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## Remembering Plowden

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**ABSTRACT** In 2017 the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the much-misunderstood and maligned Plowden Report went unnoticed – a pity for those sharing progressive values, needed much more now than in the 1960s. In this article the author argues that the spirit of the report and its underlying values need restating in the current climate.

The year 2017 could have seen the celebration of an important educational anniversary – 50 years after the publication of the much-misquoted and misunderstood Plowden Report of 1967. Given the current downbeat educational, political and economic context, it was not surprising that *Children and their Primary Schools* had not been celebrated, but in 2018 it stands out as a very significant educational landmark with qualities that are in marked contrast to the present educational Zeitgeist. In the half-century since its publication it has been widely quoted (and often, especially more recently, misquoted!). It is probably only now that something of its true significance can be gauged with the hindsight born of the experience of performativity, market-led approaches, the tyranny of national testing and the deficiencies of an insensitive inspection system.

First and foremost, it was a *serious* attempt to ‘consider primary education in all its aspects’, not just the perennial, Gibb-obsessed concerns of literacy and numeracy. There has been nothing published since that has been comparable in scope to it, though the Cambridge Review came close. It was based on a great deal of commissioned research; it drew on a survey by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) of all English primary schools and it called on oral or written evidence from a very wide range of interested parties. It provided a rich, detailed appreciation – not one crafted to a political context.

Allied to this was its *principled* approach. Helpfully to both its advocates and its detractors, it made its underlying values explicit: equality of educational opportunity, compensation for handicaps, respect for individuality and a commitment to the highest educational standards. It treated research findings

with caution and care; it revealed rather than glossed over the wide spectrum of opinion it elicited; and it was not afraid to put forward a value-informed vision for the development of English primary education – one with which many readers of *FORUM* would empathise 50 years on.

Most amazing of all to the reader who revisits the report was its *positive, affirmative* tone – a marked contrast to so much current soul-searching. Not only was the future of English society viewed optimistically (too much so, as it turned out), but teachers, schools and above all children were valued for what they had achieved and for what they were achieving currently rather than being criticised for achievements as yet unrealised. Unlike government and Ofsted reports since, Plowden praised, celebrated and encouraged. In particular, there was no hint of the ‘discourse of derision’ that would prove so damaging later and which still lingers in some quarters to this day.

One of its most appealing features, its *purple prose*, proved a mixed blessing since phrases taken out of context could be, were, and still are seized upon by its critics. ‘The child is the agent of his own learning’ and the all-too-confident assertion that “‘finding out” has proved to be better than “being told”” were seen by some critics as implying an abdication of the teacher’s responsibility to teach. But other passages were conveniently forgotten: ‘From the start there must be teaching as well as learning’ and ‘We certainly do not deny the need for practice of skills and consolidation of knowledge.’ The Devil can quote scripture to suit his purposes, as have too many recent politicians and pundits whose ideological preoccupations and values are far removed from those of Plowden.

The effects of the report are difficult to summarise. Its critique of streaming (‘Streaming serves as a means of social selection’ and ‘Streaming can be wounding to children’) provided a major stimulus for its abolition – aided by the efforts of Brian Simon and articles in *FORUM*. For some teachers it provided, and still provides, a perennial source of inspiration – a view of what might be possible ‘in the best of all possible worlds’. Its support for individuality, imagination and creativity led to some outstanding work by individual schools and teachers which demonstrated how the potential of so many children is untapped by conventional schooling.

But it had other effects too. The value it placed on individuality could lead to an undue emphasis on individual learning which denied children sustained interaction with the teacher either as a class or in groups. A small minority of teachers did abdicate their professional responsibilities, though not to the extent later caricatured by former chief inspector Michael Wilshaw and his political masters. Certainly not enough attention was paid to the content of the curriculum or the variety of means by which it might be taught.

Just over 50 years on, the report needs to be celebrated, not so much for its particular recommendations but for the optimistic, affirming spirit in which they were offered. In particular, primary teachers were made to feel good about themselves and their profession. There was plenty of rhetoric in Plowden, but what splendid rhetoric! We could do with more such uplifting rhetoric at the current time.

**COLIN RICHARDS** was a recently qualified primary teacher at the time the Plowden Report was published. He was a fierce critic of aspects of the report after it had been published, but 50 years on he has largely recanted. Now, as a retired senior HMI, he is an emeritus professor of education and the vice-chair of governors of a secondary school in Cumbria. He tweets at [@colinsparkbridge](#). *Correspondence:* [profcrichards@gmail.com](mailto:profcrichards@gmail.com)

