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PRIMARY REVIEW
RESEARCH BRIEFINGS
1/2

AIMS AND VALUES IN PRIMARY EDUCATION: ENGLAND AND OTHER COUNTRIES

Maha Shuayb and Sharon O'Donnell
National Foundation for Educational Research

This briefing draws on Primary Review Research Report 1/2, *Aims and Values in Primary Education: England and other countries*, by Maha Shuayb and Sharon O'Donnell. The report was commissioned to review and compare policy documents, legislation and representative published research on the aims, purposes and values of primary education across six contrasting countries (England, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland and Sweden). The report provides a chronological review of the priorities of, and changes and trends in, these aims and values during the period 1965 to 2006. Few policy documents focused explicitly on the aims of primary education as such. Consequently, the authors analysed a wider range of documentation, drawing out the key points of reference relevant to the aims and values at the primary stage.

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 1/1 (*Aims as Policy in English Primary Education*), 1/3 (*Aims for Primary Education: the changing national context*) and 1/4 (*Aims for Primary Education: changing global contexts*). **The full report, including details of all sources consulted, is available at www.primaryreview.org.uk.**

Despite a large number of initiatives and system changes, the aims, purposes, values and priorities of primary education continued, during this period, to be shaped by two main influences: child-centred thinking and the imperatives of economic and social progress.

Aims and values in primary education: 1960 to 1979

Child-centred philosophies were most strongly manifested in the aims and values of primary education during the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in England, Scotland and the Netherlands. In England, for example, a child-centred ethos was advocated in the Plowden Report of 1967 which focused on a holistic and rounded education, care for children's diverse needs, and individualisation. In Scotland, the influence of the child-centred philosophy was evidenced in the publication in 1965 of *The Primary Memorandum* which set out a curriculum for the primary school designed to accommodate the needs of children of a wide range of abilities and interests.

Attempts to implement these theories in primary education, in England and Scotland particularly, proved challenging. In New Zealand and Germany a shift towards a more child-centred approach was even less successful.

By the end of the seventies, child-centred education philosophies were attracting considerable criticism, being deemed difficult to assess and a hindrance to academic standards and economic growth. Perhaps the most significant effect of the child-centred approach expressed in educational aims and values during this period was in changing attitudes towards ethnic minority pupils and pupils with special educational needs. In England, this resulted in policies and guidance directed specifically to the needs of children whose first language was other than English, those from ethnic minorities, and those who were deemed to be 'handicapped'. This movement was echoed in the education systems of the Netherlands, Scotland and Sweden, although the extent to which the values were applied varied between countries.

Aims and values in primary education: the 1980s

During the eighties, two main trends were identified in the majority of the countries surveyed: government expenditure on education increased, and governments sought increased control over education at the point of delivery. This increased governmental control had a significant impact on the aims of primary education. Whilst some countries continued with or began to adopt child-centred aims and values, others began to focus more on the economic outcomes of the educational process.

In the Netherlands, for example, the *Primary Education Act 1981*, stipulated that the main goal of primary education should be to provide a child-centred education and cater for pupils' emotional, social and cognitive needs. In contrast, other countries, including England, Germany and Scotland, became more concerned with the potential economic impact of education. This was partly due to the economic recession following the oil crisis of the seventies. England, for example, introduced its first National Curriculum which, although lacking other than a very general statement of aims, focused clearly on raising pupils' academic achievement in literacy, numeracy and science, recognising the importance of improved standards of attainment in these subjects for the economy. Whilst focusing on education's role in preparing the next generation for a flexible and demanding job market, the new curriculum also acknowledged education's role in ensuring the spiritual, cultural and physical development of children.

Having similar regard to the role of education in preparing pupils for their contribution to society as a whole, but approaching the matter somewhat differently, it was during this period that Sweden introduced the teaching of citizenship as one of the aims of primary education.

During the 1980s, reflecting similar changes in attitudes towards ethnic minority and disabled students to those which began in England during the seventies, the education systems in Sweden and New Zealand began to highlight the need to cater for these groups. In New Zealand, for example, a review of the curriculum recommended increased equity for those who had previously been disadvantaged including girls, multi-ethnic groups, and students with special needs.

In Germany, attempts to implement a more child-centred ethos were abandoned during the 1980s, as neo-conservative values came to dominate the education debate.

Aims, purposes and values of primary education: the 1990s

During the 1990s, alongside an increased emphasis on raising standards in literacy, numeracy and science in several of the countries surveyed, citizenship education also began to feature more prominently.

In England, the new National Curriculum, published in 1999, included for the first time an explicit statement of aims, values and purposes. These reflected the aim of promoting pupils' spiritual, moral, social, cultural, and physical growth, and preparing pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life. The explicit statement of values focused on the self, relationships, society and the environment.

In New Zealand, policy documents published during the period encouraged students to become independent lifelong learners and focused on the multicultural character of New Zealand society, whilst the new curriculum framework emphasised a range of values including honesty, respect and tolerance. In Germany and the Netherlands, policy documents again emphasised the holistic development of the child – cognitive, social and emotional.

The aims and values of primary education: 2000 to 2008

In the first few years of the 21st century, the aims, purposes and values of education in the surveyed countries appeared to reflect economic and social imperatives on the one hand and the idea of individualised or personalised teaching and learning on the other. A hybrid of economically driven, learner-centred, and societally-engaged aims seemed to reflect the continuing influence of child-centred teaching and learning philosophies, at the same time as education's role in preparing children for their place in society and for their contribution to an ever-changing economy.

In England, for example, the 2003 Primary National Strategy emphasised that, at the same time as focusing on excellence, attainment and standards, primary education should also be concerned with

enjoyment and a child's individual needs. In New Zealand, academic standards were highlighted, alongside the social, ethnic, and cognitive differences among students, and the social and economic aims of education. Many commentators have difficulty with today's hybrid, viewing it as contradictory.

Conclusions

- Over the last 40 years, the aims, purposes and values of primary education in the six surveyed countries appear to have passed through distinct phases. In the first phase, the child was the main focus and this greatly influenced the aims and values of the curriculum. In the second phase, social and economic concerns began to come to the fore; whilst today's aims focus on raising standards of achievement, and on preparing children for life in a multicultural society and in an ever-changing economic and work environment in which they will require a wide range of skills.
 - There appears to be a belief across countries that in order to achieve excellence - academically, vocationally, economically and socially - education requires a degree of personalisation (though the meaning of the term may vary).
 - The aims, values and purposes of primary education today combine the requirement to prepare children for their economic role in society, with the need to identify their individual strengths and weaknesses, so as to provide them with the necessary support to achieve targets. Child-centredness is thus being adapted not only to ensure the individual child's growth, but also to prepare him or her to fulfil their economic role.
 - Governments in the six countries included in this survey have also begun to recognise what Sweden recognised many years ago; that citizenship education is vital as one of the aims of an all-round education.
 - There is also a growth of interest in healthy, safe and sustainable living, and in primary education's role in encouraging young children's awareness of such issues.
 - The aims, values and purposes of primary education today across the six countries reviewed appear to reflect more similarities than differences. Although recognising and incorporating some elements of child-centredness, they are expressed primarily in terms of standards of achievement and of economic and social goals.
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FURTHER INFORMATION

The report on which this briefing is based: Shuayb, M. and O'Donnell, S. (2008) *Aims and Values in Primary Education: England and other countries* (Primary Review Research Survey 1/2), Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education. ISBN 978-1-906478-13-1.

The report is available at 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**.

Enquiries: The Administrator, The Primary Review, Faculty of Education, 184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ. Phone: 01223 767523.

Email: enquiries@primaryreview.org.uk. Website: www.primaryreview.org.uk.

Press enquiries: richard@margrave.co.uk (Richard Margrave, Communications Director).

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