

## Reconciling subjects and contexts: the case for a pragmatic primary curriculum

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### Abstract

*In this paper the author examines changes in the primary curriculum in this country since the time of the Plowden Report of 1967. Since that time there have been several changes of emphasis from teaching through subjects to teaching through contexts. The author considers some of the reasons for this oscillation and suggests some principles which a renewed primary curriculum might be constructed upon. The author also suggests that a renewed curriculum should place much greater emphasis upon the use of spoken language in the classroom and that much more consideration needs to be given to the challenges which change curriculum change poses for practitioners. For a number of reasons, it is suggested that the term 'pragmatic' might be a good label for the curriculum of the future.*

**Key words:** *primary, curriculum, subject-teaching, topic-teaching*

### Introduction: Back to the Future

Imagine a group of time travellers making infrequent visits to English primary schools. What changes might they have noticed if their visits had taken place in, let us say, 1962 and 2002?

Of course demographic changes and other changes in society from across those four decades would have been evident among the children and adults in primary schools in 2002. A host of more subtle changes in the available resources (particularly computing hardware) and in the overall appearance of the classroom and school environment would have been evident too on the later visit. It is also likely that our visitors would have noticed extra adults working in classrooms and they might have remarked upon the reduction in class sizes (though in some schools this would not have been a stark contrast to their previous visit). I like to imagine that a more welcoming and less austere atmosphere would generally have been evident in schools in 2002 than had been common forty years earlier, but I think that there would have been disappointment too, among the visitors, at the sight of some of the school buildings which had remained in use throughout the intervening decades.

Significantly though, our visitors would have seen, in both 1962 and 2002, a style of teaching which involved children sitting for extended periods while their teacher did most of the speaking about the subject matter in hand. The response that the children were expected to make, in both visits, was very largely the production of a piece of writing. In 2002, as in 1962, the subjects dominating the curriculum were mathematics and English, with the rest of the curriculum divided up into fairly discrete subject areas.

Had our imaginary travellers visited mid-way between these two dates they would have been taken aback by the differences evident in many schools. A visit to many primary classrooms in 1982 would have revealed a radically different approach to the processes of teaching and learning. The Plowden Report (DES, 1967) had encouraged a pendulum swing away from the formal curriculum which existed in schools prior to that time, a curriculum which had prioritised the development of what we have since come to call 'basic skills'. Plowden was the catalyst which led many schools and many LEAs to adopt a more experiential, exploratory approach, underpinned by a largely Piagetian model of child development. Many classrooms (by no means all - it is important not to overstate the case) were places in which traditional subject barriers had been subordinated, for significant parts of the school day, to a different kind of curriculum organisation, one which organised learning opportunities through topics and first-hand experiences. From these experiences it was hoped that children could make discoveries of a significant kind facilitated by their teachers. Whole class teaching was still to be found but was much less commonly practised than in 1962 or in 2002.

The last five years have seen further changes in many schools which have been encouraged to make curricular innovations by the Primary National Strategy (DfES, 2003) and related developments. This movement could be characterised, to a considerable degree, as a swing back in the direction of post-Plowden practice, but against a different background, given the educational priorities of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

There are, at the time of writing, two major national reviews of primary curricula and primary practice underway, namely the Primary Review (DfES, 2003) and the QCA (2008) Futures project. The Primary Review in particular, with its broader remit, offers a vital opportunity, the first of its kind since Plowden, to take stock of the current state of primary education in this country and to re-define for ourselves what schooling (assuming that the institution survives) will look like as this century unfolds. I believe that it is necessary, as part of this process, to re-examine the major changes in the primary curriculum over the post-Plowden era in order to learn lessons for the future.

### **A policy pendulum**

There were a whole range of factors which led many primary schools in this country away from post-Plowden practice in the decades after its publication. Pin-pointing the critical moment of change is difficult but the initiation of the 'Great Debate' in 1976 during the late years of the Labour Government certainly marked a turning point. The educational changes brought about by the Conservative Government which followed and which were, in some respects at least, consolidated by the current Labour Government during its first period of office from 1997 onwards, led to a radically different approach from that envisaged by Plowden.

A crucial driver of change in the middle of this period was the Education Reform Act, which introduced a market-oriented approach to schools and brought about a return to a curriculum based upon separate subjects of a traditional kind – this curriculum being mandatory for the first time in history - with a testing regime to underpin it. A decade or so later, the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) and the National Numeracy Strategy (DfEE, 1999a) completed this transition. Accompanying these structural changes, there was a change too in the language used within and about schools. Although few had explicitly abandoned their commitment to the 'child-centred' approach to schooling which emerged in the wake of Plowden, that and similar terms gave way to terms more consistent with the new philosophy. Words like 'entitlement' gained currency, as did terms like 'standards, effectiveness and 'value for money.

The picture set out so far is of course over-simplified. It is certainly not my intention to suggest that the Plowden Report (or, for that matter, the Cockcroft (DES, 1982) and Bullock (DES, 1975) Reports which subsequently addressed mathematics and English) advocated the abandoning of basic skills, or that these passed out of fashion in every classroom. Nor is it true to suggest that the National Curriculum (DfEE, 1999b) or the NLS and NNS discouraged cross-curricular approaches to learning or discouraged teaching in innovative and exciting ways. It seems however, that an almost inevitable consequence of the kind of pendulum change that has taken place is that a new approach is seen as needing to sweep away what has gone before. Old ways are sidelined, to the point of appearing discredited. Dominant messages are passed on to prospective and serving teachers who seek reassurance about the prevailing culture and practices which affect their job. Subtle views which recognise the balance between approaches are often drowned out by more simplistic statements of the current orthodoxy.

So what is to be learned from this reflection? It seems to me that the most vital lessons are these. As we embrace new practices, we must take care to resist the temptation to exaggerate the break with the past. We must also take careful account of what it is feasible for the busy primary teacher to do. Teachers can only attend to so much at once. In the wake of Plowden it was unsurprising that attention to the development of basic skills and to the essence of curriculum subjects waned in many classrooms and in more recent times it is unsurprising that the construction of motivating, cross-curricular themes and contexts has taken a back seat in many classrooms as teachers have responded to the latest round of targets in the core subjects. A recent OFSTED report on schools (OFSTED, 2006: 53) suggests that '*some schools* have begun to consider greater flexibility in the organisation and teaching of National Curriculum foundation subjects' [my italics]. Perhaps we should not be surprised though that not all schools have moved rapidly towards a less subject-bound approach so soon after a different model was believed to define good practice?

The need for clarity and consistency in defining our purposes is crucial if we are to maximise the chances of success. No less important is the need to ask whether the classroom teacher is sufficiently well resourced – most notably in terms of training and of time available in the school day - to enable her to do the job effectively. We need therefore to take a pragmatic view of what initial teacher education (ITE) and continuing professional development (CPD) are needed by teachers to prepare them for, and sustain them through, any changes which might be proposed and we need to take a serious look at the workload implications and sheer feasibility of any systemic changes proposed. I would suggest, therefore, that a renewed primary curriculum model should:

- be stimulating and lead to the development of appropriate knowledge, skills and understanding;
- be coherent and manageable by teachers and others involved in multi-professional school teams and be consistent with the shared ethos of such teams;
- form a distinctive bridge between the Foundation Stage curriculum and the secondary curriculum;
- harmonise with ongoing major educational projects such as the Primary National Strategy and 'Every Child Matters'.

### **An inconsistent approach to classroom speech**

At about the same time as the Plowden Committee was researching and publishing its findings, educationalists were taking serious account of spoken language and its relevance to the classroom; this renewal of interest in language issues fed into the Plowden Report itself and into post-Plowden approaches. Of course the encouragement of language development had long been recognised as an essential aim of primary teaching. New and related areas of attention, however, included the social functions of language, the relationships between language and cognitive development and the relationships between language and social disadvantage. The lines of thinking which were explored with particular interest around the time of Plowden have continued to provide important insights for classroom practitioners up to the present day, but policy and practice related to these have been uneven.

An enormous amount has been written about the issues alluded to in the previous paragraph and it is possible to do no more in a paper of this length than to sketch some of these in the broadest terms. Among the most significant developments in the 1960s and 1970s was the linguistic work of, for example, Chomsky and Halliday, which in different ways revolutionised our understanding of the creativity inherent in the production of speech and of its functional nature. Some of these insights paralleled the theoretical work of philosophers of language such as Austin and Searle who made clear how much of language might be regarded as action, 'speech acts' designed to achieve particular effects in the world (see, for example, Austin, 1962 and Searle, 1969 and more recent development of these ideas in Astington, 1993). Important links can be seen here to the various views of the relationships between language and cognitive development put forward by, for example, Piaget and Vygotsky.

The relationships between social class, language use and educational success were explored by, among others, the British sociologist Basil Bernstein. Although his research and writings began in the 1950s, it was in the 1960s that Bernstein's ideas gained popular attention. The central notion inherent in Bernstein's early work was that the typical language use of different social classes allowed them very different levels of access to educational success. This early formulation of his theory (e.g. in Bernstein, 1973), suggesting the existence of 'elaborated' and 'restricted' codes, used respectively by middle-class and working-class children to the educational disadvantage of the latter, was seen by many at the time as a crucial insight into the hidden processes of educational disadvantage.

Bernstein's arguments and the ways in which they were developed by others were severely criticised by, in particular, the American sociolinguist William Labov. In a highly influential article Labov (1969), cited counter-examples from an American context to Bernstein's theories. So powerful was the attack on Bernstein's ideas that many who have heard little of his work may therefore have dismissed it as a discredited theory. This has increasingly come to seem, however, an unnecessarily harsh assessment. Bernstein refined his theories throughout the rest of his life and others, notably Joan Tough in her work for the Schools Council in the 1970s (Tough, 1977), returned to the idea that children enter school with language skills which render them more or less likely to succeed there, all other things being equal. A consequent responsibility of schools must therefore be to help children to develop their language skills appropriately in order to remove barriers to educational success. Of course it is essential, in so doing, to avoid a negative view of under-achieving groups, the so-called 'deficit model', and Labov's article reminds us of this in stark terms.

There have been many instances since Plowden where necessity or choice have raised the profile of speech in the classroom. However, I believe it is fair to claim that a curriculum approach designed to promote learning through speech, rather than the written medium, has not been consistently promoted in the decades since Plowden. It is important at this point, however, to note more recent developments. The last decade or so has seen a resurgence of interest in the vital role of spoken language – or ‘oracy’ as it is sometimes called – in the primary classroom. One of the most influential initiatives has been that of ‘dialogic teaching’, the approach developed by Robin Alexander (Alexander, 2004) and others which has drawn upon, and inspired, a range of related projects and research. Dialogic teaching is giving rise to an exciting movement which, if promoted more widely, promises to give a more appropriate emphasis to spoken language within the primary curriculum. Support of both a practical and theoretical nature for dialogic teaching is drawn from a range of sources, including neo-Vygotskian approaches such as Neil Mercer’s work on ‘intermental thinking’ (Mercer, 2000). Approaches of this kind are, I believe, deceptively complex. A surface understanding of what they entail is straightforward enough but a full understanding of the basis for such work is far less so, forcing us to re-consider the relationships between language, thought and social experience. Once again, we are required to consider how we might create the most propitious conditions for prospective and serving teachers to acquire the knowledge and understanding they require to prepare them fully for such approaches. One approach which has much in common with dialogic teaching is Philosophy for Children – a movement which is gaining popularity within schools (see for example [sapere.org.uk](http://sapere.org.uk)).

It is immediately clear how important all of these insights can be, if presented in a usable way, to primary teachers. The Plowden Report observed, however, that it ‘was rare to find teachers who had given much time to the study of educational theory, even in their training college days’ (DES, 1967:190). One aspect of my own research is to investigate whether this contention is valid today. If it is indeed borne out, I believe that we will need to consider an important question. How can we deal pragmatically with the diverse educational needs of the primary school teacher given finite time and resources?

It appears that a systematic focus on the linguistic and cognitive development of the child has become less prominent in ITE in recent years than in the past. This has happened for a variety of reasons but I believe that there is more recent evidence of some reversal of this trend which is, to my mind, very welcome. Although there is no consensus of opinion about some of the key issues in this area, there is a great deal which is widely accepted. A renewed primary curriculum should be based much more explicitly upon a pragmatic collection of such agreed precepts. It should therefore take full account of:

- children’s linguistic and cognitive development.

### **The problem of context**

A challenge which has long faced primary school teachers may be posed as a question: Should we organise the primary curriculum according to traditional subjects or should we do so on some other basis? I realise that framing the question in this way suggests a duality, an either-or choice, rather than a spectrum of possibilities and this is a crucial point to which I shall return. I think that it is fair to claim, however, that these two approaches have had periods of dominance in our primary schools over the last few decades in fairly distinct ways. The purported advantages and disadvantages of each approach have been much debated over the years. In Figure 1, I have given my own summary of some of the claims made for these two approaches, considered for the moment as being entirely separate from one

another, and, in the remainder of this section, I will consider some elements which I feel are central to this debate.

**Figure 1: Some arguments for subject-based and non subject-based approaches to the primary curriculum**

<b>Subject-based approach</b>	<b>Non subject-based approach</b>
More easily ensures that individual subjects are taught in a comprehensive way.	Allows more contextual coherence but subject coverage can be patchy. Some subject links with 'topics', 'themes' etc can be tenuous.
Can make it easier for teacher to plan for progression and to cater for individual needs.	Progression in relation to particular subjects may be hard to maintain.
Allows teachers to concentrate on developing children's 'basic skills'.	Allows suitable contexts for 'basic skills' to be practised.
Requires teachers to generate motivation within the boundaries of particular subjects.	Enables teachers to exploit children's interest in 'real world' topics and contexts which will typically spread across subject boundaries.
Progress may be easier to assess.	May be more compatible with 'constructivist' and 'social constructivist' learning models.
Supporters of a subject-based approach might argue that the typology of subjects is historically established and has high cultural value.	Supporters of a non subject-based approach might argue that such subject typologies are essentially arbitrary and that their historical roots lie in school systems of the past.
Provides links to current secondary school curricula.	Provides links with the current Foundation Stage curriculum.

Terminology is problematic here because non subject-based approaches have acquired a variety of labels – 'cross-curricular teaching' is one fairly clear and common label but terms such as 'integrated curriculum' and 'integrated day' were particularly popular terms in the post Plowden era (and these terms related to organisational aspects of practice as well as to the curriculum itself). Other terms in use at various times have included 'topic' (or sometimes 'topic work'), 'theme' (as in 'cross-curricular themes', 'thematic work' etc) and 'context' ('contextualised work' etc). Each term carries its own connotations for different users and different practices can sometimes be referred to by the same term. I am not aware that any standardised and consistent use of such terms has emerged at any point.

I should perhaps make my own views clear at this point. As someone who began primary teaching in a contextualised, cross-curricular way, I am certainly aware of the challenges this approach poses for the teacher, but I am also aware of its very substantial benefits to children. It was the difficulty which so many practitioners experienced in maintaining consistent, high quality teaching through this approach which led to a return to a more subject-based approach. The report of the so-called 'three wise men' (Alexander *et al*, 1992), is sometimes perceived as sounding the final knell of the post-Plowden period of curricular innovation, although Alexander's own account of the period (Alexander, 1997) makes clear that preliminary drafts of that report were far more measured than the version which was eventually made public, following the intense media and government pressure to present more extreme conclusions. Once again perhaps, too great a break with the past

was the dominant message to emerge. In the face of such evident difficulties though, why should we consider this approach?

It need hardly be noted that there has been a great tradition of educational thinkers – Dewey, Froebel and Montessori among them – who have advocated approaches which stress that first hand experiences and real-life contexts should be the wellspring of the primary curriculum. It would be misleading to suggest that these thinkers, whose views I have just referred to as forming a tradition, have entirely congruent positions. An amalgamation of views of this kind, however, form the largely unseen foundations of what we might describe as a ‘child-centred’ approach to education. I believe that such ideas have generally struck a chord with teachers and that primary teachers are often highly skilled at uncovering and exploiting suitable contexts to engage children and lead them towards learning opportunities. Unfortunately, a process which establishes stimulating contexts through the choice of particular topics or contexts does not guarantee the emergence of subject content which is coherent, progressive and easily structured, far less does it guarantee that the topics can be mapped onto traditional subjects in a way which ensures that these are taught in a comprehensive way. I believe that most difficulties for practitioners have arisen from this dilemma.

There are a variety of strategies which can be taken in the attempt to reconcile subjects with contexts. It seems to me that these can be considered broadly as three approaches. Two of these three approaches were represented in Figure 1 and will be elaborated upon in the remainder of this section.

The first approach is to begin with context or topic. The ‘topic web’ diagram, very commonly used in the post-Plowden era as a starting point for planning, gives a clear indication of how curricular decisions might be made where this is the starting point. A topic would be chosen or given to teachers who would consider the curriculum areas which could be taught under that umbrella. The topic of ‘Transport’ might therefore lead to scientific experimentation with children discovering the factors affecting the distance or speed at which toy cars can travel. Measuring and data handling possibilities here offer clear links with mathematics; writing up or speaking about experiments (probably too much of the former) provide valuable opportunities to develop language. Within subjects themselves too, there is often the invitation to relate to the ‘real world’, English teaching stressing, for example, the need to take account of audience and purpose.

This model certainly enables teachers to tap into real-life (and imaginary) contexts which will engage children. However, as Figure 1 suggests, concerns grew in the decades after Plowden that this approach could lead to an ill-defined and fragmentary curriculum with too many decisions about inclusion and exclusion dependant on the arbitrary selection of curricular areas to fit particular topics.

A second approach is to begin with subjects as separately identified in the National Curriculum and then attempt to find appropriate contexts in which to locate them and establish links across subjects. This approach has been consistently promoted since the introduction of the National Curriculum and, implemented well, it has a range of benefits, avoiding more easily the arbitrariness referred to above. Current QCA guidance gives useful illustrations of how this may be done, with the curriculum being adapted to take account of children’s needs and local circumstances. History units, for example, which are based upon the study of particular people, places and events can be re-defined to make them more relevant to particular school settings. This raises an important question about the prescribed

curriculum. What choices may teachers and schools exercise in selecting and omitting elements of that curriculum? The answer to this question seems to me not entirely clear.

Turning to difficulties in the subject-led approach, White (2007) has recently noted that the subjects in the current school curricula have been passed down, largely unchanged, from school systems of the past. In particular, White identifies the current range of subjects with a nineteenth century, middle class model. It seems evident, however, that they are not categories which most children recognise intuitively. Indeed, for many children the division of the school day into subjects appears to be an irrelevance and teachers are sometimes cornered into defending an external curriculum as being something which has to be imbibed, like medicine, for the child's own good. This is especially so where the content is extensive and the room for choice narrow.

A subject-led curriculum may also, arguably, be a worse fit than a more contextualised model with models of learning which emphasise the child's construction of knowledge, models generally labelled as 'constructivist' or 'social constructivist'. There is clearly a tension between a prescribed curriculum and the child's desires to explore whatever he or she is interested in and we may take different views about the resolution of this tension. At one extreme we might place the approach of schools such as Summerhill (Neill, 1962) which leave the option of attending lessons entirely in the hands of children. The reality in regard to this and many other tensions is that the mid-ground is the place of compromise. Few teachers or schools would make lessons voluntary but few would allow no room for the child's own interests to be explored. The degree to which a school allows and, perhaps more importantly, encourages children's own interests, though, is a crucial one to be clear about and recent moves towards 'personalised learning' (see, for example, Wilmot, 2006) require such clarity, however that particular issue is eventually resolved.

Great emphasis has been recently laid, by QCA and others, on the encouragement of responses deemed 'creative' and the current use of this term is itself deserving of comment. In the early years of this decade, around the time of the second visit by my imaginary time travellers, there was a groundswell of unease within primary education about the territory that primary education in this country seemed to have reached. Most would, I think, have acknowledged that the clarity and rigour which the Strategies and associated guidance had brought to subject-teaching in primary education (particularly in English and mathematics) was beneficial to children and that this seemed to be borne out in test results. The feeling of unease which was evident around the turn of the millennium seemed to relate, however, to the suspicion that such improvements had been achieved at too great a cost: something important had disappeared, or was in the process of disappearing, from our schools. Many ways of characterising this disappearing ingredient could be suggested but the word which seemed to gain greatest currency was 'creativity'. The Times Educational Supplement ran a campaign to re-claim creativity in primary schools and the term began to serve as a clarion call to all who sought a change in direction.

Clearly, creativity is an attribute which schools would wish to promote. However we define it, creativity is a highly desirable goal for a society, leading to enjoyment and satisfaction for many and extraordinary achievement for a few. We might go so far as to suggest that creativity is one of the defining features of human experience. Since the publication of 'Excellence and Enjoyment' (DfES, 2003) to launch the Primary National Strategy, the promotion of creativity has been a recurrent theme of curriculum development materials emerging from central government. While these offer rewarding experiences for children who partake in them, there is still a difficult task facing teachers who wish to develop such approaches more consistently. If primary teachers are to teach a curriculum which covers a



wide range of curricular areas and children (and hence teachers themselves) are to be assessed against ever more demanding targets, what room is there for teachers themselves to exercise the creativity they once did in making the curriculum enjoyable and accessible? As I have already noted, busy teachers can only do so much.

To summarise, I would suggest that, even though many teachers make a wonderful job of combining subject rigour with engaging contexts, many others struggle because of the difficulties inherent in the two approaches discussed. I shall turn, in the next section, to a third set of approaches which I feel may offer a better resolution.

### **A third attempt at reconciliation**

Before considering this third approach I would like to suggest the remaining criteria which I believe a renewed primary curriculum should meet. I believe that it should:

- take sufficient account of children's varied modes of learning;
- be suitably adapted to the needs of the emergent citizen of the twenty-first century.

My contention is that primary teachers will always experience difficulty in attempting to contextualise learning if approached directly through either a subject-led or topic-led approach for the reasons outlined in the previous section. A third option, and one that I feel has the greatest potential for success, is to re-configure the curriculum according to a different set of principles. This is not a new suggestion. Curriculum designers have frequently recommended approaches based, for example, on certain core skills or other attributes. The identification of these varies according to the preference of particular curriculum designers. We must take care, however, that, in constructing such an approach, we do not simply add another layer of planning and organisation to that which must already be undertaken.

An illuminating approach is the Queensland 'New Basics' project which involves a radical redesign of the school curriculum. Clark describes the 'productive pedagogies' and 'rich tasks' which are components of this curriculum and he describes the third component of this 'holistic' curriculum as being:

*centred on four clusters of practices essential for survival in the world in which students will live and work:*

1. *Who am I and where am I going?* Life pathways and social futures.
2. *How do I make sense of, and communicate with, the world?* Multi-literacies and communications
3. *What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economics?* Active citizenship.
4. *How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?* Environments and technologies. Clark (2005: 514)

I believe that the key strength of this model lies in its attempt to create appropriate links to the world around the child, within a holistic framework. Clark also points forcefully to the importance of avoiding a subject-led, or what he describes as a 'partitioned', curriculum which he suggests (2005: 512-513)

*is in danger of leading children to a partitioned view of the world, held in place by the structural arrangements cemented into school and classroom organization, processes and practices...(W)e need to reject the notion of partitioned knowledge and a partitioned curriculum and conceptualize both knowledge and the curriculum in a very different way.*

There are interesting overlaps between the model described by Clark and the aims for the school curriculum recently identified by White (2007). These are grouped in four categories headed: 'Personal fulfillment', 'Social and civic involvement', 'Contribution to the economy' and 'Practical wisdom'. Another model suggesting a re-conceptualisation of schooling to take account of the changing world of the child is contained in a report to UNESCO (Delors *et al.*, 1996: 37) which recommends the adoption of 'four pillars: learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be'. However easy or difficult these approaches are to put into practice, they each share the quality of appearing relevant to the developing needs of the child and they attempt to modernize the curriculum to ensure a better fit with the world of the twenty-first century into which the child is growing.

Another model which has much to recommend it is the curriculum model of the Foundation Stage, incorporating as it does the six areas of Learning and Development (under review at the time of writing: see, for example, [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk)). The development of the Foundation Stage curriculum has been interesting to observe alongside developments in curricula for older children. Although the Foundation Stage curriculum is seen as needing to respond to wider initiatives (the preparation for reading for example), it contrasts starkly with the subject-driven curriculum of Key Stages 1 and 2. Embedded in the Foundation Stage are many of the features I have argued for in this paper. There is frequent recourse to first-hand experience within a fluid curriculum with much opportunity for individual choice. It requires a child-centred approach to curriculum planning and sensitivity to the needs of each child in its systems of assessment.

Some have argued for the extension of the Foundation Stage curriculum for use with older children and this approach is being trialled in many schools at present. While I understand and sympathize with the rationale for this strategy, I am concerned that the Foundation Stage curriculum has been very well-designed to meet the needs of children at a particular stage of development and I am not convinced that simply moving this curriculum up the school age range would be appropriate. Instead, I would argue for the construction of distinctive primary curriculum models. Such models, including one that I am working on myself, would hopefully meet the criteria I have set out in this paper. They will however, have to be explored elsewhere.

### **Concluding thoughts**

We need to remind ourselves of the amount of change which lies before our society and indeed our planet. Plowden (DES, 1967: 185) predicted that the society ahead of its own report

*...will certainly be one marked by rapid and far reaching economic and social change. It is likely to be richer than now, with even more choice of goods, with tastes dominated by majorities and with more leisure for all; more people will be called upon to change their occupation.*

The advances in science and technology which our age has seen have allowed us to envisage a future which is in many ways more alarming than the future predicted from the late 1960s. Readers need no reminder of the range of challenges which appear to lie ahead of us. We must recognise, however, as many commentators have pointed out, that the future is uncertain. The prediction in Plowden of 'more leisure for all', for example, is an example of this and will bring a wry smile to many in our over-worked society of the twenty-first century. I believe that it is imperative that, as educators, we strive to help our children to maintain optimism without naivety, to help them to develop knowledge and a willingness to act appropriately while maintaining their sense of personal security and their hopes for the future. This is no easy task when we, and they, are bombarded by apocalyptic visions of what that future might hold.

I have tried in this paper to cast a critical eye over some of the features of the post-Plowden era. Inevitably my analysis will not concur with that of every reader but I hope that it resonates with the experiences of some. I have urged a move towards a more 'pragmatic' primary curriculum for reasons which I shall make explicit in conclusion. Dictionary definitions of the word 'pragmatic' include a concern with practical results and a willingness to learn the lessons of history and these seem appropriate goals in this context. The word also relates, however, to the study of language and, in particular, to the ways in which meanings are exchanged by speakers and listeners. This seems an important reminder of our purpose as we strive to boost the status and exploit the value of spoken exchanges in the primary classroom. Finally, the word 'pragmatic' has a special place in philosophy, describing an approach to the pursuit of truth in which we need not wait for absolute certainty before acting upon what appears to be the case. John Dewey famously described the test which pragmatists would suggest that claims need to pass as 'warranted assertability'. I believe that, armed with twenty-first century insights from neuroscience and elsewhere, we should re-approach the major debates of the last century concerning child development and we should base any new curriculum upon those propositions which it seems warranted to assert.

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