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Journal of Early Childhood Research 2005 3: 115

DOI: 10.1177/1476718X05053923

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talking early childhood education

fictional enquiry with historical figures

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ABSTRACT

The use of fictional writing, and in particular fictional dialogue, has gained increasing credibility and popularity within the field of qualitative social science research (Clough, 2002; Denzin, 1997; Tierney, 1998) but research in early childhood education has yet to exploit such methodologies. This article asks: what is meant by the term 'narrative inquiry' and how do researchers justify its use in research design and report? The article first argues the place for narrative enquiry in early childhood research. It then demonstrates the power of creating fictional dialogues by illustrating the educational ideas of two historical figures and famous pioneers of early childhood education, John Amos Comenius and Susan Isaacs, through an authored 'dialogue' with Philip Selbie. This fictional dialogue explores the meanings of Comenius' and Isaacs' work and their relevance to Selbie's work with young English speaking children in the Czech Republic of 2004.

KEYWORDS *early childhood education, fictional dialogue, historical perspectives, narrative enquiry, qualitative research methods*

introduction

In any field of enquiry, we work against an historical context of insight that we largely take for granted. Working from the shoulders of our antecedents, we attempt to trace new configurations of phenomena which will variously make the familiar strange and the strange familiar; prompt new insight or at

journal of **early childhood research**

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Vol 3(2) 115–126 [ISSN 1476-718X DOI: 10.1177/1476718X05053923]

least erode a lack of understanding; shine a light differently on things. We do this within a tacit agreement with our readers about an 'archaeology' of ideas that has already shaped our own, without which, indeed, we should have no ideas worthy of the name.

In any *form* of enquiry – or at least any reported form – we make decisions according to our purposes (and trained instincts) as to whom we shall cite as present in our work. Inevitably these characters – or, rather, their insights – are almost always recent and local; unless it is a self-consciously historical enquiry, we take for granted a wealth and weave of much earlier enquiry which provides the timbers which support the stage on which we assemble characters for the particular conceptual narrative we wish to see played out. We should not, then, – we should have no need to – cite Plato, or Locke or Wittgenstein; instead we can build, and rebuild on these earlier and taken for granted thoughts.

Any enquiry is a search for meaning, and we could argue that in *social* enquiry there is inevitably an element of quite personal knowledge to be sought. And so here, we first argue the need for the adoption and exploitation of narrative/fictional forms of enquiry further to understand the legacy of pioneers in early childhood education. Having set our stage, we demonstrate how fictional conversations can be used to develop and probe historical works. Selbie is in conversation with Isaacs and Comenius; three characters, never together in 'real' time, meet and talk, debate and question and explain their ideas about young children, how they learn and what this means for early education practices. Finally, the article concludes with our reflection on the usefulness of Selbie's fictional enquiry to explore part of a legacy of thinking in early childhood education and his own beliefs and values in relation to young children's learning.

narrative enquiry in early childhood research

Although we are freer to present our texts in a variety of forms to diverse audiences, we have different constraints arising from self-consciousness about claims to authorship, authority, truth, validity, and reliability. Self-reflexivity unmasks complex political/ideological agendas hidden in our writing. Truth claims are less easily validated now; desires to speak 'for' others are suspect. The greater freedom to experiment with textual form, however, does not guarantee a better product. The opportunities for writing worthy texts – books and articles that are a 'good read' – are multiple, exciting and demanding. But the work is harder. The guarantees are fewer. There is a lot more for us to think about. (Richardson, 1994: 523–4)

If we think of the writing of stories in educational research as the creation of a building the writer becomes architect. The question, therefore, is not technical; it is not '*how do I construct this building?*', but rather '*what is this building for?*'

Questions of purpose and function follow – ‘what must it *do*’, ‘who is it *for*?’ So, in setting out to write a fictional conversation such as the one that follows here, the primary work is not carried out at the keyboard but in the head; in the interaction of ideas, in the act of thinking, tuning in, decision making and focusing on the primary intent of the work. Of course, writing fiction – like constructing a building – is not carried out outside of a need, a community, a context. These are actually the primary ingredients.

Several writers (Rosen, 2000; Sandelowski 1994; Tierney 1995, 1998) have begun to establish the ground on which a more evidently aesthetic research form – specifically through the use of *storytelling* – can be constructed. The central thesis is that there exists a characteristically narrative structure to consciousness. People continually strive to make sense of their lives through telling (themselves or others) stories of one form or another. Therefore it might be argued that even the quantitatively-based research report has a story to tell because such research inevitably involves human experience (even though the research design might seek to exclude it). MacIntyre’s (1985) expression of the ‘unity of a human life’ develops this theme: we think in stories, and every researcher asks, consciously or otherwise: what is the story I wish to tell? Every published refereed research report contains its own stories, some untold.

Fictional narrative is useful only to the extent that it opens up (to its audiences and its authors) a deeper view of life in familiar contexts: it can make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar. As a means of educational report, the use of fictional tools can provide a means by which those truths, which cannot be otherwise told, are uncovered. The fictionalization of educational experience offers researchers the opportunity to import fragments of data from various real events in order to speak to the heart of social consciousness. To date, early childhood research has not exploited this methodological terrain. Narrative/fictional enquiry has yet to make its debut on the stage of social enquiry in early childhood contexts, but the example that follows seeks to persuade readers of the usefulness of such a device to aid the exploration of ideas. For example: What *was* it that underpinned Isaacs’ thinking? Could she *justify* her ideas when they are held up to Comenius’ philosophy about childhood and learning? And what do these ideas mean to an early childhood teacher in the 21st Century? The fictional conversation that follows crosses the boundaries of time and cultures, but it derives from real events and feelings – the writings of Comenius and Isaacs and the personal/professional experiences of Selbie – and some of these actual words and ideas are footnoted in the conversation which follows. However, it is ultimately a fiction: a version of truths which are woven by the author from an amalgum of ideas and ‘hunches’.

a fictional conversation between John Amos Comenius (JAC), Susan Isaacs (SI) and Philip Selbie (PS)

introductory comments

When writing fictional conversations, one of the decisions that have to be made is how much to assume a reader will know about the 'participants'. Naturally, as the author of 'their' words I have had to get to know them myself by reading their own writings (and others about them) in order to write with any integrity on their behalf. Although the dialogue might be of worth in presenting ideas in themselves and even a 'good piece of writing' in the literary sense, it seems only correct that it should fundamentally *re-present* the participants' ideas if it is to fully achieve all it intends to in this form of research writing. Naturally, the reader will need to accept my interpretation of what I have discovered about the participant's ideas as the result of my research. However, I feel it worth noting a few biographical details about Comenius and Isaacs as objective background information for the reader to begin to gain some insight into their personalities and the historical time period that helped shape their thinking

John Amos Comenius was born in 1592 in the southern part of Moravia (now the Czech Republic). Educated at Heidelberg University in Germany, Comenius was subsequently ordained a clergyman before returning to Moravia where he became a schoolmaster and church pastor. In 1628, as the result of the outbreak of religious wars, Comenius settled in Poland where he wrote his first books advocating the reform of the education system before his whole library was lost in a fire. Comenius' writings earned him a great reputation abroad and he was invited to England in 1641 and then to Sweden and Hungary to reform school systems. In 1658 he published *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*, which is believed to be the first illustrated textbook for children. Comenius died in 1670 in Amsterdam and is known internationally for his efforts on behalf of universal education.

Susan Isaacs was born in 1885 in Lancashire, England, the last of nine children, whose mother died when she was six. Her own schooling was difficult and she was removed from school at the age of 14 although she continued to self-educate vigorously. Isaacs trained as a teacher and obtained an Honours degree in Philosophy and a scholarship to Cambridge. After two lecturing posts she founded the Malting House School, Cambridge in 1924. The school had an experimental philosophy with no fixed curriculum and placed an emphasis on individual development and joy in discovery. Isaacs also trained and practised as a psychoanalyst and this clearly influenced her work, particularly with regard to observing young children's behaviour. In 1930 she published *Intellectual Growth in Young Children* and three years later *Social Development in Young Children*. Before her untimely death from cancer

in 1948 she became the first Head of the Child Development Department of the Institute of Education, University of London, from where she was a great advocate of Nursery schooling.

Philip Selbie qualified as an Early Years teacher in the UK and, for the last five years, has taught young children at an English-speaking International school in Prague, Czech Republic. His interest in the philosophical ideas behind educating young children began during a visit to Comenius' homeland as part of a group of teachers offering in-service training to Czech language teachers after the fall of Communism in 1989. He is currently Head of Early Years at English International School, Prague.

the conversation – what motivates young children to learn?

PS: John, your writings make great use of examples from the natural world to help convey your thoughts about many issues related to teaching and learning. When considering what motivates learners, especially very young children, what examples from nature do you suggest are helpful in this respect?

JAC: When we examine the role of the teacher in the process of learning we can liken it to that of a gardener who intuitively takes into account the seasons as well as the environment when first planting a seed and then supporting its growth.¹

PS: Implicit in this analogy is the view that there is a relationship between the gardener and the seed, and in the case of learning, the teacher and the child. Given the right environment, motivation can be considered as being intrinsic as well as extrinsic so we perhaps need to take a broad view of motivation in this discussion.

JAC: Yes, and in my opinion this issue of motivation in young learners is a significant issue to consider together. I believe that too many young children are denied the intellectual and emotional growth they are capable of and therefore not only their own lives, but also those of society in general, are robbed of a great inheritance.

PS: What might be your reasons for making such a claim? It certainly is the opinion of some that the provision of quality learning experiences in the years preceding a more formal school experience can make a significant impact on the lives of children and young people later in life.

JAC: Well, I fear that often many schools become places of fruitless toil and wasted opportunity. Those who are responsible for education too easily adopt 'accepted' practices without considering the needs of the child and the circumstances in which learning takes place. Teaching styles must continually be adapting to circumstances and responding to individual children's needs.

PS: Are you saying that teachers do not necessarily take enough account of the needs of pupils when they teach?

JAC: To a certain extent I am. It is never easy to reflect systematically upon the nature of individual children and the way they are learning. Naturally, there are constraints of time and so on that put pressure on even the most skilled and dedicated of teachers. However, in my view, it is necessary to place an extremely high priority on the skills of observation and reflection and the ability to adapt teaching styles accordingly.

- PS: Before we return to my question of what teachers might do at a practical level to motivate young children's learning, I think it worth asking Susan Isaacs her opinion on our discussion so far. Susan, you trained to be a teacher in the early part of the 20th century and entered the profession with a background in psychology as well as education. Would you agree that there might be too many teachers who do not examine their practice critically for one reason or another?
- SI: In a word, yes! In my opinion it is the prime responsibility of a teacher to observe closely the children in his or her care and to learn from them in such a way that how they teach and what they teach is tailored to the individuality of each child.
- PS: In that case how does a teacher begin to balance the need to observe and reflect on a personal level and the need to teach in the more obvious sense of the word?
- SI: I am not sure that there is such a clear distinction to be made between the two. Both roles are tightly interwoven in a healthy and fruitful teaching and learning relationship. Although the teacher is the 'guide' in one sense, he or she needs to be willing to be guided by the child in another.²
- PS: Can you be a bit more explicit in this respect?
- SI: Well, as John was pointing out earlier, a teacher who follows precedent uncritically when teaching young children, or indeed any individual child, is very unlikely to teach them as well as someone who is willing to modify their approach in the light of their experiences. My own observations lead me to believe that young children have a natural desire to understand the world around them but they also have a desperate need to be understood by those who are significant in their lives. Obviously, parents and friends are examples of such people but so too are teachers.
- PS: So, having highlighted the need for teachers to observe young children and learn from them as teachers let's return to the question of motivation. John, you said earlier that 'too often schools are places of fruitless toil and wasted opportunity' so what might teachers do at a practical level to ensure that this is not the case?
- JAC: Firstly, it might be worth my saying here that when I mentioned 'fruitless toil' I often think that some teachers seemingly work a great deal and achieve proportionately very little. By this I mean that there are times when learners might actually benefit from teachers who consciously seek to 'do' less. I believe a great deal of learning takes place in the minds of young children when they are left to discover their world uninterrupted by the teacher.³
- PS: I should like to return to that point later in our discussion. For now, if we accept that teachers have some form of 'active' role in their relationship with young learners, where would you see the greatest need for their obvious involvement?
- JAC: Firstly, schools should be pleasant places and especially for young children.⁴
- PS: Certainly, I would agree with you. My own experience when observing young children in a classroom is that they generally seem to be very sensitive to the 'atmosphere' of the physical environment in which they find themselves.
- JAC: So let me ask you a question. In what ways have you tried to ensure the environment of your classroom promotes children's ability to learn?
- PS: Well, most young children respond positively to a friendly smile, warm gestures from adults and other children. In addition I think most children quickly come to value and respect clear routines and expectations that are set for them and others. However, it is also essential to consider carefully the layout of furniture,

the provision of adequate space as well as the learning resources that are available. Young children generally seem to enjoy bright colours and be curious about natural objects and those that provide plenty of visual and tactile stimulation.

JAC: When would you say young children are in most need of such things to support their learning?

PS: In my view, until a young child feels emotionally secure in a school environment these factors are highly significant in having an impact on their motivation to learn. It is clear to me that many young children are full of uncertainty when they first come to school. This is more evident in some than others but I think most have fears about leaving the familiarity of the home and the security of already established relationships. I think it goes without saying that all of us, adults as well as children, are more motivated the more confident we feel about ourselves.

SI: I should like to add a comment here. Before a child even comes to school, it is important to consider that s/he has learnt a great deal in the home environment. Perhaps the most important thing a child has realized is that s/he has a place and an identity, has relationships within a family and, of course, they are beginning to understand a little of what they can and cannot yet accomplish on their own.

PS: So in what way does this view add to our discussion about motivation in young children's learning?

SI: Well, I would agree with what you just said about the relationship between self-confidence and motivation. It is my opinion that the provision of an environment that meets the emotional needs of a young child as s/he makes the transition from home to school is fundamental in enabling a young child's intrinsic motivation to learn and flourish in an uninterrupted way.

PS: John has already highlighted the need for the school to be a 'pleasant place' in this respect. What would you consider to be important for the teacher to do in a practical sense to ensure that young children are as motivated to learn in school as they were at home?

SI: I would support all that has already been suggested about the classroom, but I think it necessary not to underestimate the importance of extending such qualities to the outside environment. Young children's confidence in themselves is promoted a great deal by being given space to simply run and jump and express themselves freely and enjoy games with other children too.⁵

PS: In what other ways can a teacher motivate young children to learn?

SI: If we return to what I said just now about how much young children learn on their own at home, teachers need to observe children carefully to establish what the next step is in this process of learning independently.

PS: We are back to the issue of teachers being a sensitive 'guiding hand', much like that gardener nurturing growth from a small seed.

SI: Absolutely. Once a child begins to feel confident, or put another way, has established him/herself in the social environment of school, the skill of promoting independence in learning becomes a very high priority in my mind. Perhaps somewhat controversially, I would advocate giving young children a relatively high degree of freedom to satisfy their curiosity and express themselves within the context of any broad learning experience.

PS: Before we discuss why you feel this is important, can we establish the degree of freedom you are considering it is important to give to young children? I think it

- goes without saying that there have to be some boundaries or limits to freedom, especially where the legitimate needs of others might be compromised.
- SI: Of course. The teacher should not condone anti-social and aggressive behaviours that go counter to the 'pleasant' atmosphere that you were describing earlier. I do believe however, that young children should be allowed to express themselves fully and if such behaviour leads to conflict with other children or adults then it is the teacher's responsibility to address such behaviour constructively. In my view, such things as aggressive behaviour should be seen in the context of, and at the same time, part of a young child's emotional development.
- PS: So why do you consider your advocacy of freedom as potentially controversial?
- SI: Because many would regard too much freedom for the young child as either physically or morally dangerous or at least an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher. On the other hand, I would prefer not to set limits on children's impulses that are governed by adult expectations of respectability and pedagogical purpose.
- PS: Indeed, I have read an account from the Malting House School where you seem to have been prepared to join in with a group of children whose curiosity about whether a rabbit was really dead or not led them to put it in some water to see if it floated. The following day, after a discussion with two boys, you actually encouraged them to dig the rabbit up to see if it was still there. If this is not crossing the boundaries of conventionality for you, surely it could at least be argued to be unwise for young children to follow their curiosity to such extremes?
- SI: Absolutely not. Firstly, I would argue that such examples of allowing young children greater freedom to learn will lead them to discover the truth for themselves and not some 'sanitized' version that we adults often try to satisfy them with. What is equally important though is that as teachers we are at the same time fully exposed to young children and therefore more able to make informed and accurate assessments of their all round development.⁶
- PS: What is the basis for your highlighting this as important in motivating young children to learn?
- SI: My view is that everything young children do springs from the deep desire within them to learn from and understand the world in which they find themselves.⁷ It goes without saying that this will sometimes lead them into behaviours that will challenge not only their boundaries of knowledge but also some people's view of what is acceptable for young children to do.
- PS: You have already implied that anti-social behaviour, while not acceptable in itself, is a potentially 'valid' form of expression for a young child to exhibit. Is this the understanding that you are essentially keen to encourage teachers to adopt when they observe such behaviour?
- SI: Yes, and this helps to answer your earlier question of why I consider it important to allow such freedom of expression. To repress such behaviour, purely because it does not 'fit' with our adult understanding of how to behave, to me demonstrates a failure to try and fully understand young children. Young children long to explore, to discover and to understand and as teachers we should be accepting the challenges that it will bring to our relationships with those we teach. Only by working in this way can teachers honestly say they are being responsive and reflective educators engaged in motivating and encouraging independence in young children's learning.
- PS: John, what would be your observations on this final part of our discussion?

- JAC: Firstly, I fundamentally agree that motivation in learning springs from the freedom to learn independently. I began this discussion by basically asserting that teachers needed to examine critically their practice in the light of their honest observations and being prepared to be adaptable and flexible in their teaching styles. However, I must admit a little unease about the degree of freedom that Susan seems to be proposing.
- PS: Can you explain why?
- JAC: Well, as Susan implied earlier, this issue of advocating freedom of expression in pursuit of truth for the child and the teacher touches upon some very controversial areas. I am not sure that I would go as far as she does in advocating such apparently extreme freedom of expression. In my opinion, freedom in learning needs to be handled carefully as it has its pitfalls as well as its obvious advantages.
- PS: What would be your biggest concern in this respect?
- JAC: For me, as someone who places the spiritual dimension at the heart of the teaching and learning process, we should never lose sight of the fact that teachers and learners are operating in a created world. Such a world has limits and boundaries that are set ultimately for our good and protection as we gradually discover our place in society and the world at large.
- PS: Can you explain your point of view a little further?
- JAC: Well, I would say that young children, while immensely curious and intrinsically motivated, need 'guiding' in the same way as we agreed that the gardener intuitively tended the seeds at the beginning of our discussion. For me, therefore, it follows that a wise gardener would never 'repress' growth (and I agree with Susan in this respect); however, he would also take account of what he feels is beneficial for the developing seed in the longer term. I would, therefore, question the appropriateness of digging up rabbits with young children in the account that you mentioned earlier. It seems to me that the dignity of the rabbit as a created animal, together with the fact that death itself has a certain amount of mystery attached to it for all of us, would warrant handling in an honest, yet different way.
- PS: It has been particularly useful to discover the essential areas of agreement as we have talked together as well as to realize that each of us brings our own perspective to the discussion, which inevitably shapes our point of view. Perhaps I could ask you to summarize what we have covered in discussing this issue of what motivates young children to learn?
- JAC: We have established that schools should be pleasant places. We have highlighted the role of the environment and the teacher in contributing to the process of learning and the necessity to grant freedom to young children in support of their natural desire to learn. However, it is worth remembering too that ultimately learning should be a pleasant experience in itself.⁸
- PS: I would certainly agree that most young children I have encountered, both within as well as outside a teaching relationship enjoy learning. Beneath, the freedom and excitement they display often hides a feeling of empowerment. I believe it is this empowerment that produces those powerful positive emotions that we all associate with being motivated when being in a quality learning experience.
- JAC: Yes, let us not forget, too, that really motivated learning is characterized by an excitement and a joy on the part of the teacher as well as the learner. Such

excitement is so easily lost if teachers are not independent learners themselves and are not willing, or simply not able, to take risks and challenge their own understanding about what motivates young children in their care.

on reflection: using fictional methods to explore and report thinking

We hope that the conversation above 'spoke' for itself. But given that this article argues the place of fictional enquiry and report in early childhood education we want now to reflect on the process of this particular fictional enquiry and report. There were two enquiries here. Philip Selbie's enquiry into the ideas of Isaacs and Comenius and a methodological enquiry; the seeking out and the crafting of the tools fit for the job.

Readers will identify their own 'key points' in the conversation, but the device of fiction has enabled the bringing together of minds and ideas to confront important moral and philosophical concerns of the present day. How do you foster children's curiosity and freedom to learn? How far can you go in developing children's investigative instinct? When does encouragement of children's 'scientific' enquiry threaten or undermine the development of children's spirituality? Selbie's self-conscious enquiry into the ideas held by Comenius and Isaacs and (no less importantly) his own thinking, opens up new thinking which sheds light on some of the key issues in early childhood today: children's rights, moral education, belief, values, constructions of childhood, the role and purpose of early education, the environments for learning.

We suggest that *some* researchers might develop the capacity to imagine 'what might be' as a postmodern ethnographic project of understanding early childhood education in the 21st century. The idea of methodological regulation here is importantly shifted from material to moral accountability, and, to echo Richardson (1994: 523) thus '*... self-reflexivity* [within the fictional piece] *unmasks complex political/ideological agendas*' (in the author and the reader). Throughout the conversation any reader will 'test' for plausibility. Does this 'sound' real? How might these three people have engaged with each others' ideas? What can we learn as we are witnesses to this exchange? And this brings us to our final point. Methodologically, the fictional/narrative 'turn' gives us new opportunities to explore ideas and push out our own boundaries of understanding. The inclusion of such forms of enquiry in early childhood research can open up new opportunities to explore, for example, the history of early childhood education, as well as present pressing concerns. Can this *count* as research in early childhood education? That decision depends on our own definitions and expectations of educational enquiry, and our own capacity to engage with the ideas on offer, but if it is – in Stenhouse's

characterization of research – ‘systematic and sustained enquiry, planned and self-critical, which is subjected to public criticism’ (Stenhouse, 1975: ix) then it ‘counts’!

This article comprises largely an imaginary conversation. But in the imagining and in the reading, real understandings about the work of two pioneers and our own beliefs and values and practices can be generated. We suggest that narrative/fictional enquiry should become part of the tool-kit of early childhood research offering the researcher and the reader new paths of exploration and new opportunities for understanding.

notes

1. ‘Is there any who denies that sowing and planting need skill and experience? . . . the trained gardener goes to work carefully, since he is well instructed, where, when, and how to act and what to leave alone, that he may meet with no failure’ (Comenius, translated in Keatinge, 1923: 111).
2. ‘The grown-ups who are tending little children need to have a sense of fitness and proportion, to know when to give and when to withhold, when to see the baby in the child, and when to respond to the man that he is to be’ (Isaacs, 1954: 22).
3. ‘Let the main object of this, our Didactic, be as follows: To seek and to find a method of instruction, by which teachers may teach less, but by which learners may learn more; by which schools may be the scene of less noise, aversion, and useless labour, but of more leisure, enjoyment and solid progress . . .’ (Comenius, translated in Keatinge, 1923: 4).
4. ‘The school itself should be a pleasant place, and attractive to the eye both within and without. Within, the room should be bright and clean, and its walls should be ornamented by pictures’ (Comenius, translated in Keatinge, 1923: 131).
5. ‘In general, our aim should be to give children as many opportunities of free movement as possible, and to make use for social purposes of their love of doing things’ (Isaacs, 1929: 71).
6. ‘. . . I myself happen to be interested in *everything* that little children do and feel’ (Isaacs, 1933: 113).
7. ‘The thirst for understanding springs from the child’s deepest emotional needs, a veritable passion’ (Isaacs, 1932: 113).
8. ‘. . . if the scholars are to be interested, care must be taken to make the method palatable, so that everything, no matter how serious, may be placed before them in a familiar and attractive manner . . .’ (Comenius, translated in Keatinge, 1923: 132).

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