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The Plowden Report Twenty Years on

MAURICE KOGAN

ABSTRACT *This paper considers the membership, terms of reference and assumptions governing the work of the Plowden Committee. It evaluates criticisms made since of its proposals and findings. It relates the Committee's conclusions to possible change models and to forms of policy analysis that might have been used.*

The Plowden Committee met for the first time in the autumn of 1963 and reported in the autumn of 1966. It was the Central Advisory Council for Education (England). A parallel Council for Wales sat under the Chairmanship of Professor C. E. Gittins with identical terms of reference. The Gittins Report produced similar conclusions on the nature and best ways of achieving good primary education, but also included valuable chapters on the problems of the small rural school and on bilingualism. The two reports should be a valuable source for those who wish to compare the problems of two similar but different systems of primary education in the 1960s. The Gittins Report was published in both English and Welsh; the translation into Welsh occupied four professors for nine months and sold 26 copies.

Plowden's membership and terms of reference were a product of the optimism and belief in social engineering of its time. The terms of reference, drafted at a flick of the wrist by a gifted under-secretary, Ralph Fletcher, were "to consider primary education in all its aspects, and the transition to secondary education". There was no urgent reason why the policy machine should choose primary education as a subject for elongated and careful study. It had been, however, 30 years since the last of the Hadow Reports had been published and it might thus have been time for primary education to be worked over. The time and mode of transition from primary to secondary education was indeed beginning to be an important issue, so important that a needed flexibility in the law governing it was introduced whilst the Plowden Committee was at work on it.

The terms of reference once decided, the mode of enquiry and its membership became the subject of long and interested discussion within the Ministry of Education (it was promoted to being a Department led by a Secretary of State half way through the Plowden Committee's term of office.) The membership of previous CACs had been mainly distinguished practitioners although they and the consultative committees of pre-1939 days included such distinguished experts in their own fields as R. H. Tawney or Geoffrey Crowther. The team who were concerned with the selection of the Plowden Committee hoped to subject what Martin Rein has called 'the hot knowledge' [1] of the practitioner and practical administrator to the informed critique of the sceptical philosopher and professional social scientist. The result was what one member called 'a comprehensive school'. It included A. J. Ayer, then the Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford, David Donnison, recently appointed to a Chair in Social

Administration at the LSE, Harold Rose (to be succeeded by Ian Byatt) both LSE economists, J. M. Tanner, a Reader, later Professor, in Child Development at Great Ormond Street. The growing power of the new serious media was represented by the appointment of Timothy Raison, who had just launched *New Society*, and eventually reached membership of a Conservative Cabinet. What Edward Boyle called 'the fourth estate' was represented through two members of the Confederation for the Advancement of State Education. Other members represented expertise in the practice and administration of and training for work in the schools.

It was thus hoped that the Committee would be capable not only of making the case for primary education—all Advisory Councils made a case for the area over which they were expected to pass judgement—but also of making it both critically and professionally. Although the term was not then in use it was thus to be an exercise in policy analysis.

The Committee began its work at a time when some of the deeper problems facing post-war Britain and its welfare state were beginning to emerge but when we were still confident that intelligence, liberal sentiments and systematic thinking could get us through them. The members of the Plowden Committee visited the USA and were reasonably hopeful that the horrors of Harlem or Chicago's south side schools, or deep racial division, let alone steep increase in the levels of unemployment among school leavers, could be avoided here. The Committee evinced a belief in the ability of educational systems to detect good practice and disseminate it. It took for granted the ability of policy makers to analyse issues in order to develop new and successful policies which could provide the framework for good, benign and liberal practices. That framework would protect and house good professional practice. Teachers working in artistic interaction with their pupils would create a curriculum that would support the individual good and yet contribute to benign engineering for the whole society. Now we may know better that nothing is easily achieved and a great deal is easily destroyed or humiliated or impaired.

THE EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL ASSUMPTIONS

The Plowden Committee took on the exemplary function adopted by all previous Consultative Committees and Central Advisory Councils. It laid out the best practices that could be found in primary schools with a view to encouraging others to follow them. The Committee came to the conclusion that a strong minority of primary schools were successful in inculcating appropriate attitudes and relationships towards pupils that the Hadow Reports of 1931 and 1933 [2] had thought appropriate in primary education. Its assumptions were that education best began by generating pupil motivation within an informal but firm relationship established by the teachers and by eschewing a teacher dominated curriculum. This view was well nourished by the practitioner evidence reaching the Committee but also fell in well with the developmental theories contained in the second chapter of the Report. These described how children would follow best a natural trajectory of development which could be impeded or enhanced by what the schools could do but was essentially best if left to follow the paths of natural development and motivation: "Until a child is ready to take a particular step forward, it is a waste of time to teach him to take it" (Chapter 2).

This view of education, naturalistic, heuristic and developmental as it was, was in some unremarked conflict with the Committee's thinking about education as a redistributive agency. Steps should be taken, the chapter on educational priority areas

urged, to improve the educational chances and the attainments of the least well placed. This would call for a new distribution of educational resources. Here the Committee accepted the products of 20 years of social science which showed how social factors, family backgrounds and attitudes and school characteristics were associated with differences in children's performances. The important concept of positive discrimination made its official appearance first in this report although the phrase was in fact offered to a working party of the Council by a DES official. The notion of educational priority areas which it incorporated and which was later taken up by Anthony Crosland as Secretary of State had been anticipated in the preceding Newsom Report on the least well endowed pupils in secondary schools [3]. The assumption that areas where deprivation was most present should receive special treatment in terms of buildings, staffing ratios and other facilities went well with recommendations that social services should march forward with education in order to arrest alienation and deprivation in the whole community. Whilst the Committee believed in endorsing that which came naturally through professionally created child centred and individualised education, the EPA policy was an example of global solutions and social engineering. Environmental factors were thus emphasised at the same time as the child was endorsed as the agent of his own learning.

The Plowden Report was contemporaneous with that of the Seeborn Committee which recommended the creation of social service departments and the development of multidisciplinary teams. The ideology of corporate planning has landed local authorities with a lot of technocratic techniques hostile to professional identities but in part was consistent with practitioner needs to connect across departmental boundaries. Again, Plowden was in the thinking set of its time. Now beliefs about local government veer between holistic and corporate systems and atomism as represented by decentralisation. The strong endorsement of professional individuality was never reconciled with the hopes for working across boundaries.

Strongly linked with the naturalistic and developmental approach were the proposals for consultation and participation. Participation by parents had not yet become community control but Plowden argued for closer relationships between public institutions and their clients. Its statements in favour of parental participation may seem weak now in view of the recommendations of the Taylor Report [4] and the proposals in the 1986 Education Act for the composition and powers of governing bodies, but at the time they were radical.

Other educational assumptions were on the liberal side. Nursery education should be provided not only for the good of the children but also as part of the rights of parents who might wish to go to work and thus have a greater choice of life style. Primary education should begin at a time when individual children were ready for it and the transition to secondary education should be such as to avoid the painful divisions in modes and substance still now experienced.

CRITICISMS OF PROPOSALS AND FINDINGS

The assumptions of the Report have been vigorously attacked, and on two scores. First, the research evidence so arduously pulled together by the secretariat in so short a time has been criticised as being incompetently interpreted and directed towards creating credibility for proposals which the Committee wished to back; this was "a role that can be described as stage management" [5]. For example, "the research directed attention to a new arena in which the policy of parent involvement would be enacted.

The research did not create the policy any more than a set constitutes the play. But the research did make it easier for the audience to share the understanding the committee had about the need for increasing parent involvement". Acland, indeed, concludes, sometimes on reanalysis of the data, that the proposals on educational policy areas, on the importance of class size, and on parental involvement, were weakly or wrongly made because they lacked regard to proper research authorities or to the evidence collected. In effect, when faced with research evidence which implied that class size may make no difference the Committee followed its instinct or professional institutions and depended on what Cohen and Lindblom would call 'Ordinary Knowledge' [6]—intuitions based on common sense inferred from the experience of thousands of teachers.

The second set of attacks opposed the fundamental assumptions as opposed to the findings of the Report. The Black Papers [7] were anticipated by severe criticisms by a group of savants from the London University Institute of Education whose perspectives range from regret for the passing of the elementary schools (Elvin) to critiques of the sociological and developmental bases of the Report (Bernstein and Foss) [8]. The Report did not pursue Bernstein's work on the structure of language and on children's linguistic development, which seemed to run counter to the more naturalistic and heuristic modes advocated by Plowden.

The most cogent and recent critic of Plowden has been Brian Simon [9]. Simon maintains that progressivism shared with the vogue for mental testing a kind of 'reductionist biologism'. In his view it assumes that the function of education must be restricted to the flowering or maturation of inborn qualities so that the teacher must stand away from the child in order not to interfere, or distort, his or her natural spontaneous development. He argues that this is not far different from the perspective of measurement psychology which is that teaching can only bring to light a given, inborn, quota of intelligence. Moreover, he believes that the New Education, and the progressive working-out of it embodied in Plowden, when joined in what Selleck called 'an obligato' with psychological measurement, left the elementary schools, and therefore the later primary schools, hopelessly adrift so that they created their own somewhat more primitive pedagogy which largely ignored progressive notions.

Moreover, the Plowden emphasis on the individual child was unrealistic. It was not possible for teachers to cater for 30 individuals each pursuing their own development and at the same time ensure that worthwhile common core education was available to all.

Simon has certainly made an elegant connection between two apparently contradictory themes in British education. Yet as I have remarked in reviewing Simon's excellent book elsewhere, there is something of a *reductio ad absurdum* in his argument. Plowden's determinism, if that is what it was, should be seen in the context of what the report was advocating as good practice. The Committee assumed that there were indeed enormous gaps between the potentials of the mass of children and what was being provided for them and that providing a good environment in which innate capacities could find their way would indeed arrest the determinism of a dull, prescribed and formal curriculum. The Committee disliked, too, the way in which the curriculum had been dominated by eleven plus testing which was itself a product of Burtian psychometric testing. Simon is on surer ground, reinforced by his own research, in criticising the lack of realism of the Plowden Committee in believing that teachers could administer highly individualised programmes to classes that might

contain more than 30 pupils. But even here the Committee was at some pains to see how far it had and could be done and to describe ways of doing it.

CHANGE MODELS

How well have the educational and social policies advocated by Plowden stood the test of time? The public rhetoric of both Ministers and their opponents emphasises standards rather than the interplay of teachers and pupils in a self-motivated quest leading to self-acquired skills. If we take recent HMI writing as an indication, contemporary thinking may not seem far away from that of either Hadow or Plowden at least in terms of the objectives. But operationally there must be large changes stemming from an attempt to make schools more accountable and thus to express their objectives more sharply for review and critique. Schools must now “take account of the policy decisions of LEAs and central government and of the expectations of parents, employers and the community at large” [10]. There should be “an agreed range of learning and experience”. And schools now apparently ‘deliver’ a curriculum. Whereas Plowden emphasised individuality the present vogue is towards socially endorsed commonalities.

The Plowden Report embodied notions of change at several levels. The optimistic assumption about the ability to cause change by exemplary description is general to the whole British tradition of advisory committees in education. In an earlier discussion of the role of Central Advisory Councils in educational policy making [11] I wrote “that the Central Advisory Councils enhance the process of social discovery and criticism by taking issues that are already prominent in the educational establishment, by collating the data which make or criticise the case for change, and by presenting government and public statements upon which changes in policy can be based”. The processes by which the reports might contribute towards change were multiple. They had an evangelical purpose and provided teachers and administrators with visions of the best practice in the hope that the best might be emulated. Plowden thought that whilst it would investigate whether schools were resting on their past laurels “our review is a report of progress and a spur to more”. Poor practice was gently rebuked and the best was encouraged by describing it. The extent to which the Plowden Report did, in fact, generate change through sympathetic description could only be ascertained by means of a detailed enquiry among teachers who have passed through the education service since its publication, and that has not been done.

At another level, the committees might well legitimise new thinking about the relationship between education and society. Anthony Crosland, while talking with somewhat laconic detachment about the CACs, agreed [12] that “the CAC did document the good and the bad in the system and, in particular, legitimise the radical sociology of the 50s and the 60s. Better than any other group of documents”. Note here that the use of ‘radical’ meant not much more than progressive in 1970 when this discussion took place.

But if it is true, as I thought much nearer the time, that “assumptions were written, made acceptable and put into the policy bloodstream by the official reports”, what is dolefully evident is that they did not stay there very long. The reports might help establish a social policy whose time has already come but, perhaps, no more than an influential book written by an above average academic or, more potently, by the sudden flash of intuition by a bad minister on a good day.

Moreover, the progressive mode of primary education had had a massive head start

in that there were already excellent examples of 'open' primary schools already well known and well loved and, indeed, in such areas as the West Riding, Oxfordshire, Hertfordshire and Leicestershire, fully backed by leading administrators and not challenged by even the most traditional of Conservative local authorities. Plowden could extol these as examples. But it is difficult to measure the 'percolative' effects of these models throughout the country as reinforced by the Plowden Report.

There is, indeed, a further possibility of testing the extent to which a report such as that of the Plowden Committee could act as a change agent. By the early 1970s British primary schools had become the affectionate target of able and highly motivated Americans who were hungry for examples of good primary education. The British 'open school' became an important example of what could be done by teachers working with meagre funding. British teachers were seen to have a philosophy which they were allowed to implement without pressure from bureaucracies or external experts. Some of us were involved in an effort funded by the Ford Foundation and housed within a still confident and well founded Schools Council to produce written exemplars of British primary education that might then transfer to the USA [13]. It is not easy to know whether this attempt at cultural transfer has survived or whether whatever could be transferred has withered under the onslaught of American educational fundamentalism. This, again, is a subject which a gifted British researcher, perhaps operating in a department which Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer would regard as competent to do research, should undertake.

A final reflection on Plowden and change might seem depressed and sceptical. Progressive primary modes can produce marvellous results as Edith Biggs and many other educational developers and recorders were so well able to document, although the progressive movement in primary education is now being blamed for a reduction in mathematical standards. Indeed, one can see very little difference between the ideals of good primary education and that of the most privileged and successful university education. But, following Brian Simon's critique discussed above, many teachers and pupils may not be able to achieve enough by learning through discovery. One might start with that as an ideal. But quite soon, as Plowden to some extent conceded, there must be an insistence on the statement of educational objectives to be achieved within the classroom. The world of knowledge is not easily within the teacher's grasp without the use of external and quite well structured materials. None of this is necessarily antithetical to what Plowden extolled. But the Report tilted distinctly towards discovery and the heuristic process and away from the structured and that which might be transmitted through firm and perhaps standardised learning routines. This could be done badly and be an easy cop out by teachers, but used intelligently might provide fibre in the educational diet.

Perhaps the best ideals of education are just too difficult to achieve for all or for most. It is difficult for social reformers to think of going for less than the best but the experience of 20 years points towards a stronger control over one's optimism about what is feasible. The Plowden Report produced a normative model of the good primary school; it could not and did not produce an objective account of what it takes to make it good or how to evaluate it.

The same is true of the social policy aspects of Plowden. The Committee hoped that the schools could help break the vicious cycle of deprivation by arming children with skills and knowledge and self-confidence based upon their innate thirst for learning. The schools could be part of a wider network of mechanisms for social rescue and revival. But this hope, too, rested upon assumptions which were matters of faith rather

than certainty. They place upon teachers the role of social change agent. Many teachers do not feel this to be their job and may not be politically inclined that way anyway. Some of those most inclined to social change seem to fall into political radicalism which eschews sound arrangements for reaching consensus about what to teach, how to teach it and within what kind of managerial arrangements. When, on top of that, the political and administrative structures within which schools must find resources and legitimacy become hopelessly politicised by heroic ministers and sharply ideological local authority leaders all chance of causing useful change passes away. Social change of the kind adumbrated in Plowden requires the kind of consensus which knows that if there are to be a new generation of winners there must also be a new generation of losers whose needs must also be accommodated if they are not to become the political enemies of what is proposed. Plowden had no way of predicting the politics of education in the 1970s and 1980s.

POLICY ANALYSIS

Finally, we can now look back on Plowden as an example of policy analysis. In effect, two institutional formats and two art forms were entertained side by side. The Committee and its Report combined the accumulated intuitions of teacher professionals with an attempt to advance rationalistic planning. The policy analysis began with statements about the nature of the child and his modes of development and the social contexts within which the schools had their being. It went on to state a theory or, perhaps more accurately, a prescription for good curriculum development. It did its best to shore up its knowledge base by promoting what was then an ambitious programme of research, mainly on the social factors affecting education. The report attempted to consider alternative patterns for, for example, the ages and stages of education and it also attempted to cost its proposals.

So it was a beginning in policy analysis applied to education, at a time when there were few examples for it to follow. At the same time, however, it was saturated by progressive educational thinking as represented by some of the best expertise of the time in primary education. The rational and social science based sources thus had to come to terms with sources drawn from experience and substantiated or entrenched, according to one's biases, in strong professionalism with which all CACs had to come to terms. On the basis of these conceptual and empirical sources it felt it could then make policy pronouncements. Of course, the correspondence between evidence and conclusions was intermittent. It has already been remarked that where the evidence did not fit the intuition of the Committee and of its witnesses it followed 'Ordinary Knowledge' and its own intuitions.

In institutional terms, too, there were elements of the Great and the Good about the Committee and it would not be unfair to describe either the Chairman (Lady Plowden) or the Vice-Chairman (Sir John Newsom) of being of that genre, although Newsom's initial claim to both greatness and goodness was as a practising Chief Education Officer of a highly regarded county. At the same time, however, that element in British policy making and deliberations was, as has been seen, accompanied by the recruitment of social science thinking.

The Central Advisory Councils have now been frogmarched off the stage. The 1986 Education Act repeals provision for them. One can see the reasons why. The multiplicity of objectives and of art forms, the extolling of good practice and the recommendation for policy change offered ministers a mixture that might be too rich

or simply unusable. In fact, no CAC produced unusable results and Plowden no more than any other. The creation of a better art form is not easy to work out. It seems clear that educational life needs some antidote to the increasing power of political action, and the decreasing willingness of the DES, both ministers and officials, to listen to outside thinking.

But that counter-policy device would have to differentiate more boldly between two essential components. There is room for far more analysis of the state of education, both descriptive of its present art forms and institutions, and analytic about its faults, and possibilities, and potentials for development. That would be largely a technocratic task to be undertaken jointly by social scientists and educationists. The second stage is the development of better normative statements and models about education. HMI is already expertly committed to that task but one would prefer to see it even more detached from the DES and its ministers and permanent administrative staff. At present, the dice are far too loaded in favour of the centre. It would be an optimistic view of democracy in Britain which assumes that the centre can aggregate needs and wants and feelings from the base line of educational activity, the schools, or from the main client groups who use them.

So the Plowden Committee, as the last of its line, serves as a good monument to a healthy tradition, but one already moving into social, political and intellectual contexts where its multiplicity of objectives and of art forms made it inadequate for the far more complex challenges of the 1980s. A more detached and expert entity capable of analysing the state of education is needed. And that needs to be placed under the control of a body which is not committed to pursuing the latest policies laid down by Downing Street but instead able to collate the knowledge and feelings of those who use education for good ends.

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