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## After 100 years we still want good citizens

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The latest research from Robin Alexander's independent team of academics looks at how goals have changed over time. Helen Ward and Adi Bloom report.

"Primary education should assist girls and boys, according to their different needs, to fit themselves, practically and intellectually, for [More...](#)

Those words could have been written yesterday. In fact they were set down more than 100 years ago by Robert Morant, permanent secretary at the board of education, who was then the Government's highest education official.

His comments in 1904 setting out the twin aims of education for elementary schools reflect the debate still raging today about child-centred education and how best to develop children's intellectual growth while ensuring the economy has the workers it needs.

They are revealed in the largest study of primary education for 40 years which is being run from Cambridge University by Professor Robin Alexander and foreshadows the inquiry by Sir Jim Rose into what should be taught in primary schools. John White, emeritus professor of the philosophy of education at the University of London's Institute of Education, looked at past research on aims of primary education for the Primary Review.

In 1904, there was little room for personal fulfilment in elementary schools for five to 11-year-olds. Their aim was to prepare working class children for blue-collar jobs, while secondaries groomed middle class pupils and children on scholarships for white collar occupations.

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But Sir Robert fashioned a ladder between the two, pointing out an 'important though subsidiary' aim of elementary schools was to discover children of exceptional capacity who could transfer to secondary schools - the origin of the selective system.

By 1931, when Sir William Henry Hadow, a vice-chancellor of Sheffield University, chaired a government-appointed committee on The Primary School, the child-centered approach was on the rise.

Elementary schools were no longer for children of the 'labouring poor' but were becoming primary schools leading to secondary education after 11. The curriculum was then left to teachers. Sir William favoured projects over subject teaching - except for the need to drill the 3Rs - and argued that primaries should not be about merely preparing children for their next challenge but should be planned around "the needs of the child at that particular phase in his physical and mental development".

Debate about child-centred education peaked in 1967 with the Plowden Report. It said that schools should prepare children for society but also to "develop in the way and at the pace appropriate to them".

The following year The Philosophy of Primary Education by Robert Dearden, an education philosopher from London University's Institute of Education, ripped into the prevailing mood. Education, he said, could not be modelled on natural growth. The aim should be to help learners become independent and moral adults.

And, said Professor White, a new mainstream began to emerge, seeing primary schools as needing to be more responsive to a wider social and political world as well as to the child's well-being.

In the 1980s, politicians became concerned that standards were slipping and wanted to wrest back control of the curriculum. In 1988, the national curriculum appeared. It focused on what children should learn rather than why, but recently the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority said schools should help young people become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens.

Professor White said: "School education should have its sights on the kinds of persons it wishes its students to become, on the qualities of character, ethical as well as intellectual, with which they should be equipped. In order to be such people, they will need knowledge and understanding of all kinds of things. But acquiring knowledge and understanding is not a self-contained educational aim of its own. One must start further back, with wider concerns about people's well-being and the kinds of persons we would like pupils to become."

Child-centred education? Or not?

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Two ideas drive primary schooling, according to researchers from the National Foundation for Educational Research: child-centred education and social and economic progress.

Over the past 40 years, England, Scotland, New Zealand and Sweden have moved from a child-centred view to one more concerned with setting standards, a paper by Maha Shuayb (CRCT) and Sharon O'Donnell for the Primary Review finds.

Germany, meanwhile, has moved from a more authoritarian approach towards child-centred philosophies, while the Netherlands has kept close to its child-centred approach throughout the 40 years.

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