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Short and Fraught: the history of primary education in England

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ABSTRACT Official reports on primary education are a bit like London buses. You wait ages and then three come along at once. There has been no major report on primary education since the 1967 Plowden Report *Children and their Primary Schools*. Now, final reports are awaited from the Cambridge Primary Review and the government-appointed Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum, and the Children Schools and Familes Select Committee has just published its report on the National Curriculum. This piece aims to place these reviews in their historical context.

When, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, politicians finally decided that all children should be educated, parliament passed the 1870 Elementary Education Act (The Forster Act), implementing the recommendations of the 1861 Newcastle Report, which had urged the state to provide 'sound and cheap' elementary schools for children aged 5-13. The education provided by these schools was, unsurprisingly, limited and inferior. Blyth argues that elementary schools were 'a whole educational process in themselves and one which is by definition limited and by implication inferior; a low plateau, rather than the foothills of a complete education' (Blyth, 1965, p. 21).

The elementary schools

- catered for children up to 14;
- were for the working class;
- provided a restricted curriculum with the emphasis almost exclusively on the '3Rs' (reading, writing and 'rithmetic);
- pursued other, less clearly defined, aims including social-disciplinary objectives (acceptance of the teacher's authority, the need for punctuality, obedience, conformity etc);
- operated the 'monitorial' system, whereby a teacher supervised a large class with assistance from a team of monitors (usually older pupils).

The remuneration of elementary school teachers was based on the system of 'payment by results' introduced by Lowe's Revised Code in 1862. This laid down precise standards in reading, writing and arithmetic – 'reading a short paragraph in a newspaper; writing similar matter from dictation; working sums in practice and fractions' (Williams, 1965). Thus public funding for the schools was tied to the criterion of a minimum standard.

By the early years of the twentieth century, the principles of child development were beginning to influence – albeit very slowly – the style of education offered to younger pupils. Blyth (1965) distinguishes five factors which gave impetus to the developmental tradition during this period:

- the growth of developmental psychology;
- the writings of Dewey, especially his emphasis on the 'curricular importance of collective preparation for change, and on liberation from the traditional thought-patterns which could be regarded as undemocratic whether in the home, the school or society at large (Blyth, 1965, p. 35);
- the great wave of emancipation that characterised the years after 1918. Children were to be given the chance to be themselves at any age and in concert with their peers of both sexes (Blyth, 1965, p.35);
- the growth of what is now rather loosely described as the 'welfare state';
- the rapid growth of the concept of 'secondary education for all' officially enunciated for the Labour Party by the great socialist historian RH Tawney in 1923.

To Blyth's list we may add the following:

- the kindergarten movement, based on Froebel's theory and practice from the 1890s onward – 'natural development', 'spontaneity' etc. This had been adapted to the Board Schools' drill practice in an extremely mechanistic manner, so losing its educative significance;
- the work of Dr Maria Montessori in the early 1900s, with its emphasis on structured learning, sense training and individualisation. Its main impact was in infant schools, especially middle class private schools;
- Margaret and Rachel McMillan and their emphasis on improving hygienic conditions, overcoming children's physical defects, and providing an appropriate 'environment' for young children;

- *What is* and *What Might Be* published by ex-Chief Inspector of Elementary Schools Edmund Holmes in 1911. This was 'the first striking manifesto of the 'progressives' in its total condemnation of the arid drill methods of the contemporary elementary school' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 34);

- Susan Isaacs' two books of 1930 and 1933 on the intellectual and social development of children.

Hadow Reports (1931 and 1933)

It was against this background that the Hadow Committee, in their report on *The Education of the Adolescent* (1926), recommended the division of schooling into primary and secondary phases with the break at age 11. Having proposed the establishment of primary schools, the Committee went on to consider the type of education which should be provided in them, and produced two further reports on the subject: *The Primary School* (1931) and *Infant and Nursery Schools* (1933).

In the first of these two wide-ranging reports, *The Primary School*, the Committee related the history of the development of education for 7 to 11 year olds, described the physical and mental development of children of that age, made suggestions about the internal organisation of primary schools, considered provision for 'retarded' children of primary school age and made some surprisingly progressive suggestions with regard to the curriculum. They considered the staffing of primary schools and the training of teachers; the provision of premises and equipment; and the sort of examinations which were appropriate for children in primary schools – both for seven year olds on entry and for 11 year olds on leaving. They ended their report with 'Suggestions on the teaching of the various branches of the curriculum of primary schools'.

In their recommendations, they reiterated the view they had expressed in their 1926 report that 'primary education should be regarded as ending at the age of eleven' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 2) and added that 'primary education may be said to fall into two well-marked stages – one extending up to the age of seven plus, and the other comprising the period between the ages of seven plus and eleven plus' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 3). They recommended separate infant schools where this was possible but urged close cooperation between infant and junior schools. They stressed that 'the needs of the specially bright and of retarded children should be met by appropriate arrangements' and approved of mixed primary schools 'provided that due regard be paid to the differing needs of the boys and girls in the matter of games and physical exercises' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 9).

Their report noted recent research on children's learning and suggested that 'school subjects and their presentation should be kept closely related to the children's concrete knowledge and their own immediate experience. At this stage the teaching should still be based directly upon what the pupil can perceive or recollect at first hand, usually in visual form, and not upon abstract generalisations or theoretical principles' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 23).

The main purpose of the primary school curriculum should be 'to supply the pupils with what is essential to their healthy growth, physical, intellectual and moral, during this stage of their development' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 29). Famously, they said 'We are of opinion that the curriculum of the primary school is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience, rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 30).

The committee favoured the 'project' or 'topic' approach to the primary curriculum. 'The traditional practice of dividing the matter of primary instruction into separate 'subjects', taught in distinct lessons, should be reconsidered', they said, subject to the rider that 'provision should be made for an adequate amount of 'drill' in reading, writing and arithmetic' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 34).

They made a number of recommendations relating to the education of 'retarded' children – principally that the extent of their retardation should be investigated and responded to appropriately; that special schools for the more severely retarded should be 'closely related to the general educational system' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 40) and that classes containing retarded children should be small.

On staffing, they stated bluntly that 'none of the classes should contain more than 40 children' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 43). They recommended that mixed schools should include 'an adequate number of men' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 44) and that the practice of employing uncertificated teachers as heads should be ended. Teacher training courses should be adjusted 'to suit the new organisation of schools' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 47). All courses 'should afford adequate practice in methods of individual and group work' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 49) and teachers should be trained to cope with the special needs of retarded children.

They made a number of recommendations regarding the provision of adequate buildings, equipment, libraries and playing fields.

On testing, the Committee said that seven year olds should be assessed on entry to junior schools by means of intelligence tests, school records and consultation between teachers, but they warned that 'the classification of these young children should be regarded as merely provisional, and should be subject to frequent revision' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 61). They looked forward to a time when examinations at 11 for selective secondary education would be unnecessary, or at least diminished. For the time being, however, they recommended tests in English and arithmetic plus 'carefully devised group intelligence tests', though they warned that 'in our opinion it would be inadvisable to rely on such tests alone' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 65). They recommended that a 'continuous record of each child's progress should be kept in primary schools' (Hadow, 1931, §113 para. 67). Parents should be given termly or annual reports on their children's progress and, in the child's final year, information about secondary education in their area.

The Committee's 1933 Report, *Infant and Nursery Schools,* covered much the same ground as the previous report, but in respect of children up to the age of 7+. It made 105 recommendations – the largest number of any of the five Hadow reports.

The Committee recommended that the existing age limits for compulsory and voluntary school attendance should not be changed; that children should transfer from infant to junior classes between the ages of seven and eight; and that, wherever possible, separate schools should be provided for infants. They

stressed, however, that 'the primary stage of education (i.e. from the beginning of school life to the age of eleven) should be regarded as a continuous whole' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 7).

They emphasised the importance of detecting 'early signs of retardation' but disapproved of retarded children being taught in separate schools at this early age. They deprecated any attempt to insist on the keeping of elaborate records but considered it 'very important that some simple forms of school record should be regularly made' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 13).

They noted that effective cooperation between parents, teachers, doctors and school nurses had resulted in 'a marked improvement alike in the health and cleanliness of the children' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 14) and urged that such cooperation should continue. They expressed concerns about the poor diet of some children and its effect on their growth. They noted the need for 'a proper balance between exercise and rest' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 20) and stated that 'the most important single factor in reducing the incidence of infectious disease is that the school should be of open-air design' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 21). Teachers should be alert for defects in vision or hearing and adequate medical records should be kept.

The treatment of children in the earliest years of life – including an 'open air environment' – was of utmost importance if later emotional development was to be satisfactory. Between the ages of two and five children should be 'surrounded with objects and materials which will afford scope for experiment and exploration' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 28). The young child should not be expected to perform tasks which require 'fine work with hands and fingers' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 34). 'The ideas presented to him should ... be very simple and few at a time; oral lessons should be short and closely related to the child's practical interests' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 38).

The fundamental purpose of the nursery school was 'to provide an environment in which the health of the young child – physical, mental and moral – can be safeguarded (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 40). 'Its aim is not so much to implant the knowledge and the habits which civilised adults consider useful, as to aid and supplement the natural growth of the normal child' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 41).

The same principle applied in the infant school as in the primary school, that 'the curriculum is to be thought of in terms of activity and experience rather than of knowledge to be acquired and facts to be stored' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 44). Practical and physical activities should be paramount. 'The principle underlying the procedure of the infant school should be that, as far as possible, the child should be put in the position to teach himself, and the knowledge that he is to acquire should come, not so much from an instructor, as from an instructive environment' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 61). Freedom and individual work were 'essential' for the children, and 'freedom in planning and arranging her work is essential for the teacher if the ever present danger of a lapse into mechanical routine is to be avoided' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 67).

The nursery school 'is a desirable adjunct to the national system of education; and ... in districts where the housing and general economic conditions are seriously below the average, a nursery school should if possible be provided' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 72).

No infant class should have more than 40 children, and, where practicable, all the teachers should be certificated. Nursery teachers should have had 'special instruction in nursery care' and 'helpers' should be provided to assist them. Nursery school heads ('superintendents') should be specialists 'in the charge of very young children' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 90).

The design of the infant school was 'not yet in complete harmony with modern opinion regarding its function and activities' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 91). The Committee urged a more generous floor space allowance than that for junior schools, and the provision of 'semi-open-air buildings' and 'garden playgrounds' to secure 'the essential conditions of fresh air, sunshine and light' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 94). Lavatories should be within the school and supplied with hot water (something which had still not been provided at my infant school in the early 1950s!). Classrooms should be furnished with light tables and chairs, a piano, 'possibly a gramophone and some instruments of percussion' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 104) and should be 'adequately supplied with suitable books' (Hadow, 1933, §123 para. 105).

The New Primary Schools

Hadow's proposal for the division of schooling into the primary and secondary phases was accepted by the government in 1928, though primary schools were only formally established after the second world war in the wake of the 1944 Education Act and it would be the mid 1960s before all children were educated in separate primary schools.

By the 1940s the developmentalists were in the ascendancy. 'The approach of the "new" educationalists had, by 1939, become the official orthodoxy; propagated in training colleges, Board of Education in-service courses, by local authority inspectors, and the like' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 35). But was developmentalist education being put into practice? Galton et al are doubtful: 'How far it affected actual practice in schools is, however, another matter' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 35).

There were two main reasons why the implementation of developmentalist education was slow and patchy. First, the new primary schools quickly became the battleground for a number of competing forces. Those who believed in the new ideas about child development clashed with those who saw the job of the primary schools as being to get children through the 'scholarship' examination. The latter group tended to win, so the primary schools were seen as a 'sorting, classifying, selective mechanism' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 36). And second, psychologist Cyril Burt and educationist Percy Nunn continued to assert 'the absolute determination of 'intelligence' by hereditary or genetic factors' Galton

et al, 1980, p. 36). They therefore strongly recommended that children should be segregated into classes on the basis of ability ('streamed').

For these two reasons, 'the basic class teaching approach, with the main emphasis on literacy and numeracy, continued in the new junior schools after the Second World War' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 36).

Progress had been made, however. As the Ministry of Education pointed out in its handbook *Primary Education* (1959):

> The curriculum of the primary school derives from that of the public elementary school. It sprang from the first purpose of popular education – to create as cheaply as possible a literate population, literacy being interpreted as reading, writing and arithmetic. ...
>
> The primary school curriculum, taken crudely as meaning the names of subjects which might appear in the school's timetable, is therefore founded on tradition, and has gradually been enriched and liberalised as more generous and enlightened views have prevailed and as conditions have made a fuller and better education of children possible. Public opinion has now accepted the principle that education should be concerned with the all-round development of each child according to his age and capacity and that this education should aim at making him a better member of the community, spiritually, morally, physically and intellectually. The traditional curriculum is therefore very differently interpreted from the way in which it was originally conceived. (MoE, 1959, p.113)

The handbook continued:

> The fact that the same curriculum, in the most general terms, is in operation in all primary schools, does not mean that, even in such terms, it is regarded as final or perfect. It is constantly under review from one angle or another by teachers, administrators and members of the public; and it is always gradually changing in emphasis, in scope and in interpretation. It is, in short, responsive to the demands which fresh needs, rising aspirations, and new knowledge make upon it. (MoE, 1959, p. 114)

Progress gathered momentum in the 1960s, when educational developments became 'rapid, all-embracing, and, in retrospect, perhaps surprising' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 39). There was a move towards more informal, child-centred education with an emphasis on individualisation and learning by discovery: in short, a 'progressive' style of education, facilitated by the introduction of comprehensive secondary education which freed the primary schools from the constraints of the eleven plus exam.

A number of factors provided the context for these educational developments in the 1960s:

- the 'permissive society';

- a heightened consciousness among young people of their role in society – full employment, relative affluence and so increased independence and autonomy;
- the encouragement by LEAs of innovation in schools;
- the increased professionalisation of teachers and the high degree of autonomy which they enjoyed;
- a decline in the inspectorial role of HMI and LEA inspectors;
- the development of new 'open plan' schools – which reflected the decline in whole-class teaching methods and the increasing importance (encouraged by the Plowden Report) given to the individualisation of the teaching/learning process.

The Plowden Report (1967)

It is clear, then, that this was a time of great excitement in education. The eleven plus was being abolished, freeing primary schools from the constraints imposed by the need to 'get good results'. Streaming was being abandoned. Sybil Marshall was writing about the creativity of primary pupils in *An Experiment in Education.* Comprehensive schools and middle schools were being established. Teacher-led curriculum innovation was being actively encouraged. The Plowden Report *Children and their Primary Schools,* the first thorough review of primary education since the 1931 Hadow Report, was very much a product of its time, full of enthusiasm and optimism.

Plowden 'clearly and definitely espoused child-centred approaches in general, the concept of 'informal' education, flexibility of internal organisation and non-streaming in a general humanist approach – stressing particularly the uniqueness of each individual and the paramount need for individualisation of the teaching and learning process' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 40).

The essence of Plowden is summed up at the start of Chapter 2: 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child' (Plowden, 1967, para. 9). And not just the child, but the individual child. 'Individual differences between children of the same age are so great that any class, however homogeneous it seems, must always be treated as a body of children needing individual and different attention' (Plowden, 1967, para. 75).

In relation to the curriculum, the committee was clear. 'One of the main educational tasks of the primary school is to build on and strengthen children's intrinsic interest in learning and lead them to learn for themselves rather than from fear of disapproval or desire for praise' (Plowden, 1967, para. 532).

The report's recurring themes were individual learning, flexibility in the curriculum, the use of the environment, learning by discovery, and the importance of the evaluation of children's progress – teachers should 'not assume that only what is measurable is valuable' (Plowden, 1967, Ch.16 para. 551).

Many of Hadow's recommendations – restructuring the primary curriculum in terms of projects, focusing on children's interests, the use of discovery methods and the importance of collaborative work – were reiterated in Plowden. Hadow had said 'The project would provide many openings for independent enquiries by children who might be attracted specially in one direction or another, or could bring special gifts, e.g. in drawing or modelling, to the illustration of particular points' (Hadow, 1931, §84). And again, 'The principle underlying the procedure of the infant school should be that, as far as possible, the child should be put in the position to teach himself, and the knowledge that he is to acquire should come, not so much from an instructor, as from an instructive environment' (Hadow, 1933, §100). Plowden agreed: 'The sense of personal discovery influences the intensity of a child's experience, the vividness of his memory and the probability of effective transfer of learning' (Plowden, 1967, para. 549).

Hadow had recommended collaborative group work: 'The work would take largely the form of cooperation between a group of children, all of whom would find they had something to learn from the work of their fellows' (Hadow, 1931, §84). Plowden supported this theme: 'The teacher has to be prepared to follow up the personal interests of the children who, either singly, or in groups, follow divergent paths of discovery' (Plowden, 1967, para. 544).

Hadow had argued in favour of what would today be described as a child-centred approach to education. 'Even in a single school may be found a wide range of types of mind and of conditions of environment' (Hadow, 1926, §103). The construction of curricula, therefore, was 'not a simple matter; and uniform schemes of instruction are out of the question if the best that is in the children is to be brought out' (Hadow, 1926, §103). Plowden took up this theme: 'No advances in policy, no acquisitions of new equipment have their desired effect unless they are in harmony with the nature of the child' (Plowden, 1967, para. 9).

However, Hadow had emphasised the need for a balanced approach. 'There appear to be two opposing schools of modern educational thought, with regard to the aims to be followed in the training of older pupils. One attaches primary importance to the individual pupils and their interests; the other emphasises the claims of society as a whole, and seeks to equip the pupils for service as workmen and citizens in its organisation ... When either tendency is carried too far the result is unsatisfactory' (Hadow, 1926, §102). Plowden also urged balance: 'We endorse the trend towards individual and active learning and 'learning by acquaintance', and should like many more schools to be more deeply influenced by it. Yet we certainly do not deny the value of 'learning by description' or the need for practice of skills and consolidation of knowledge' (Plowden, 1967, para. 553).

Hadow had urged teachers to see children as individuals. Plowden took this further. 'We found that the Hadow reports understated rather than overestimated the differences between children. They are too great for children to be tidily assigned to streams or types of schools. Children are unequal in

their endowment and in their rates of development. Their achievements are the result of the interaction of nature and of nurture. We conclude that the Hadow emphasis on the individual was right though we would wish to take it further' (Plowden, 1967, para. 1232).

In the teaching of reading, Hadow had recommended the appropriate use of look and say, phonic, and sentence methods. 'Each of these methods emphasises important elements in learning to read, and most teachers borrow something from each of them to meet the need of the moment or the special difficulties of different children' (Hadow, 1933, §97). Forty years later Plowden noted that 'the most successful infant teachers have refused to follow the wind of fashion and to commit themselves to any one method' (Plowden, 1967, para. 584).

On writing, the Hadow Committee had urged that children should be 'encouraged to express themselves freely' and that spelling lessons should be based on the words the child actually uses, or on the literature s/he is reading. Children 'should not learn lists of unrelated words. Any attempt to teach spelling otherwise than in connection with the actual practice of writing or reading is beset with obvious dangers' (Hadow, 1931, Ch. 12, English). Again, Plowden said much the same: 'In a growing number of junior schools, there is free, fluent and copious writing on a great variety of subject matter ... To this kind of writing ... we give an unqualified welcome' (Plowden, 1967, para. 603). 'The best writing of young children springs from the most deeply felt experience' (1967, para. 605).

In the early years after the establishment of primary education, Hadow's views on the curriculum had been largely ignored and forgotten. The elementary school lived on, even if it was now called a primary school. These schools bore all the hallmarks of the elementary system 'in terms of cheapness, economy, large classes, obsolete, ancient and inadequate buildings, and so on' (Galton et al, 1980, p.33). They also continued to provide a curriculum based on the arid drill methods of the elementary schools, methods which were encouraged by the introduction of the 11+ exam for selection to secondary schools.

No wonder Plowden felt the need to say it all again in 1967. Twenty years after her report was published, Bridget Plowden wrote 'we did not invent anything new' (Plowden, 1987, p. 120).

She was right. If Hadow's recommendations had been implemented there would have been little need for Plowden, which reiterated much of what Hadow had said forty years earlier. Yet Plowden was still seen as dangerously progressive by many, especially the hacks of the tabloid press and the writers of the 'Black Papers'. The educational backwoodsmen needn't have worried. As Benford and Ingham pointed out, teachers had been 'concerned to play safe rather than inspire' and their inaction had 'necessitated the translation of Hadow (1931) into Plowden (1967). Each was welcomed in its own time. Each was subsequently neglected where it mattered most: in the classroom' (Benford & Ingham, *The Times Educational Supplement,* 6 March 1987).

There is no doubt, however, that Plowden caught the mood of its time. Perhaps the word which best sums up that mood is 'optimism'.

> It is fashionable to deride the 1960s as culturally aberrant and wildly idealist. Healthy idealism may be preferable to entrenched ideology parading as pragmatism, which has been the chief characteristic of subsequent decades. Many of us who were active in education in the 1960s look back on a time of optimism, a spirit of shared concerns, and the beginnings of an articulation (in every sense) of an education system which would offer the greatest possible opportunities to everyone as an entitlement, not a privilege.' (Plaskow, 1990, quoted in Chitty & Dunford, 1999, p.22)

However, this optimism, expressed by Plaskow and shared by many, was not to survive long in the following decade.

The Great Debate

Although, as we have seen, progressive educational ideas had, by 1939, become the 'offical orthodoxy', politicians appeared to show little interest. This was no doubt partly because ministers had long been expected to keep out of the 'secret garden' of the curriculum. But that changed on 18 October 1976 when Prime Minister Jim Callaghan gave a speech at Ruskin College Oxford which opened the 'Great Debate' about the purposes of education.

Callaghan's Labour government was in deep financial trouble and he was pressured by the US and by the right wing of his own party to accept a loan from the International Monetary Fund. The cuts in public expenditure which were forced on him worsened provision of education and other public services and increased unemployment. Callaghan told the Labour Party conference that his government was making 'a definitive break with the post-war past – a break that embraced not only financial policy but the social and political order that economic growth and full employment had enabled' (Jones, 2003, p. 73).

The worrying economic climate provided the context for the views presented in a series of 'Black Papers' written by right-wing educationalists and politicians, of which the first, published in 1969, specifically focused on the progressive style of education being developed in the primary schools as 'a main cause not only of student unrest in the universities but of other unwelcome tendencies or phenomena' (Galton et al, 1980, p. 41). Bennett's 1976 Black Paper *Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress* was represented in the media as 'a condemnation of so-called 'progressive' methods in the primary school' (Glaton et al, 1980, p. 41).

The Black Paper writers were given ammunition by the 'William Tyndale Affair'. William Tyndale was a primary school in north London where, in 1974, some of the staff introduced radical changes associated with an extreme form of romantic liberalism. The result was a violent dispute among the staff and between some of the staff and the school managers. Chaos ensued as the staff

lost control of the school and its pupils. Local government politicians and the local inspectorate became involved and, ultimately, there was a public inquiry in 1975-6 into the teaching, organisation and management of the school.

The affair raised a number of crucial questions which centred on issues such as:

the control of the school curriculum;
the responsibilities of local education authorities;
the accountability of teachers;
the assessment of effectiveness in education.

This, then, was the political, economic and educational context in which Callaghan gave his Ruskin College speech. It was followed by various DES and HMI initiatives regarding the curriculum, the establishment of the Assessment of Performance Unit and the beginning of mass testing by LEAs. The debate was characterised by the increasingly detailed interventions of central government into schooling.

> The interventions began in the form of spending cuts and developed into a strategy for relating education to a large-scale programme of social and economic restructuring: the education revolution of the 1980s and 1990s had its origins in the conflicts, crises and realignments of the 1970s. (Jones, 2003, p. 74).

Callaghan called for a public debate on education which would allow employers, trades unions and parents, as well as teachers and administrators, to make their views known. The curriculum paid too little attention to the basic skills of reading, writing and arithmetic, he said. Teachers lacked adequate professional skills and did not know how to discipline children or to instil in them concern for hard work or good manners. Underlying all this was the feeling that the educational system was out of touch with the fundamental need for Britain to survive economically in a highly competitive world through the efficiency of its industry and commerce.

Expanding on Callaghan's theme, *Education in Schools: a consultative document*, acknowledged that there had been positive developments. 'Primary schools have been transformed in recent years by two things: a much wider curriculum than used to be considered sufficient for elementary education, and the rapid growth of the so-called "child-centred" approach' (DES, 1977). It commended many aspects of these developments. 'In the right hands, this approach has produced confident, happy and relaxed children, without any sacrifice of the 3Rs or other accomplishments – indeed, with steady improvement in standards. Visitors have come from all over the world to see, and to admire, the English and Welsh 'primary school revolution'.'

However, it went on to suggest that few teachers had sufficient experience and ability to make the new approach work. 'It has proved to be a trap for some less able or less experienced teachers who applied the freer methods uncritically

or failed to recognise that they require careful planning of the opportunities offered to children and systematic monitoring of the progress of individuals.'

It concluded that 'the challenge now is to restore the rigour without damaging the real benefits of the child-centred developments.'

Callaghan's Ruskin speech was viewed with suspicion by the teaching profession but it was too late. From now on, politicians would impose their views on the nation's teachers. Hadow's plea that the teacher must have 'freedom in planning and arranging her work' so as to avoid 'the ever present danger of a lapse into mechanical routine' (Hadow, 1933, §105) was rejected.

Political Control of the Curriculum

In 1978, the DES published HMI's survey of *Primary Education in England*. It noted that 'the teaching of the basic reading skills was accorded a high degree of priority' (DES, 1978, para. 5.26) and that there had been 'a rising trend in reading standards between 1955 and 1976-77' (DES 1978 para. 5.17). It concluded that 'teachers in primary schools work hard to ensure that children master the basic techniques of reading and writing. There is little support for any view which considers that these aspects of language are neglected in primary schools' (DES, 1978, para. 5.46).

The survey ended on an equally positive note:

> This survey could not have been conducted without the goodwill and cooperation of the teachers; in giving this they exhibited the same characteristics that have led to the establishment of good and friendly relations among themselves and with the children they teach. In that teaching, they show their concern for individuals, and a positive determination to help children acquire the basic skills of literacy and numeracy. During years when the public at large has seemed to be critical of schools the relations between teachers and individual parents have become closer and more friendly; and the curriculum has broadened to include much that is of value. Good relations within the schools, increasingly good relations with parents, and a thorough concern for teaching the basic skills are solid foundations on which to build further. (DES, 1978, para. 8.66)

Despite the survey's positive findings, Margaret Thatcher's governments, from 1979, deliberately sought confrontation with the 'education establishment' and endeavoured to create the perception of a 'crisis' in education, with the aim of taking total control of the educational process.

They began with the curriculum. In 1979 the government published *LEA Arrangements for the School Curriculum* which required local authorities to publish their curriculum policies. This was followed by Circular 6/81 (1981) and a whole raft of publications including *A Framework for the School Curriculum* (HMI, 1980), *A View of the Curriculum* (HMI, 1980), *The School Curriculum* (DES, 1981)

and *The Curriculum 5-16* (HMI, 1985). Circular 8/83 (1983) required LEAs to report on their progress in developing curriculum policy.

The Thatcher governments also sought greater control over the training of teachers. In 1983 the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE) was established to set standards for initial teacher training courses. And in a move designed to reduce the influence of teachers in curriculum development, the Schools' Council, in which teachers had played a significant role, was abolished in 1984. Its work was shared between the School Examinations Council (SEC), whose members were nominated by the Secretary of State, and the School Curriculum Development Council (SCDC), which was instructed not to 'concern itself with policy'.

In 1985 Keith Joseph proposed linking teacher appraisal and performance-related pay. The result was a year of industrial action by teachers.

A decade of confrontation and manufactured crisis culminated in the 1988 Education 'Reform' Act, which was presented as giving power to the schools. In fact, it took power away from the LEAs and the schools and gave them all to the Secretary of State – it gave him hundreds of new powers. Even more importantly, it took a public service and turned it into a market.

The Act imposed on schools a National Curriculum written by a government 'quango' (quasi-autonomous non-government organisation). Teachers had virtually no say in its design or construction. It was almost entirely content-based. Addressing a conference at the University of London Institute of Education, Denis Lawton described the new curriculum as 'the reincarnation of the 1904 Secondary Regulations'. It was huge and therefore unmanageable, especially at the primary level. It divided the curriculum up into discrete subjects, making integrated 'topic' and 'project' work difficult if not impossible. It prevented teachers and schools from being curriculum innovators and demoted them to 'curriculum deliverers'. And its implementation led to a significant drop in reading standards.

The arrangements for testing and league tables were based on the 1988 Black Report produced by the National Curriculum Task Group on Assessment and Testing (TGAT). Each pupil was to be assessed on ten 'Levels' across hundreds of 'Attainment Targets' in the ten National Curriculum subjects. It never had a chance of working and was soon drastically reduced.

The curriculum and the testing arrangements were constantly revised. Right-wing think-tanks and pressure groups were unhappy with aspects of the first version and campaigned for 'the simplification and 'Anglicisation' of the national testing system, so as to emphasise basic skills and the English cultural heritage' (Jones, 2003, p. 141). The New Right gained control of the curriculum and assessment councils, where they provoked strong opposition from teachers, especially from teachers of English, leading to a widespread boycott of Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) in 1993-4.

As a result, the government was forced to redesign the National Curriculum, reducing the amount of detail and removing 'the stronger signs of

the traditionalist and ethnocentric enthusiasms of the New Right' (Jones, 2003, p. 141).

When the Tories (now led by John Major) won the 1992 election, Kenneth Clarke was appointed the new education secretary. He wanted to see a return to streaming and more formal teaching methods in primary schools, so he commissioned Robin Alexander, Jim Rose and Chris Woodhead to produce what became popularly known as the 'Three Wise Men Report'.

Produced in just one month, *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools: a discussion paper* (1992) argued that there was evidence of falling standards in some 'important aspects of literacy and numeracy' (DES, 1992, para. 2); that Piaget's notion of 'learning readiness', as set out in the Plowden Report, was dubious and that the progress of primary pupils had been 'hampered by the influence of highly questionable dogmas' (DES, 1992, para. 3.2); that while there was a place for well-planned topic work more emphasis should be put on the subjects of the National Curriculum; and that many primary teachers were not equipped to teach subjects effectively so there should be more use of specialist teachers.

While the tone of the paper was very different to that of Plowden – both were products of their respective periods – the Three Wise Men Report did not offer Major and Clarke the wholehearted support of their reactionary policies for which they had hoped.

1997 Blair: micromanagement

Many teachers hoped – some even dared to believe – that the election of the first Labour government for eighteen years, led by Tony Blair, would usher in a new golden age in education. Tests and league tables would disappear, chief inspector Chris Woodhead (who had become a hate figure for teachers) would be sacked, Ofsted scrapped, grant maintained schools brought under local authority control and selection finally abolished.

But it was all to prove a delusion. The first 'New Labour' government, swept to power in May 1997 with a Commons majority of 179, was to prove very different from any previous Labour government. Indeed, in many ways – its belief in market forces and its commitment to globalisation, for example – it would be virtually indistinguishable from its Tory predecessor.

Blair's decade in power was to see ever greater interference in the minutiae of school life. In its first White Paper, *Excellence in Schools* (1997), it proposed that at least an hour a day in primary schools would be spent on English and an hour on maths. Teachers would be told not only *what* to teach but *how* to teach it. (The National Literacy Strategy was introduced in September 1998, the National Numeracy Strategy in September 1999).

The New Labour government seemed to have mixed views on the value of the National Curriculum. It announced that only English, maths, science, IT and swimming would now be statutory requirements for primary schools, though the schools were still required to provide a 'broad curriculum'. The 2001 White

Paper *Schools: achieving success* went further, proposing that successful primary schools could opt out of the National Curriculum and develop curriculum innovations.

By 2003, concerns were growing about the effectiveness of the National Literacy Strategy. Ministers announced that it would be reviewed, since it had failed to deliver any improvement in reading and writing scores in three consecutive years (*The Guardian,* 9 January 2003). Many – including some eminent writers – criticised the sterile nature of much of the strategy. Award-winning author Philip Pullman wrote of a task undertaken by 200,000 eleven year olds in their Key Stage 2 tests:

> They were confronted with four crudely drawn pictures of a boy standing in a queue to buy a toy, and they then had to write a story about them, taking exactly 45 minutes. It was a task of stupefying worthlessness and futility, something no one who was serious about the art of storytelling could regard with anything other than contempt. (Pullman, 2003)

Bowing to pressure from the teacher unions and others, Education Secretary Charles Clarke announced that primary school tests and targets would be streamlined. The tests for seven year olds would be less formal and would form part of a wider teacher-led assessment (*The Guardian,* 20 May 2003).

This did not mean, however, that the government intended to stop meddling in schools. In November 2003 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) published materials designed to help teachers develop their pupils' speaking and listening skills, and in December 2004 Ofsted published *Reading for Purpose and Pleasure: an evaluation of reading in primary schools*. The following year the government announced that it would force schools to teach reading by the 'synthetic phonics' method – a decision based on one small, flawed experiment in Clackmannanshire, much criticised by experts like Dr Jackie Marsh, President of the United Kingdom Literacy Association (*The Guardian*, 3 December 2005) and Professor Stephen Krashen (*The Guardian*, 5 December 2005). So much for Hadow's sound advice to use a range of methods and Plowden's warning about following 'the winds of fashion'. Politicians, as always, know best.

This, then, is the historical background which provides the context for the current reviews of primary education in England.

Current Affairs

The Primary Review was established in 2006. Based at Cambridge and led by Professor Robin Alexander, it has been widely seen as the successor to the 1967 Plowden Report, though, as Alexander has written: 'In fact, the new enquiry is very different. Instead of a publicly (and generously) funded official commission of the great and good, we have an independent review led by academics, guided by a diverse and talented Advisory Committee and funded – with an inevitably

tighter budget than Plowden – from a private source, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation' (Alexander, 2007, p. 190).

There are similarities, however. Like Plowden, the 2006-8 Review 'seeks to combine retrospective evidence with prospective vision. Like Plowden, the Primary Review seeks to be reasonably comprehensive. Like Plowden, the Primary Review hopes to make a difference. But that could well be where the similarity ceases' (Alexander, 2007, p. 190).

The Review set out 'to establish from both official and independent sources exactly what has happened to the quality of primary education since defining educational quality became the prerogative of national government' (Alexander, 2007, p. 195). It has gathered evidence from written and electronic submissions, meetings with teachers, parents, children and community representatives, searches of official data held by government and by national and international agencies, and surveys of published research.

Writing in 2007, Alexander hoped that the Review would 'construct an accurate and illuminating account of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary English primary education; and that on this basis we can formulate a vision for the future which lifts educational horizons far above the current preoccupation with government initiatives, and reinstates a vision of teaching as much more than mere compliance' (Alexander, 2007, p. 197-8).

The Review has already published a wide range of papers and its final report, to be published later this year by Routledge, will be in two volumes with the provisional titles *Primary Education in England: what is and what could be* and *Understanding Primary Education: research surveys commissioned by the Cambridge Primary Review*.

As the Cambridge Review was getting into its stride, Secretary of State Ed Balls threw a spanner into the works. On 9 January 2008 he wrote to Sir Jim Rose inviting him to conduct 'an independent review of the primary curriculum' (IRPC) with a view to making 'final recommendations to the Secretary of State by March 2009 so that the new primary curriculum can be introduced from September 2011.'

The government's justification for this new review of primary education was presumably that it had already commissioned a review of the secondary curriculum and had introduced an early years 'foundation stage'. As Rose put it, you couldn't 'just extend one backwards, the other forwards, tie a knot in the middle and say that's primary education' (Wilby, 2008).

However, given that the Cambridge Review – the biggest investigation of primary education since Plowden – was already under way, many felt that the Rose review was designed as a spoiler. The government was fed up with adverse headlines like 'Poor performance linked to substandard classrooms', 'Government policy has created impersonalised education', and 'Study reveals stressed out 7 to 11 year olds' (Wilby, 2008). It was also concerned that the Cambridge Review would condemn England's testing regime – the hated SATs. So it created the IRPC as a diversion, 'with a suspiciously similar email address,

a claim that it too is independent, and an identical deadline for its final report of Spring 2009' (Wilby, 2008).

There were other concerns about the IRPC. One was that the QCA was required to produce draft programmes of study based on the report's recommendations during the consultation period, effectively rendering redundant most of the responses. Another was that the views of representatives of local authorities and teachers' professional associations who attended meetings during the 'informal' consultations were apparently excluded.

A third concern was that consideration of SATs was 'specifically excluded from Rose's remit' (Wilby, 2008). Introducing the IRPC's interim report in December 2008, Rose urged ministers to review the arrangements for SATs tests (already abolished in all parts of the UK except England). 'I'm ruled out of making recommendations about testing', he told Polly Curtis. 'That's not to say every school doesn't ask about testing. It's the elephant in the room' (*The Guardian,* 8 December 2008).

In order to contribute to the debate about the IRPC report, the Cambridge Review brought forward publication of its material on the curriculum. *Towards a New Primary Curriculum* was published in February 2009 in two parts: *Past and Present* and *The Future.* Its authors commented:

> Some readers may become impatient with the history, the account of witnesses' concerns and our apparent preoccupation with the problematic. For them, solutions are more important. They are of course welcome to turn straight to Part 2. Yet it is only by understanding the history, recognising the deeply-rooted and often cyclic nature of the problems, and by accepting the inadequacy of some of the surrounding discourse, that we can make progress. That is why the grounding provided by Part 1 is essential. Without it, we shall simply repeat past mistakes. (Alexander & Flutter, 2009a, p. 1)

In the authors' view, a future primary curriculum must:

> confront and attempt to address the problems and challenges in current arrangements; be grounded in explicit principles of design and implementation; pursue and remain faithful to a clear and defensible statement of educational aims and values.
> (Alexander & Flutter, 2009b, p. 21)

Yet another review of the school curriculum appeared on 2 April 2009, when the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (CSFC) published its report on the *National Curriculum.* It argued that 'the National Curriculum is in urgent need of significant reform' and made 32 recommendations including 'scaling down' the curriculum and 'limiting its reach'.

While it described the Cambridge Review as 'very welcome' it commented that it contained 'extensive analysis of the problems but has not enough to say

about what might be done in practice to address them' (CSFC, 2009, para. 59). It went on:

> The Rose Review and the Cambridge Review both recognise that the primary curriculum is overly full, but neither offers a practical basis that appeals to us for reducing the load. As we have indicated, we would see greater merit in stipulating a basic entitlement for literacy and numeracy and offering general guidelines on breadth and balance to be interpreted by schools and teachers themselves. (CSFC, 2009, para. 59)

Writing in *The Guardian*, Alexander described the committee's jibe that the Cambridge report offered 'a good analysis of the problems but no solutions', as 'bizarre'. He continued:

> Apart from the detailed proposals on curriculum aims, substance, structure, development and implementation, which the committee appears not to have noticed, other ideas from the Cambridge review appear, almost verbatim, in the committee's own recommendations: abandoning the national strategies in their present form; supporting local ownership; reconfiguring the roles of national agencies, local authorities and schools; making Curriculum Matters central to initial teacher training. More bizarre still, the committee's report includes as an appendix a comparison of the Rose and Cambridge curriculum reports, which says enough to contradict its criticisms of both of them. (Alexander, 2009)

Past, Present and Future

Eighty years ago, Hadow was extraordinarily optimistic about the future of education in England: 'We cannot but feel – as we unanimously do – that the times are auspicious, and the signs favourable, for a new advance in the general scope of our national system of education.' That advance encompassed a vision of a future in which all children would enjoy 'the free and broad air of a general and humane education' (Hadow, 1926, Introduction).

To some extent, Hadow's optimism was justified. In the three decades or so following the Second World War England's primary schools became a model for other parts of the world. Sadly, from the late 1970s onwards politicians began to take ever greater control of the educational process, and by the early years of this century they had imposed a sterile, utilitarian, test-driven curriculum.

The history of primary education in England has thus been relatively short but worryingly fraught. It is to be hoped that a more humane and inspiring vision of its possibilities will emerge in the wake of the curriculum reviews currently being undertaken. Whether it does so remains to be seen.

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