

Plowden in History: popular and professional memory

PETER CUNNINGHAM

ABSTRACT The author reflects on the way that the Plowden Report is represented in the historical record. Simple narratives of education policy are inadequate to capture the Report's significance in a decade of cultural turmoil, and the professional contention that it generated. Historical accounts will vary according to the viewpoint of the historian, and we must have regard to oral as well as documentary evidence. Following the Plowden Report, subsequent researches in the primary classroom and changes in state education policy indicate its practical and symbolic importance, but the memories of teachers are sometimes more muted in their recall of its impact on their practice.

Historiography

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus reputedly observed that we cannot step into the same river twice. We don't have his own writings, only quotations embedded in the work of later authors, and even his vital dates in the sixth century BCE are a matter of conjecture; in ancient times he was nicknamed 'the Obscure' for the difficulty of his thought. Such uncertainties are echoed even in our own abundantly documented era, when the constant stream of historical time in which we live demands continual reassessment of the past. So it is with the Plowden Report, the meaning and significance of which continue to change as our historical perspective lengthens.

A common account is that Plowden was a key historical moment in a unified national chronology of educational policy and educational reform, the moment at which primary education ceased officially to be the 'Cinderella' of the system. But history is not a single narrative except as an artifice of historians. It is a whole series of overlapping narratives in the life stories of individuals who lived through history. Thus the point at which innovation occurs differs in the professional trajectory of individuals. It may be a starting point, a turning point or an endpoint; the launch pad to a career of idealism or commitment, or a symbol of the decadence in which one was trained; the point at which primary teaching found its feet, or the point at which it all started to

go wrong; the culmination of what had been anticipated and worked for for years, or the nail in the coffin that terminated a career.

The 'truth' of the historical event is not fixed in a text, but rather what was made of it, the significance it held, the meanings with which it was endowed. The Revised Code of 1862 and the 1988 Education Reform Act are examples of other key events that acquire a life of their own in historiography. Often they are linked to notable characters, like Robert Lowe in the former case and Kenneth Baker in the latter. The Butler Act and the Plowden Report, for example, further complicate historical understanding as they become inextricably bound up with perceptions of personalities as putative authors of events.

Historical accounts would concur that following publication the Report provided a battleground on which all sorts of tensions in popular culture and professional practice were engaged and subsequent treatments have to be understood in that light.

Both professional memory and popular memory are at play in the historical re-presentation of events, not only Plowden as a professional text, but also the 'Swinging Sixties' more generally as a decade of change. Social and cultural history of the 1960s is only beginning to be seriously researched as historians, some of whom lived through the period, acquire sufficient distance to begin to offer more detached perspectives on the period as a whole. Two major recent studies are by Arthur Marwick, who could personally recall the decade and paid significant attention to Plowden, and Dominic Sandbrook, born after 1970, whose accounts ignore the Report. For Marwick:

Myths of the hippie paradise, and of the proximity of the alternative society, were constructed at the time and have inspired believers ever since. So too with myths about how progressivism ruined the educational systems of Britain and America. (Marwick, 1998, p. 498)

Marwick highlighted the Plowden Report as a document of more significance than A.S. Neill's influential *Summerhill* [1] in the general controversy over progressive approaches. He identified the Committee as 'the great and the good', the voices of measured judgement who listened carefully to professional experts. He offered a very tentative criticism however of the experts, civil servants, psychologists and academic educationists, that whilst eager to empathise with the problems of the poor, they were 'not exposed to the blasts of scepticism and cynicism generated in ordinary families struggling to make their way' (Marwick, 1998, p. 499).

Marwick also documented effectively the variety of dissenting responses that marked subsequent debate: not simply the 'thundering denunciation' of the Black Papers (1969 etc.), but also the more measured critique of Richard Peters (Peters, 1969) and others, the emotive if professional retort of Stuart Froome (Froome, 1970), Neville Bennett's classroom research (Bennett, 1976) and the 1978 National Primary Survey by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) (Department of Education and Science/Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools,

1978). By contrast, Sandbrook attends to education mostly with regard to politics and political personalities, though with some reference to children's experience, but his focus is exclusively on secondary and higher education; in his historical panorama it appears that Plowden has failed to rescue primary education from its 'Cinderella' status. (Sandbrook, 2005, pp. 312-316, 2006, pp. 420-429).

Philosophical and ideological debates provoked by Plowden, to which Marwick alludes, were bound to colour subsequent recollection, and the nature of those debates provides the focus for much of the professional historiography, and accounts by educationists that continued to engage with questions about learning, curriculum, the social role of the school and the teacher, raised by the Plowden Report. To mark the 20th anniversary, *Oxford Review of Education* published a special edition, in which Andrew Wilkinson pertinently commented:

The influence of a document is not confined to what it purports to say. It has sociolinguistic meanings related to its status, power, context, timing, reader receptiveness. (*Oxford Review of Education*, 1987, p. 111)

Maurice Kogan, looking back from the late 1980s with a hint of despair, observed:

Teachers working in artistic interaction with their pupils would create a curriculum that would support the individual good and yet contribute to benign engineering of the whole of society. Now we may know better that nothing is easily achieved and a great deal is easily destroyed or humiliated or impaired. (*Oxford Review of Education*, 1987, p. 14)

But Kathy Silva was more upbeat:

What matters most, however, is that the Report reaffirmed the place of schooling in the humanistic tradition. Education is about nurturing the moral, aesthetic and creative aspects in children's development, not about 'getting the country somewhere'. It is for this humane view that Britain still attracts the envy of teachers throughout the world. (*Oxford Review of Education*, 1987, p. 11)

In my own historical account of primary curriculum change, which terminated with Plowden, particular interest lay in the report's dissemination, in particular the publicity it aroused even in the course of the enquiry, ensuring that its work reached a wider public and aroused a more popular interest in the work of primary schools (Cunningham, 1988, pp. 155-160).

Brian Simon's account of Plowden set in the context of post-war education attempted to unpick the elements of 'myth' and 'reality' in the so-called 'primary school revolution' (Simon, 1991, pp. 379-382), and his detailed analysis identified both the professional and the political threads in the

narrative. Simon's own very active involvement in understanding the nature of classroom activity is also recorded in Maurice Galton's later revisiting of their ORACLE [2] research (Hargreaves & Galton et al, 1999). In the 1976 ORACLE study, only 7% of the classrooms were still organised in the traditional manner, with children seated in rows, facing the front, but the study revealed that the Plowden ideal of activity, discovery and interaction was somewhat illusory in most classrooms (Hargreaves & Galton et al, 1999, pp. 39-40, 80). Evidence suggested there had not been a 'primary revolution'.

Teachers' Voices

Brian Jackson's research in 1962 showed that 85% of teachers still supported streaming (Simon, 1991, pp. 346-347) so it would hardly be surprising to find considerable professional resistance to the various recommendations of the Plowden Report. Inevitably reactions were mixed. It might be argued that the teachers' voice can be found in a direct response to Plowden by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) in 1969. This is the voice of the 'organised teacher', a voice that had been heard by the Committee itself, as the NUT presented written and oral evidence. The Union indicated that it had long been seeking parity with secondary schools in the treatment of primary children and teachers, and it viewed the report as of outstanding and historic importance in its analysis of children's social and educational needs. In its recognition of the need for what, in 2006, we might recognise as the 'Every Child Matters' agenda with its 'extended schools', the union considered that teachers were inevitably well placed for early diagnosis of children's problems, and that only the education service could properly coordinate the contribution of different social services; schools should be the focal point of services for 'purposive integration in the interests of the child'. It had been 'traditional for teachers to believe that the total physical, mental and social well-being of the child is their concern', and that during the previous decade this belief had been given 'scientific form and validity' from sociology (National Union of Teachers, 1969, pp. 6-7). But in these, as in curricular matters, it staunchly defended the professional independence of teachers and resisted the 'encroachment of exaggerated expectations' (National Union of Teachers, 1969, p. 5); the teachers would resist any attempt at imposition by the Secretary of State, HMI or local education authorities (LEAs) of curriculum innovation, and demanded the provision and proper resourcing of in-service training.

There is valuable evidence for the Plowden era in published accounts by teachers that deserve more attention than they have hitherto received from historians. Here we may read of progressive practice in the Plowden years. However, Rachel Scott and Beryl Gilroy make no specific mention of the Report in their evocative descriptions of primary teaching in the 1960s and 1970s. Scott's account (1971) richly illustrates the freedom to innovate and the child-centred practices that the report encouraged in the particular contemporary context of new Commonwealth immigration. Sybil Marshall,

herself the author of the highly influential *Experiment in Education* published in the run-up to Plowden, described Scott's work as 'one of the most illuminating and heart-warming educational documents I have come across' (Scott, 1971, p. 13). A distinguishing feature of the Plowden Report is the photographic evidence it contains, and no single picture more so than its frontispiece portraying a multi-ethnic group of children enthusiastically gathering around the photographer in a school playground. Rachel Scott hoped to offer 'the children's views of themselves and the culture they (we) had previously felt to be so unassailable ... The efforts of these dedicated teachers to understand their charges brought them in touch with the adult communities to which the children belonged' (Scott, 1971, p. 13). In her third and fourth chapters, 'How We Began' and 'So Much to Learn', Rachel Scott epitomises a process of teaching, starting from where the children are.

Beryl Gilroy, who moved to England from Guyana in 1951, documented her experiences as a primary teacher (Gilroy, 1976), culminating in the Plowden years as the only black headmistress in her London borough. *Black Teacher*, published in 1976, is the moving but humorous and entertaining account she wrote of her experiences and is worth comparing with the Plowden Report itself. In the Report, 'Children of Immigrants' is in retrospect a disappointingly brief chapter but one which, although adopting the largely assimilationist stance prevailing at that time, identifies the potentially enriching cultural contribution that might be made as well as difficulties of communication and understanding that were encountered, and racist attitudes embedded in traditional teaching materials. Gilroy, as a victim of racism herself, is forthright about the culture clashes, for instance the views of some of her black parents that schools were too soft in their discipline and too informal in their teaching methods. At the same time she recognised the value of an active, expressive and practical curriculum, cookery, arts and crafts, dance, drama and music, of teaching English as a second language (Gilroy, 1976, pp. 168-169).

Young teachers' voices as they entered primary teaching in the mid-1970s, and again 10 years on, in 1985, were recorded and analysed by Jennifer Nias (1989). Here again, there is no explicit reference to the Report, but Plowden hangs like a backdrop, setting the scene in which these teachers lived their professional lives; but the ideological camps formed in staffrooms, the 'progressives' and the 'traditionalists', constituted in effect a response to Plowden. Primary teaching as a bottomless pit for 'the investment of scarce personal resources such as time, interest and energy' (Nias, 1989, p. 208) was largely, though far from exclusively, a product of the Plowden ethos, and paradoxically the sense of public criticism that was affecting Nias's teachers by 1985 was a part of the post-Plowden 'backlash'.

What picture might we get from oral history, as a way of understanding the part that Plowden played in teachers' lives and careers? In a series of oral history projects undertaken throughout the 1990s concerning teachers' professional identity, a team of researchers began by interviewing retired teachers who had been trained under the student teacher scheme between the

wars (Cunningham & Gardner, 2004). The multiple references to wartime evacuation led to a further investigation, aiming to find out more about the wartime transition in primary teachers' practice. For the latter enquiry we interviewed teachers trained before the war, teachers trained during the war, and some whose training took place in the immediate aftermath. In accounts from all these cohorts, Plowden frequently provided a further point of reference, from those whose active careers ended about that time, to those for whom it occurred at the peak of their career. It would be foolish and misleading to seek to generalise from responses in semi-structured interviews and life history narratives that did not in any case insist on evoking specific references to Plowden.[3] But rather the wealth of individual accounts can be explored for the range of responses, as recalled through a retrospect of 30 years or so. The issues entailed in gathering and understanding oral histories of teachers have been explored in our writings (Cunningham, 1999; Cunningham & Gardner, 2004).

We might assume that enthusiasm for Plowden would correlate to the youth of the teachers, but our respondents in the above projects did not include children of the post-war bulge who would have trained and emerged as newly qualified teachers in the years around 1963. In fact, one of our youngest respondents, trained post-war, commented [4]:

Well I always thought the trouble with Plowden, and I said it at the time, was that it brought us over the hill and then everyone started running and couldn't stop. (WEP C020 Norman Trenton)[5]

However, one of the greatest enthusiasts for progressive methods was also one of our oldest interviewees. Daisy Shipley (PITT A232) had been born in 1907 and Plowden more or less coincided with the end of her long teaching career. Although she did not specifically mention the Report, her testimony made clear that the Plowden ethos had been attractive to her in her advanced stage of professional development. She attended courses run by HMI and by the West Riding of Yorkshire LEA where the outstanding Director of Education, Alec Clegg, encouraged her and visited her school:

It was this freedom in education that fascinated me. And developing the whole child rather than just his development in arithmetic and English. To think of the spiritual side and the child as a whole, that was what mattered. (Cunningham & Gardner, 2004, pp. 212-213)

Eric Brody (WEP A060), Miss Shipley's exact contemporary, was by contrast more sceptical as regards teaching methods, and refused to be moved into reorganising his classroom.

Well it was the Plowden Report of course that did it all, child centred education. The teacher just stands by and supplies the material and the children learn this as they go along. Which I didn't agree with at all, but I had one young lady who came to us as a new member of staff, the first thing she did when she came was to turn

all the desks round into groups. I said to her 'You've got children there with their backs to you, how are you going to teach them like that?'. 'Oh we don't do class teaching anymore'. I thought ... I thought 'You carry on as long as you get results with that, that's alright, I'm going on my usual way'. And I didn't turn my desks round.

But he did recognise Plowden as an endorsement of post-war innovation that had resulted from a new generation of teachers. He had begun teaching in 1927, taught in primary schools throughout his career, as head teacher from 1950 to 1971. After the war,

you were building up – you were always building up a new profession, the older people who'd hung on 'til the war ended before they retired had gone and you had youngsters coming in with new ideas.

Kathleen Fox (WEP A079) was 10 years younger than Miss Shipley and Mr Brody, and began teaching in 1938 in London primary schools, later moving to the headship of a small rural school where she remained from 1956 to 1976. This school was inadequately housed, and the county inspector tried to persuade her to agree to an open plan for the new school. He sent her to observe one near Oxford,

and when I came back I decided even more I didn't want an open-plan school! [laughs] I mean this is perhaps four classes in the one space, you know. So I didn't care for that idea at all. So we had a traditional four class school built.

Mention of the Plowden Report also made her chuckle:

I tried to have a happy medium. I tried to have a happy medium between the two. My motto has always been, 'Moderation in all things' you know. So we did arrange, we did have tables and chairs and we had two tables together so there were four children at the sort of table. So it was all right for some group work, you know but we also had chalk and talk [laughs] which is another thing ... I don't think we were going to get any blackboards. I had to be after the architect for that, for some blackboards.

I mean all our children could play and they can play and they do learn through play but I don't think you can make that your main basic method, you know. No you see I would have been considered a bit old-fashioned in the days of the Plowden Report but now they're coming back to my way of ... I mean now I would feel quite happy with the ways that teaching is being done now in many ways.

This not uncommonly cautious and selective response to Plowden was also evident in Frances Cuffley's account. Frances Cuffley (WEP C009) was younger

again by a decade than Kathleen Fox, beginning her career in the immediate post-war years, teaching infant and primary before progressing to be head teacher of an infants' school from 1965 to 1985. She expressed a perceived threat of indiscipline from the new methods, and a perception of training colleges as doctrinaire.

The Plowden Report ... I took some [of those ideas] on and I threw the others out because a lot of it, I felt, wasn't going to help the children at all. Children have got to have routine and they've got to have a pattern that they recognise or know. It's no good leaving them all airy-fairy and floating about. It just gives a feeling of disturbance amongst them. I know that ... that's when my sister trained. She trained in the 60s and that was the area they tried to instil into her. No chairs, no blackboards, no rhythm, no fixed ideas – each child for himself. It doesn't work. It doesn't work. And I know that the education adviser used to come round and say to us, 'Don't worry to teach, the children will learn'. The children don't learn. They have to be taught. Some will learn. Some will come to you. They can read at the age of four and others if you left them, never learned to read and the ones that find it difficult have got to have it much more structured and if they're really finding it difficult, then you've got to work things out that will suit them. And that was the area that I enjoyed.

She also questioned the premise of children as 'natural learners' and identified gender differences in behaviour based on her personal experience as a teacher.

They [the advisers] would have liked us to be under pressure, yes, they would but you see I'd been with Miss Scott for too long. I knew how important it was that the children had got to be taught. They don't just learn, especially little boys, especially little boys. Little girls want to please and they'll do what you want and they'll get stuck into it. Not little boys – life's too exciting.

John Draper (WEP C013) was more or less Frances Cuffley's contemporary, training in the post-war years before teaching in a suburban primary school for the rest of his career, from 1955 to 1987. He considered that freedom for teachers had been acceptable for his generation, based on assumption of a discipline instilled through national military service or through training college, but he feared that a younger generation, especially male teachers, had become sloppy, less thoughtful and evaluative. Women teachers, he thought, were more dedicated than men.

He became coordinator for maths in his school, and what he particularly appreciated after Plowden was:

Far more practical hands-on work, especially ... I keep talking about the Maths. ... Far more practical work we introduced, instead of this formal teaching, we brought a lot more apparatus for the children,

which is something I always wanted to do but there wasn't the money. Then we got money from the authorities to do it. They ran some excellent courses.

And I think the children ... Well, they loved the ideas and learned far more and could understand more, what number was all about and various concepts.

He spoke of rearranging the classroom, moving from individual desks facing front to desks arranged as a table, not with their backs to the board, but looking sideways on, but

If I was teaching sometimes a concept that I could teach all, we just turned the desks around. So they were all facing my way, not in rows, just where they were sitting ... I didn't like the idea of sideways. I much prefer head-on but that seems to be the ... still is the fashion these days, that they sit in groups.

He was very keen on project work in the fourth year, undertaking local study for history and geography, and residential trips that included making films. On the other hand,

I didn't [teach an integrated day] because I was teaching fourth years but it certainly happened in the first year because they'd been doing it in the infant class and we thought it was too big a transition so they started like that. But no, it was very much always in the fourth year, a structured day.

Though they developed ideas at the school, and experimented with teaching methods, he felt under no pressure to change his style of teaching, and taught by 'chalk and talk' where he felt it was needed:

Chalk and talk. I would do it like that, rather than try and do it through work cards, which seemed to be the fashion ...

He felt that Plowden had ultimately had no effect on him:

No, not really. It was just a name, again. [laughs] There have been so many names – I can assure you.

Conclusion

Plowden carries symbolic value, standing for certain ideals in the education of young children, but how long will it survive the memories of those who remember it? It is remembered variously by older and retired teachers, according to the ways in which it was encountered in their professional experience, and according to the subsequent course of their careers and the course of educational politics more generally. It lives on in the history of culture, in the history of policy, in the history of educational practice, and in each of those contexts it is subject to continual reinterpretation.

The Plowden Report was the last great achievement of the Central Advisory Council (and its forebear, the Consultative Committee). Subsequent research into classroom practice, HMI reviews and reports could never enjoy such a holistic approach to ‘children and their primary schools’. The launch of the independent Primary Review (<http://www.primaryreview.org.uk/>) – and its timing, 40 years (or one career’s span) after Plowden – recognises the extraordinary cultural changes that have occurred in the intervening period and continue to occur. This new review might well consider the view of Kierkegaard, ‘father of existentialism’, that life, though it must be lived forwards, can be only understood backwards. To improve the future, we must strive to learn from the past, a past that is not a simple narrative of policy but also a complex layer of individual and collective memory.

Notes

- [1] *Summerhill* (Neill, 1962), a radical approach to education, was first published as a collection of Neill’s writings in the USA in 1960, and then in 1962 by Victor Gollancz in London, with a foreword by Erich Fromm. It was reissued as a Pelican paperback in 1968, the year after the publication of Plowden.
- [2] *Observational Research and Classroom Learning Experience*.
- [3] Kogan, in *Oxford Review of Books* (1987, p. 17) proposed that ‘The extent to which the Plowden Report did, in fact, generate change through sympathetic description could only be ascertained by means of a detailed enquiry among teachers who have passed through the education service since its publication, and that has not been done’. That constitutes a project that could still be undertaken, though it was not the principal focus of our enquiry. Oral historians will however be alert to the fact that, like Kogan himself in 1987, like our teacher respondents of the 1990s, the teachers concerned will be remembering with hindsight, across the intervening landscape of National Curriculum, national strategies, testing and league tables.
- [4] Pseudonyms are used throughout, and the numerical reference is to the respondent’s record in the Archive of Teacher Memory at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. Original audio recordings of interviews, and transcripts, are filed according to project: PITT (Professional Identity and Teacher Training), WEP (Wartime Evacuation Project).
- [5] Mr Trenton’s expression here is curiously reminiscent of a comment made in 1974 by the Chief Education Officer, Alec Clegg, of progressive teachers who ‘have jumped on the bandwagon but cannot play the instruments’ (Cunningham, 1988, p. 12).

References

- Bennett, N. (1976) *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress*. London: Open Books.
- Cunningham, P. (1988) *Curriculum Change in the Primary School Since 1945: dissemination of the progressive ideal*. London: Falmer.

- Cunningham, P. (1999) *Being a Primary Teacher in the Twentieth Century*. Coventry: Centre for Research in Elementary and Primary Education, University of Warwick.
- Cunningham, P. & Gardner, P. (2004) *Becoming Teachers: texts and testimonies, 1907-1950*. London: Woburn Press.
- Department of Education and Science/Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (1978) *Primary Education in England*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Fröome, S. (1970) *Why Tommy isn't Learning*. London: Stacey.
- Gilroy, B. (1976) *Black Teacher*. London: Cassell.
- Hargreaves, L. & Galton, M. assisted by C. Comber, A. Pell & D. Wall (1999) *Inside the Primary Classroom: 20 years on*. London: Routledge.
- Marwick, A. (1998) *The Sixties: cultural revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- National Union of Teachers (1969) *Plowden: the Union's comments on some of the major issues of the Plowden Report*. London: NUT.
- Neill, A.S. (1962) *Summerhill: a radical approach to education*. London: Gollancz.
- Nias, J. (1989) *Primary Teachers Talking: a study of teaching as work*. London: Routledge.
- Oxford Review of Education* (1987) Special Issue: 'Plowden Twenty Years On', 13(1).
- Peters, R.S. (Ed.) (1969) *Perspectives on Plowden*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sandbrook, D. (2005) *Never Had it So Good: a history of Britain from Suez to the Beatles*. London: Little, Brown.
- Sandbrook, D. (2006) *White Heat: a history of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*. London: Little, Brown.
- Scott, R. (1971) *A Wedding Man is Nicer Than Cats, Miss: a teacher at work with immigrant children*. Newton Abbot: David & Charles.
- Simon, B. (1991) *Education and the Social Order, 1940-1990*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

PETER CUNNINGHAM entered teaching in the wake of the Plowden Report and subsequently worked in Oxfordshire and Leicestershire primary schools where children's creativity was fostered within an integrated curriculum. He continues to take a keen interest in educational policy and curriculum development viewed in the context of cultural history. Particular interests are the training and professional identity of primary school teachers, researched by means of oral history. He has also written on educational innovators and progressives, and has been an active member of the History of Education Society, UK. *Correspondence:* Peter Cunningham, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 8PQ, United Kingdom (bjc36@cam.ac.uk).



Children, their world, their education

LAST CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The Primary Review is a comprehensive and independent enquiry into England's system of primary education (see this issue of *FORUM*, p. 190).

If you have views on the condition and future of this vital phase of education, please send them to us **NOW**, in writing or electronically.

For further information go to
www.primaryreview.org.uk