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(Mis)fortunes of the ignorant

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(Mis)fortunes of the ignorant

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Chapter review essay


This review is a personal response to the linked, auto-ethnographic chapters: Essex boys can’t rite, wright, right, write... I got there in the end and Rose tinted torture and the tale of Wayne Lacey: Physical Education, a force for good at Bash Street School. Both are available in The Sporting Image: What If?, a book of creative writing from students and staff at UCLan, the underpinning research for which all stemmed from real-life events in sport, edited by Clive Palmer in 2010.

Reviewing these two chapters has been a stimulating and rewarding experience. The stylistic way in which these chapters are written, cunningly and subtly invites the reader along a path which is much more than just a story of a young person’s life. In truth, a lot can be taken from the words presented as the lessons are clear yet multi-layered. As an undergraduate who has had and uninterrupted experience of classroom education, the chapters are distinctly relatable to my not-so-long-ago experiences of school. To achieve this, the author has an uncanny ability to elicit the reader’s empathy for many of the captured experiences. This review therefore presents the perfect opportunity for an aspiring teacher (me) to consider the experiences of a learner through the reflections of a current teacher; offering new insight into the learner-teacher relationship through his auto-ethnography. For example, recognising the faults and not blindly copying the bad habits of an ‘anti-role model’ may never have occurred if such a reflection had not been written.
Consequently, this type of investigation into the learner-teacher relationship is a highly valuable lesson for me; presented in an accessible and intriguing way which could contribute to any student’s study of coaching, teaching or leadership on their journey into the professional world of work.

‘I never got caught’ (Palmer, 2010:29) is a statement which offers the reader some confidence in the realism of the tale and therefore trust in the author that their account is not filtered for the purposes of mere academic reputation – it is there because it has a message. The author admits that as a school child they did do what kids do; plot against teachers and involve themselves in food-fights worthy of the local newspaper’s attention. Also, the author was no stranger to the ‘whacking stick’ in PE at school. Alas, they were having fun, or so it seemed at the time, and the honesty can be appreciated in the writing.

The social dynamics of being at Bash Street School, regardless or enhanced by the fact that it was a personal struggle to survive, seems to have been a valuable social experience which Clive acknowledges. However, in the second chapter (the Wayne Lacey tale) there is a chilling realisation about how quickly a pupil can make judgments about teachers which will impact upon the education the teacher aims to provide for a child. In this instance Clive and his twin brother, whilst looking forward to lessons in the school’s engineering department were punished [caned] for potentially causing confusion to the teacher [getting their names mixed up which he might be embarrassed by], but interpreted at the time as ‘in case they misbehaved’. The caning was a ‘light-hearted’ preventative measure taken on recommendation from the school’s PE teaching staff. (Note: for the next two years at school the twins did not feel inclined speak to this otherwise popular member of teaching staff; a conscious effort was made to ignore him). The end of this chapter leaves the reader with the pitiful image of Wayne Lacey, a shadow of a boy who endured bullying all his school life, being belittled by the PE staff in a gym lesson. Throughout both chapters there is a sense of academic awareness and balance in how the story is told (it is an academic who is telling the story after all) even though in retrospect the author realises the actions of his teachers’ may have been through ignorance at the time. This balance was illustrated when Clive as a pupil, recognised the value of education and the implications of not valuing it; there were the ‘popular’ classmates leaving school early (i.e. rogues not permitted to take examined subjects), or expressed comically as those who; ‘left school early to have babies - advanced biology perhaps?’ (Palmer, 2010:30).

The expression of memories are rooted within Clive’s personal reflective process and a comic style is evident throughout. This may serve useful purposes in research for anonymising and protecting some of the people involved in the more controversial reflections, such as the excessive use of the whacking stick which
seemed to border on chronic child abuse. The recollection of the whacking stick may have been innocent enough at first, it was a laugh, a gimmick, pretend torture metered out for show, however under closer critical consideration the rich and extended description of the whacking stick, how it was used (bio-mechanically interpreted by the author), how it was constructed and then repaired with tape, how it made the author and other pupils feel and the repetitive use of the word ‘WHACK!’ in the text may be an insight into a negative memory explicitly engraved in the mind of the author.

The author acknowledges that being taught by Mr. Williams is a constant and valuable source of learning how NOT to teach PE. After all, ironically, one of his students would one day hold a PhD – in sport no less. The potential for learning from Mr. Williams’ actions is highlighted through a negative lens, interpreting him in the role of a wicked pirate to emphasise his actual characteristics but also protect him. His is a negative example to follow, the author is saying, if you want to teach PE, don’t do it like Mr Williams. It is recognisable however, that those experiences of the whacking stick remain vivid for the author, some 35 years later. Was this the most profound memory of ‘being educated’ after 5 years of Physical Education classes? For the reader it is as if you are there in the class with Clive, achieved through the rich description of the whacking stick incidents, but also Mr. Williams’ lack of control over his saliva while talking and then the Wayne Lacey incident itself. There is a palpable inference of overpowering male teacher behaviour, a patriarchy through PE into a kind of sanctioned gang-status. The PE staff seemed to be riding a high of superficial respect from children in fear, rather like the command of Fagin over his band of pick-pockets in Oliver Twist. All this appeared to have been an accepted part of Physical Education and wider school culture at Bash Street School in the 1970s and 1980s.

The writing style adopted for these chapters is perhaps the most influential medium for the writer-reader relationship. If the style of writing was boring or failed to grab the reader’s attention early on, he may quit reading before the author’s message is understood. Both chapters eliminate this possibility instantly through their titles, the first title being a play on words that foretells what may be discovered;

*Essex boys can’t rite, wright, right, write… I got there in the end.*

A play on words in titles is not a rarity for this author and the full title of the closing chapter to the book is like a story in itself;

Addendum, Appendix, Addi-on bit.

**WARNING:**

*If you are interested in teaching PE don’t read this.*

Rose tinted torture and the tale of Wayne Lacey:

*Physical Education, a force for good at Bash Street School*
Although a completely reasonable title owing to what the chapter reveals about the power-crazed PE teachers, stating ‘don’t read this’ plays on the reader’s sense of wanting what they can’t have, a concept that is scientifically supported of course by Berns (2006) but then again, we already know that from our own life experience. The author’s attention grabbing, complex and textured style of writing prompts the reader to reflect upon their own PE experiences and will appeal to readers who like writing that communicates life experience. However, for someone interested in a more formal and factual writing style, these chapters may not be for them as it is riddled with metaphors, emotive language and rhetorical questions. The author’s style is evident in both of his stories and even has an influence upon the structure of the whole book in which they sit – all the stories are biographical revelations of one sort or another. However, writing both a broad autobiographical account spanning about 15 years (Essex Boys chapter) and then progressing on to a densely reflective account of a specific experience at school over 1 year (Wayne Lacey chapter) is a comprehensive and absorbing snapshot of experience providing an almost three dimensional glimpse into the educational experiences of someone who is now a genuinely student-centred, research informed, author and teacher.

The time elapsed between Clive’s actual education experiences in 1970/80s, and his critical reflection about his schooling across these chapters in 2010 permits some retrospective judgement that is simple but influential. For example, Clive’s remarks about the guidance from staff at his Sixth Form College is revealing about his (mis)fortunes in education, i.e. that his 7 ‘O’ Levels were insufficient to start doing ‘A’ Levels with the prospect of going to university never being mentioned to him. Clive says, ‘I now know this was utterly appalling advice from academic staff in a college’. As a student keen to further my understanding of the learner-teacher relationship, reading these stories has been a valuable source of learning. This in part is due to the author using teacher informed meta-reflection to clarify the learner-teacher process. This can and will be used to inform my learner-teacher interactions and reflections on similar experiences to promote clarity and comprehension in what I do, just as the author has attempted to do in his stories for us.

To sum up, for undergraduates a lot can be learnt from these chapters; about the game of education but also not to ignore your true passions and skills in learning – even if some teachers fail to ask you to use them. Through their ability to resonate with peoples’ common educational experiences in sport, PE or the Outdoors, these accounts can be used to inform critical evaluation of the learner-teacher relationship, especially where there exists the potential for further research. For a learner, poor advice may well lead to misfortune, but they may also be ignorant about what good or poor advice looks like, just as Clive was at some points. However by reflecting upon these experiences, appreciating the learner-teacher relationship from both
sides, it is apparent that misfortune may just be a learner’s ignorant (ill-informed and innocent) misinterpretation of the experience at the time. Clive’s recollections of his experiences formulated into these stories will help me to make informed choices now. Through reflection and critical consideration, the fortunes of the aware can begin to emerge from the (mis)fortunes of the ignorant.

References


JQRSS Author Profiles

James Edwards\(^1\) is a 20 year old undergraduate in his final year of studying BA (Hons) Outdoor Leadership at the University of Central Lancashire. James, whilst still at school discovered Outdoor Education and through this new interest showed signs of academic promise in the core subjects with recognition by the National Academy of Gifted and Talented Youth. He became intrigued and quickly fell in love with the out-of-classroom experiences of learning and the connection with nature that Outdoor Education offered. As a strong advocate of outdoor learning James is keen to make a meaningful impact through education upon the lives and outlook of people he may have the pleasure of teaching in the future.

Clive Palmer\(^2\) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Sport, Tourism and The Outdoors, University of Central Lancashire. His research interests include Sports Coaching and Physical Education, Student Centred Learning and Creative Pedagogies, Outdoor Education and Sports Philosophy.