Twenty Years at the *TES* – and not a word about phonics

DIANE HOFKINS

ABSTRACT In her former role as primary editor at the *Times Educational Supplement*, the author met the great and the good of the educational world and monitored developments in schools, always with interest, often with concern, and – sometimes – with bemusement.

The irrepressible Bill Laar, former chief inspector of Westminster and now general trouble-shooter, speaker and consultant, at one time began his talks by telling his audience how he picked up the phone one day, and heard a voice at the other end say, 'This is the head of John the Baptist speaking'.

I love this joke, not just because it's funny and so obviously something that really happened, but because it reminds me of what is particular about British primary education. There's the fact that schools are run by head teachers, and the way that implies an emphasis on curriculum and pedagogy rather than on administration. My elementary school in New York was run by a principal. Then there's the public funding of religious schools. This is unconstitutional where I come from. You could not have a head of John the Baptist in New York. My elementary school had a number. The local Catholic school was called Immaculate Conception, so there must have been a principal of Immaculate Conception – quite a difficult principle, too, for young children, who are not even supposed to know what conception is.

So, I guess I'm going to miss being primary editor of the *Times Educational Supplement*. It was a privileged position within the world of primary education, in all its various incarnations – reporter, page editor, section editor, editor of *Primary* magazine, commentator and leader writer. It provided a unique perspective and also a unique opportunity to communicate with teachers and heads, to help keep their spirits up, encourage them to be creative and a bit rebellious, to remind them how good they are. Not to mention the chance to make Chris Woodhead choke on his cornflakes of a Friday morning.

Which leads me to Plowden. One of the highlights of my career – it feels like more than 10 years ago – was the chance to edit a 20-page *TES* special,

Plowden – 30 years after an education revolution. There was a tremendous buzz about the project. One freelance writer instantly volunteered to come in and help, perching at the end of my desk under the newsroom coatstand. Even the subeditor, a former secondary teacher, knew the report well and had a vision for how to present the articles. The report summary at the centre was simply headlined 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child'. It was one of those publications that people kept for years. It helped explain how primary education had got to where it was in 1997 – still in the middle of a policy tug of war between progressive and traditional philosophies – and suggested where it might be bound. It's clear today that 1997 was a hinge between two phases in primary education, and not coincidentally between Tory and Labour governments.

My editor's letter commented: 'Plowden's optimism and belief in the power of schools and society to make a difference contrasts sharply with the depressed and disillusioned responses of teachers to this month's *TES* survey of the profession'. It continued: 'Teachers are feeling ineffectual, undermined by decaying buildings and falling status: teacher-bashing by both Labour and Conservatives has destroyed their faith in political change. Nearly all the top priorities drawn up by teachers in *TES* focus groups are needs identified by Plowden: more investment in schools, limiting class sizes to 30, a nursery place for all four year olds, steps to raise teachers' status and a programme to tackle crumbling schools'.

Over the past 10 years, Labour has tried to tackle all those complaints. Yet we are not happy. All four-year-olds have a place, but is it the right sort of place? The General Teaching Council has been established to help raise teachers' status, but it won't happen as long as ministers continue to micromanage teachers. One clear-cut success is the physical state of schools. 'Crumbling schools' was a perennial shock horror education story in the mid-90s. It was not unusual to visit schools where the damp walls were covered over with heavy coloured paper, buckets stood under leaky flat roofs, the floors were splintering, the toilets were somewhere across the school yard, or Nissen huts were used as classrooms. Or all of the above. Today, most primary school buildings are pretty nice. And that does help to make teachers and pupils feel more valued.

The year 1997 also formed a hinge between the government telling teachers what to teach and telling them how to teach. 'Now there is pressure for more subject teaching, more streaming, more whole-class teaching', said my editor's letter. 'The latest initiative, the National Literacy and Numeracy Project, goes about as far as possible, insisting that teachers in participating schools spend up to an hour a day in direct teaching of only English or maths, from a minutely detailed syllabus'.

The supplement ambled through nearly every aspect of the Plowden Report: a piece on how it was put together ('Gathering of the great and good'), interviews with teachers who had kept the faith, child poverty, child development theories, streaming, parent power, educational priority areas

(various versions of which have been attempted by Labour since 1997) and a wonderful interview with Lady P herself.

The appointment of a woman whose only full-time job had been as a secretary in a boot factory had 'come about in the most establishment of ways', wrote Biddy Passmore. 'Sir Toby Weaver, then a senior official at the DES, is a cousin; Sir Edward Boyle, then Minister of Education, was a friend of her husband's. Once he had met her, Sir Edward was in no doubt: "I've found the chairman I want and that's it", he told startled officials'.

The particular article that made Chris Woodhead, then chief inspector, choke on his cornflakes was written by the late Annabelle Dixon, a former editor of *Forum*, who described the way her rigorous Plowden teacher training had given her both roots and wings. 'I merely expected a training college to tell one first *what* to teach and then *how* to teach. It hadn't occurred to me that there could be two other words of prior importance; the *who* we were to teach and *why* we were engaged in this activity in the first place', she wrote. Her article concluded:

> In my case, future study as a psychologist widened the spread of my roots; my experience of teaching young children for more than 30 years has given my wings their steady beat and has helped to keep me above the earthbound priorities of those who consider position in a league table to be the ultimate goal. My flight path has taken direction from the buoyant, unchanging, intellectually curious and endearing nature of children themselves, from whom we can still learn so much about what it is to be both educated and human.

You can read the whole article, or anything else in that supplement of 24 January 1997, at http://www.tes.co.uk/archive.

We asked greats and goods (OK – mostly my chums) what a Plowden review of 1997 should investigate. I invite you to consider how education has progressed since then.

Margaret Morrissey, chairman of the National Confederation of PTAs (Parent–Teacher Associations), wanted a law to officially involve parents in schools. Mary Jane Drummond, of Cambridge University Institute of Education, believed a new review should look at what we'd learnt about children's learning since 1967.

Professor Christine Pascal, who is now Director of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood at University College, Worcester, asked questions which seem up-to-the-second today: 'We should look at what makes a good teacher and what makes for good learning. I want to get to grips with what makes for a fantastic education or a dismal one. We must be rigorous about it. We have not given enough attention to the subject in recent years because the focus has been on inputs and outcomes and the process is lost. The inputs and outcomes are an essential part of what happens but the process is the connective tissue between them'.

Ted Wragg wanted Key Stage 1 to be simplified into six major areas. 'I would go for literacy, numeracy, the world about us, arts, how the world works, and look at whether kids should do a modern language in primary school', he wrote sagely. 'Teaching strategies should be the second major focus to enable us to get away from the rubbish that is talked about traditionalists versus progressives'.

Bill Laar wrote: 'Any consideration of primary education for the next decade must be based on a review of socio-economic circumstances and the critical changes that have taken place since 1967. These include the increasing breakdown of family life, our increasing failure to eradicate poverty, and the emergence of an underclass. A new Plowden would need to investigate ways of controlling the pronounced inequity in learning opportunities between pupils in particular areas and schools. I believe there is sufficient evidence for us to be alarmed about the emergence of disadvantaged schools which have underprivileged intakes and significant special educational needs, and find it difficult to attract heads and to recruit and retain staff. Without radical action the children who use them will continue to suffer'. And sadly, he is saying exactly the same things today.

All these issues will now come under the scrutiny of the Primary Review launched in the autumn of 2006, funded by Esmée Fairbairn and led by Professor Robin Alexander and his team at Cambridge. The review's slogan is 'Children, their World, their Education'. And this is absolutely right. Children are at the heart of the educational process, of society, of the school. Robin and his advisory committee, chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh, now chair of the National Children's Bureau, are well aware that today's children need the skills to cope with the messy, chaotic world they will inherit from us. Not just to cope with it, but to find creative solutions to impossible problems and to thrive. Systematic phonics is not the answer to this challenge. There is no avoiding the extraordinary complexity of the issues at hand.

Robin Alexander wrote in the *TES* in October 2006: 'In this era of globalisation, this review must also have an international outlook ... The gap between the world's rich and poor continues to widen while there is a fast-growing consensus that escalating climate change may make this the make-or-break century for humanity as a whole. What are the prospects for our children, and for their children? What are the implications for education?'

The review has commissioned more than 30 research surveys, set a ream of questions for investigation, and sought input from everyone with an interest in these questions. It will be the first review with such a wide range since Plowden. 'The evidence base for effective teaching is vastly stronger now than it was 40 years ago', Robin wrote. 'But research also shows that the radical implications of this evidence may not yet be fully understood, still less reflected in the classroom'.

When I wrote my swansong, my final *TES* column, last July, I was not free to reveal that it *was* my last article, that there was going to be a primary review or that I was on the advisory committee. But I thought I'd better seize the

opportunity to call for a new Plowden and to sum up the state of primary education as I saw it in 2006:

> As another school year draws to a close, how are you feeling? Are your principles in harmony with what's been required of you? Has your energy gone into what's best for the children or into form-filling? Do you feel pulled in so many directions it's hard to figure out what really matters?
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> During the past year, primary education has become more complex than ever before. There's the extended day, a new inspection system, the expectations of the *Every Child Matters* agenda, the looming requirement to teach a foreign language – and then there's ever more evidence emerging from brain research about how learning takes place.
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> Doesn't primary education need a good, hard look? The last time we had a comprehensive inquiry into schooling for under-11s was 40 years ago, when the Plowden committee spent several years asking the questions that were important at that time: should there be selection at 11? Should children learn by being told or finding out for themselves? What about nursery education? They concluded that 'at the heart of the educational process lies the child', the Sixties' version of 'individualised learning'.
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> When the *TES* asked the question 'What is education for?' last year, we came up with four 16-page specials on the theme. No one made the argument that, at its heart, education was 'for' delivering the national curriculum or comparing schools through league tables. The big themes had to do with helping children to become their best selves and grow up to be creative, compassionate participants in the wider world.
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> The commentator Anne Atkins believed education should develop 'inner resources and independence of thought', while veteran Labour politician Tony Benn felt children should learn 'the danger of hate and the power of love'. In today's jargon, we would call that personal skills.
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> Ted Wragg, the wise and much-missed *TES* columnist, thought the 'personalised learning' methods of the Ancient Greeks, which prepared students to speak in public and think logically, had a lot to teach us.
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> 'Consider the 21st century society in which today's children will live', he wrote. 'Most will work with their fellow human beings, rather than alongside a noisy machine. For the majority, knowledge, skill and the ability to communicate will be far more important than either muscles or knowledge on its own'.
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> But what will the adults of the 21st century talk about?

> For the past few centuries, school has been the main means of handing down national culture to the next generation. Through history, literature, geography, children learned what it meant to be British, American, or Russian. School showed them who they were. The people they mixed with in later life had the same background knowledge; had read the same books and grew up to listen to the same radio and television programmes. Now they create their own 'personalised learning' on the internet, choosing what they want to look at, not what someone else gives them.
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> Our pundits said one of education's purposes was to pass on the best of what has been thought and said. But in today's confusing, globalised world, there is less certainty about what constitutes the 'best'. Our horizons have to be wider than they used to be.
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> The government, meanwhile, wants teachers to do it all. They remain wedded to the nine primary school subjects plus religious education, with tests and league tables. But ministers have added citizenship and personal and social education; they are encouraging thinking skills, learning to learn, education for sustainability and assessment for learning. But the core of inspection is still academic 'standards'.
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> They want personalised learning and whole-class teaching; to label children as 'able' or 'less able', but still to help them 'reach their full potential'. They want children at the centre; they want standards to come first. Schools should be innovative, but ministers know best.
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> The policy-makers recognise there's an overwhelmingly complex world out there, yet they think education can be solved by better phonics teaching.
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> But where do we go from here? We can't carry on like this. We need to discover what we really believe is most important.
> The children of the 21st century will need to develop the talents and clarity of thought to become leaders and problem-solvers in a world we cannot imagine. The least we can do is construct an education system that prepares them as well as it possibly can.

What can I say about 20 years of primary coverage on the *TES*? It was a privileged position, not just in primary education but in journalism. I didn't fall into education journalism, nor into primary education. I sought them out. I've never been a teacher (apart from some volunteering), but I was fascinated by how children learn and believed that education was the most important thing society did. For the *TES*, Rupert Murdoch was a relatively benign publisher (the paper was bought by venture capitalists in October 2005). Personally, I was never stopped from publishing what I believed in. The job gave me a front row seat at the political show, the chance to visit dozens and dozens of schools, the opportunity to foster debate when the government was trying to stop it, and the

ability to support creativity, lateral thinking, and cross-curricular projects during some of the gloomiest days of government diktat.

Primary magazine's aim when it was launched in 1998 was simply to help make primary school amazing for children. The mission continued after it closed in 2002. The *TES* Target Creativity campaign in 2003 urged primary schools to bin the Key Stage 2 targets and set ones they believed in. The campaign, which promoted a rich and broad curriculum, had a huge response, but many schools remained daunted by the government's mixed messages, which extolled innovation and creativity on one hand and 'standards' and 'results' on the other.

Through the Primary Forum page (2002-06), brave, undaunted schools could share their practice – schools which taught through the arts, connected up all the subjects, used the Foundation Stage areas of experience right through Year 6, schools where every child truly mattered.

As I look through nearly 20 years of work, trends, revelations and memories pass before my eyes. In 1987 it was nearly impossible to find anyone who would review a reading scheme. In 1990, I observed the three prototype Key Stage 1 pilot Standard Assessment Tasks – the ones which took about six weeks per child – being conducted by plucky suburban teachers and resentful inner London ones. I produced an interminable analysis, running on for pages. It's hard to imagine anything like that being published now, but at the time, the editor said with delight, 'This is what everyone wants to read'; and in those days, when a blog wasn't even a twinkle in Bill Gates's eye, she was probably right.

I'm reminded of the power wielded by Black Paperites such as John Marks during the Nineties, the demonisation of Plowden, and the pivotal Three Wise Men report, which pushed the pendulum back toward the centre. It still rankles that when my biggest scoop was splashed across page 1, no other newspaper followed up the story (after all, it was only primary). It heralded the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, revealing that for the very first time ministers were likely to be telling teachers not just what to teach but how to teach. The alarm bells went off immediately. Professor Kathy Hall warned in January 1997: 'It is a step toward trying to make the curriculum teacher-proof'.

Over the years, I have probably written more about phonics than any journalist on the planet, and each time I have sworn never again. Well here's my chance not to write about it. Nuff said.

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Children, their world, their education

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