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## Where There is No Vision ...

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**ABSTRACT** Plowden's 40th anniversary coincides with the launch of a new enquiry – the 2006-08 Primary Review – into the condition and future of primary education in England. This article outlines the scope, character and aspirations of the Primary Review, points up similarities and differences with Plowden, and draws some important lessons from the Plowden experience. Along the way, the article argues for Plowden to be rescued from the tangle of well-meaning interpretations and less well-meaning myths which have obscured its actual text; and stresses the need for a vision for primary education which provides a proper moral response to the fragile condition of the world which today's children will inherit.

### **Cautionary Tales**

Though Hadow (Board of Education, 1931) paved the way, it took Plowden's happily timed appearance (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) at the crest of 1960s optimism finally to propel English primary education into the cultural and political mainstream. This imposing document – two volumes, 1189 pages, 46 plates, a vast body of evidence – confirmed the profound importance to both children and society of what hitherto had been regarded as little more than a sideshow to the grander enterprises of secondary and higher education.

The price paid for this elevation was the rapid collapse of the cross-party consensus which attended Plowden's launch and the burial of its true messages in the mire of professional misunderstanding, media mythologising and political scapegoating; for Plowden had transformed primary education into something worth arguing about, indeed fighting for. The report undoubtedly liberated and inspired some exceptional teaching, and it is essential that this be duly recalled and properly recorded (Cunningham, 1988); so indeed that tradition of close attention to children's thinking, feeling and learning (Armstrong, 1980) which was far more searching than the too-easy rhetoric of generalised child-centredness allowed. But Plowden also unleashed a discourse which combined the simplistic, muddled and doctrinaire in debilitating proportions.

Academics rapidly exposed Plowden's philosophical and evidential frailties (Peters, 1968), and classroom researchers discovered the prosaic truth

that post-Plowden pedagogy was all too often notable less for the inspirational shock of the new than the ideologically convoluted persistence of the old (Simon, 1981; Alexander, 1984). Meanwhile, headed by the 'Black Paper' merchants, the political and media right began to blame Plowden for declining standards of reading, behaviour, public morality, imperial ambition and much else besides (Cox & Dyson, 1971), and continued to do so until 1997. At that point crude Plowden-bashing gave way to the breathtaking hubris of New Labour's chilling Downing Street edict that the entire period should be written off as one of 'uninformed professional judgement' (Barber, 2001, pp. 13-14).

In celebrating Plowden's anniversary it is therefore essential to distinguish carefully between three different versions of the report: what it actually said, what people claimed it said, and what they did in its name. *Forum* certainly won't wish to send birthday greetings to a fiction, and it will be interesting to see whether contributors to this anniversary number themselves agree on what Plowden was really about.

The gulf between the first two of my three Plowdens could be alarmingly wide. So, for example, though it was taken to pronounce the death of a subject-based curriculum, Plowden actually favoured (para. 555) a measured progression from a relatively open curriculum in the early years to a subject-differentiated one by age 12 – hardly revolutionary; and its discussion of that curriculum (paras 558-721) was anyway contained within the traditional subject framework and indeed offered an elaboration of Hadow's 1931 account rather than anything startlingly new. (This isn't the only continuity: read both reports and you'll discover just how much Plowden owes to Hadow's misleadingly dour little document.)

Again, though it was held to advocate unbridled individualism, Plowden actually recommended (para. 1243, subsection 96) 'a combination of individual group [*sic*] and class work'. The absence of a comma here didn't help the cause of clarity, but the general thrust of Plowden's advocacy of 'mixed methods' was pretty evident, and Plowden itself acknowledged (para. 754) what it took the combined efforts of several major classroom research studies finally to bring home many years later: the essentially unrealistic nature of any aspiration to the complete individualisation of learning in classrooms of 30 or so children (Galton & Simon, 1980).

Yet that particular aspiration, and others supposedly but not actually authorised by Plowden, took root. I use 'authorised' advisedly, for the third version of Plowden – what people did in its name – was all too often associated with a professional climate in which messianic zeal, absolute head teacher authority and local authority patronage combined to make impossible the realisation of another of Plowden's clearly signalled intentions. This was to sustain as 'one of the mainsprings of progress in primary schools ... the willingness of teachers to experiment, to innovate and to change' (para. 1151) and to do so by attending closely to evidence from published research, for 'research and practice are parts of a whole, and neither can flourish without the other' (para. 1152).

As John Dewey noted in relation to the American progressive experience and the fate of his own writing: 'An educational idea which professes to be based on the idea of freedom may become as dogmatic as ever was the traditional education which was reacted against' (Ravitch, 1983, p. 59). Later, his widow complained to comparativist Edmund King that Dewey's followers 'could not see their idol for the incense they sent up' (King, 1979, p. 343).

Something of this fate certainly befell Plowden, as anyone who lived and worked in primary education during the subsequent decades can testify. Lady Plowden was an unlikely guru, but then the real priesthood here was not the chair or members of the Plowden Committee but those who anointed themselves as interpreters and guardians of its truths before a dependent and performant compliant teaching force (Alexander, 1997). What came to matter, as I've said, were Plowden versions 2 and 3 rather than the all-important version 1, the *Urtext* of Plowden as published. Regrettably, the sacerdotal imagery I've employed here is not at all far-fetched, for at this time it was sufficient in some LEAs (local education authorities) to assert 'Plowden says...' to block all further discussion.

This is a cautionary tale for anyone embarking on a new enquiry into primary education. Another is the time which it takes to implement even those changes which seem both sensible and urgent. True, the Educational Priority Area (EPA) scheme was a Plowden success story, the prototype for a whole succession of urban socio-educational interventions. But Plowden also recommended as an adjunct to its strategy for tackling social disadvantage the immediate and substantial expansion of pre-school education (para. 343) – yet how long did it take England to come anywhere close to catching up with its Continental neighbours in this regard? Relatedly, and pressing home the theme of giving every child the best possible start in life, Plowden argued (para. 215) for close collaboration between educational, social and medical services, but only with the 2004 Children Act and Every Child Matters did seamless multi-agency activity become a reality, and it took several cases of children suffering the harrowing consequences of agency disarticulation to achieve what common sense as well as Plowden had long demanded.

Beyond these important examples are many habits of thought and practice which have survived not just the 40 years since Plowden but the century which preceded it as well, and have resisted each and every challenge to their hegemony: the class teacher system (from which Plowden encouraged more deviation than many realise) (paras 752-777); the infant/junior separation (now KS1/2); the fractured curriculum ('basics' vs. the rest, later repackaged as 'core' and 'other foundation', latterly as 'excellence and enjoyment'); the defining of those 'basics' as proficiency in the 3Rs but little else, despite all that we know, for instance, about the cognitive and cultural power of talk or the rooting of truly civilised human relations in the capacity to imagine.

## 40 Years On: the Primary Review<sup>[1]</sup>

Cautionary tales, certainly. Yet 40 years on another enquiry into primary education is under way, so those involved must heed Plowden's sobering lessons as well as its high ambitions and undoubted achievements.

In fact, the new enquiry is very different. Instead of a publicly (and generously) funded official commission of the great and good, we have an independent review led by academics, guided by a diverse and talented Advisory Committee and funded – with an inevitably tighter budget than Plowden – from a private source, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Like Plowden, the 2006-08 Review of Primary Education in England (shortened to the Primary Review) seeks to combine retrospective evidence with prospective vision. Like Plowden, the Primary Review seeks to be reasonably comprehensive. Like Plowden, the Primary Review hopes to make a difference. But that could well be where the similarity ceases.

### Evidence

Conceptually, the Review is a matrix of 10 themes and four kinds of evidence. The evidence comes from:

- written and electronic *submissions*, which are open to all (including readers of this article, naturally);
- face-to-face *soundings* with national organisations and regional gatherings of teachers, parents, children and community representatives;
- *searches* of official data held by government and by national and international agencies; and
- *surveys* of published research.

This last evidential strand alone constitutes probably the biggest sweep ever of published research relating to English primary education, and to achieve it the Review has commissioned 30 thematic research literature surveys from over 60 leading researchers. Here, the Primary Review has one big advantage over Plowden: the range and quality of the research evidence available to it, especially in the core domains of learning and teaching, but also – apropos lessons which must be learned – in the realm of government educational policy.

And policy, make no mistake about it, is all-important. When Plowden was published people still recalled 1940s Minister of Education George Tomlinson saying 'Minister knows nowt about curriculum' and although in 1960 another minister, David Eccles, mused mildly about penetrating the 'secret garden of the curriculum' his successors showed little inclination to do so for another 25 years. Now of course the curriculum garden is a well-manicured park with an officious keeper at every turn confining visitors to the allocated routes and ensuring that each plant reaches its preordained height. It even has zones signposted 'excellence' (a 3Rs boot camp) and 'enjoyment' (a couple of rusting swings). Not really what Froebel had in mind. (Maybe I've taken the image too far, but let it stand.)

Back to the Primary Review. The research surveys are but one strand of the Review's evidence. At the time of writing – two months after the Review's launch and with the 1 March 2007 deadline for submissions still some time away – the submissions have started arriving at our Cambridge office and we are finalising arrangements for the 'community soundings' strand, which will entail discussions, between January and March 2007, with teachers, parents, children, local authority officers, employers and other community figures in 10 regional locations in different parts of England. The community soundings will lead, from April to July 2007, to a series of 'national soundings' with representatives of a large number of organisations both inside and outside education, at which we shall not only invite witness statements in the usual way but will also test reactions to emerging evidence from the Review's other strands.

Plowden's Annex B shows that the Committee received oral evidence from 30 organisations and 137 individuals, and written evidence from over 300 sources. Annex C records Committee visits to about 300 schools in England and six other countries. We have neither the time nor the resources to come close to this number and range of direct encounters. But emulation of these statistics is not necessary. For example, there is now an impressive body of international comparative research, and of comparative official data from sources such as OECD, Eurydice, INCA and IEA (not to mention the Internet) which make such trips less essential than they were to Plowden, and which take the Primary Review's international perspective far beyond what Plowden was able to achieve. The dangers of naive international comparison and policy borrowing must of course always be understood (Alexander, 2001).

Yet what really matters evidentially is the way our methodology achieves and triangulates its coverage by combining and balancing different kinds of data: invited opinion (submissions and soundings) with published empirical evidence (research surveys and official data searches); opinion seeking which is both interactive (soundings) and non-interactive (submissions); published empirical data from sources both official (searches) and independent (surveys); voices from the educational grassroots – teachers, parents and children – as well as the educational establishment. And although opinion-seeking and discussion with those directly involved must always be central to an exercise of this kind, we can confidently assert that the range of published research which is available to the Primary Review far exceeds that to which Plowden's advisers had access.

### **Themes and Perspectives**

A national system of primary education offers to an enquiry such as the Primary Review, if that enquiry is properly conceived, a dauntingly vast canvas. It is *national*, so it raises questions about national values, national identity, the condition of English and indeed British society and the lives and futures of the groups and individuals of which that society is constituted. It is a *system*, so there are questions about policy, structure, organisation, finance and governance to

consider. And being an *education* system, it raises a distinctively educational array of questions about the children whose needs, along with those of society, the system claims to address, and about schools, what goes on in them, and the contexts within which they operate.

Some earlier enquiries and initiatives have claimed to be comprehensive but have in fact been restricted to the point where the discussion of even what they treat in detail loses some of its validity. This is because ostensibly concrete and practical matters such as curriculum, teaching, assessment, leadership and workforce reform – to take some typical recent instances – raise much larger questions of purpose, value and social context. Thus, a curriculum is much more than a syllabus: it is a response to culture and the future – and English culture today is complex, while even optimists recognise that the future is highly problematic. Teaching is not merely a matter of technique, but reflects ideas about thinking, knowing, learning and relating. Assessment, for better or worse, has become as much a political as a professional activity. In turn, all of these are framed, enabled and/or constrained by policy, structure and finance. And so on.

So breadth of coverage in a national educational review is essential. At the same time, it is impossible to cover everything, and choices must be confronted and made. The coverage of the Primary Review is therefore expressed as a hierarchy of ‘perspectives’, ‘themes’ and ‘questions’ so that we can keep constantly in mind what matters most.

We start with three broad *perspectives*:

- children and childhood;
- culture, society and the global context;
- education.

In other words, children, the world in which they are growing up, and the education which mediates that world and prepares them for it. These are the Review’s core concerns and together they provide the framework for its more specific themes and questions.

Next, 10 *themes* attend to those particular matters on which it has been agreed that the Review should concentrate:

- purposes and values;
- learning and teaching;
- curriculum and assessment;
- quality and standards;
- diversity and inclusion;
- settings and professionals;
- parenting, caring and educating;
- beyond the school;
- structures and phases;
- funding and governance.

Finally, for every theme there is a set of *questions*. These indicate in more precise terms what we need to investigate, and what we wish to encourage those providing evidence to comment upon.

Space does not permit us to set out the full list of questions we have identified under each theme (they can be readily checked on the Review website), but it is worth spelling out the three perspectives in full, for they encapsulate the Review's main concerns.

#### *Children and Childhood*

What do we know about young children's lives in and out of school, and about the nature of childhood, at the start of the twenty-first century? How do children of primary school age develop, think, feel, act and learn? To which of the myriad individual and collective differences between children should educators and related professionals particularly respond? What do children most fundamentally need from those charged with providing their primary education?

#### *Culture, Society and the Global Context*

In what kind of society and world are today's children growing up and being educated? In what do England's (and Britain's) cultural differences and commonalities reside? What is the country's likely economic, social and political future? Is there a consensus about the 'good society' and education's role in helping to shape and secure it? What can we predict about the future – social, economic, environmental, moral, political – of the wider world with which Britain is interdependent? What, too, does this imply for children and primary education? What must be done in order that today's children, and their children, have a future worth looking forward to?

#### *Education*

Taking the system as a whole, from national policy and overall structure to the fine detail of school and classroom practice, what are the current characteristics, strengths and weaknesses of the English state system of primary education? To what needs and purposes should it be chiefly directed over the coming decades? What values should it espouse? What learning experiences should it provide? By what means can its quality be secured and sustained?

(<http://www.primaryreview.org.uk>)

These perspectives also demonstrate some of the most striking conceptual or thematic differences between the Primary Review and Plowden. Follow the trail of Plowden's chapters. It starts with 'The Children: their growth and development', progresses to 'The Children and their Environment' and thence into 'The Structure of Primary Education' and onward to aims, learning, curriculum and so on. In as far as Plowden looked outward it addressed – albeit

very persuasively – essentially local questions to do with the relationship of community, home and school, especially in the context of social disadvantage. In this it was very much of its time, for the 1960s was the decade of celebrated studies like Douglas's *The Home and the School* (Douglas, 1964) and EPAs merely awaited Plowden's nod to spring into life.

The Primary Review is also concerned with this vital relationship. Indeed in unravelling it we are talking to parents and children as well as to those who purport to speak for them and act in their interests. Yet the Review's perspectives are no less national and international than local. Further, while Plowden seemed to fuel a tendency to see children and society as in opposition – 'children vs. society' became as common a dichotomising slogan as 'children vs. subjects', and perhaps a more damaging one – we now understand that the two are inseparable. Partly this arises from the belated acceptance that philosophically the child/society duality is untenable because children are members of society and childhood is anyway a social construct; partly it reflects our post-Vygotskian understanding that culture is an essential ingredient in human development, and that in such development the 'natural' and 'cultural' lines reinforce one another (Bruner & Haste, 1987; Alexander, 2006a).

### **Why a Broader Perspective? Why a Review?**

There are two main reasons for the need to broaden the perspective of a new enquiry into primary education beyond the nexus of child, family, community and school. First, in place of the *laissez-faire* localism that attended primary education in the 1960s England now has one of the most centralised education systems in the developed world and, since 1997, one of the most closely scrutinised and tightly policed. The language is indicative: Plowden's benign opening maxim 'At the heart of the educational process lies the child' (para. 9) was soon challenged in what was surely a deliberate way – 'The school curriculum is at the heart of education' (Department of Education and Science, 1981, p. 1) – when the Thatcher government gave early warning of its intention to take greater control. In turn, with control of curriculum and testing secured by the 1988 Education Reform Act, this generalised repositioning gave way in 1997 to the strutting machismo of standards, targets, step changes, league tables, task forces, best practice and failing schools, and the endless parade (or 'rolling out') of initiatives and strategies, each habitually but implausibly prefaced by 'tough' or 'new', or more commonly by both. Finally, the entire edifice was crowned by a Primary National Strategy (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) with a designated Strategy 'manager' in every local authority.

And it is a culmination. Ten years or so after Plowden, and acting on that report's recommendation, Her Majesty's Inspectors undertook a survey of 542 primary schools to see how the system was progressing. They highlighted problems of curriculum breadth, quality, expertise and management and encouraged discussion on ways of using teachers' curriculum specialisms to

achieve more even curriculum quality across the school as a whole (Department of Education and Science, 1978). But the curriculum itself remained firmly in the hands of schools and LEAs, who indeed responded with rather unwise contempt to the then government's not unreasonable request for information on how they were fulfilling their statutory curriculum responsibilities (Department of Education and Science, 1977).

Ten years on again, in 1988, LEA bluff had been called, England had its National Curriculum, national standards and national tests, and power in these and other matters had been transferred overnight from LEAs to Downing Street.

Fast forward another decade, to 1998-99: the final frontier had been breached, and the same Labour Party that had raised its hands in horror at the Conservatives' seizure of educational power in 1988 now took to itself powers beyond even Margaret Thatcher's wildest dreams – not just over curriculum and assessment but over the minute-by-minute conduct of teaching itself, as precisely prescribed literacy and numeracy lessons were laid down for every classroom in the land.

It follows, then, that one of the Primary Review's central tasks is to establish from both official and independent sources exactly what has happened to the quality of primary education since defining educational quality became the prerogative of national government. But – and this takes us to the second main justification for the Review – the debate cannot stop there, for educational quality and standards are culturally, philosophically and indeed empirically much more complex notions than their political arbiters admit. Certainly they can no more be exclusively equated with test scores at age 11 than the 3Rs can be defined as the totality of a rounded education.

Thus, beyond the no-nonsense Westminster slogans about standards and 'real world' relevance lies a country whose real-world consciousness is strikingly permeated by questions of cultural diversity and identity, a country which in one authoritative estimate is sleepwalking into racial segregation and communal strife (Phillips, 2005), and which in another has allowed its democratic processes to become dangerously undermined by a combination of public apathy and political chicanery (Power Enquiry, 2006). Such pathologies have as direct a bearing on how we define quality in primary education as do the more obviously symptomatic debates about religious dress and faith schools which these days rarely leave the headlines, let alone the annual ritual of Standard Assessment Task results by which quality is officially defined.

But in its proper resonances 'quality' is no less international than national or local. Globalisation is hardly a new phenomenon, but the way its absolute primacy as economic and hence educational imperative is daily insisted upon would surely have startled Lady Plowden's committee. In this matter, the UK's global economic competitiveness, and the country's position in the OECD league tables of student attainment, are undoubtedly important yet also are only part of the story. The gap between the world's rich and poor continues to widen, while there's a fast-growing consensus that escalating climate change and global warming may make this the make-or-break century for humanity as

a whole, and that these trends – and whatever can be done to bring them under control – are rooted as directly in public economic policy as in private attitude and aspiration (Stern, 2007).

To some it may seem far-fetched to link primary education, national identity, democracy, global poverty and climate change, though people are happy enough to link primary education via skill development to global economic competitiveness. Yet such matters bear directly on what we mean, or might mean, by educational quality. Education helps to shape both consciousness and culture, and hence the good society. Today's children will need the knowledge, skills and dispositions not only to cope with the world others have created, but to act on that world in its interests as much as their own.

Meanwhile, there's increasing concern that childhood here and now is being fast eroded by a whole raft of social changes ranging from increased marital breakdown to precocious consumerism, the loss of inter-generational contact and the poverty of the inner lives of those children whose days outside school are dominated by television, the Internet and battery-driven toys which leave nothing to the imagination. And today's security-obsessed primary schools, with their reinforced doors, keypads, Criminal Records Bureau-vetted adults and anxious parents waiting in their no less fortress-like SUVs to hurry their children home to tea, television and texting contrast all too tellingly with the physical openness of schools during the 1960s and 1970s (even though the much-vaunted curricular and pedagogical openness of those schools was often illusory).

It is a coincidence, but as far as we are concerned a highly advantageous one, that the Children's Society has launched a 'Good Childhood Enquiry' to address some of these latter concerns. Their timescale is almost identical to ours and we are hoping to liaise closely with them about the important ground shared by the two enquiries.

It's a statement of the painfully obvious that today's children, and their children, rather than the adults and politicians who confidently make the decisions which affect their futures, will reap the environmental, economic and social whirlwind that many now predict as a certainty rather than warn against as a mere possibility; and that such concerns cannot but raise daunting questions about the kind of education which schools should provide and the values they should pursue. Political vision is notoriously short term. Educational vision cannot afford to be: today's primary children will live well into the twenty-first century and on current life-expectancy projections some of them will make the twenty-second. Primary education cannot conceivably cater for every life-chance contingency, let alone when so much is fluid and uncertain, but it can at least strive to lay an appropriate foundation for a challenging future, and in doing so acknowledge that its agency is moral no less than instrumental (Alexander, 2006b).

Deep and urgent concern about the prospects for children, their world and their education is chiefly why the Primary Review is needed. That, and the need

to take stock of the impact for better or worse of 20 years of unremitting government intervention in a sector which during the Plowden era was left very much to its own devices – maybe too much for its own good. And, too, there is a need to bring together and make sense of the extensive evidence which is now available to us from research, official sources and – we earnestly hope – the many who will send in their ideas and whom we shall consult through the programmes of national and community soundings.

### **Can We Make a Difference?**

Nothing can be guaranteed, and even if the Review's interim and final reports make a big media splash there's no automatic route thence to thoughtful consideration and appropriate application of the Review's analysis, findings and recommendations. The mixed fate of Plowden and the premature demise of several highly deserving national enquiries provide a constant warning of how difficult it can be to make a difference outside one's local patch, especially if one's messages go against the political or cultural grain.

What we can say at this stage, though, is that the Review took nearly three years to plan and that much of that time was devoted to careful consultation with a wide range of interested individuals and groups. As a result, though the Review's independence is everywhere understood, its team have established constructive working relationships with the Department for Education and Skills, Office for Standards in Education, Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, Teaching and Development Agency and the General Teaching Council, with the two main opposition parties, and with the all-party Commons Education and Skills Committee; and, beyond such official bodies, with the teaching unions, with major faith groups, and with a large number of professional organisations.

Unlike Plowden, we are not an officially commissioned enquiry and, notwithstanding the current cordial working relations we have secured with government and statutory agencies, we can presume nothing about the level of official support which our findings and recommendations will secure. On the other hand, some are predicting that because no Secretary of State nowadays would give a government-commissioned enquiry into primary education the freedom which Sir Edward Boyle granted to Lady Plowden's committee in August 1963 ('to consider primary education in all its aspects'), a genuinely independent enquiry such as the Primary Review will attract attention precisely because it can ask what it wants, and say exactly what it needs to in the light of the evidence it receives.

Unlike Plowden again, we are not staking everything on a single final report, but will be putting our evidence into the public domain as it emerges in order to stimulate debate, and in this, also unlike Plowden, we have the enormous resource of electronic communications to assist us. Like Plowden, however, we hope that there will be sufficient people of goodwill out there who share our deep concern about the importance of primary education and the

world in which our children, and their children, will grow up. We hope that they will be prepared to join the debate, submit evidence and help us to construct an accurate and illuminating account of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary English primary education; and that on this basis we can formulate a vision for the future which lifts educational horizons far above the current preoccupation with government initiatives, and reinstates a vision of teaching as much more than mere compliance (Alexander, 2004).

We'll give it, as they say, our best shot.

### Note

- [1] Details of the Primary Review, which is supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, are at <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk>. The website also explains how to submit ideas and evidence, and we hope that *Forum* readers will be encouraged by this article to do so. The deadline for submissions is 1 April 2007.

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*Children, their world, their education*

## **LAST CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS**

The Primary Review is a comprehensive and independent enquiry into England's system of primary education (see this issue of *FORUM*, p. 190).

If you have views on the condition and future of this vital phase of education, please send them to us **NOW**, in writing or electronically.

For further information go to  
[www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk)