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PRIMARY REVIEW  
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS  
1/1

## AIMS AS POLICY IN ENGLISH PRIMARY EDUCATION

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This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 1/1, *Aims as Policy in English Primary Education*, by John White. The report tracks changing official views of the aims of English primary education over the past century, compares these with official statements of aims from other parts of the UK and sets them alongside selected discussion of educational aims from the theoretical literature. **The full report, including details of all sources consulted, is available online at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk).** The report is one of four research surveys which the Primary Review has commissioned on the theme of purposes and values in primary education and should be read in conjunction with reports 1/2 (*Aims and Values in Primary Education: England and other countries*), 1/3 (*Aims for Primary Education: the changing national context*) and 1/4 (*Aims for Primary Education: changing global contexts*).

The report is divided into two parts:

1. Historical, presenting the changing aims of primary schools, as stated in official documentation, across the 20th century and into the 21st.
2. Theoretical, presenting educationalists' - largely philosophical - views of what the aims of primary education should be.

### Changing policy on primary aims

#### 1904-1988

The primary school emerged in the early twentieth century from the elementary school, an institution intended largely for 'the children of the labouring poor'. In 1904 Robert Morant drew up a set of aims for the latter, sharpening the gap between the purposes of elementary and secondary schools. This played down intellectual aims and put more stress on practical activities and personal qualities, not least those thought to be required by an industrious and unselfish work force. Selecting highly able children for transfer to secondary schools was another, though subsidiary, aim.

The Hadow Report of 1931 encouraged the transition from elementary schooling as an inferior alternative to secondary, to primary education as a prelude to secondary education for all. Since state control of non-secondary curricula had ended in 1926, it is not surprising that both the Hadow Report and the Plowden Report of 1967 had little to say about the aims of primary education. What they did say tended, not always consistently, to play down the acquisition of knowledge in favour of activity, experience and attention to children's needs, and to back a developmental view of young children's learning. A further leitmotif of Plowden, continued in the work of the Schools Council until the 1980s, was to encourage teachers to work out their own aims and indeed start with their existing practice and see what aims this embodied. Within this context of relative professional autonomy, primary teachers' aims were investigated empirically by Ashton *et al* in 1975.

In 1981 the Thatcher government recommended the same set of aims for all maintained schools in England. This was the first time that this had been done. The aims of primary education were thus implicitly seen, and are still seen, as the same as secondary aims. The 1981 scheme placed great weight, without providing any rationale for this, on intellectual aims, little on the acquisition of personal

qualities, and none at all on learning as development, thus making a decisive break with the views of Hadow and Plowden.

### **1988-2007**

These features of the 1981 recommendations persisted into the post-1988 period, when the 1988 Education Reform Act brought aims and curricula for all types of school back under state control. The National Curriculum introduced in that year entrenched the traditional place of a range of – largely intellectual - school subjects but included no more than an uninformative two lines on the aims underlying them.

In 1999, following pressure from teachers during the 1990s wanting to know what the National Curriculum was meant to be for, QCA and the government produced a lengthy set of overall 'values, aims and purposes' for both the National Curriculum and the wider school curriculum. Personal qualities figure prominently among them, knowledge and understanding somewhat less so. These aims were not made statutory and there is no evidence that they have had widespread impact on schools' curricular thinking. With one or two additions, the National Curriculum subjects of 1988 continued to provide the backbone of the curriculum and there was considerable mismatch between the new aims and the specifications for the various subjects.

Since 2003, led by Northern Ireland, there have been concerted attempts in each part of the UK to support an aims-based curriculum - that is to say, a curriculum in which aims, once selected, are to be realised by the most appropriate curricular means, rather than one in which aims and curriculum remain separate. In England, as in other UK countries, the continuing protected position of the traditional subjects creates difficulties for this project; but the subjects will now have to be responsive to a new set of national aims, interdisciplinary work will be encouraged, and schools will be freer to devise their own curricula within statutory constraints. The overall national aims are three-fold: to enable all young people to become *successful learners, confident individuals, and responsible citizens*. One as yet unrectified weakness is that no rationale has been provided for these three aims or for the more specific aims falling under each heading.

The new aims, including the specific ones, are to be statutory for Key Stages 3 and 4 and it is likely that primary schools will soon follow suit. This is the first time that English schools have had a detailed set of statutory aims to help them shape their curricula. The impact of this change on how twenty-first century schools will operate is potentially profound.

Since 1981, as stated earlier, official statements on aims have not differentiated the aims of primary schools from those of secondary. There is some reason for thinking, however, that Morant's subsidiary aim of 1904 for the elementary school – of preparing highly able pupils for an appropriate secondary education – has tacitly persisted throughout the twentieth century as one aim of the primary school and in some ways is still with us today. Another historical legacy is found in the re-emergence of the developmental approach in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for children aged 0-5, which overlaps the primary phase. 'Early Learning Goals' are specified for each of the six EYFS 'Areas of Learning and Development.'

### **What should primary aims be? Theoretical perspectives**

Throughout the period covered by this report, official statements about primary aims have influenced educational theorists' views on the topic and vice-versa. The idea that the aims of primary education are very different from those of secondary schools derives not only from Morant's initiative, mentioned above, but also from the work of early twentieth century educationalists like Edmond Holmes and Percy Nunn who reacted against the elementary tradition. Both Holmes and Nunn argued, in different ways, for a developmentalist account of learning, and this in turn left traces in both the Hadow and the Plowden Reports. However, in the late 1960s Robert Dearden produced a powerful critique of the 'child-centred' position represented in these reports. After his book appeared, it was increasingly difficult to argue for a specifically primary set of aims. Writers – mainly philosophers – have tended to write about school aims without differentiating between primary and secondary education.

Their substantive proposals have been various. Richard Peters emphasised the acquisition of knowledge and understanding for its own sake and several prominent theorists have followed him in

this. More popular accounts over the last forty years of what education should be for have tended to polarise this view and the view that children should be allowed to develop naturally, usually to the disadvantage of the latter.

Robert Dearden's own account, in terms of equipping learners for a life of personal autonomy within a moral framework, has been developed further by later writers. In recent decades the tendency of philosophical writings has been towards placing specific aims like Dearden's within larger settings, so that their rationale becomes more perspicuous. There has thus been much work on the promotion of personal well-being as a key aim, this being seen as a more inclusive concept than personal autonomy. These philosophical explorations are now becoming increasingly relevant to policy-making, given that well-being underpins the 2004 Children's Act, the five 'Every Child Matters' outcomes and the 2007 Children's Plan. The complex relationship between personal well-being and morality has also been investigated. Well-being and autonomy aims have also been more explicitly connected to the educational requirements of a liberal democratic society; and issues to do with such a society, about, for instance, the role of civic dispositions, and the rights of religious and other communities found within it, have been explored in depth. The importance of education for sustainable development and global awareness has become especially salient in recent years.

Many of these ideas have impacted on government policies on aims over the last forty years, and have proved influential in the curriculum deliberations of QCA and its predecessors. If pressure for governments to produce not just lists of aims but also defensible rationales for how they fit together continues, the increasingly holistic accounts of the theorists could well be of service.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: White, J. (2008) *Aims as Policy in English Primary Education* (Primary Review Research Survey 1/1), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-12-4.

The report is available at [www.primaryreview.org.uk](http://www.primaryreview.org.uk) and is one of 32 Primary Review interim reports. Two of these deal with the opinion-gathering strands of the Review's evidence base. The remainder report on the thirty surveys of published research which the Review has commissioned from its 70 academic consultants. The reports are being published now both to increase public understanding of primary education and to stimulate debate during the period leading up to the publication of the Review's final report in late 2008.

The Primary Review was launched in October 2006 as a wide-ranging independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it is based at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and directed by Professor Robin Alexander.

The Review has ten themes and four strands of evidence (submissions, community and national soundings, surveys of published research, and searches of official data). The report summarised in this briefing relates to the **Research Survey** strand and the theme **Purposes and Values**.

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