

Whatever Happened to Plowden's Middle Schools?

MICHAEL TIDD

ABSTRACT The author surveys the brief history of middle schools, from Plowden's recommendation of 12 as the age of transfer, to the present day, and asks if there are now arguments for a review of current arrangements.

Changes taking place now suggest that within 50 years, educationalists may look back on a 'middle school experiment' which lasted for less than 50 years itself. Perhaps they will be right to do so, but there has never been a national policy either in support of or against the schools, and no real investigation into their merits or disadvantages. So what happened to the three-tier system which the Plowden Report sought to make the national norm?

Chapter 10 of the report looked in some detail at the options for modifying the length of each phase of education. It made a number of recommendations, notably that the Department for Education should 'announce as soon as possible a national policy on the structure of nursery and primary education and on the ages of transfer from stage to stage' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, para. 407). The failure of successive governments to act on this message led to a wide variety of approaches in the provision of education nationwide.

Indeed, at the time the report was commissioned, middle schools were not even legally possible. Under the 1944 Education Act, transition had to take place around the age of 11, and the 11+ examination had been established as the means of selecting children for secondary education. By the time the report was produced, however, much had changed in terms of legislation. The 1964 Education Act allowed for experimentation to take place with other ages of transfer, the government had signalled its intention to raise the school leaving age to 16, and local education authorities were invited to submit plans for reorganisation of secondary schools to comprehensive provision. These changes created the opportunity for wholesale reform of the age of transfer to be considered by the Plowden Committee. It is worthy of note that although middle schools were now permitted under law, they were still required to be

categorised as either primary or secondary. Schools catering for pupils aged up to 12 were 'deemed primary', while those catering for pupils up to ages 13 or 14 were 'deemed secondary'.

The Plowden Committee reviewed the existing situation in some detail. Having already discussed the advantages of extending infant provision to three full years, the report discussed the relative advantages of transfer at ages 12 or 13, and decided on the former.

Of course, none of this took place entirely out of context. By the time the report was published, the first middle schools were already being planned. The year following the publication of the report, middle schools opened in Bradford, West Yorkshire. Nevertheless, the evidence was limited. No middle schools existed before the report was published (although Leicestershire had taken to splitting provision at secondary level between 11-14 and 14-18 schools).

Evidence for Change

The report clearly welcomed the intended removal of the 'dreaded landmark' of the 11+ exam, and so it felt open to consider a range of options. In doing so, it considered the strengths and weaknesses of change at 11, and clearly favoured a raising of the transfer age. It had praised the work taking place in junior schools, and saw advantages in extending that provision. Its arguments ranged from the philosophical (quoting Piaget's views about the delay in the 'emergence of powers of abstract thought') to the purely practical, focusing a great deal on the growing length of the secondary course, with more students staying on to 16 and 18.

In coming down in favour of transfer at age 12 (and hence, recommending middle schools providing education for pupils aged 8-12 – current Years 4 to 7), the report was clear that the new schools should provide a distinct style of education. Middle schools should be staffed by teachers from both sectors; provision should build on the best of junior schools' work, while providing for greater specialist teaching for older pupils.

Realising the Change

Sadly, implementation of the report's recommendations was piecemeal at best. Despite clear intentions of pushing forward comprehensive reform in the late 1960s, the government's low majority and delays in bringing forward the legislation meant that it was never a legal requirement for authorities to move towards comprehensive provision. Likewise, its failure to enact any of the chapter 10 recommendations wholeheartedly led to a range of provision nationally.

Nevertheless, middle schools arrived in 1968, and the trend boomed over the next 10 years. Indeed, within three years of publication of the report, some 130 middle schools had already opened. Contrary to the recommendations of

the report, many authorities pursued the route of 9-13 provision so the large majority of these schools were 'deemed secondary'. By 1974, however, the trend had changed: middle deemed primary schools were in the majority. Education department records show some 500 middle deemed primary schools opened by that year, with around 400 'deemed secondary' schools; in 1981 well over 1000 middle schools were in place.

Some local education authorities no doubt opted for deemed primary middle schools on the basis of the convincing educational justifications put forward by Plowden. Many information leaflets published at the time purveyed this view. However, there were more pressing needs. The invitation to provide comprehensive education, combined with RoSLA (Raising of the School Leaving Age), led to an ever-greater demand for school places. Authorities were forced to address this, and in many areas middle schools provided the cheapest, and most convenient, solution. Indeed, perhaps one of the greatest achievements of middle schools is not related to that which took place inside them, but rather to the broader achievement of bringing about a comprehensive education system in so many authorities.

An Untimely Demise?

While 1981 provided a new peak for middle schools, it was also the year in which some of the first reorganisations took place to close them. Having been the route by which many authorities had provided places for an expanding school population, they were also the first victims of the falling rolls which began in the early 1980s. The lack of a national programme and the need to remove surplus places had long been a dagger hanging over the head of middle schools. The 8-12 middle schools recommended by Plowden were the first to go. Where high schools faced falling rolls, it was much easier to move one year of pupils from the middle to the high schools, thus removing surplus places at these smaller schools, than to face possible closures of small secondaries.

Despite new middle schools continuing to open, overall numbers fell during the 1980s. As with so much else in education, things were to change dramatically with the introduction of the Education Reform Act in 1988. The arrival of the National Curriculum, so clearly dividing education into its constituent stages, hammered another nail into the coffin of middle schools. Authorities again began to review their provision. The result was clear – within 10 years, middle school numbers had more than halved, a pattern which looks likely to be repeated over the 10 years to 2008.

Again, reasons given by local authorities have included educational matters: the need to keep Key Stages together, the need for specialists for all Key Stage 3 pupils, the negative effects of transfer. But overwhelmingly, the reason for the demise of the middle schools is exactly that which brought about their booming numbers: changes in pupil numbers.

The Changing Face of Provision

Despite the government's claim that it is concerned with 'standards not structures', recent years have seen an increasing number of government initiatives to introduce new structures to education. None of these has endeavoured to do anything but consolidate the divide between primary and secondary schools. Focus has moved from one sector to the other, and while strategies are, at least in theory, linked, little provision is made for those schools which straddle the middle Key Stages.

Nevertheless, a new trend has emerged. In 2002, Hinde House School in Sheffield absorbed one of its feeder primaries to become a through 3-16 school. This has started a slow but growing trend for such schools. Whether these might become the schools of the future is, as yet, unclear.

It seems unlikely that we will, in the near future, see such a wide-ranging and well-informed discussion of options as we did under Lady Plowden's leadership. But if such a review were undertaken, what might today's recommendations be?

A Possible Future

Increasingly in recent years, there have been calls for increased specialism in the later years of primary school, and particularly in Years 5 and 6. As far back as 1992, the 'Three Wise Men' – Chris Woodhead, Jim Rose and Robin Alexander – were calling for increased use of specialists. And despite the move towards a more integrated curriculum in primary schools since the emergence of the Primary Strategies, there is a growing minority of commentators pointing to the high demands of the primary curriculum and putting forward increasing specialisation as the answer. Adding to the pressure are the forthcoming requirement to offer an 'entitlement' to a modern foreign language at Key Stage 2, and the introduction of Planning, Preparation and Assessment time.

Is the solution to increase the number of specialist teachers in primary schools? Or would a return to 8-12 or 9-13 middle schools help to ease the problem? And what too of the increasing integration of the 14-19 curriculum? Perhaps Leicestershire's small-scale arrangements of High Schools for 10-14 year-olds offer a solution? Certainly we have no reason to believe that a clear break at 11 has anything to offer.

In many recent reorganisations back to two-tier provision, authorities have raised concerns about the apparent 'dip' in pupil achievement in the years immediately after transfer, citing it as a reason for closing middle schools. However, closer inspection appears to suggest that a dip is more likely in Year 8, during the 'wilderness years' of Key Stage 3 – hence trials of a two-year approach to that Key Stage. So if transfer isn't the direct cause of the problem, perhaps it's the long spread of time at a large secondary school that leads to the dip in performance?

The Plowden Report warned – even before the school leaving age was raised – that 'seven years is a long time ... There is something to be said for

shortening the total span of secondary education, and this can only be done by starting it rather later'.

Were we too quick to dismiss a system which offered us this opportunity? If today's current spending on new buildings and facilities for schools had preceded the imposition of such a rigid curriculum, might we now be working in a different field – one where we could strive for Plowden's comprehensive ideal?

Reference

Central Advisory Council for Education (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools*. The Plowden Report. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

MICHAEL TIDD qualified as a teacher in 2006. He trained at the University of Chichester for teaching at Key Stages 2 and 3 with a mathematics specialism. He is now a Year 7 class teacher at Thomas A Becket Middle School (deemed primary) in West Sussex. *Correspondence:* Michael Tidd, Thomas A Becket Middle School, Glebeside Avenue, Worthing BN14 7PR, United Kingdom (michaeltidd@blueyonder.co.uk).

Did you know?

If you order or renew your Personal subscription to *FORUM* online, you are entitled not only to the conventional printed editions but also to immediate access to the current *online* edition (before publication of the printed edition) and all available *previous* online editions. An annual Personal subscription costs only about £26.00 (or US\$50.00 outside the UK).

To find out more please visit the journal's website at www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM
(click on 'Subscribe here' in the left-hand column)

or go direct to www.wwwords.co.uk/subscribeFORUM.asp for the subscription order form.