

Editorial

DEREK GILLARD

In August 1963 the UK's Minister of Education, Sir Edward Boyle, asked the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) 'to consider primary education in all its aspects and the transition to secondary education' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p. iii). The Council, chaired by Bridget Plowden, presented its report to Anthony Crosland, Secretary of State for Education and Science, in October 1966, and the Plowden Report *Children and their Primary Schools* was published, 40 years ago this year, in 1967. A similar report was produced for Wales.

'At the heart of the educational process lies the child'. That much-quoted opening sentence from chapter 2 set the tone of the report. Child-centredness and learning by discovery were the two key messages which most people took from Plowden. Many regarded them as radical new ideas. Some viewed them as dangerously subversive.

Yet, as Bridget Plowden herself wrote (in 1987), 'we did not invent anything new' (p. 120). The report certainly 'endorsed the trend towards individual and active learning' and 'learning by acquaintance' and hoped that many more schools would be influenced by it. Yet it also warned 'we certainly do not deny the value of learning "by description" or the need for the practice of skills and consolidation of knowledge' (p. 120).

Hadow had promoted these ideas 30 years earlier, but they go back much further than that. Indeed, as Aubrey Nunes (n.d.) points out, 'the idea of learning by doing is a good one. It has a long and ancient history'. He traces it back to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and argues that it resurfaced in the Renaissance in *The Scholemaster* by Elizabeth I's teacher, Roger Ascham (1515-1568).

But this long and honourable ancestry didn't prevent the backlash against Plowden. In the years after its publication it was blamed for just about everything from an infant's poor spelling to national economic failure, and its message about the centrality of the child in the educational enterprise was misrepresented by traditionalists and ignored by politicians. The 'Black Papers' were followed by Jim Callaghan's Ruskin speech and the 'Great Debate'. Then, from 1979, Margaret Thatcher's administrations set about creating a 'schools crisis' in preparation for their ruthless marketisation of education.

A leader in the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)* (6 March 1987) summed up the situation well. 'The Plowden Report has been misquoted, misunderstood, over-simplified, torn to shreds by academics and used by a few schools to justify some fairly mindless practice'. Twenty years on, it said, 'primary teachers are beset by criticism, renewed accusations (unsupported by evidence) of falling standards in basic skills, and calls for a national curriculum and "benchmarks" at 7 and 11'.

We didn't just get benchmarks. The 1988 Education Reform Act imposed a sterile, content-based National Curriculum, a grotesquely complicated regime of tick boxes and tests, and a system of school league tables which replaced cooperation with competition. And just when we all thought things could only get better, along came Tony Blair's New Labour administrations. With their Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, they've gone even further than the Tories, telling teachers not only what to teach but how to teach it.

So where are we now, 40 years on? And, perhaps even more importantly, where are we going? This issue of *Forum* tries to answer these questions. In doing so, it unashamedly celebrates Plowden as the great, humane statement about the possibilities of primary education which it undoubtedly was.

It begins by looking back to the precursors of Plowden – the Hadow Reports. It was, after all, Hadow's proposal, in 1926, for the division of schooling into two stages with the break at 11, which led to the creation of primary schools; and it was the Hadow Reports of 1931 and 1933 which set out a vision of the style of education the new schools should espouse.

Next, in pieces by Peter Cunningham, Paul Warwick, Brian Melling and Philip Gammage, it reviews the history of Plowden in the experience and consciousness of teachers. As Peter Cunningham says, the report 'hangs like a backdrop, setting the scene in which these teachers lived their professional lives'.

Then, it examines a range of Plowden-related issues in the light of events since the report was published. Mike Brogden argues that changes in the design of school buildings had little effect on what went on in them; Alicia James assesses Plowden's part in changing adult concepts of childhood; and Trevor Kerry asks if integration is a 'dirty word' or a 'golden key'. Michael Armstrong analyses the art work of three young American children; Mike Ayles argues that Plowden played an important role in promoting parental participation in primary schools; and Leslie Carrick reviews foreign language teaching from Plowden to the present. Elizabeth Wood argues that the concept of child-centred education has re-emerged within contemporary social policy initiatives; Michael Tidd looks at what happened to the middle schools which Plowden proposed; and George Smith, Teresa Smith and Tom Smith revisit Educational Priority Areas.

It brings the story up to date with Maurice Galton's analysis of the effects of New Labour's education policies on primary schools and their pupils, and with Diane Hofkins's review of her 20 years as assistant editor of the *TES*.

And finally, it looks to the future with Robin Alexander's piece about the new Primary Review, which he is leading. Supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and based at Cambridge University's Faculty of Education, the Review aims to be 'a wide-ranging and independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England' (Primary Review website: see Links below). Given all that has happened in the 40 years since Plowden, the Review is timely and welcome.

The Review team is anxious to receive ideas and evidence, so if you get this copy of *Forum* in time, do visit the Primary Review website (see Links below) for details of how to contribute. The deadline for submissions is 1 April 2007.

It is easy – especially at my age! – to wallow in rose-tinted remembrances of the past. But looking back has its value, for it is only by knowing the past that we can understand the present, and only by understanding the present that we can hope to do better for our children in the future.

Maurice Kogan 10 April 1930–6 January 2007

As I finished writing the above editorial, I learned of the death of Maurice Kogan. He will be remembered for his many books and for his work at Brunel University. But for readers of *FORUM* – and especially of this issue – he will best be remembered as the Secretary of the Plowden Committee, a job which enabled him to promote the importance of evidence-based educational research of value to both practitioners and theorists.

In May last year I wrote to Maurice to ask him if he would contribute an article to this issue. He replied: 'I'm glad to be asked but a bit overwhelmed with requests for productions that are not at the top of my own agenda – which includes contending with ill health. So I must beg to be excused. At 76 one is entitled to some rest!' After such a long and distinguished career, he is certainly entitled to that.

Anne Corbett's obituary of Maurice Kogan can be found on the *Guardian* website at:

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/obituary/story/0,,1986788,00.html>

References

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- Nunes, A. (n.d.) *From Plato to Plowden*.
<http://www.pigeonpostbox.co.uk/ppbmisc/others.php>
- Plowden, B. (1987) 'Plowden' Twenty Years On, *Oxford Review of Education*, 13(1), p. 119ff. <http://www.dg.dial.pipex.com/documents/plowdenore09.shtml>

Links

Derek Gillard's website (<http://www.dg.dial.pipex.com>) includes the full texts of all the Hadow Reports and the Plowden Report.

Primary Review website. <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk>

DEREK GILLARD taught in primary and middle schools in England for more than 30 years, including 11 as a head teacher. He retired in 1997 but continues to write on educational issues for his website and for *FORUM*. *Correspondence:* Derek Gillard, 60 Oxford Road, Marston, Oxford OX3 0RD, United Kingdom (dg@dial.pipex.com).