in dialogue and in respectful relationships. Yet her book does not set out to be a research account *per se*. It is a study of Clanchy's own practice as she seeks to improve it, and it provides an explanation as to why she works the way she does. Without spelling out her values, it is clear as one reads, that Clanchy recognises each child as a unique person deserving of her best pedagogical efforts. She respects each child as a knower who deserves to be encouraged to come to know in ways that are unique and appropriate for them. Clanchy constantly questions her own motives and her agenda. She seeks to establish if she is genuinely trying to help her students to improve their lives, through living her values to the best of her ability, or if she is just the "posh do-gooder, a Victorian lady on a mission who has not noticed that her message is obscured by her person, and the injustices of class which she embodies" (p. 158).

Relationships and professional dialogue – what Clark (2001) calls "talking shop and authentic conversation" – are crucial to both the research process and to genuine critical reflection. One of the aspects of her practice that really struck me was Clanchy's references

to the many professional conversations she had with colleagues, particularly Miss B. In Glenn *et al.* (2018), Glenn discusses the power of dialogue as "the mainstay of our learning community" (p. 16): dialogue for clarification, for personal learning, for the learning of others, as an expression of mutual respect, for healing and well-being and for creativity (pp. 16–21). All these kinds of dialogue feature in Clanchy's descriptions and explanations of her practice. She also models and endorses the need for critical friends, against whom we can bounce ideas and get constructive feedback.

I have been involved in self-study action research since the late 1990s. My research (Roche 2000, 2007) was influenced by the work of Jean McNiff on 'action research' and Jack Whitehead on 'living-educational-theory' with the idea of trying to realise one's values in one's practice as one generates a personal educational theory. It is further explained in Roche (2011, 2015) and in co-authored works: McDonagh *et al.* (2012/2020); Sullivan *et al.* (2016); Glenn *et al.* (2017). Whitehead (1989; 2018) coined living-educational-theory "as the educational explanation a researcher gives for their educational influence in the learning of other people, in the learning of the community or their organisation they are part of, and in their own learning".

I believe that that definition is given life in *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* and that the book makes a valuable contribution to the body of professional learning for teachers. It is an excellent example of a teacher actively trying to live out her educational values in her practice in ways that are caring, loving (in the sense of *agape*), emancipatory, life-affirming and ultimately transforming. Throughout, Clanchy shows us that she is continuously reflecting and tweaking, constantly questioning herself and, while she does not articulate it in quite this way, she is constantly asking "What is my concern / why am I concerned? What am I going to do about it? Am I living my values, or am I a living contradiction?" (Whitehead 1989).

To conclude: we are living in strange and troubling times. Now, more than ever, children need consistently caring teachers who will endeavour to encourage them to become their best selves. Likewise, teachers need professional advice about being the best teacher they can be. Clanchy is a wordsmith, and this book is written in a wonderfully accessible style. It might provide educators with some food for thought and an opportunity to pause and reflect on our own educational practice.

Kate Clanchy is a writer, teacher, and journalist. In 2018 she was appointed MBE for services to literature and an anthology of her students' work, England: Poems from a School, was published.

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