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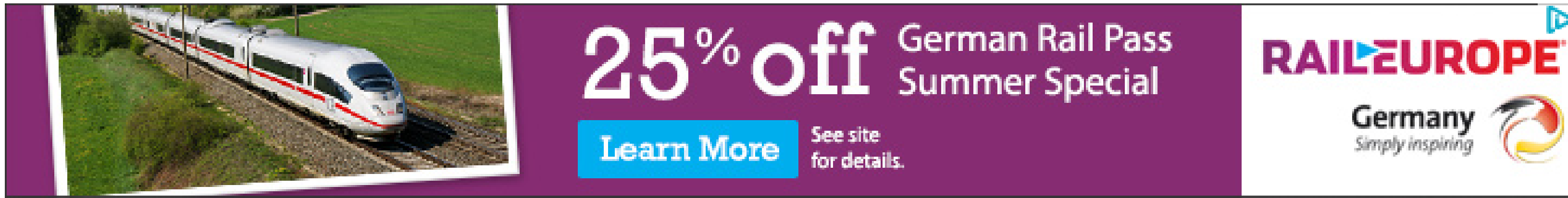

Why is primary schooling still based on Victorian policies?

Mike Baker hopes some major changes are finally in the offing

Mike Baker
The Guardian, Monday 14 September 2009

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Article history

Manor Street primary in the late 19th century. Photograph: Braintree district council

Stepping through the door of my old primary school, the memories come flooding back: bawling my eyes out on day one, the daily bottle of free milk, the, frankly, terrifying headmistress, Miss Jarvis, reciting the times tables, copying italic handwriting, and losing my marbles one playtime.

The former Manor Street primary school in Braintree, Essex, hardly seems to have changed. That is because it is now a school museum. The classroom where I was taught is now a re-creation of a Victorian elementary school. And, remarkably, it looks hardly any different from the mid-1960s when I was in the first-year juniors.

There are big changes ahead in primary education, as the Rose Review recommendations are implemented and as we await the Cambridge Primary Review, the most comprehensive study of primary schools for 40 years, which is due to be published next month. It's a good time to look back at the development of primary education and see how we got to where we are today.

The Manor Street Museum School offers 21st-century pupils a day in the classroom of the late 19th century. This former elementary school, opened in 1862, has the high windows, straight rows of desks, writing

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slates, and pink-coloured British Empire wall maps characteristic of its era.

For today's children, used to informality, circle-time and group work, Victorian teaching methods are a shock. Occasionally they are reduced to tears by the realistic role-play of the severe Victorian school mistress who inspects their hands for cleanliness, and their minds for godliness, before making them chant the times tables in traditional rote-learning fashion.

Sylvia Reeve, a retired teacher, plays the Victorian schoolmistress very convincingly, but is genuinely surprised by some of the things today's primary children do not know. "Their general knowledge is quite poor ... a lot of children don't know that they live on an island, so I always bring out the map of the British Isles."

That will chime with those who think we still have much to learn from old ways. So what did Victorian children learn? According to Professor Robin Alexander, who is leading the Cambridge Primary Review, it was "the three Rs – but excluding talk, which was seen as a subversive activity – and there was also history, geography, drawing and PE".

The 19th-century curriculum is surprisingly familiar to anyone who attended primary school until quite recently, such has been its hold over schools. Indeed, despite significant modernising changes in the late 1960s and 70s, today's primary schools have, in certain respects – such as the national curriculum and the emphasis on testing pupils in maths and English – moved back towards their Victorian legacy.

Perhaps that is not too surprising since the architect of these changes, former education secretary Kenneth Baker, experienced, and enjoyed, a very traditional curriculum when he was young. He was one of several education policymakers, including David Blunkett and Chris Woodhead, who shared their primary school memories with me for the (forthcoming) radio series.

Lord Baker, as he now is, attended primary school in Southport during the second world war. He recalls "learning tables by heart and chanting

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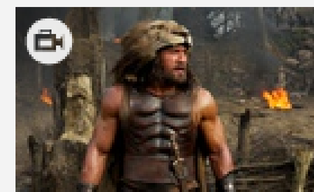

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them out with the class, learning poetry by heart, and we had copper-plate handwriting to copy. It was absolutely wonderful for me, it was the basis of my education."

But not everyone looks back with affection. Another former education secretary, Shirley Williams, who attended elementary school in London in the late 1930s, remembers the poverty of fellow pupils and the low expectations of the staff.

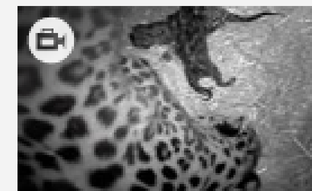
"Classes were of about 40, and often the screen between two classes was rolled back so they were combined into a class of 80, and between them a teacher would sit with the cane across their knees. If you did anything at all, like talking or throwing a paper dart, you got caned. There was a lot of caning."

Williams's experience differed little from the education offered in the late 19th century, testimony to the conservatism of English primary education. For example, while other European countries, including Scotland, were pressing ahead with state-funded mass education, Westminster saw no need for government to get involved and left it all to voluntary bodies.

In 1861, the official Newcastle Commission rejected the notion that education should be either compulsory or a responsibility of the state. So schools were provided by the different church societies, driven, as Alexander puts it, by "the battle for children's minds and souls". This shaped the education offered: reading was the focus, since the main aim was to instruct children in the Bible. Writing and speaking were considered rather less important.

It would be almost another 10 years before the Elementary Education Act of 1870 established local school boards to at least plug the gaps left by the church schools. And it was not until 1876 that education was made compulsory for children up to the age of 10.

According to Alexander, primary education is still burdened by its past. "It still bears the character of those Victorian schools. For example he cites the fact that primary schools have remained stuck with the system of generalist teachers, the class teacher, rather than the more expensive



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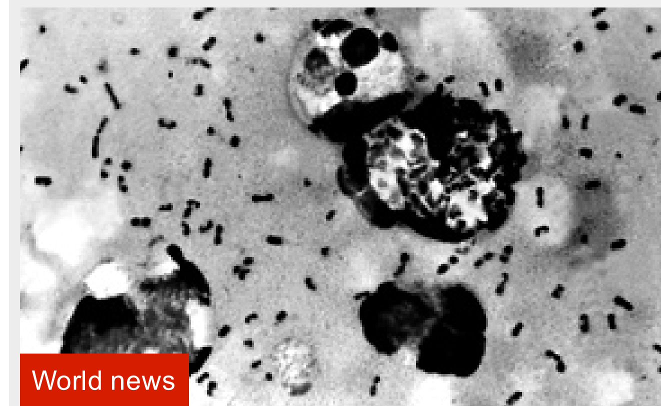
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model of subject specialists, as happens at secondary level. As he says: "It is cheap and efficient, that is why we still have it. It's not there for educational reasons, but for economic reasons." Other legacies include: the national curriculum, with its focus on traditional subjects, the focus on numeracy and literacy, the use of national tests as a means of government control (the notorious system of "payment by results" introduced in 1861 went much further than today's Sats and linked school grants to test outcomes). And, according to Alexander, another legacy is the "sharp differential in funding between primary and secondary that still hasn't been fixed".

The elementary school only intended to provide a rudimentary education for children who were expected to start work by 12 or 13. It was not until the late 1920s that mass secondary education was seriously proposed, bringing with it the idea of a separate "primary" phase to the age of 11. This was eventually made a reality in the 1944 Education Act.

In the early postwar years, primary education was overshadowed by the 11-plus, which determined grammar school entrance. It led to most primary schools adopting streaming from an early age. Robert Smith, who taught in a Sheffield primary school just after the war, recalls "the scholarship class was streamed according to ability on arithmetic and English. We worked them very hard and about 10% were selected for grammar school."

But in 1967, the Plowden Report finally pushed primary schools into the modern age, injecting ideas from psychology, child development, social equality and welfare. Children were no longer just empty vessels to be filled, but individuals who responded to different learning styles.

Robert Smith, by then a young primary headteacher in Oxfordshire, is the only surviving member of the Plowden committee. Today he recalls its willingness "to ask very fundamental questions". Unlike today's government-commissioned inquiries, Plowden gathered evidence very widely, including from abroad, and achieved political consensus.

Its essence is caught by the sentence: "At the heart of education lies the child". According to Smith, "that was fundamental, the idea that education should be related to ... individual differences, especially the range of

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should be related to … individual differences, especially the range of intellectual ability and children's capacity to learn at different rates".

The late 1960s and 1970s were seen by some as the high point of "progressive" education. Primary schools were gradually released from the 11-plus and were not yet bound by a national curriculum or Sats. Many still see it as a "golden age" of curriculum freedom.

But by the 1980s there was a political backlash, provoked in part by extreme examples such as the William Tyndale primary school in Islington, London, which became notorious for allowing children to do as they liked during lessons, including watching TV or playing table-tennis.

This backlash, which ended with the creation of the national curriculum under Margaret Thatcher's government, has led many ever since to see primary education as a battle between polar opposites: child-centred or subject-centred, progressive or traditional, informal or formal, a broad curriculum or the "three Rs".

Alexander calls this polarisation "pernicious", arguing "there never was a pure form of progressivism in our schools". He believes there need be no contradiction between a focus on the basics and a broad curriculum. He says evidence shows that "schools that do best in the basics are those that put them in the context of a broad and balanced curriculum. That is why polarisation is unhelpful … it doesn't help the children". This thinking will be reflected in next month's Cambridge Primary Review.

As the debate over the curriculum, Sats and league tables continues, politicians will, no doubt, continue to be influenced by their own experiences of primary school, by nostalgia for the past, and by false polarities in teaching methods. History may always be with us; but we don't have to be its slave.

Mike Baker presents From Abacus to Circle Time: A Short History of Primary Schools on BBC Radio 4 on Tuesdays at 4pm, starting today

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muinteoir

15 September 2009 1:17pm

There is nothing false about the polarities. Progressive is a weasel word that carries too many misleading connotations e.g. progressive school as was once applied to Bedales and St Christopher among others. Child centred is a much more accurate term to describe the ideology signaled in the famous quote above from Plowden. In addition to signifying a position on pedagogy and the curriculum it also expressed the interests of social layers, mainly fractions of the middle classes. Traditional ideology, as appeared in the Black Papers also expressed social interests in this case that of the dominant orders as it focussed on order, deference and compliance. That primary schooling is resistant to change is caught in the notions of 'the grammar of schooling' and 'path dependency' which attempt to show why this might be so.
Given compulsory attendance, a classroom, pupils, a teacher or a teacher plus learning assistants, a curriculum and a system of assessment together with asymmetric power relations between teacher and taught, how many options are there for alternative approaches?
Change is structurally constrained and the child centred ideology is essentially Utopian as its nowadays few adherents pursue, for the most part, the unrealisable goal of unalienated school work. Rooted in the ever shifting romantic critique of capitalist modernity it is doomed to periodic resurgence followed by defeat. Expect it to make a re appearance soon as New Labour's managerialist school policies suffer the fate of payment by results and the elementary school code.

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RickoShea

15 September 2009 3:41pm

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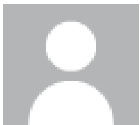
Professor Robin Alexander believes that the lack of specialist teachers as opposed to general class teachers in primary schools is due to the fact that that "It is cheap and efficient, that is why we still have it. It's not there for educational reasons, but for economic reasons". This prompts the following questions:-
1. Is Professor Alexander aware that there already are specialist teachers in many primary schools?
2. What is wrong with something being cheap as long as it is efficient, especially in a period of financial stringency? Primary schools are a lot smaller than secondary schools and their size usually cannot justify the employment of a whole host of specialists.
3. Is it not preferable for younger children in particular to have one principal teacher to help them maintain that sense of security which they need for both educational and social reasons?
On the broader question of old-style v. new-style primary education, I wouldn't be inclined to place too much reliance on Shirley Williams' reminiscences of her experience at an 'elementary school in London' in the 1930s. As I understand it, she was packed off to the United States by her parents when World War II broke out and educated privately thereafter.
If Mr Baker is interested in personal experiences for his radio programme, let me offer him three for the price of one, i.e. those of myself and my parents. I am seven years younger than Shirley Williams and my education was in the state sector throughout. With one brief exception, my primary education (between 1942 and 1948) was both formal and excellent. The teachers were kindly and the cane used but rarely. I acquired a sound foundation for my subsequent career in university teaching.
My parents, both working-class south Londoners, did not have the benefits of the secondary education which I enjoyed as a result of the 1944 Education Act. However, there was plenty that was good in the elementary education they received before World War I. Their classes were large (40+) but they both left school at 14 able to read, write and calculate. They also knew a lot more about English history and the works of Shakespeare than some present-day university students.
Forgive me, therefore, if I am unimpressed by the more modern methods of primary school education which Mr Baker seems to favour.



MartinRich

16 September 2009 11:02am

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I'm unconvinced that different teachers for different subjects really work that well at

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the primary level. Aged 8 (what would now be the start of year 4) my parents moved me from the local primary school (one form in each year, one teacher per form) to an independent school where different subjects were taught by different teachers. In many ways it was like making the primary/secondary transition three years early - and also wandering into an environment where merciless bullying of anybody who'd come from a different educational background to their peers was tolerated. That model probably worked for a very few pupils who stood to excel academically, or at sport or music, but for many others it was unsupportive and frightening.

Of course, the local school that I left wasn't perfect either. I remember life there as being quite comfortable and carefree, but I didn't learn very much, and in retrospect the approach to education there was very unimaginative. I don't remember specialists being brought in *in parallel* with the class teachers, which would have been a nice way to add interest to particular subjects. I don't remember much effort being made to adapt to different children's abilities. And I suspect that all those limitations had more to do with inertia than either lack of resources or adherence to any educational ideology.

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