

Primary mover

Forty years after the Plowden report, education for the under-11s is being reviewed, and the mastermind behind the project has some radical ideas. **Peter Wilby** reports



Robin Alexander: he believes the three Rs should become four, with the addition of 'oracy'. At the moment, he says, our fourth R is religion Photograph: Graeme Robertson

Exactly 40 years ago this month, a Labour government received the report of a committee, chaired by Lady Plowden, on "primary education in all its aspects". Its two thick volumes, eventually published early in 1967, contained 197 recommendations (to schools and local councils, as well as the government) and the results of more than a dozen surveys, and it would become the primary teacher's bible for the next quarter of a century. In those days, central government had no direct powers over either curriculum or teaching methods. But Plowden gave the official imprimatur to what was loosely called "progressive" or "child-centred" teaching and, for a time, even Tory councils prodded their schools to "go Plowden" as it was known. Later, Plowden became synonymous with ill-disciplined sloppiness and was blamed for everything from mass illiteracy to sexual promiscuity and national economic decline: "much happiness and painting but very little learning", as a Thatcherite minister put it.

Now we are to get a new Plowden, another giant review, with 30 surveys and 60 consultants, asking "questions that need to be asked, without fear or favour" on teaching methods, streaming, testing, the national curriculum, school design, faith schools, governance and almost anything else you care to mention, including the highly disputatious question of

whether standards are rising or falling. "We have commissioned three surveys on standards," says Professor Robin Alexander. "We're not announcing the researchers' names because we want them to pursue their work uninterrupted."

Alexander, a fit-looking 65-year-old, is the mastermind behind the review, which began last month and reports in 2008 with, its website promises, "recommendations for future policy and practice in English primary education". He is under no illusions that, in what he calls "a febrile political climate", he is treading on eggshells. "There may be uncomfortable moments and unpalatable findings," he says gravely. The government's primary strategy, published in 2003, won't be treated, he says, "as unproblematic". Since he once scorned the strategy as "ambiguous and possibly dishonest, stylistically demeaning, conceptually weak, evidentially inadequate and culpably

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ignorant of recent educational history", this may be putting it mildly.

Alexander, a fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and a former professor of education at Leeds and Warwick, heads the Cambridge University team that is organising the review, with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Unlike Plowden, it has no official status, and the Department for Education was at first lukewarm about the whole thing, though it has now promised "cooperation". But Alexander has everybody else who matters behind him, including the Commons select committee, Ofsted, the teachers' unions, local authority education officers, and many leading education academics. This review, when complete, will have clout.

It will also be unafraid of challenging orthodoxy. Plowden, the daughter of an admiral and a pillar of the liberal wing of the English establishment, had little direct experience of state schooling and simply gave powerful momentum to prevailing trends. But Alexander, as we shall see, has his own ideas about education which sound, to English ears, very radical indeed, and, despite his academic and slightly pedantic manner, he has in the past been involved in sharp political controversy (see panel overleaf).

We meet in the boardroom of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and I ask why we need the primary review. "We've had 20 years of continuous educational reform," he says. "We've moved from one of the most decentralised education systems in

the world to one of the most centralised. We've had a long sequence of government initiatives, and the views of the present administration reach deeply into the curriculum.

"Where do the views of the rest of the population come into this? This government came into office on the votes of only 22% of those eligible. We want to give a voice, not just to the 198,000 primary teachers in England but to parents, children and the public. We want as many people as possible to give evidence. It's a democratic imperative. Primary education belongs to all of us.

"The country has changed since Plowden. Big questions are being asked about identity, social cohesion and social division, about religious faiths and so on. People are asking whether we still have a coherent society at all. Plowden was launched in a spirit of optimism. The news is mostly pretty bleak now. Yet though we've had a lot of small-scale inquiries, we haven't had a major review."

Moreover, Alexander insists, we have far more evidence than we had even 20 years ago about what works and what doesn't for the under-12s. "There's all the inspection evidence from Ofsted and a vast body of published research," he says, while lamenting that "much of it is wilfully misused". And, he adds, theories of how children learn have changed radically. Children are no longer seen as "lone scientists", each of them needing to make an individual



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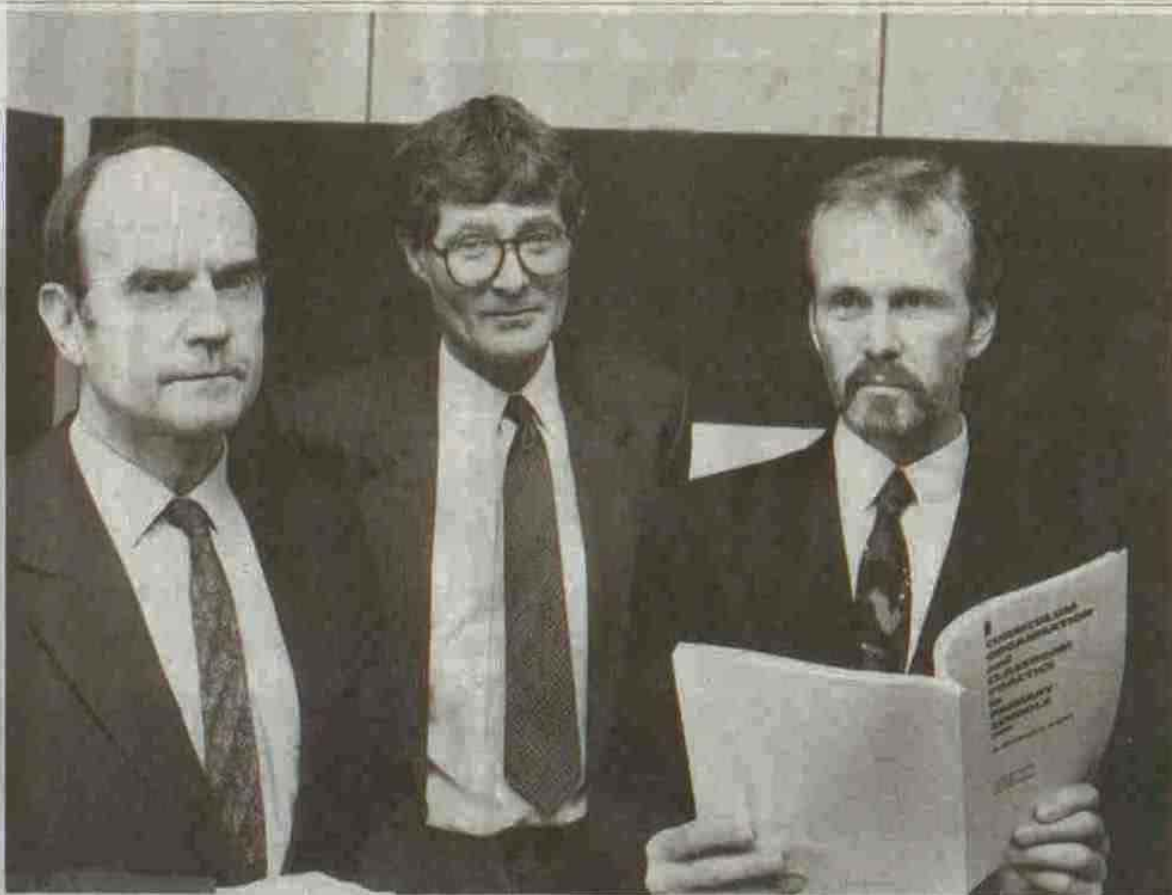
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journey to understanding of language, number, art and so on; effective learning is seen as a collective, social enterprise and there is neuroscientific evidence to support this view. The quarrels between "progressives" and "traditionalists", between "child-centred" and "subject-centred" approaches, which began with Plowden and continued long after, are not only disruptive and divisive, argues Alexander. They are also redundant.

This takes us into Alexander's own ideas about primary education. And though he emphasises that the review "isn't a vehicle for my interests; I'm just one contributor", he has a big idea which, it seems to me, is bound to influence the review's focus. "The tradition of English education," he says, "is that children should be seen and not heard. The Victorians invented a mass elementary school system for the working classes and the important thing was that you learned basic skills and asked no questions. We inherited from them the idea of the three Rs. Our fourth R, if it exists at all, is religion." But there should be a fourth R that has at least equal status with the others, Alexander argues: oracy.

"In many other countries," he says, "the spoken word has a much higher status." The tradition of English classrooms is for the teacher to do most, and sometimes nearly all, of the talking. Pupils are asked questions that are framed to elicit "correct" answers; they are not encouraged to engage in a dialogue, still less to think aloud, reason and argue. "Progressive teaching" was hardly an improvement on this. (Plowden devoted just three out of 1,243 paragraphs to "speech".) Teachers asked questions which, though

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startling findings – set out in a 600-page volume that won educational book prizes on both sides of the Atlantic – is that the longest pupil "utterance" during an English primary school lesson lasted just nine seconds, while in Russia it could reach 40 seconds. In fact, in Russia, children on average spoke for longer than the teachers. This wasn't quite true of France but, argues Alexander, the French view of primary education is quite distinct from the English. "It's there to advance republican ideals, a very different thing from the minimalist teaching of the three Rs," he told me.

This doesn't mean, he emphasises, that teaching in France or Russia is better than in England, which in any case has become stronger on oracy during the past few years. But it shows that different forms of pedagogy (a word rarely used in this country) are possible and that we can learn from them. But does classroom talk – or, as Alexander rather off-puttingly calls it, "dialogic teaching" – improve overall learning?

Certainly Alexander, who has also studied classrooms in Denmark and Finland, finds fewer behavioural problems and longer concentration spans in most other European countries. He also argues that there is scientific evidence to support the view that talk empowers a child's thinking. Talk doesn't just improve communication skills and confidence, it has "unique

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Alexander believes talk empowers a child's thinking Roger Bamber

ostensibly "open", were unfocused and unchallenging. Children were habitually praised, rather than getting any kind of useful feedback. Talk of either kind, Alexander argues, hardly deserves being called dialogue, and it would seem pretty bizarre anywhere outside a school.

Contrast that with France or Russia, where children are expected, from an early age, to talk clearly, loudly and expressively. In Russia, particularly, the child talks to the class as much as to the teacher and it is quite common for children to go to the front and explain how they have worked through a problem. The manner of a child's response – the clarity and the articulation – matter as much as, if not more than, the substance.

Alexander has evidence to support his thesis from extensive observations of schools in France, Russia, the US and India, as well as England. Among the many rather

'The political discourse has moved on'

Outside academia, Robin Alexander is best known for his role, albeit a partially unwitting one, in the final demolition of the Plowden consensus.

Before he was 50, he led the blameless, obscure life of a provincial schoolteacher, who moved belatedly into academia. It was after he became professor of education at Leeds University that he shot, in dramatic fashion, to national prominence.

Leeds, long a penny-pinching Tory council, was taken over by Labour, which injected £14m into its primary schools. Alexander headed an evaluation team which reported "a cycle of low expectations and unchallenging curriculum opportunities". Teachers, it said, were under pressure to adopt "discovery learning" and teaching in groups. Career prospects, the report implied, depended on following the Plowden orthodoxy.

Alexander's team even criticised the emphasis on classroom wall display, which at the time was like suggesting the Pope should appear at mass without his vestments.

Alexander insists the report, which came out in 1991, contained many nuances, and the team had defended the council's £14m investment. But Fleet Street doesn't do nuance, and headlines celebrated a devastating critique of leftwing ideology. The Daily Telegraph hailed it as the educational

equivalent of "the dismantling of the Soviet empire" and thundered: "Look on your works, Lady Plowden, and despair." It was a gift to a Conservative government facing a general election. John Major, addressing his first Tory conference as prime minister, used the report to support "a return to basics" and announced "the progressive theorists have had their say and ... they've had their day".

"The report happened to come out at the end of July when there wasn't much news," recalls Alexander. "The government and press got hold of it, and they wouldn't let go."

Alexander waded deeper into the political quagmire. Ministers invited him, Jim Rose, then chief primary inspector, and Chris Woodhead, then chief executive of the National Curriculum Council (and not yet the notorious figure he became as head of Ofsted), to hold a quick inquiry into "the delivery of education in primary schools". Appointed just before Christmas, the inquiry was inevitably dubbed "the three wise men". Alexander clearly regrets the outcome. "The tone was wrong," he says. "It was aggressive, combative ... I'd rather not talk about the dynamics of it; it's too long ago to rake up."

What's clear, though, is that Woodhead re-drafted what was supposed to be "a discussion paper" and the

education department's press release hardened it further. "Call for return to traditional school lessons", screamed the newspaper headlines.

Alexander protested that the message was more mixed; for example, Clarke's pre-inquiry call for a return to streaming was rejected. The press accused him of a U-turn and called him "one rather unwise man". Meanwhile, some fellow academics accused him and his co-authors of subjecting Plowden "to a public deconstruction".

But if some suspected Alexander of being a teacher basher and a cheerleader for chalk-and-talk, he has given them ample cause to rethink. Nobody has been more critical of the narrowness of testing and the individual competitiveness it encourages. Woodhead lined him up with the late Ted Wragg as one who wished to replace literacy and numeracy with "individual empowerment and social progress".

So will the primary review lead to another punch-up? "I think times have changed," says Alexander. "The debate was ludicrously polarised in the early 1990s. It was heavy on scapegoating and gross over-simplification of the issues. The political discourse has moved on. People are more prepared, in government and in the profession, to entertain complexity."

Peter Wilby

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There is more. "There is a relationship between dialogue and democracy. If we are serious about citizenship, it starts in the classroom." He says his book on dialogic teaching was sent by the Hong Kong government this year to all its schools. This is not only because Hong Kong worries that its schools rely too much on learning by rote, but also because the government wants to nurture the habits of democratic participation and resist pressure from Beijing to become a less liberal society.

Is the British government at all interested in democratic participation? Its Primary Strategy, when first published, mentioned talk only once, and very briefly. Only later – perhaps stung by criticisms, particularly from Alexander – did it decide that it was central to the strategy and write it prominently into teacher-training materials.

Ministers got little praise from Alexander for this belated conversion. He accused them of pirating, without acknowledgement, his own materials on dialogic teaching and added that this "opportunistic appropriation" smacked of "control freakery".

Does he regret those harsh words? No. Alexander promises that the primary review won't pull its punches and that it will be "fiercely independent". I believe him.

For details of the review and how to submit evidence, go to www.primaryreview.org.uk