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The Best of Language Matters, Centre for Literacy in Primary Education, London

Review by: Susan Ellis, Strathclyde University.

This book delivers exactly what it says on the box, plus a bit extra. It is a selection of 48 articles published in the CLPE journal *Language Matters* from the 1970's, 1980's, 1990's and 2000's. The journal began publishing half way through 1975 and stopped in 2002, so the bulk of the articles are from the 1980's and 1990's.

This period covers a time of great change in English educational policy, and the articles reflect the impact of these changes, particularly on how teachers frame their teaching and how they see learning, teaching and their professionalism in relation to policy development. Yet, reading through the articles, I was also struck by the persistent themes that span and unite the decades; the need to involve children and ensure that teaching addresses their interests and concerns; learning as a process of knowledge construction that involves both children and teachers and the importance of innovation and emotional commitment for teacher development.

CLPE was originally founded as an in-service institution by the Inner London Education Authority and only became an independent charity in 2002. This means that many of the articles are London-based and all speak particularly to the concerns and developments in English education. The chapter introductions by Myra Barrs, which set the work of each decade into the political and policy context of the time, provide a clear and helpful frame for readers. For many in England, they will provide a helpful chronology and be useful reminders of what happened; for others, they will serve as a history lesson about what teaching was like before they joined the profession. For those outside the English system, they provide essential information that helps one to recognise the significant changes in viewpoint and perspective represented in the articles.

All the articles chosen for this book link theory and practice, but they do so in different ways. Many were written by teachers who were involved in staff development courses.

Others were written by academics, artists, writers and publishers, but all treat children's ideas and understandings seriously as central to the educational debate.

Teachers are always interesting when they talk about the children they teach and their own practice in schools. The articles from the 1970's convey the excitement of 'bottom-up' policy development in an era when the curriculum did not come 'pre-packaged', teachers developed their own topics and had to ensure coherence, depth and breadth. The article by Ruth Crow on *Writing in a Thematic Context* illustrates that teaching is not just about technicalities but about the personal involvement of teachers and pupils in topics of mutual interest. In this pre-packaged educational world, it serves as a strong reminder of the power and importance of the teacher's emotional and intellectual commitment to the topic. Susan Bugler on *Writing for a Purpose*, also from the 1970's, illustrates how to harness the other key force in every act of learning that happens in classrooms; the involvement and interests of pupils. Both articles provide 'food for thought' for policy-makers wanting to introduce and support creative teaching and learning. They should also be required reading for every newly qualified teacher.

Many of the articles from the 1980's provide clear and careful descriptions of classroom practice and its impact on pupils and teachers. David Barton writes powerfully about how his preconceptions were challenged by what children actually knew about each others' home cultures, and their willingness to connect with each others' cultural roots.

Many of the radical ideas from the 1980's are now widespread and have lost their radical edge as they have been accepted as routine pedagogy. The careful descriptions of practice provided by Moira McKenzie (*Shared Writing: Apprenticeship in Writing*) and Nicola Baboneau et al. (*Developing a Voice of their Own*) serve as important reminders of how fresh and inspirational these ideas were, and should still be. Other articles drive home to the reader, just how concepts can be reinterpreted and totally change their meaning. Home-school links, a strong theme in this collection, is now seen by policy makers at both national and school level as a way of communicating the schools' agenda to parents

and enlisting their support for school work. Only pre-five education adapts the curriculum to support home experiences. Three articles, by Heather Mines, Gillian Lathey and Harriet Proudfoot, all explore the role of teachers in enabling children's home lives to impact on school policies and curriculum. Now there **is** a radical idea.

The articles by academics and educationalist involved in staff development written during the 1980's are classics, as powerful and relevant today as they were then. Margaret Meek on *Texts that Teach* and Myra Barrs and Sue Pidgeon on *Language and Gender* in particular detail the issues and arguments that continue to underpin much current thinking and research.

In the 1990's, successive governments sought to 'teacher proof' educational standards by defining the content and delivery of the curriculum ever more tightly, culminating in the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy. Yet the articles from this era continue to explore themes of creative teaching and learning and the importance of context, purpose and intellectual and emotional engagement that were established in previous decades. I enjoyed the articles by Lesley Fisher (*Changing the Reading Environment*), Sarah Horrocks (*Animating the Imagination: Using puppets in the classroom*), Fiona Collins (*Storytelling as a Creative Art*) and Anne Thomas (*Children as Reflective Readers*).

Murial Demwell's article on *Story as Lifeline*, describes the sort of sensitive teacher intervention that must have been struggling to survive under the deluge of paperwork, planning charts, work programmes and targets that were hitting teachers in schools. I suspect that for many teachers, articles such as this, and the one by Beverley Falk on assessment of a reader, must have provided important and reassuring touchstones in the midst of change.

The other articles I loved from this decade were Myra Barrs clear and measured discussion of genre theory; Margaret Mallet on *Engaging Mind and Heart in Reading to learn: the role of Illustrations*; David Lloyd's article offering a publisher's insight into picture books and Quentin Blake's extract from *La Vie de al Page*. These, along with the

articles on new literacies, *Children and Video Culture* by Helen Bromley and *Media Texts and Popular Culture in the Classroom* by Cathy Pompe speak directly to current issues, as does the hard-hitting article on teacher development, written in 2001 by Jo Edwards

This collection of articles conveys the excitement of the 1970's and early 80's, the careful description of the 1980's and early 1990's and the concerns about changing literacies, creativity and professionalism voiced towards the end of that decade and the early 2000's. For those who have been involved in teaching and education for some time, it is a powerful reminder of how the tone and nature of educational debate has shifted over the years. For others, it will illuminate current thought and practice by providing important perspectives from the past.