



... children, their world, their education

PLOWDEN, TRUTH AND MYTH: A WARNING

Robin Alexander
University of Cambridge

Honorary Fellowships Award Ceremony,
The College of Teachers, 15 May 2009

On this occasion of the award of the first Lady Plowden Memorial Medal, and in the presence of members of Lady Plowden's family,¹ I have been asked to say a few words linking the Plowden report with another major enquiry into English primary education: the Cambridge Primary Review, currently nearing its completion.²

The Plowden report was published 42 years ago, in 1967.³ That means that many people here today know about it only by reputation. I am an exception: as a young teacher I was first in line at our local bookshop to buy a copy. I have read it several times, and I still refer to it. Indeed, on the Cambridge Primary Review we have frequently checked to see what Plowden says on this or that aspect of primary education in order to assess what has changed over the past half century and what has not.

Here's just one example, very much to the government's credit. In 1967 there were about 4 million pupils in England's primary schools, the same number as today, together with 140,000 primary teachers and a handful of ancillary helpers. Today, the education of the same number of children is in the hands of 198,000 primary teachers and 173,000 teaching assistants and other support staff. That's a truly dramatic professional transformation.

But comparing the state of primary education then and now is not my concern tonight. My message is more in the nature of a warning about the difficulties facing those who, like the Plowden Committee and our own Cambridge Review, seek to uncover and report the truth about the condition of education in England. Truth, of course, is dangerous territory, but the debate about Plowden became so polarised that it is right to ask how far it relates to the report as written. And on that score, it's clear that there is not one Plowden report but three - at the very least.

The first version, of course, is Plowden as published, or what Plowden actually said. There it is, immutable, undeniable: a massive body of evidence and discussion ending with 197 recommendations. It is a truly impressive document which in many respects retains its relevance, even though the world has changed and research has transformed our understanding of childhood, teaching and many other matters with which the report deals.

¹ Penelope and Francis Plowden.

² For information and copies of all the Review's publications: www.primaryreview.org.uk.

³ CACE (England) (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools* (the Plowden Report), London: HMSO.

The second version of the Plowden Report is what well-meaning Plowden enthusiasts or advocates during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s *claimed* that Plowden said, usually on the basis of hearsay, and what they did in schools and classrooms in the report's name. I remember how frequently I met, right up to the 1990s, teachers who prefaced assertions about what was right for young children with the statement, often delivered in hushed and reverential tones, 'Plowden says' - which of course was supposed to put their assertions beyond debate. Yet for many of them, the supposed authority of Plowden came not from the text but from colleagues, heads, teacher trainers or local authority advisers, and these people sometimes distorted Plowden's words beyond recognition in pursuit of a vision of primary education about which Plowden himself was much more cautious and measured. This, I have to say, is where the problems started. If only more teachers had *read* Plowden rather than relying on the doctrinal re-interpretations which others provided, the report itself might not have had to bear so much subsequent scorn. These were the people, clearly, in the mind of Sir Alec Clegg, one of Plowden's staunchest supporters, when in 1974 he warned:

What will educational historians say about the transformation of our primary schools since the last war? They will no doubt write about open education, vertical grouping, activity methods, free choice and other clichés which were the verbal shorthand of those that started it all and knew what they were doing, but which more recently have become the jargon of those who have jumped on the bandwagon but cannot play the instruments.⁴

The third version of the Plowden Report is also what people *claimed* that Plowden said, though this time they were opponents rather than supporters. Their version of Plowden was shaped by a belief that the 1960s and 1970s were years of educational and moral decline, of plummeting standards in the 3Rs, of permissiveness, self-indulgence and - the ultimate insult - the final loss of empire. Casting around for an explanation, or rather a scapegoat, they found the Plowden report. Some even blamed it for the student riots of 1968, which would have made the rioting students barely one year old. As with Plowden Version 2, the creators of Version 3 were unlikely to have read Plowden itself, but they had a fierce certainty that their version of the report, and of educational history, was incontrovertible.

So we have Plowden as *published*, Plowden as *sanctified* or *mythologised*, and Plowden as *demonised*: a book, an orthodoxy in the name of the book, and a backlash. I hope the Dean of Westminster⁵ will forgive me for suggesting that there may just be religious parallels here, for this is the fate of all books of real significance, and Plowden was certainly that - even though it has not been enlisted to justify quite so many contrary purposes as has the Bible. Indeed, and pursuing the religious parallel, the ideas of the American philosopher John Dewey, to whom the American version of progressivism is often traced back, were so distorted that Dewey's widow complained that his enthusiastic followers 'could not see their idol for the incense they sent up.'⁶

Plowden as published; Plowden as sanctified; Plowden as demonised. Plowden Versions 1, 2 and 3. Now I'm not going to bore you with a forensic comparison of the three versions, but a couple of examples may help.

⁴ Quoted in Alexander, R.J., Rose, J. and Woodhead, C. (1992) *Curriculum Organisation and Classroom Practice in Primary Schools: a discussion paper*, London, DES, para 22. Sir Alec Clegg was the very influential Chief Education Officer for the West Riding of Yorkshire.

⁵ Present at this event (see note 18).

⁶ Letter to the late Professor Edmund King quoted in King, E.J. (1979) *Other Schools and Ours: comparative studies for today*, London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 343.

- Plowden was welcomed by its supporters and criticised by its detractors for pronouncing the death of a subject-based curriculum. In fact, although it argued for children to be helped to cross subject boundaries in pursuit of knowledge and understanding, Plowden actually favoured a measured progression from a relatively open curriculum in the early years to a subject-differentiated one by age 12 - hardly revolutionary - and its discussion of curriculum was in other respects pretty conventional, using all the familiar subject names.⁷
- Plowden was celebrated by the mythologisers and ridiculed by the demonisers for saying that all teaching, even in large classes where this was clearly impossible, should be individualised. But although Plowden '*welcomed* the trend towards individual learning' it actually *recommended* 'a combination of individual, group and class work'.⁸

There are many examples like these, and they show just how important it is to check a text one wishes to cite in support of an argument and never, never, rely on someone else's version of it.

And what of Plowden as the arch-progressive tract which became the butt of the 1970s Black Paper authors, the press, several secretaries of state, and even prime ministers, one of whom in 1991 proclaimed:

We will take no lectures from those who led the long march of mediocrity through our schools ... My belief is a return to basics in education. The progressive theorists have had their say, and ... they've had their day.⁹

Well, the authors of the same government's so-called 'three wise men' report of 1992, of which I was one, examined the published evidence from research and school inspection about what Plowden had led to, and in a key paragraph we concluded:

The commonly held belief that primary schools, after 1967, were swept by a tide of progressivism is untrue. HMI in 1978, for example, reported that only 5 per cent of classrooms exhibited wholeheartedly 'exploratory' characteristics and that didactic teaching was still practised in three-quarters of them ... The reality, then, was rather more complex. The ideas connoted by words like 'progressive' and 'informal' had a profound impact in certain schools and LEAs. Elsewhere they were either ignored, or ... adopted as so much rhetoric to sustain practice which in visual terms might look attractive and busy but which lacked any serious educational rationale.¹⁰

It was Version 2, then, which was the real problem, not the Plowden report itself: what one might call 'Plowdenism' rather than Plowden, and on that score the evidence from research and inspection showed that there were indeed grounds for concern. But the demonisers were not at all happy to be told that their versions of the Plowden report and educational history were incorrect. For them, and with Britain heading for the 1992 general election, the only thing that mattered was the clarity of the oppositional politics of 'them and us'. To sustain this they required nothing less than a full-blooded progressive revolution against which they could mount their back-to-basics counter-revolution. They needed a clear-cut Manichaean confrontation, not a typical English muddle. So the demonisers' response to our pointing out

⁷ CACE (1967) para 555 and chapter 17.

⁸ CACE (1967), recommendation 96.

⁹ Prime Minister John Major at the Conservative Party Conference, 1992.

¹⁰ Alexander, Rose and Woodhead (1992) paras 19-20. The reference is to the HMI primary survey of 1978 (Plowden had recommended checks on progress every ten years): HMI (1978) *Primary Education in England: a survey by HM Inspectors of Schools*, London: HMSO.

that the truth about the so-called progressive revolution was much more prosaic than portrayed was to accuse *us* of being closet progressivists and of rewriting history.¹¹ And so, alas, it goes on ...

History, indeed, is the issue. For when one looks closely at English primary education, and probes beyond the apparent transformations of the past few decades, what is remarkable is not so much what *has* changed as what has *not*. In today's primary schools you will find - alive, well and seldom questioned - habits of thought and practice which have survived not just the 42 years since Plowden but the century which preceded it too. For example: the exceptionally early start to formal schooling which marks England out from most other countries; the division at age seven of infants and juniors, which became key stages 1 and 2; the division of primary from secondary at age 11; the generalist class teacher system of age-based classes each taught by just one teacher who professes expertise in the entire curriculum, rather than by a range of specialists as in secondary schools; then there's what Christine Gilbert's predecessor David Bell called the 'two-tier' curriculum of 'the basics' and 'the rest',¹² one protected and massively resourced, the other taking its chances and often, as we've seen in recent years with primary arts and humanities, losing out; and the defining of those 'basics' as the ability to 'read, write and add up' but little else, despite all that we know, for instance, about the immense cognitive and cultural power of talk or the rooting of truly civilised human relations in the capacity to imagine, create and empathise.

All these features of supposedly modern primary schools and a 21st century curriculum go back in an unbroken line to the Victorian elementary schools, into which they were introduced in pursuit of goals such as cheapness (the classteacher system), or educating the urban masses thus far but no further, in case they questioned their lot (the minimalist curriculum and the narrow view of the 'basics').

If we understand the history of primary education we understand not only how we have arrived where now we are, but also why so few people seem unable to entertain alternative possibilities. For, interestingly, the authors of Plowden Version 3 - the demonisers - always proclaim '*back to basics*', never '*forward into the 21st century*' and a re-assessment of what the 'basics' should now entail. Always back, never forward.

Which is our cue for fast-forwarding to the Cambridge Primary Review. This is a three-year fully independent enquiry, generously supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, into the condition and future of English primary education. So far, it has published 31 interim reports. In a few months' time it will produce its final report. It has received well over 1000 formal written submissions from individuals and organisations, ranging in length from 1 page to 300 pages. In over 240 consultation meetings, seminars and conferences the Review team has travelled the length and breadth of the country, talking to children, teachers, parents and a wide range of community representatives, as well as to government, opposition parties, national agencies and many other organisations. It has commissioned from 66 leading academics in Britain and other countries 28 surveys of published research relating to the Review's ten themes which between them have examined over 3000 published sources. Added to the sources in the forthcoming final report this means that the Review has drawn on over 4000 publications, as well as the submissions, soundings and other consultations. In addition, it has re-assessed a large quantity of official data.

¹¹ Or, more accurately, the accusation was levelled at the one of the so-called 'three wise men' who reminded the journalist in question what the three had written. See 'One rather unwise man', *The Guardian*, 12 February 1992.

¹² Ofsted (2004) *Standards and Quality 2002-3: the annual report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools*, London, Ofsted. Chief Inspector Christine Gilbert was also present on this occasion (see note 18).

One would have thought that this breathless catalogue of evidence, and of evidence of different kinds, would be enough to persuade people that this is a serious, thorough and scrupulously-conducted enquiry. But that would be to reckon without those mythologising and demonising tendencies from which Plowden suffered so grievously and which remain very much alive – even down to the same old claims about the 1970s and the progressive takeover. That would be to ignore, too, the way that education now is if anything far more politicised and polarised than it was in the 1960s and 1970s.

Thus it is that a DCSF spokesman recently accused the Review of ‘peddling recycled, partial or out-of-date research’;¹³ while a minister, who on his own admission had not read any of the Cambridge Review’s reports or briefings, said ‘My people say it’s rehashed’.¹⁴ Meanwhile, his Secretary of State said ‘I’m not going to apologise for delivering what parents want, even if these researchers ... don’t like it ... They are out of touch with parents around the country who want to know their children are learning the basics of English and maths’.¹⁵ And for good measure, one of the Prime Minister’s former Downing Street advisers said, of the report which the Cambridge Review published on the primary curriculum¹⁶ in February, and with all the authority which working in Downing Street confers:

This is another deeply ideological strike against standards and effective teaching of the 3Rs in our primary schools. Many of its contributors oppose the very idea of ‘standards’ ... A return to a situation where the teaching of the basics is subsumed into a process of osmosis would destroy another generation of primary schoolchildren in the same way that the children of the seventies were failed ... Of course we need to get the balance right, but the Cambridge Review is not about getting the balance right. It is about reversing the changes of the last twenty years and returning our schools to a time when there was no public accountability and the basics were largely subsumed into other lessons.¹⁷

This is classic Version 3 demonology, and the giveaway is that reference to the ultimate demonological repository, the 1970s (well, no, perhaps not quite the ultimate one). Naturally, the Cambridge report on the primary curriculum said none of the things attributed to it, and indeed the Cambridge Review has argued strongly and consistently for both standards and accountability. For us the issue is not whether standards are important - of course they are - but how they should be defined and assessed; and not whether schools should be accountable - of course they should - but how. And although there have been arguments about the teaching of reading and maths, the one thing primary schools have never neglected, including during the 1970s, is the 3Rs. It’s the rest of the curriculum which has been progressively squeezed almost to the point where in some schools it has lost its viability.

Is there a moral to all this? Well, what happened to Plowden will almost certainly happen to the final report of the Cambridge Primary Review, especially as it will be published in the run-up to what we can anticipate will be a bitterly-fought general election. Indeed, the demonisers

¹³ DCSF spokeswoman, quoted in *Times Educational Supplement*, 29.2.08.

¹⁴ Interviewed and quoted by Jenni Russell in *The Guardian*, 26.3.08.

¹⁵ Quoted in *The Independent*, 29.2.08.

¹⁶ The Review’s curriculum report is in two parts: Alexander, R.J. and Flutter, J. (2009) *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: past and present*, and Alexander, R.J. (2009) *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: the future*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, www.primaryreview.org.uk.

¹⁷ Conor Ryan, *Conor’s Commentary* 20.2.09, <http://conorfryan.blogspot.com/2009/02/lets-not-go-back-to-70s-primary.html> (accessed 29 April 2009).

have already started work – as always without having read a word of what we have written. So we have been warned.

But something else occurs to me, and it bears on tonight's event. I hope fellow-recipients of the College's honorary awards¹⁸ won't mind my saying that each of them, in different ways, is strongly committed to the pursuit of truth – that slippery concept again. Yet the search for truth, and the separation of truth from mere myth, are surely what unite school inspection, religious leadership, academic research, teaching and the courageous journalism of people like John Simpson (not that there are many like him!).

But also - for that's why we are here – all of us present tonight are committed to *education*, and here I can find no better way to reinforce the concerns I have expressed, and the connections I have tried to make, than to quote from a lecture which Archbishop Rowan Williams gave last year at my own university, Cambridge. He said:

If you're going to be a decision-making citizen, you need to know how to make sense and how to recognise when someone else is making sense ... You need to know how to share forms of argumentation. When people don't have methods of argument in common, they can't have intelligent disagreement, they have a fight ... Education is a training in what you can *trust* and what you can *share* ... We sometimes over-emphasise the role of education in teaching you to be suspicious; important though that is, to teach people how to be suspicious ought also to be to teach them something of what they can trust; what meaningful action together is like; how arguments and priorities and visions can be communicated; how common languages can be shaped ... Faith and hope are at work, and they're at work in the training of reason ... Faith as the capacity to trust arguments which can be shown to be trustworthy; hope as the conviction that it is possible to act collaboratively in human society, not just with endless rivalry and jostling for position; and I'd like to think that charity comes in somewhere as well – charity in the sense of a generous awareness that there are different ways of making sense, different sorts of questions to ask about the world we're in, and insofar as those questions are pursued with integrity and seriousness they should be heard seriously and charitably.¹⁹

As always, Rowan Williams has caught both the complexity and the simplicity of what is at stake. Regrettably, the experience of Plowden, the Cambridge Review and countless other major reports shows that we are still some way from the kind of discourse - in education and in our democracy - on which true progress depends.

This is the text of Robin Alexander's invited lecture at the Awards Ceremony of the College of Teachers, which took place on 15 May 2009. Footnotes and references have been added.
www.robinalexander.org.uk , www.primaryreview.org.uk .

¹⁸ Professor Robin Alexander, HMCI Christine Gilbert CBE, The Very Reverend Dr John Hall, Ivor Poole, Professor Lesley Saunders, William Simmonds, John Simpson CBE, Alan Tuckett OBE, Professor Geoff Whitty.

¹⁹ Williams, R. (2008) 'Faith, reason and quality assurance – having faith in academic life', lecture given at the University of Cambridge in the series *A World to Believe in: Cambridge consultations on faith, humanity and the future*, 21 February.