

# **How the Plowden Report (1967) sent Early Childhood Care and Education in Britain down the wrong path, and why we have never found our way since**

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## **Abstract**

The 1967 report of the Central Advisory Council for Education, chaired by Lady (Bridget) Plowden, was hailed as a breakthrough at the time. It was the first official recognition that the state has a role in the care and education of children before the compulsory school starting age of five. The key recommendation in relation to early years provision was that local authorities should offer part-time nursery education for nearly all four-year-olds and 'a good many' three-year-olds. Part time attendance should be the normal form of nursery education because 'young children should not be separated for long from their mothers'. The report was untouched by the second wave of feminism or by notions of equality and inclusion which informed early years policy in the Nordic countries and to a lesser extent in France and Italy. The pattern of short morning or afternoon sessions except for children in acute social need persists in the UK to this day. It ignores the needs of full-time working mothers, single parents and different forms of family organisation, especially among black and minority ethnic communities. Childminding, the major form of early years care outside the home, rated only half a sentence in the report. The crucial mistake was the failure to integrate early years provision with the statutory national education system, leaving it fatally vulnerable to political changes and economic downturns and making it the first candidate for cuts when local authorities fall on hard times.

## **Introduction**

The first international conference that I ever attended was held in Copenhagen to share information about services for young children in European countries. I was invited by Roy Parker, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Bristol, to join a group of academics and practitioners from the UK, headed by Sir William Utting, a senior civil servant in the Department

of Health. The speaker from Denmark announced that they had just appointed a Commissioner for Children and made a decision that it was necessary to spend a much higher proportion of GDP on children of all ages, but especially on pre-school children. At the time, expenditure on children under school age in Denmark was at about the same level as in the UK.

One after another, speakers from the Nordic countries, France and Italy, set out ambitious plans to improve Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). I felt an acute sense of shame when Bill Utting tried to justify the chaotic patchwork of services in the UK on the grounds that they offered 'Choice and Diversity'. As a mother of young children myself, I knew this was simply untrue.

Access to formal early education was quite rare and depended on where the family happened to live. Even if you were lucky enough to live near a nursery school or an infant school with a nursery class, finding childcare to cover adult working hours was a constant problem. Organisations like BAECE (the British Association for Early Childhood Education, founded 1923) and the Nursery Schools Association had been campaigning for an expansion of nursery education for many years, with virtually no success. So the announcement by Sir Edward Boyle, then Minister of Education, that the Central Advisory Council for Education (CACE) was to be asked to conduct an enquiry on primary education in England, including pre-school provision, was widely welcomed. The appointment of Lady (Bridget) Plowden to chair the Council was rather accidental – she had sat next to Sir Edward at a dinner party – but it turned out to be an excellent choice.

### **Revisiting Plowden**

What came to be known as the Plowden enquiry was the first major study of primary education since the Hadow Report in the very different circumstances of 1933. The committee, which met for over three years to consider its findings, was a rather curious mixture of experts, professional teachers and complete amateurs, guided by an able administrative Secretary, Maurice Kogan, a career civil servant who later became Professor of Public Policy at Brunel University. The most influential member of the group was probably Michael Young, although he kept a characteristically low profile. The final report, *Children and their Primary Schools* (CACE, 1967)

was extremely comprehensive, made extensive reference to the research available at the time and took evidence from a very wide range of organisations and individuals. The report was mainly drafted by another civil servant, Derek Gillard, who later noted caustically that the translation of the report into Welsh occupied four professors for nine months and sold 26 copies.

Why return to Plowden after so long? 185 out of its 197 recommendations were implemented, an astonishingly high proportion, but the main reason is that it continued to provide the basic framework for ECEC for the next 50 years, in fact up to the time of writing.

Chapter 9, entitled 'Providing for Children before Compulsory Education', noted that the under fives were the only age group for whom no extra educational provision of any kind had been made since 1944. This might have been taken as an opportunity for a fundamental rethinking of services for children under school age, as was done in many of the Nordic countries. But in line with the historic UK preference for piecemeal social reform, what happened instead was that modest additions were grafted on to the existing creaking structure. The only members of the committee who seem to have argued for radical change were those who were best qualified to do so by knowledge and experience: Professor David Donnison, Sir John Newsom and Michael Young, later Lord Young of Dartington.

Donnison was Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics, Newsom the author of an earlier report on 'less able' children, *Half Our Future* (Newsom, 1963) and Young, the founder of the Consumers' Association, the Advisory Centre for Education and later co-founder of the Open University among several other important organisations. These three entered a note of reservation to the final report which, if adopted, would have resulted in a much better service for young children and their families:

*Day nurseries should be as much within the educational service as nursery schools, and responsible to education authorities. The problems that will arise through confining the under threes to day nurseries and providing all day nursery schools for the over threes will be formidable enough anyway, but less so if the responsibility for the reorganization rests with one authority rather than two....Moreover, the trend of modern thinking is to emphasise the educational needs rather than the purely physical health of children, including the under threes; and in accordance with this trend it would be appropriate for*

*nurseries, whatever the age of their children, to be part of the educational rather than of the health service (p.487).*

Unfortunately this was too far ahead of its time for the other members of the Council and it was not until 1997, with the election of a Labour Government, that responsibility for the education and care of children under three was transferred to the Department for Education.

### **Expanding Early Years provision**

During the Second World War, the government set up day nurseries to enable women with children to take the place of men away in the forces and to work in munitions factories. After the war ended in 1945, these closed quite rapidly because the prevailing view was that young children should be at home with their mothers (Jackson, 2010).

Most members of the Plowden committee were in agreement that there needed to be a substantial increase in pre-school provision. But how was the expansion to be achieved in a time when, as always, money and resources were tight, and there was already a severe shortage of teachers?

The answer, which seems to have met with no significant opposition, was to double available places at a stroke by making all nursery education part-time, with children attending for short sessions, either in the morning or afternoon. Clearly this coincided with the strong feeling of many members of the committee, possibly inspired by a misinterpretation of John Bowlby's research findings that any separation of a young child from her mother, even for a short time, was undesirable (Bowlby, 1951). The recommendation that there should be a 'large expansion' of nursery education was qualified by the statement that 'young children should not be separated for long from their mothers. Attendance need not be for a whole half-day session and in the earlier stages only one, two or three days a week will often be desirable'. It is clearly envisaged that the expansion will be led and managed by the Local Education Authority, but there is a rather condescending nod to the pre-school playgroups movement: 'we understand that the Pre-School Playgroups Association wish to continue and extend their activities...' It was acknowledged that a minority of children (estimated to be about 15 per cent) would need full-time nursery education for 'a variety of reasons', not specified.

However, it was very important that the case for a substantial extension of nursery education was accepted, not only on educational grounds but also for social, health and welfare considerations, foreshadowing a more holistic view of early years provision.

At this point, day nurseries make their first appearance in the Report as 'the proper place' for those children who have to be away from their homes before the age of three (p.122). What is meant by 'have to' is further explored in Paragraph 330 which is worth quoting in detail because it illustrates the fundamental ethos of the report:

*The extent to which mothers of young children should be encouraged by the provision of full-time nursery places to go out to work raises a question of principle. Some mothers must work because they need the money. The government, for reasons of economic policy, wish to see more women working. But, to work full-time, a mother must expect that her child will attend nursery for extended hours and during school holidays. Our evidence is, however, that it is generally undesirable, except to prevent a greater evil, to separate mother and child for a whole day in the nursery.....some mothers who are not obliged to work may work full-time, regardless of their children's welfare. It is true, unfortunately, that the refusal of full-time nursery places for their children may prompt some of them to make unsuitable arrangements for their children's care during working hours. All the same, we consider that mothers who cannot satisfy the authorities that they have exceptionally good reasons for working should have low priority for full-time nursery for their children.*  
(p.128)

Since the publication of the Plowden Report, nursery education has continued to be provided almost exclusively on a part-time basis because it was predicated on two assumptions: that the nuclear family of wage-earning father and stay-at-home mother was not only the norm but the *desired* norm, and that nursery education should reflect and support that norm (Moss and Penn, 1996). Although Bridget Plowden herself was very active in public affairs and charitable organisations, as the daughter of an admiral who later became Master of a Cambridge College and the wife of a high-ranking public official, she would never have had to work for money or take full-time responsibility for the care of her four children. She seems to have had great

empathy for women less fortunate than herself but no first-hand experience of juggling work and childcare in the absence of any coherent state provision.

It is interesting to note that Margaret McMillan, along with her sister Rachel one of the most persuasive advocates for early education in Britain, was firmly opposed to part-time nurseries and classes:

*A short nurture day is in great measure a waste of time and money. The great process which it exists to forward is not possible in short sessions broken by long intervals.*  
(McMillan, 1930 p. 37)

She also pointed out that half-time nursery schooling was often an excuse for avoiding provision of meals. Depriving a child of dinner was an important matter if it might be her only chance of a proper meal during the day. It is sad to reflect that this might have once been seen as a consideration only in poor areas such as McMillan's home town of Bradford. In 2022, with a so-called cost of living crisis looming, much talk of heating or eating, and food banks proliferating everywhere, it once again seems highly relevant.

What does part-time nursery schooling mean in practice? Two-hour sessions, either morning or afternoon, sometimes on only two or three days a week, confusing for the child and useless for the caring adult who has hardly arrived back home after accompanying the child to the nursery before it is time to turn round and go to collect her again. Mothers trying to hold on to a relatively well-paid job or build a professional career may have to patch together several different kinds of childcare, supplementing the meagre public offering by falling back on relatives, if available, playgroups, childminders and private nurseries.

The discussions of the Plowden Committee were virtually untouched by the second wave of feminism, which strongly influenced thinking in Scandinavian countries. For instance, there was clearly no idea that fathers could have any significant role in the upbringing of their young children. Or conversely that women could have interests and activities beyond domestic work and childcare, other than working because they had no man to support them. In Sweden, Denmark and Norway, childcare was recognised as necessary not only to enable women to work

and earn money, but to take part in civic affairs, participate actively as citizens in their communities and have some space to engage in sport and recreational activities.

### **From Welfare to Education**

The pattern of offering ECEC on a sessional basis, bearing no relation to normal adult working hours, has persisted right down to the present, so that working parents on average incomes are usually obliged to patch together all kinds of different forms of provision in order to cover the hours of care needed, and during their children's earliest years when they most need consistency and stability rather than experiencing a variety of different settings and caregivers over the course of a week.

Despite energetic lobbying over many years by pressure groups and voluntary organisations, the official view, that government should have no role in the provision of care and education away from home for children under three, was very entrenched, and there was little change in early years services until the change of government in 1997. This coincided with a fall in the child population creating empty places in infant schools, which were filled by admitting four-year-olds to reception classes. In fact four, rather than the statutory age of five has become the usual time for starting school in the UK, two years earlier than in most other countries (Jackson and Cameron 2014; Brooker, 2002). There is considerable pressure on parents to send their four-year-olds to full-time school, as otherwise they risk not getting a place in the primary school of their choice. Moreover, the emphasis on childcare as a remedial service focused on families in difficulties or those thought to be providing unsatisfactory care for their children, which also dates back to Plowden, can be clearly seen in government guidance and policy statements through the following years (Jackson, 1993). In 1996 Moss and Penn commented that thinking about nursery education in the UK stagnated after Plowden, despite all the social changes and theoretical revisions that had taken place since then.

For a while, the election of a Labour government in 1997 seemed like a new dawn after so many years of inactivity. Almost immediately the government took the bold step of moving responsibility for all early years services from the welfare (social services) to the education sector, as advocated by Donnison, Newsom and Young in their note of reservation in the Plowden Report

so many years earlier. The greatest significance of this move was the implicit recognition that education begins at birth and not simply at the age of entry into formal schooling. Other legislative and policy developments followed, notably the 2004 Ten Year Strategy for Childcare, followed by the Childcare Act 2006, the first law to be exclusively concerned with early years and childcare. The intention of this Act was to bring early years within the mainstream of local authority services, but its provisions fell far short of the universal full-time early childhood education, with extended hours of subsidised childcare if needed, available to all children aged three to six years in Nordic countries, and in many other parts of Europe. Because it failed to embed pre-school education as a free universal service on the same basis as school-age education (as some members of the Plowden committee had unsuccessfully advocated), the important reforms introduced over this period remained highly susceptible to political changes, as the rise and fall of Children's Centres shows only too clearly (Eisenstadt, 2018).

### **Sure Start and Children's Centres**

Sure Start was the largest new component of the 2004 Childcare Strategy, the first government programme ever to be targeted at the 0 to 3 age group. The ideas underpinning it were partly derived from the American Headstart programme, which showed very positive long-term outcomes from high quality early childhood provision, and it was based on sound research and practice knowledge embodied in the 'Birth to Three Matters' framework (Abbott and Langston, 2004). Sure Start was an area-based programme providing funds for a variety of early education, childcare and family support services for children under four in the most disadvantaged areas. Originally, every Sure Start Centre set up under the scheme had to include day care to enable mothers to work, but the funding arrangements greatly underestimated the cost of childcare and this element of the scheme rather quickly fell into abeyance. Despite this, Sure Start is generally regarded as one of the major successes of the Strategy. Evaluation was built in from the beginning and showed small but significant improvements in outcomes for children – enhanced language development for instance. Equally Important, the Centres were greatly appreciated by the parents who used them and the communities in which they were located.

Later, Sure Start Centres were rebranded Children's Centres, intended to provide early education, childcare, health services, family support and employment and financial advice in one location. The Treasury allocated substantial funds for the purpose and Children's Centres spread like wildfire, numbering 3,500 at their peak. It is notable that the idea of local centres of this kind, available to all parents 'within pram-pushing distance' had first been proposed forty years earlier by Jack Tizard, the founder of the Thomas Coram Research Unit, in the book *All Our Children* (Tizard, Moss and Perry, 1976).

Once again though, the fatal mistake was to set up Children's Centres as an add-on instead making them part of the statutory education system. The election of a right-wing government in 2010 effectively constituted their death knell. The original vision of a Children's Centre in every community, providing the basis of a universal ECEC service on the European model, reverted to the idea of a targeted remedial service aimed at families in difficulty or perceived to be failing. Over 400 Centres closed in the first two years of the coalition government and most of the others were hollowed out as a result of funding cuts. As they gradually reduced their activities, fewer people found it worth using them, so that local authorities could justify closing them on grounds of lack of demand (Eisenstadt, 2018). In the end they closed down almost as quickly as they had sprung up.

### **The privatisation of childcare in the UK**

The Childcare Act 2006 referred to above obliges local authorities in England and Wales to ensure that there are sufficient childcare places to 'meet the needs' of working parents. However, publicly provided childcare has almost disappeared. Care for children of working parents is found mostly in the private sector, provided either by childminders or in day nurseries run for profit, and increasingly, by large commercial chains. In the absence of state provision, the number of private day nurseries has grown exponentially, charging fees that put them out of reach of families on average incomes, and meaning that women in professional jobs are essentially working for no financial advantage or are forced out of their professions altogether (Jackson and Forbes, 2015; De Luca, 2022 ; Siraj, 2022;). Mothers with fewer educational qualifications are forced to work part-time for low wages and turn to relatives, especially grandmothers, to fill the

gaps (Rutter and Evans, 2011). Low-income families spend 20 per cent of their income on childcare, compared with eight per cent on average spent by better-off families.

For children under three the most common form of day care is still childminding, usually known as family day care in countries other than the UK. Childminding only merited half a sentence in the Plowden report, where it is described as a 'new occupation' despite having been the main form of childcare for poor working parents since the time of Dickens (Jackson and Jackson, 1979). The National Childminding Association, which has played an important part in training and support since its foundation in 1976, is now called PACEY (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years) but still uses the term childminding on its website ([www.pacey.org.uk](http://www.pacey.org.uk)).

There continues to be a conflict between standards and costs. Childminding is no longer a cheap service for poor parents and the fees are only marginally lower than those charged by private day nurseries. They still do not provide a very good return for providers, with the result that the number of childminders has been declining steadily for the last ten years.

### **An early childhood curriculum**

Until the late 1990s the idea of a structured programme for childcare did not exist in the UK. People who looked after young children outside the school system did their best to keep them occupied and happy, but were basically left to get on with it without much direction. That changed with the introduction in September 2008 of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), a national curriculum for children aged 0-5. It became a statutory requirement for every type of early childhood service, including childminding, to be enforced through inspection by Ofsted on a four-year cycle. It has been revised many times, usually to make it less demanding on practitioners, which was certainly necessary. The first version, for example, had a list of 69 Early Learning Goals (ELGs) against which children were to be assessed. Subsequent revisions (2012, 2014, 2017) reduced the ELGs to a more reasonable 17, but steadily shifted the emphasis from spontaneous, child-led activity in the direction of school-readiness. Trevor and colleagues argue that there is an unhelpful contradiction between a curriculum which recognises child-initiated activities and play as essential for children's development and the demands of a future-oriented,

prescribed and structured curriculum, primarily concerned with the impact of early years education on the UK's economic competitiveness within a global market (Roberts-Holmes, 2012). Although the terminology may be different, this has distinct echoes of the acrimonious debate that followed the publication of the Plowden Report between the proponents of 'traditional' and 'progressive' teaching methods (Scruton, 1987).

### **The ECEC workforce**

We know that the quality of any early childhood setting is strongly related to the education and qualifications of the staff (Sylva et al, 2010). Professor Cathy Nutbrown was commissioned by the coalition government (2010-2015) to carry out a review of the early years workforce. She pointed out that there was no standard qualification for the work, but literally hundreds of different courses in further education colleges in addition to degree courses in Early Childhood Studies at universities. Nutbrown's final report made 19 recommendations designed to ensure that:

*Staff are as good as they can be and have the skills, knowledge and understanding to make the most of the Government's investment in the early years. Working in the early years sector should be a recognized and fulfilling career that attracts the best men and women* (Nutbrown, 2012).

The aim should be for every early childhood setting to be led by someone with graduate-level qualifications

The government minister, Liz Truss (HM Foreign Secretary at the time of writing) claimed that she had accepted most of the recommendations and incorporated them into the policy document *More Great Childcare* (DfE, 2013), but Nutbrown published an angry response accusing the government of 'shaking the foundations of quality'. She pointed out that the overall thrust of her report had been brushed aside and most of her recommendations had, in effect, been rejected (Nutbrown, 2013). Most importantly, the opportunity to rationalise the education and career structure of early years work was lost. In particular, the proposal for early years professionals to undertake a PGCE and be awarded Qualified Teacher Status was turned down, once again reinforcing the existence of a two-tier profession, offering those who work with the youngest children or in childcare settings as opposed to schools, lesser status and poorer pay and

conditions than those teaching older children. This makes it an unattractive career option for academically able young people, especially boys, perpetuating the gender imbalance in the profession. It makes the aspiration for every early years setting to be led by a graduate look more remote than ever.

*More Great Childcare* made the absurd suggestion that if those proposing to train as early years practitioners were required to have English and Maths GCSEs, the child-adult ratios could be relaxed to make care cheaper. Nutbrown pointed out that this made no sense at all:

*The difference will be too few adults with too many little children, too few moments in the day for a toddler to have uninterrupted time with their key person, and too few early years practitioners to talk and work with children...Childcare may be cheaper but children will be footing the bill.* (Nutbrown, 2013, p.9).

Or as Polly Toynbee pointed out in the *Guardian*, 'How do you fit six children into a buggy?'

At the time, the government was forced by the storm of protest to backpedal, but the idea has now resurfaced, ostensibly to make childcare less expensive for families during the so-called cost of living crisis and reduce costs for providers. Numerous analysts have pointed out that tinkering with the ratios will have a negligible impact on costs, but may well have the negative effects for children predicted by Nutbrown.

### **The impact of Covid**

The Covid-19 pandemic has turned established patterns of work upside down, and it is too soon to know what the final landscape of employment will look like. An urgent debate is in progress about the advantages of continuing to work from home (for those who can) or returning to the office, full-time or part-time. However, anyone who thinks home-working is the answer to the problem of childcare has never tried it. Little children need, if not constant attention, at least constant availability. Attempting to work while looking after a young child means frustration and stress for parents, strained relationships, and an impoverished experience for children, probably involving long hours in front of screens with effects we do not yet know (Jackson and Forbes, 2015).

## Conclusion

Looking back over the last fifty years, we can see that at some times, the needs of young children and their families have been the focus of attention and at others they have receded into the background, usually depending on which party is in power at Westminster. The basic shape of early childhood education and care as set in the Plowden recommendations has not changed; in most places it remains the 'hotchpotch' described by Jack Tizard and numerous commentators since. A recently published study of ECEC, from University College London, argues that there is no point in continuing to tinker with this broken system: what we need is *transformational* change in every aspect of early childhood services (Cameron and Moss, 2020). In fact we should get away from the idea of a separate sphere of 'care' altogether; the aim should be a comprehensive education system for children from 0 to 6, a unitary system of nurture and learning, a democratic system that recognises children as active agents in their own development and creates the best conditions in which they can flourish.

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