

Submission to the National Discussion on Education

Commission on School Reform

What kind of education will be needed by children and young people in Scotland in the future?

Children and young people will continue to need an education which promotes the development of literacy and numeracy. These fundamental skills remain of central significance in accessing knowledge, developing understanding and forming the higher order cognitive skills, such as analysis and synthesis, which young people need to acquire as they grow older.

Their education needs to extend their experience and to support them in making sense of that experience. Creating educational capital in this way helps them form the knowledge basis for all further learning. Their education needs to be organised to provide well-constructed opportunities for them to acquire knowledge, including fundamental concepts, and to apply that knowledge in practical circumstances.

It needs also to promote socialisation. Wellbeing and sound mental health are growing concerns. In short, the scope of education is broadening.

The curriculum available to them needs to be designed with specific reference to a clearly-defined and generally-accepted set of principles, such as breadth and balance, and whose development takes explicit account of clearly-defined objectives, both behavioural and expressive. There is an opportunity currently to examine and redefine these principles, e.g. the principle of progression requires re-examination and re-definition.

How do we make that a reality?

There is a need to give greater emphasis in teacher training and on-going professional development to the design of learning experiences and we need curriculum theory and philosophy to be emphasised as part of training for senior promoted posts in schools.

Education Scotland, or whatever it becomes in the next couple of years, needs to be resourced and charged with a duty to produce a 'library' of well-designed learning experiences focussed on promoting the curriculum's objectives and exemplifying the application of its underpinning principles.

What choice and personalisation mean in the context of schooling in Scotland needs to be taken seriously and the implications of doing so examined in detail. Any such examination,

without which this question is hardly worth asking, needs to be free of ideological or political considerations since it will have implications for how more diversity is introduced into the school system, particularly the senior phase, and what decision-making authority is put into the hands of young people e.g. through, perhaps, a 'voucher system or a charged Young Scot card' which supports them in deciding what they want to learn, where, with whom, when and how.

Teacher capacity will remain central to securing the delivery of the curriculum – particularly if teachers, as they should be, are expected to make local, classroom-based decisions about young people's learning.

The appropriate utilisation of contemporary and emerging technologies will be of central significance in this regard.

How can every child and young person's individual needs be supported and addressed in the future?

This is a very ambitious intention which might best be described as a stretch aim, an ongoing aspiration. Although a worthy aim, it runs the risk of widening inequality because the loudest voices could monopolise the system (which, to a large extent already happens.) Those in greatest need could be overlooked through a lack of resources if they have no effective parental advocate. It is, therefore vital that schools and the system more widely continues to take care to ensure that the aspiration is applied fairly. In other words, there are important issues of balance which need to receive appropriate attention. Meeting individual need is important but does not outweigh all other considerations. Education has to embody the equitable notion of a 'common entitlement'.

Two specific areas that are worthy of attention in this regard:

1. The use of contemporary and emerging technologies

These will be central to securing this aspiration. There is a need, which is bound to increase over time, for appropriate and sophisticated supporting materials, e.g. an emerging library of interactive MOOC-like materials. Equally important will be the development of teacher capacity to manage these technologies, the capacity for young people to make decisions and the deliberate development of a more diverse system of provision.

However, any growth in the dependence of learning on technology will widen social inequality unless strong safeguards are put in place, which would mean mainly generous subsidy of equipment and networks for people who can't afford these. That link between inequality and dependence on advanced technology was one of the most commonly found effects of the Covid-related closures in numerous countries. Account will need to be taken of differences in home circumstances with young people being enabled to access good quality study facilities outside the home.

Neither the desire to address individual needs nor the increasing use of technology should be allowed to obscure the importance of being able to work in collaboration with colleagues and peers. In significant measure, learning is a social activity. Furthermore, employers and

others are keen to emphasise the importance of young people developing interpersonal skills and being enabled to work in teams.

2. The system of pastoral care in schools

The pandemic and its aftermath have significantly widened and greatly intensified the pastoral role of schools in providing support for young people and their families. This is true across the board but is a particularly acute issue for schools serving disadvantaged communities. The cost of living crisis has served only to exacerbate a situation that seems likely to persist for the foreseeable future. It is over 20 years since the publication of 'Better Behaviour Better Learning' (2001) which led directly to the setting up of the National Review of Guidance Reference Group and its report 'Happy Safe and Achieving Their Potential' (2004). With this notable exception, the reform of school education in Scotland since at least the 1970s has focused almost exclusively on curriculum and assessment: the 1977 Munn (S3/4 secondary curriculum) and Dunning (Assessment for All) reports; the 1983 HMI report 'Teaching and Learning in the Senior Stages of the Scottish Secondary School'; the SED's '16-18 Action Plan' (1983) for non-advanced vocational education in S5; the Howie Report 'Upper Secondary Education in Scotland' (1992); the Higher Still 'Opportunity for All' (1994) and Curriculum for Excellence (2004). The recently published Muir Report 'Putting Learners at the Centre' and the ongoing Hayward Review of the future of qualifications and assessment sit squarely in that tradition. Throughout this entire period, changes in Scottish education have been dominated by a focus on curriculum and assessment. Given the recent and dramatic changes in schools' operational environment, now would be an ideal time to widen the focus of reform to include a re-evaluation of the capacity of schools to provide appropriate pastoral care and support to young people and their families.

What is one thing that needs to stay and why?

The critical importance of knowledge as the factual and conceptual basis for further and higher order learning should be recognised.

The role which the school plays on supporting the personal and social development of young people requires equal recognition.

What are the most important priorities for a future Scottish education system securing developments which will support choice and personalisation?

'Choice and personalisation' would almost certainly widen social inequality unless very stringent precautions are taken and additional support is available for the already disadvantaged.. The strong connection between choice and the widening of inequality is one of the few undisputed conclusions of the sociological and economic analysis of education. Conversely, compulsion, standardisation, and common standards have been the most powerful force for equalising of opportunities. At a time when greater choice is seen as an absolute good and, indeed, the economy may call for greater flexibility, it is important that the requirements of greater equity are given due consideration. (Note that this does

not contradict the principle of giving greater autonomy to schools, provided that the autonomy is about means towards these common ends.)

Evaluation needs to be carried out to ensure that 'choice and personalisation' don't lead to young people making easy choices. For example, we should not be satisfied with a situation in which many young people now have no Science learning beyond S3. Such a retrograde narrowing of the curriculum was practically unheard of before the introduction of National awards and a reduction in the number of subjects in S4. It is important to allow 'choice' as a motivational tool for learners whilst still retaining breadth. That is the job of school leadership. Common standards and expectations are needed but with greater school autonomy for the delivery of them.

The concept of 'personalisation' makes more sense for what should be the senior phrase – S5/S6. Even then, the less motivated and confident learners will not sustain independent, online learning unless appropriately guided and supported.

How can ensure that everyone involved in education in Scotland has a say in future decisions and actions?

One suspects that the realisation of this, another stretch aim, will depend on our having the courage, at national and local government levels, to delegate much of the decision-making, particularly in relation to the curriculum and its delivery, to schools or local groups of schools in communities. Such delegation would imply the existence of well-designed and concise curriculum guidelines, well-designed syllabuses and an array of course materials to support their delivery. It would also imply an inspection system engaged in assessing the impact of local decisions rather than the prosecution of a particular 'model' of what a school should be and it would imply that there was local access to a range of data and intelligence gathered to inform and service local decision-making rather than any other purpose, such as political advantage.

Consideration should also be given to freeing teachers (including headteachers) from the constraints on their free speech that currently arise from their employment contracts to better enable them to contribute to policy discussions. Headteachers need to be able to speak openly and criticise their councils if necessary.

We need to also consider how parents are involved in their children's learning. Schools will consult parents on documents such as 'Vision, Values and Aims' but we would question how meaningfully they are involved in learning. Meaningfully involvement is needed so parents can support their children as well as the teachers and school staff. COVID and the home learning experience showed many parents the reality of the type of learning their child was experiencing. This presents an opportunity to embed parental involvement in learning. Some schools will of course demonstrate great examples of parental involvement, but it is not clear that it is embedded at a national level.

Do you have any other comments that you would like to provide about a vision for the future of Scottish Education?

Scotland's recent educational history has been characterised by the introduction of policies on the basis of very little evidence, and in the absence of any piloting, and where pilot projects have been run, the correct lessons have not always been learned. Now, we need the right changes, for the right reasons.

The essential first change we need is to governance. Schools, headteachers and teachers need to be given the freedom to improve the outcomes of their children in a way that local and national governments of all political backgrounds have proven themselves unable to do.

(['Fit for Purpose: School Governance for the 21st Century'](#) was attached to our submission)