Obituary: Professor James Britton

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James Nimmo Britton, educationalist: born Scarborough, Yorkshire 5 May 1908; teacher, Harrow Weald County Grammar School 1933-38; Educational Editor, John Murray 1938-53; Senior Lecturer / Head of English Department, Institute of Education, London University 1954-70, Goldsmiths' Professor of Education 1970-75; Director, Schools Council Project on Writing 11-18 1966-72; member, Committee of Inquiry into Reading and the Use of English 1972-74; books include Language and Learning 1972, Prospect and Retrospect 1982, Literature in its Place 1993; married 1938 Muriel Robertson (two daughters); died London 28 February 1994.

JAMES BRITTON was the chief architect of a theory of language and learning which has influenced the thinking and practice of several generations of teachers, both in Britain and in the United States, Canada and Australia.

The seminal years for Britton's work were those he spent at the Institute of Education, London University, where for 16 years from 1954 to 1970 he was senior lecturer and then head of the English Department. During that time, a quiet passion for ideas led him to construct an alternative body of theory to that which might be offered by, for example, linguistics as a base discipline for English teaching. Britton was concerned with larger questions than those generally posed by linguists. He wanted to explore the relationships between language and thought, and between thinking and feeling, the links between unconscious and conscious ways of knowing, and the symbolising nature of

language. He was drawn to the work of certain philosophers, psychologists, thinkers and writers, many of whom, like Michael Polanyi, had an unorthodox background - Britton's whole cast of mind was strongly interdisciplinary.

Throughout this enterprise he was particularly in search of an adequate psychological description of learning and development, which would take proper account of the role of language in learning and thinking. Not finding this in any ready-made form, he created his own personal synthesis from the work of George Kelly, Lev Vygotsky and DW Harding, all psychologists with an optimistic view of human beings as active discoverers and interpreters of the world. The consequence of Britton's work was that a thorough and coherent theoretical basis was established for educational work in the field of language development, and indeed - through the concept of 'language across the curriculum', which became a central tenet of the Bullock report on English teaching - well beyond 'English'.

Britton lived out his theory, and through a number of initiatives he and his colleagues influenced the practice of examining boards, of English teachers and of other educationalists. They carried out investigations into the role of talk in learning, into the examining of English and - in a major research project - into the development of writing abilities.

This work touched thinking and practice in many parts of the English-speaking world, and in several parts of the world has informed official educational policy. It helped establish talk as a serious activity in classrooms, and one which should count in assessment. It asserted the importance of young children's being able to use their home speech in their learning in school, instead of being cut off from the basis of their language by a premature focus on standard forms. And it gave an account of written language development which suggested a way of classifying the different purposes and audiences for writing in school, and proved what a narrow range of these potential kinds of writing most children experienced. All through this period

(and thereafter) Britton was surrounded by a network of teachers and educationalists who were together part of a collaborative project, with the Institute of Education English Department as a base. But his personal and intellectual influence on this group should not be underestimated.

Another important aspect of Britton's work lay in his observations of young children. Many of his professional activities were concerned with secondary education, but his interest in early language development drew on private and personal experience, including extensive observations of his own children and grandchildren. His best-known book, Language and Learning (1972), fuses observation and theory in a remarkable synthesis, and demonstrates the continuities between early language functions and later more complex literary achievements in a text which is almost an extended narrative. His writing was always marked by a deceptive informality and ease which sometimes concealed the complexity of the ideas he was

introducing.

This simplicity and democratic informality marked his relationships, too, and partly explains the strong affection, as well as intellectual respect, which James Britton inspired in so many of the people he worked with throughout the world .

(Photograph omitted)

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