None So Blind: early childhood education and care – the connective tissue

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ABSTRACT The author makes sense of the story of his professional life through the eyes of several important writers and teachers on education and says that, for him, Bridget Plowden ranks alongside John Dewey, Friedrich Froebel, Ben Morris and A.S. Neill.

Tracing one's own involvement in an enterprise is sometimes quite instructive, but the human memory may easily distort, rewrite or re-image particularly salient events in one's past life. Moreover, many of us seem to be (mercifully, perhaps) somewhat gifted in forgetting, or glossing over, really bad experiences, such that our past is not too painful or too destructive to deal with. In short, it would seem we all tend to rewrite our history and to look back with a less than totally objective eye. I have discovered that, even when referring to a past family event in which, say, my brother and I had participated, we frequently have entirely different perspectives on that time, even though we thought we had shared the actual experience.

I mention this because, in using some impressions of my own history within this short paper, I want to be aware, along with the reader, that my perceptions may *already* be shaped more to fit my argument and the 'imagined' circumstances, than embedded in any other sort of external reality. I think it was G.H. Mead who said, 'We see through eyes that are peculiarly our own'. School experiences are no different from any others in this respect and the child and the teacher may educe quite different things from the same event and have quite a different 'take' on any presumed motives or context from which a style of pedagogy or of relationship appeared to emanate.

In 1956, when I entered Goldsmiths' College, London, after a period of education in Oxford and national service in the RAF, I was assigned to a tutor, Mr Norman Kirby MA AKC, who, among other things, had taught at the Froebel School (Ibstock Place) and had himself been educated at King's

College, London and at some time worked as Aide to Field Marshall Montgomery. He was reputed to have been a brave but quiet man who had worked behind enemy lines during the Second World War. I found him gentle, insightful, warm and very supportive. He was full of good ideas which appeared to give choice and motive to the child and he regularly took us to see nearby 'progressive' schools (such as, in those days, Brockley Primary and Deptford Park in South East London) so that we could witness countless good examples of imaginative teaching.

The county minor scholarship or 'eleven plus' exam was then still in full swing and British 11-year-olds practised their 'intelligence tests' (in reality verbal reasoning tests) and their maths and English curriculum at great length. There was a scholarly formality to the upper echelons of primary school and usually an expectation by head teachers that their most experienced teachers would work at that level (then called fourth-year juniors) to ensure the school success in obtaining a significant number of grammar school places in the eleven plus. In reality there was not much truly objective about this seeming allocation by ability, since different local education authorities and different parts of the country had differing proportions of places in 'grammar' and other schools, such that selection depended almost as much on where you lived as on your ability. A poorer authority usually had fewer grammar schools.

Despite that, the atmosphere of our Goldsmiths' lecture classes in the late 1950s seemed expectant and promising. I recall an almost clear belief that Education was deemed to be the great way, probably the only way, into a more just and humane society. The Second World War was, after all, not that long over and there was an urgent sense of possibility and excitement, of great things to come. Child-centred approaches were endlessly discussed and openly advocated. Books like *Activity in the Primary School* by M.V. Daniel (1947) were 'almost our bible' and the dreaded accompanying Hughes and Hughes text book considered dry but necessary and more suitable for intending (and by implication 'less liberal') secondary teachers than for those dedicated to training for younger children. A.N. Whitehead and Dewey were read and believed as the preferred philosophers and much, too, was made of Bertrand Russell's views on education. 'Infant method' was talked of as usually being particularly skilled and progressive and we were taken to numerous infant and nursery schools and classes to see exemplars of good work with the very young. And it seemed to me it WAS good! For those of us training for lower primary school, our teaching practice periods were regular and well prepared for and, because the course was relatively short, we had summer holiday assignments of some real substance to fulfill as well. (I used my Goldsmiths' *English Methods Folder*, made during a summer vacation, for several years at the beginning of my teaching career!)

Even now I think we were relatively well trained; and certainly we were taught by an enthusiastic and dedicated staff. Fred Schonell and Nancy Catty had been important lecturers in the college. Many others, like Doris Lee, went on to become well-known professors of education, espousing, as she did, an

active and Piagetian-based approach to maths and to learning in general. Prior to the publication of the Plowden Report by about some nine years, there was nevertheless considerable stress on active learning and on a view that children progressed through similar stages of development before reaching formal, logical, hypothetico-deductive reasoning. Much attention was paid to 'hands on' experience and to the period of 'concrete operations'. Our practice sessions always started with detailed child observation and moved to full-blown, 80% classroom teaching later; this latter was accompanied by regular lesson observation visits from staff in the school and by a 'not especially gentle' regime of tutors from the college. Additionally, as was the British custom, teaching practice (like all examinations) was well moderated by senior staff from other colleges and other parts of the country.

At the same time, I think I recall there *was* this sense of the ending of an era. The eleven plus exam was frequently vilified and many spoke openly of education as being a voyage in enculturation which should be (at least) partly chosen and determined by the child and its parents. Projects were very popular in junior and infant schools and the Dalton Plan often discussed and dissected. And projects did go mad in those days; bold and beautiful and even bizarre, some seemed. Brockley Primary School once had a collective project which turned the whole school into somewhere near the North Pole, complete with igloos and seals! There were no fully centralised constraints on the curriculum, though there appears to have been considerable consensus over what should be taught. There was also the clear acceptance that the *teacher* made his or her individual judgements about the pedagogy and the degrees of emphasis in any specific aspect of the curriculum (though such were, in reality, well within the purlieu of the head teacher and few would gainsay the head's right broadly to determine content and method in reality). Head teachers had considerable power; and I suspect the curriculum *was* the head teacher. My first was a benevolent despot and insisted that we should dress for work in a 'professional manner'. He said he preferred the men in suits and he openly discouraged women from wearing trousers. But, at the same time, educational sociology was increasing in fashion and power as a mode of analysis and awareness of the impact of poverty on achievement seemed to be coming more to the fore. There was an expressed unease with the ways that the 1944 Education Act appeared in some cases merely to re-enforce the existing social order and to confirm inequality of opportunity. With hindsight I think we were clearly *inducted* into such views even if we were not fully aware of them of our own volition.

Her Majesty's Inspectors and the Local Education Authority advisers/inspectors were powerful, pervasive and usually very well educated. They cast long shadows throughout Plowden. Those I met seemed to me to be persons of considerable distinction and creative ideas. HMI and LEA colleagues ran wonderfully exciting courses and certain LEAs, along with their inspectorial team, were well known for enlightened courses and fascinating views on education. HMIs such as Robin Tanner and John Brierley were noted for their attention to art and humanities, being artists of the highest order themselves.

Some LEAs, such as the West Riding, Leicestershire and Oxfordshire, were considered progressive and worthy of emulation (running as they were under the aegis of famous educationists like Sir Alec Clegg, John Coe and Marianne Parry). This was an era of 'vertical grouping' in infant and junior schools and some LEAs (like Leicestershire) were well known for their organisation and support. The roll call of strong and influential HMIs was considerable and LEAs encouraged and supported much further study by teachers. My own studies were, for a long time, financed by the Inner London Education Authority; and I have always been very grateful for their enlightened and supportive attitude. Teacher in-service training was not solely focused upon classroom practice, but followed the (then) Zeitgeist of enriching and extending the teacher's perceptions in both academic and artistic horizons; a view of continuing professional development I still find valid.

This then was the era in which I started teaching London infants and juniors; and, within five years, the groundswell which was to provide the initiative for Plowden was already gathering strongly. Within a mere 10 years many teachers like myself were queuing up at Her Majesty's Stationery Office to buy the offerings of the Central Advisory Council. And rich pickings they were too, confirming (as they did, or so it seemed to us; and if you don't believe that, look at the large number of the great and the good who signed up to it, or contributed to its deliberations) a specific prejudice or belief which we had already internalised, that is, '*at the heart of the educational process lies the child*' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p. 7).

Forty years or more later, at the end of my teaching career I find myself reflecting on Plowden and its truly iconic meaning for me. Of course there have been other icons, but they fit well with Plowden (Reggio Emilia, Head Start, High Scope, for example). What does its iconic message convey for me? It conveys the following – some of which is probably wishful thinking and some possibly misinterpretation, but which nevertheless make that *core of an ideology* which has driven me for 40 plus years within the field of education, schooling and teacher education:

That the *entering characteristics* of the child are of paramount importance. The child comes with a wealth of experience. As Malaguzzi says, 'Our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and other children' (quoted in *The South Australian Curriculum and Standards Accountability Framework* [Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2000, p. 4]). No one should design a curriculum 'outside' of the child and his/her interests. It is not that those interests cannot be extended and grown, but it is that those very 'hooks' of motive and attraction are key to the developing mind, to persistence and curiosity, to enjoyment and wonder. Knowing the child's entering characteristics is the first and foremost duty of anyone aspiring to be a teacher. Closely connected with this is the notion that poverty has a crushingly debilitating effect on aspirations and possibilities, that it is highly correlated with underachievement and with ineffective modes of self-realisation and responsibility.

That *the child is an agent for him/herself* and demands the right to agency and recognition. The construction of knowledge is not a passive, didactic, top-down affair. The old Confucian statement which ends, 'I do and I understand', and which was so central to the Plowden message, is never out of date. For me there is little conflict between Vygotsky and Piaget. Of course one could lay too much emphasis on language and thought as being lock-stepped and contiguous in any exercise. Of course one could overvalue the developmental stages and see them as too rigid. However, I don't think Plowden represents learning *like* that. Of course, 'discovery favours the well-prepared mind', but the skill required (by implication in Plowden) is an individually crafted and child-aware approach to learning ... not an abandonment of all other methods. The teaching skill lay (it seemed to me) in intriguing those whose imagination ran riot, whose fascination of the mind ('engagement' we now tend to call it) was to be caught and extended by the effective teacher. There was also a sub-theme which is well coupled with this and links, too, with point one. This concerns the foolishness of 'force-feeding' knowledge; the fact is that the mind is a developing instrument constantly matching analogies and past experiences. The task for the teacher, therefore, demands some considerable sensitivity and care in the matching of those concerns if optimal learning is to be a solid outcome. This view was sometimes somewhat loosely interpreted as 'waiting for the appropriate maturational level' and is, in its literal interpretation, *not* always that helpful. But goodness of fit and choosing the right moment were (for the educator) much more the main intention, it would seem.

That the processes which are involved in the day-to-day running of institutionalised provision (childcare and schooling) are of the utmost importance. These are the *relational factors* derived in part from those climates in which the children interact; the little repeated lessons of sharing and of human intercourse, the growing understanding and awareness of others, the vitality of secure attachment; all reinforce, supplement (and sometimes even contradict) the models offered by parents. They have been variously labelled and researched. Collectively we might refer to them as the '*soft variables of personality*'. In reality they are the very drivers of our humanity, internalised early on *in* life and *for* life, which make for good or ill for us as individuals and sometimes impact later on the whole community in benevolence and care, or in destructive dysfunctionality. These are the features which seem so highly predictive of adult outcomes from early childhood and which have been well documented in countless longitudinal cohort studies (see Gammage, 2006). Locus of control, attribution of responsibility, empathy and insight, persistence and self-esteem, engagement and choice are some that immediately spring to mind. Collectively and along with physical health, it is common nowadays to refer to them as *well-being* or (sometimes) as vital components in that portmanteau *social and human capital*. These are the features increasingly internalised during the first five years or so of life and which actually affect motive, perception, judgement and causal attribution and possibly the very architecture of the brain itself.

Primary education has changed quite substantially during the last 40 years, not merely nationally in England, where there has been a restrictive and centralised curriculum since 1988, but throughout the world. Principal among these changes has been the actual age range encompassed. For instance, there has been a marked 'downward drift' in the starting age of compulsory elementary or primary education throughout the Western world. Coupled with this is the increased emphasis on the importance of pre-school experience and the tendency to see childcare as educative in itself. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine those many social and demographic trends which lie behind the increasing uptake of early childhood education and care ('ECEC', as the UNESCO and OECD call it), but its spread is coupled with a strong ideology which completely merges with that of the lower primary stages and which is indiscernible from much that represents early education in general. Indeed, ECEC 'correctly' defined covers the ages and stages from birth to about eight years of age. Even in those societies which delay entry to primary school until quite late (e.g. the Nordic countries) such a definition clearly covers a substantial period of compulsory primary education. Thus it would seem to me that the ideologies of Plowden are very similar to those which influenced Head Start (USA), High Scope (USA), Reggio Emilia (Italy), Sure Start (UK), Starting Strong 1 and 2 (OECD) and The Virtual Village (South Australia) to mention but a few key country initiatives. The messages which lie behind the quite different initiatives which have taken place since the 1960s, are the opposite of 'no child left behind' (current US language of the Bush Administration) but are certainly close to the three broad ideological assertions/descriptions I have made above. They are reinforced by a movement which is complex and varied, but which (broadly) describes what have sometimes been termed in curricular frameworks as *essential learnings* (Finland, Sweden, Tasmania and South Australia), that is, as the appropriate pedagogical vehicles of development and learning. These are considered of a higher order than mere adherence to the basics of literacy and numeracy; whilst they may be accompanied by careful content analysis, they take precedence by being both the intention and the lens through which any set of ideas is transported. This is not to say that content analyses are unimportant; merely that they are predicated on a different view of the world, a view where choice and motive are mixed with concern and care for others, where the *essential learnings* give voice to our very purpose and humanity.

Am I right to connect up these ideas? I think I am. As a teacher, a psychologist and a comparativist, I have now seen and participated in some 50 years of work with young children in 20 different countries. I have been part of the OECD surveys since 1972, been involved in numerous government reviews, the most recent being South Australia, 2005, in the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce report (Ball, 1994), been a primary teacher, an academic, a teacher educator and a civil servant; I have watched children in Mia Mia and Ypsilanti, to mention but a few key influences. In all these I think I can detect Plowden's major concerns: concerns for the child as central; concerns for the child as competent; concerns for choice,

happiness and joy as motivators; concerns for the underprivileged and dispossessed; concerns for play and inquiry; concerns for a teaching based on acute observation of the child.

In narrative terms I can only make sense of my professional life through the eyes of several important writers and teachers on education. The 'collective' eye of Plowden is just such a one. In an era when Stephen Ball can write, 'Teachers are no longer encouraged to have a rationale for practice, account for themselves in terms of a relationship to the meaningfulness of what they do, but are required to produce measurable and "improving" outputs and performances' (Ball, 2003, quoted in Fielding, 2006), I draw strength from a roll call of important writers and contributors to my craft. Bridget Plowden ranks for me with John Dewey, with Friedrich Froebel, with Ben Morris and A.S. Neill ... and (not least, and back to 1956) ... with Norman Kirby.

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