Professional Amnesia: a suitable case for treatment

MARY JANE DRUMMOND

ABSTRACT Early Years educators have always had a particularly secure feel for what lies at the heart of vibrant education, for 'a principled understanding of learning'. Here Mary Jane Drummond reminds the reader, not only that professional knowledge exists outside ring binders, but that, prior to their emergence, we did know some very important things we would do well to return to. In reconnecting to the richness and depth of twentieth-century pioneers she reminds the reader how things might yet be. All the writers she cites emphasise that children's 'most urgent need is freedom to grow and think,' an insight that it as is true for teachers as it is for children: the time is ripe for some critical remembering.

The trouble started back in 1987. Without invoking a golden age, or glorifying the mythical Plowden years, my argument is that in the years before the Education Reform Act of 1988, by and large, teachers did their own thinking, turning to a variety of sources to enrich their understanding and help them make a case for their principled pedagogical decisions. But soon after the arrival of the DES National Curriculum consultation document, and the opening of the flood-gates to a never-ending stream of official publications, the first signs of professional amnesia appeared in our midst. Slowly but surely the early years community, and our colleagues higher up the primary school, began to act as if professional knowledge were only to be found in ring folders, of all degrees of glossiness; these were soon supplemented by training packs with videos and all manner of other pronouncements from authoritative bodies.

For a while, those of us working with children below the age of statutory education (which is five-and-a-bit, it's always worth saying again, not four years old) enjoyed a false sense of security; we believed the structures of the National Curriculum and its associated testing procedures had no force where we were concerned. Except of course, that as more and more four year olds were admitted to infant and primary schools, it became impossible to draw a line, still less maintain it, between statutory-aged children, authentic National Curriculum students, and the youngest children in school. With the invention of the

Foundation Stage in 2000, and the renewed flood of specifically early years documents from QCA, we realised we had been fooling ourselves. *All* our children, and *all* their educators, were now to come within the remit of our political masters, who know what is best for us all and spare no energy in telling us how to do it.

The last 18 years or so, I suggest, exemplify the blank slate model of teacher and educator development. 'They know nothing', seems to be the premise of successive education departments, 'so we will have to tell them.' Whereas I believe we did know something, indeed some very important things, and we did not and do not need so much telling. The time is ripe for some critical remembering.

Let us start with the incomparable Edmond Holmes, the former chief inspector of schools, who retired in 1910 and promptly sat down to write his most important book *What Is and What Might Be*, in which his central purpose was to challenge the entire system of teaching as currently practised in England.

> Does elementary education… tend to foster the growth of the child's faculties?... the answer to the question, so far at least as thousands of schools are concerned, must be an emphatic No… the education given in thousands of our elementary schools is in the highest degree anti-educational. (1911, pp. 43-4)

In another work, the introduction to a remarkable study of Maria Montessori, Holmes spells out the reasons for his contemptuous analysis.

> For what does education do to foster the growth of the child? If the child is to grow, he must do the business of growing by and for himself… In other words, he must be allowed to live and work in an atmosphere of freedom.
> Now freedom is the last thing that education, as we know it in this and other 'civilised' countries, allows the child… From morning to evening, from day to day, from year to year, it does, or tries to do, for him most of the things which he ought to do for himself – his reasoning, his thinking, his imagining, his admiring, his sympathising, his willing, his purposing, his planning, his solving of problems, his mastering of difficulties, his controlling his passions and impulses, his bearing himself aright in his dealings with others… it will allow him to do nothing for himself which it can do, or even pretend to do for him; and it thus develops into an elaborate system for paralysing activity. (Holmes, in Fisher, 1913, pp. 22-3)

This emphasis on the need for freedom, and the damaging lack of it, is scarily appropriate today; the planning blight that has withered the early years profession's capacity to think for itself, or allow children to do likewise, is just a more recent manifestation of Holmes' 'system for paralyzing activity'. The details of the paralyzing system have changed but the dangers endure.

Later, in a spirited address to the Conference of the New Ideals in Education in 1919, reported by his irrepressible nephew Gerard Holmes in *The Idiot Teacher*, he drew an arresting distinction between two different kinds of learning. First, learning by swallowing:

> No one in England knows better than I do what learning by swallowing means… For the first half of my inspectorial career, learning by swallowing was compulsory, and it was my duty as an Inspector – a duty which I discharged with much zeal and diligence – to see that it was systematically carried out. The children sat in blocks called classes, and opened their mouths like so many fledglings at the word of command, and the teacher then dropped into their mouths pellets of information – rules, definitions, names, dates, tables, formulae, and the like.

And secondly, its polar opposite, learning by doing:

> But the child who is learning by doing is learning many things besides the one thing he is supposed to be learning. He is learning to desire, to purpose, to place, to initiate, to execute: he is learning to profit by experience, to think, to reason, to judge. And he is learning one other thing: he is learning to cooperate with others, to work for a common end, to feel the glow of comradeship. (Holmes, 1952, pp. 49-50)

If we were to resurrect this pair of splendid definitions, and put them at the forefront of our thinking today, we would be able, I think, to slice away many stultifying elements in the current official version of the early years curriculum. We would be able to apply, to good purpose, a principled understanding of children's learning, which, in Holmes' formulation, does not only prefigure the famous Plowden passage about the child as agent in his or her own learning, but also seems to summarise most of Piaget, much of Vygotsky and a good deal of Bruner. We would be able to judge for ourselves whether our well-intentioned practices are in fact force-feeding passive learners, or whether they are acts of liberation, allowing children to live and learn in 'the safety of freedom', a principle that also lies at the heart of Montessori's work (Fisher, 1913, p. 125).

While Holmes was fulminating against the spirit of the age, another great educational thinker and pioneer was just starting her career as an academic psychologist. It was not until 1924 that Susan Isaacs moved to work at the Malting House School in Cambridge, an independent experimental school, founded and financed by the eccentric millionaire Geoffrey Pyke. Her four years at the Malting House were extensively documented in detailed, daily records of everything the children said and did. By 1930, Isaacs had completed the first of her two major works, *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*, which like its 1933 successor, covering social and emotional development, is crammed with extracts from the original data, so that generations of readers have discovered for

themselves these 'full-blooded', living, learning children.[1] Alongside the observations run the threads of Isaacs' analysis and synthesis of what she saw. Many of her findings are long overdue for revival.

In particular, I recommend the following from the much shorter book *The Children We Teach* (1932) in which she identifies the three kinds of spontaneous activity that characterise the lives of young children.

- The love of movement and of perfecting bodily skills
- The delight in make-believe and the expression of the world within
- The interest in actual things and events, the discovery of the world without

It is worth emphasising Isaacs' use of the word 'spontaneous' here: she is not listing three kinds of activities that teachers should plan for, nor three kinds of learning intentions, or three sets of early learning goals. She is synthesising her evidence of what real children actually do in the world, the activities that well up from their physical and intellectual energy, and from their deep desire to understand, which is, according to Isaacs, 'a veritable passion' (1932, p. 113).

We may also note that these activities, these three kinds of learning by doing, are comprehensive in their scope. Everything is here: the physicality of children; their interest in the world without and everything and everyone in it; and the parallel universes of the children's imagination, the world within. Isaacs' little list demonstrates that children's spontaneous activities qualify them as experts in curriculum design; they spontaneously and holistically do 'coverage' of their own accord – no sticks or carrots needed. More than 30 years after *The Children We Teach*, and nearly 20 after Susan Isaacs' death, her husband Nathan submitted a fascinating memorandum to the Plowden Committee on behalf of the Froebel Foundation. His attack on 'What is Wrong with Current Education,' and his plea for the 'root-and-branch rethinking and eventual reconstruction of our whole scheme of primary education' are clearly deeply influenced by Susan Isaacs' life's work. That it all needed saying all over again in 1965 suggests that professional amnesia is not a new condition.

But it is certainly pervasive. We do not have to go back as far as Plowden to find writers, researchers and thinkers who deserve to be rescued from oblivion. The work of the Schools Council is almost entirely forgotten now, but in the 1970s and early 80s, some of its early years projects, in particular *Communication Skills in Early Childhood* and *The Structuring of Play*, had a considerable impact on teachers' thinking and practice. The project publications (Tough, 1976; Manning & Sharp, 1977, for example), old but not obsolete, as I used to tell my sceptical students, still have many worthwhile things to say about the fundamental, dynamic interrelationship of talk, play and learning. On the subject of talk, the ground-breaking work of Gordon Wells (1986), Barbara Tizard & Martin Hughes (1984) is equally worthy of resuscitation. We may not have forgotten the names of these researchers, but we have gone barely any distance at all in applying the lessons we should have learned from their evidence and their analysis. In study after study of the new, scripted practices of the plenary session within the National Literacy framework, the findings of an

earlier age are replicated: teachers still talk too much on topics of their own selection and ask too many questions, of the wrong kind. Classroom talk is still woefully unbalanced in favour of the teacher.[2]

The penultimate expert witness for my argument against forgetting is from the more distant past: Ruth Griffith's magnum opus, published in 1930, is *A Study of Imagination in Early Childhood*. She worked in Brisbane and London in the late 1920s, documenting the spontaneous talk of five year old children from seriously economically disadvantaged backgrounds. What she heard and transcribed and brilliantly analysed should have been enough to prevent the damaging construct of 'the language deprived child' from ever being invented; it is extraordinary that this prejudiced distortion of the evidence is still alive and well. Back in 1989, Martin Hughes reported a primary headteacher describing children starting school as 'nil on entry'; she has many counterparts today, only too ready to agree with her. Griffiths takes a very different view; her observations show how each child is an artist, novelist, poet, dramatist and world-maker from the earliest age. She writes of children's imaginary worlds with great sensitivity, warning us against dismissing their fantasy thinking as unworthy, because unreal:

> It must be remembered that this world is only unreal because it is an alien world to the adult who comes suddenly into contact with it. To the child it is the real world in which he lives, the world of his self-created subjective experience. (1930, p. 116)

But perhaps the most important passage to disinter from this forgotten masterpiece is a most unsettling and unexpected observation about the dangers of opening too many nursery schools, and over-institutionalising the lives of young children:

> The primary schools may come to regard these as institutions from which they may expect a continuous stream of children broken in to school life as they conceive it. (1930, p. 337)

What Griffiths is reminding us here, if we choose to hear it, is that the quality of our nursery schools and other early years provisions is directly dependent on our understanding of what these settings are for. *Are* they for breaking children in to the structures of statutory schooling? Are they for marching children hot-foot across the acres of 'stepping stones', the curious metaphor that official guidance now uses to describe children's early learning? Are they for raising standards in literacy and numeracy? At which point we may pause to remember the splendid passage in the 1933 Hadow Report on infant and nursery schools:

> In none of this should a uniform standard to be reached by all children be expected. The infant school has no business with uniform standards of attainment. (Board of Education, 1933, p. 105)

Griffiths is clear that settings for young children should be none of the above. She argues that the lives of very young children are more intellectually rich and

vigorous than our benevolent institutions can well provide for, and that children's 'most urgent need is freedom to grow and think'. In all this, of course, her work is in a direct line of descent from Dewey, whose volumes are riddled with the metaphors of growth and direction.

Indeed, Dewey sees education as practically synonymous with life and growth: 'education has as its aim at every stage an added capacity for growth' (1916, p. 54). And in a moving passage of great eloquence he reminds us of the educator's part in this:

> The teacher must know both the capacities, the fulfillments in truth and beauty and behaviour open to children, and the conditions that ensure that [the children's] actions move in this direction, towards the culminations of themselves. (1900, p. 31)

How's that for an early years philosophy? And not a target or learning goal in sight. I rest my case.

Correspondence

Mary Jane Drummond, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 2PH, United Kingdom.

Notes

[1] 'full-blooded' is a fine epithet used by Nathan Isaacs, Susan's husband, who describes young children's learning as 'their own full-blooded active building up of knowledge' (Hardeman 1974).

[2] A useful summary of how classroom talk continues to fail young learners, and how it could be radically transformed, is given in a recent pamphlet by Professor Robin Alexander (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching*.

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