Plowden and Me: a personal memoir

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ABSTRACT The author argues that the Plowden Report, though rarely read, underpinned the work and careers of many primary school teachers. He relates his own experiences of teaching in schools and expresses his pleasure at having rediscovered Plowden through his work in a further education college Child Studies department.

My story starts in the early 1950s, aged 4 years and 10 months, in coastal Lancashire, when I walked, firstly with my mother, then with my circle of friends, to a Church of England primary school, at least a mile away from home. There were 50 other children in the class and we had, looking back on it now, a wonderful teacher who, interestingly for the time, drove a smart Morris Minor 1000 all the way to and from Southport.

She played the piano every day and we danced and sang our way through that first crucial year. Around the high walls were posters of a farmer and his animals from the phonic Beacon Reading Scheme. Oh and we did some form of physical education every day, outside when the weather allowed. We each had a small rectangular rubber mat which made rolling on the playground tarmac slightly more comfortable for developing bones and bodies. Just as well then that we danced and sang and jumped and rolled through our early days because in that large, high-ceilinged classroom, there was little room to move between the heavy double desks with cast-iron frames and wooden metal-hinged lids.

I returned to that schoolroom in my 17th year to hear at first hand the enthusiastic Harold Wilson on the hustings as our prospective Member of Parliament for what was then the constituency of Ormskirk. How small that classroom seemed then. How close we were to our new Prime Minister! About this time I read the seminal work *The Future of Socialism* (1956) by Tony Crosland who was later, as Secretary of State for Education and Science, to write the Foreword to *Children and their Primary Schools* (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p. iii) in which he acknowledged the role of Sir Edward Boyle in asking the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) 'to consider the whole subject of primary education and the transition to

secondary education'. The rest, as people say, is history. It is certainly part of my history, for I was soon to become a primary school teacher.

I attended Loughborough College of Education to obtain a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. I cannot remember much attention being given to the Plowden Report at that time but like many of my student colleagues we struggled to make sense of Piaget's theories of learning. His ideas seemed remote to me, especially as I had had no younger brothers or sisters to relate to. My attendance at a boys' grammar school near Liverpool followed by three years at what was to become 'the Polytechnic' had not provided me with any meaningful contact with children. I had done some voluntary youth work in one of Eric Midwinter's Educational Priority Areas (EPAs) but really for the purposes of educating children aged 5 to 11 I had no reference point.

The thought of undertaking teaching practice was both exciting and intimidating. One of the hardest skills I had to develop quickly was the ability to talk *with* children and not *at* them. The county of Leicestershire was regarded as 'progressive' at this time and I was fortunate to practise my craft at a purpose-built, open-plan, all-through primary school (Brown & Precious, 1968, pp. 136-139). Back at college my peers and I expressed our concerns about not being able to understand, let alone teach, reading skills. We asked for something to be included in our regular classes but we failed to persuade the course planners.

But – as I have found in my career – formal lessons are less effective than the example and influence of enthusiastic practitioners. So a group of us sought out a sympathetic and enthusiastic lecturer who had relevant primary experience who agreed to give us some guidance and practical help outside our normal timetable. We were also fortunate to have another lecturer who was enthusiastic about mathematics and was generous with her time. She helped us begin to understand the significance of Piaget's ideas for children's learning and learn to love maths, not fear it.

My first appointment, in 1971, was as 'Assistant Schoolmaster' in one of the largest junior schools in Leicester City. It was a shock when I took responsibility for my first class. There were 18 11-year-olds in a small classroom next to the boiler room and at the bottom of the stairs leading from the staffroom. Not a prestigious position. The class in this five-form entry, mixed junior school in a converted Home Farm on the edge of the city had been chosen carefully. Between them they represented a small disunited group of nations – English, Irish, Ugandan and Kenyan Asian, Polish, Italian, Afro-Caribbean, Welsh and Scottish. I can remember most of their names even today. I learned more from them than they ever learned from me. They did not find formal learning easy but they had a wealth of experience between them and I hope they went to their secondary schools with some happy memories of their last year in the Junior school.

This first experience taught me how important a good start at school could be to later success. I talked with other teachers in the school after watching how they behaved and dealt with children and colleagues. Then I

asked the Head Master (his title not mine) if he would approve my move from teaching 11-year-olds to the youngest children in the school, the seven to eight year-olds (now Year 3).

The children were organised into three parallel classes of approximately 60, each taught by a team of two qualified teachers. We had no Teaching Assistants or Learning Support nor help with children who may have had special educational needs.

We planned together every week as a team of six and taught topics such as the Egyptians. We gave the children lots of physical activities on the magnificent playing fields, used the resources of the local environment including the excellent museum and took them camping during the summer holidays. The school's deputy head was always taking on interesting extra projects such as building a sound-proofed recording room in the attic of one of the barn-like classrooms. The city and county were separate authorities until 1974 but it was this same deputy who invited me to listen to Leicestershire's then CEO, Stewart Mason, give one of his inspiring lectures at Stonehill High School, Birstall (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 518, 525). I don't believe anybody at my school ever mentioned the Plowden Report. I still hadn't read it.

Wishing to broaden my experience I negotiated what might be described as a free transfer between city schools. The respective heads knew each other. You could do that in those days. Another junior school but three strides from the city centre railway station, it shared its site with the infants' school, but we had no dealings with them – nor did anyone see the need to, especially the respective heads. However, there were staff in this EPA school (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, vol. 1, pp 50-68) who were interested in developing their knowledge and continuing to learn about children.

Encouraged by one of the deputy heads (large schools in Leicester City usually had one male and one female deputy), I studied part time for an Advanced Diploma at Leicester University and together we became involved in the ORACLE research project led by Maurice Galton, lecturer in the School of Education, which was under the leadership of Professor Brian Simon (Galton et al, 1980). We used tape recorders and checklists but the emphasis as I remember it was to observe and listen to what children actually said and to notice how they interacted with each other in group situations.

Regardless of the published findings of the research, this experience encouraged me to take notice of the purpose and focus of different groupings within classrooms, whether they are organised by the teacher or emerge from the relationships and needs of individuals. Most, if not all, of my current teaching is carried out with relatively mature adults but the group dynamic and the structured interaction between individuals is a valuable component of my lesson planning.

My next move took me to Northamptonshire in 1980, by then a largish unitary Local Education Authority (LEA) in the Midlands. As deputy of a two-form urban junior school, it was part of my brief to motivate teaching

colleagues and encourage them to work more cooperatively on curriculum planning in an attempt to improve what was taught to our children. The aim was to avoid repetition, broaden the range of topics covered and achieve some progression for all children. It was difficult! Junior teachers had little understanding of the needs of infants despite sharing the same site.

However, the authority was fortunate to have an inspirational lead inspector for primary education in the person of Sheila Addison (and her boss, Trevor Scholey, had worked for Sir Alec Clegg in the West Riding of Yorkshire!) (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, Annex C, p. 529 and Annex B, p. 509). She recognised that the county's schools provided a very variable experience and there was a challenging task ahead. She established off-site training and staff development for deputies and those aspiring to headship which looked to develop a curriculum which would be enriching and encourage children's talents and creativity.

Some teachers found her intimidating but she always knew you by name when she met you, whether it was at one of the teachers' centres or in the supermarket or department store. Prior to 1988, inspectors, curriculum advisers and interested teachers at all levels worked throughout the county to produce a curriculum statement and guidance which would recognise all children's entitlement to both a stimulating and effective school experience. We were introduced to the ideas of Christian Schiller (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, Annex B, p. 519) through the locally based National Association for Primary Education, which undertook the republication in 1984 of Schiller in his own words (Griffin-Beale, 1979). However, political developments overwhelmed these attempts which had been inspired also by a series of booklets promoting good practice written by Her Majesty's Inspectorate and known affectionately as 'Raspberry Ripples'.

By the time the National Curriculum was published (following the 1988 Education Reform Act) I had been the head teacher of a Northamptonshire village primary school for four years. It had one class in each year group. The school doubled in pupil numbers over six years due to the rapid population expansion under Northampton's Development Corporation and incoming parents' distrust of the town's lower, middle and upper school system. (In 2006 Northamptonshire completed a three-year phased transition to a two-tier primary/secondary structure.)

Countrywide, all teaching staff had to adjust very quickly to the new regime and the expectations that we now had to teach a prescribed core curriculum of maths, English and science plus a heavy load of other major subjects. Literally! We all staggered around with a ring binder for each subject. After an initial period of compliance staff began to notice that it was not working.

My deputy was the first to voice these misgivings articulately. She was an experienced Reception class teacher who had enthusiasm and a deep understanding of young children's needs. Her argument was that her class was spending so much time on science, geography, history and the rest that reading

standards were slipping alarmingly because her usual methods of developing literacy and early mathematical understanding were being squeezed out. It was about this time that teachers and others throughout the UK were voicing similar concerns which prompted the 'Three Wise Men' Report of 1992 (Alexander et al, 1992) and culminated in the Dearing Report of 1993 (House of Commons Education Committee, 1994) and the slimmed-down National Curriculum (Dearing, 1993). The Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), created in 1992, produced its own review of primary education in England which makes interesting reading (1998). Lots to read then – or more likely, read about in summaries in the *Times Educational Supplements* of the time and teacher union magazines. I still hadn't read Plowden, which seemed far less relevant than it ever had.

Early in 1991 I had moved to take up the headship of a Victorian triple-decker in north London with the brief of amalgamating the erstwhile separate junior and infants' schools which had coexisted for many years in this intimidating building. One of the parent governors at this time was Julia Hagedorn, an education journalist. There were many other professionals from media backgrounds and educational pursuits who were committed to the future success of their children's school. The active participation of parents and carers in a variety of roles was seen as vital and welcome. There was also a large nursery class which was fortunate to have two enthusiastic and knowledgeable teachers in charge during my period at the helm. Given the size of the building, the large number of crew and the speed of change in the local environment, it felt at times that I was a ship's captain.

The Inner London Education Authority was being disbanded under the terms of the Education Reform Act 1988, and Camden LEA, under the leadership of CEO Peter Mitchell (who had moved from Leicestershire), like other London education authorities, was to be given some years of grace to bring in the Local Management of Schools. The innovative and high-quality resources and post-Plowden philosophy of the Inner London Education Authority was to be fragmented. Schools had to learn to become more independent and resilient and establish their own particular ethos. There were difficulties and casualties. The splendid music service which provided high-quality, first-hand and enriching experiences to many children was one of those which struggled to survive. Our governors voted extra money to support the school orchestra.

Some personnel were metaphorically drowned or jumped ship. A notable collective bereavement at this time was suffered by the Labour Party when John Smith died suddenly. I can remember standing in our new, well-fitted staffroom's kitchen area, which provided a focal point for the increasingly cooperative and coherent teaching and support staff, when his death was announced on the radio. Soon afterwards I returned to Leicestershire, while in London, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair contested the leadership of what was to become New Labour! 'Education, education, education' was to follow. I still

hadn't read the Plowden Report and I suspect not many other serving teachers had either.

The city community primary school had great potential and did have a core of enthusiastic staff and parents but we were overwhelmed by a damaging Ofsted inspection report delivered early in my headship. Lack of strategic leadership from me, a shortage of funds, staff illness and increasingly problematic and inappropriate behaviour from prominent individual children put the school into Special Measures. Several head teachers and a revamped governing body later, the school has survived.

For me, after a short period of total disaffection, I rediscovered my enthusiasm for what had brought me into teaching all those years before. I actually began to enjoy class teaching again and did the rounds of a variety of schools, large and small, urban and rural, challenging and rewarding. I did two years of regular supply work, sometimes in the schools where I had begun my career, and also in a county open-plan primary school which had Mary Brown as its first head teacher. I began to combine this with some limited teaching in further education.

I found that in order to prepare interesting and relevant lessons for school leavers and adults alike, engaged on a wide variety of Child Studies courses, I had to read about child development, behaviour and curriculum issues – something I had previously been too busy to do.

Now, I find it very rewarding to be supporting enthusiastic adults, many of whom are returning to formal learning after years of work and raising their own children.

Most will become Teaching Assistants in a wide range of primary schools. Some already are, and are working hard to become qualified teachers. When I began to deliver a course for parent helpers called Stage 1 for Classroom Assistants in 1999 the only text available was Moyles & Suschitzky's booklet *Jills of All Trades* (1997) published by my union, the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. Now in 2007, amongst the many books, texts, reports and journals available, the Plowden Report features on the reading lists of at least three modules at higher education level. Now we are reading it together!

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