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# The Values of Scottish Comprehensive Schooling

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**ABSTRACT** It is just over 50 years since the government circulars in Scotland, England and Wales which signalled an intention to abolish selection and reform secondary schooling along comprehensive lines. Each country's policy trajectories since then have been quite different. In this article the authors reflect on more than 50 years of comprehensive education in Scotland and assess its achievements and challenges.

## Introduction

The year 2015 was the fiftieth anniversary of the government circulars that introduced comprehensive schooling to England and Wales (Circular 10/65) and to Scotland (Circular 600). The new policy of 1965 did not institute a sudden change in Scotland – there had been developments towards a more comprehensive system in the decades before and it can be argued that, even now, the intentions of the 1965 Circular are only partially implemented. Nonetheless, the anniversary provided a convenient viewpoint from which to review secondary school education over the longer term, rather than in the short-term reactive perspective of much media and political discussion. What could be learned from the story of those 50 years in Scotland and how might those lessons inform future policy? These were the questions that motivated the four editors of the book *Everyone's Future* (Murphy et al, 2015). By taking a longer-term approach, going back to the original sources, to the aspirations and the values of the comprehensive school reform, and tracing its subsequent development, what light could we shed on contemporary debates in schooling policy?

Nearing the end of our careers, we each had close knowledge of the system over many years – Croxford, Howieson and Raffe from their high-quality research within the Centre for Educational Sociology of the University of Edinburgh, Murphy from his school teaching and policy community

experience, latterly as a head teacher in three very different Scottish comprehensive schools. Although David Raffe passed away just before publication, his insight and knowledge informed our work throughout. Such was his commitment that he continued to contribute even when undergoing treatment for what proved to be his terminal illness. The work is dedicated to him in recognition of his outstanding scholarship and contribution to the field over many years. The resulting book, which includes commentaries from contributors from the other parts of the United Kingdom, traces the story of how comprehensive schooling has evolved in Scotland, summarises relevant statistics and data, explores curricular and other policy issues, examines the complexity of governance and concludes by considering the extent to which the Scottish system has achieved its ambitions, drawing out some important lessons for future policy.

Scotland's comprehensive school story has been rather different from that of other nations, including our near neighbours in the United Kingdom. After some initial turbulence, there has been considerable stability in the institutional structures of secondary schooling and in local authority governance. This has been matched by a general civic commitment to comprehensive education, evidenced in the National Debate of 2002-03 (Munn et al, 2004). Around 93.6% of Scottish secondary pupils attend state comprehensive schools,[1] with only around 15% attending a school outwith the designated catchment area, although this figure rises considerably in and around Scotland's major cities.[2]

How were we to review progress over these 50 years? Statistics indicating widening access and inclusion and improved educational performance obviously play an important role. One of the arguments for the introduction of comprehensive schooling had been that it would help eliminate the 'wasted talent' of those who left school with no qualifications at age 15. We chart steady and continuous rises in, for example, staying-on rates and examination performance throughout the period. We also draw on survey data to demonstrate the increasingly positive views of their schooling voiced by young people themselves. But statistics alone could not tell the whole story.

### **The Values of Comprehensive Schooling**

In re-examining some of the foundational documents of the Scottish comprehensive experiment, we were struck by how important the values underpinning the movement were and also how closely these tied to foundational values of democracy. The alignment between comprehensive schooling and democratic living offered a richer and deeper approach, one that captured the wide-ranging ambition of the reform. Circular 600 specifically stated as an ambition that the reform would 'minimise social divisions' and influence not just the academic but also the personal and social development of the young people involved:

Quite apart from educational considerations in the narrow sense he [the Secretary of State] believes that a system which segregates

children into separate schools at the age of 12 is wrong ... young people will greatly benefit in their personal and social development by spending the formative years of early adolescence in schools where the pupils represent a fuller cross section of the community. (Scottish Education Department, 1965, para. 5)

After some debate within the editorial team, we decided that the most appropriate values against which to judge the success of the comprehensive schooling reform were liberty, equality and fraternity. Equality (or more accurately, 'inequality') has figured recently in much political debate about education in Scotland. Equality is as important in democratic life (though in varying degrees in different democratic countries) as in schooling but it cannot ever be the only value. Liberty is arguably as important – democracy requires that individual citizens can exercise freedoms: of expression, of political and religious belief and so on. These two values have to work with each other and are often in tension:

Where individuals or groups are free to choose different paths in work or leisure or politics or lifestyle, there will be diverse unequal outcomes. In a democracy, such diversity is desirable but if liberty is taken to extreme, it inevitably increases inequalities. Those with advantages of wealth, knowledge and social influence, given a free hand, can use these advantages to gain even more. On the other hand increases in equality can often only come through restrictions on liberty. (Murphy et al, 2015, pp. 41-42)

Excessive liberty for individuals may lead to conflicts and inequalities and so needs to be balanced and restrained by compromise and social control (Dahl, 1982). We saw the tension between these values at every stage of development and at every level of policy and practice in Scottish comprehensive schooling: for example, in the introduction of parental choice in 1981, or the tensions experienced within schools through the imposition of a compulsory core curriculum, whatever the wishes or motivations of the individual pupil.

As an editorial team, we were also drawn to what Crick (1978) called the 'forgotten value' of fraternity, using this concept in a gender-neutral way to capture the 'empathy and emotion and ... warmth' involved in 'personal face-to-face relationships' (Murphy et al, 2015, p. 42). Liberty and equality can too easily become abstract, impersonal principles imposed from afar. Schools are mini-communities of face-to-face relationships in which young people learn how the different needs, interests and values of different individuals are dealt with and how wider society values them:

The constant balancing of liberty and equality can be found everywhere in schools ... where the values of community, the bonds of the family taken out into wider society, are learned and practised daily ... The school community is a step into the more impersonal wider plural society – a society of social divisions, competing values

and potentially clashing interests. The school system can bring people together within a purposeful whole or maintain, or even create, division, allocating people to different places, different roles, offering some routes to fulfilment and closing others down, renewing or fragmenting community, tolerating abuse, unfairness and bullying or using such conflict to model and teach better ways. Schools model in microcosm the relationships of adult society by the different ways in which they engage with these challenges. (Murphy, 2014, pp. 66-67)

We saw each of the values as fundamental to the aspirations and experiences of comprehensive schooling but each has its dangers, particularly if taken to an extreme point where it damages the others. Attempts to enforce equality at the expense of liberty, such as those characteristic of some Communist states, are widely acknowledged to be undemocratic. On the other hand, allowing some to make choices which confer competitive advantage, through, for example, choosing private schooling, reduces the chances of achieving equality. Empowering individuals to have more control over and more understanding of their lives, and consequently to be able to make informed and wise choices, is a fundamental purpose of all education and one that was clearly central to the comprehensive reform. However, in contributing to the growing autonomy of the individual young person, 'comprehensive education is bound to become more diverse [and to] ... free people from collective identities they had not chosen, enabling a sense of individual autonomy that is then popularly cherished as a fundamental right' (Paterson, 1997, p. 325).

Freedom to make choices is important to individual young people, and many see it as a 'right', but what if they lack the resources – educational, social, financial – to use that freedom wisely on their own account? The weaker versions of equality – equality as 'opportunity' only – allow individuals to use their freedom to make suboptimal choices. Recently in Scotland there has been political frustration with continuing inequalities in outcomes, particularly examination attainment, yet as long as some individuals have the freedom to use their financial, social or educational advantages to improve their children's chances in competitive examinations and competitive access to different post-school pathways, it is hard to see how equality of outcome can be achieved. Finding the right balance point between freedoms and desirable levels of equality is a constant ongoing challenge at system, school and individual level. We argued that the balance point where comprehensive schooling contributes most to equality is through Daunt's 'equality of value':

there is no clear way of understanding what comprehensive education is or is not, no final court of appeal before which we can test whether comprehensive education is succeeding in its own terms or not ... the fount of all comprehensive objectives and therefore of all comprehensive programmes and policies ... the guiding defining principle of comprehensive education is that the education of all

children is held to be intrinsically of equal value. (Daunt, 1975, p. 16)

Fraternity also has its challenges if taken to extreme. Communities can become self-regarding, dominated by small-scale local understandings, unable to put their difficulties and differences into a wider conceptual framework. Fraternity needs the ideals of liberty and equality to look out and look up beyond what is happening in a particular community, to match up to the best demands of democratic living. Liberty, equality and fraternity work best with each other when the potential tension between them is recognised, understood and managed. At their best they limit each other's weaknesses and complement each other's strengths, but at worst their potential conflict can spiral out of control with inconsistent lurches in favour of one at the expense of the others. Democratic living requires us constantly to seek a fair balance, but judging where that balance lies is a constant feature of all political debate, not just the politics of schooling.

### **How Successful Has Comprehensive Schooling Been in Scotland?**

In reviewing the Scottish comprehensive school experience, we concluded that the reform has contributed significantly to the extension of *liberty*. Individual autonomy and choice have been extended and there is more recognition of difference and diverse individual goals. These developments pre-date 1965 and draw on a continuous and long-standing individualist strand in Scottish educational rhetoric. A sense of individual autonomy – the capacity, knowledge and skill to set a direction to one's own life – is an important element in democratic living. The importance of a sense of individual autonomy in modern society (whatever the reality) can, of course, be associated with wider political, social and economic change. Twentieth-century Scotland had been built around contiguous social and economic communities. In agriculture, coal, steel and manufacturing industry, life in the home and at work, and the resulting social and cultural experiences, revolved around the same people, the same places. These close-knit life–work communities largely disappeared in the second half of the century. Social life is now more fragmentary, individual and diverse. There are more varied, less secure work settings, a greater emphasis on individual credentials, a globalised televisual, musical and digital culture, emphasising choice and diversity in leisure and so on.

Increases in individual liberty and choice may have negative consequences for equality and fraternity. Parental choice, introduced in 1981, reduced the extent to which comprehensive schools represented the 'fuller cross section of the community' mentioned in the 1965 Circular. Roman Catholic denominational comprehensive schools and the influential independent sector further limit the 'cross-sectional' character of the system. Within Scotland's 'curriculum for excellence', all children are guaranteed a 'Broad General

Education' to age 15 but beyond that, in the so-called 'Senior Phase', there is still no clear or consistent principled rationale allowing fair access to different possible pathways – choice, competition and selection sit uneasily side by side.[3]

The rhetoric of comprehensive schooling policy promotes all aspects of *equality*, but there has been more success in improving equality of opportunity and equality of value than equality of outcome. Equality of opportunity has increased with a broader range of curriculum options, eliminating overt gender discrimination and widening the range of post-compulsory pathways, but there have been only limited attempts to compensate for inequalities in pupils' backgrounds or to promote non-traditional choices. Comprehensive reorganisation did not abolish wider social inequalities, or the selective function of schooling, the main factors which limit equality of outcome. The narrowing in the outcomes of education that has been achieved has been small, inconsistent across sectors and stages and has tended to affect those outcomes which confer least positional advantage. While social class inequalities in attainment, for example, have declined more, and more consistently, in compulsory schooling, as credential inflation increased, inequalities in post-compulsory education, for example in access to higher education, remain deep-seated. Since 1965, the positional advantage of higher attainment has moved up the age range to 18 or later.

Comprehensive education in Scotland has, however, promoted greater equality of value. Pupils who would once have been marginalised are now full members of the moral community of the school, although, especially within the 'Senior Phase', the selection function inevitably means that the financial, career and social-status value of future options determines to some extent the value of current pathways. Scotland's high-status certificate, the 'gold standard' for university entrance since 1888, is called 'Higher'. What does this say, if not that other options are 'lower'. Nevertheless, enhanced equality of value and respect within schools tempers the inevitable inequalities of post-school pathways.

Equality of value and respect are closely associated with *fraternity*. We saw the increase in fraternity as an important, if largely unacknowledged, achievement of comprehensive schooling in Scotland, and possibly in other countries as well. Scottish schools today are vastly more inclusive, humane, cohesive, supportive, tolerant and open communities than those of 50 years ago. The same is broadly true of Scottish society in general, reflected in declining crime rates among young people, greater tolerance and respect for diversity, and the popular support for democratic processes revealed by the independence referendum of 2014. As in the case of liberty and equality, these changes run alongside wider changes in society and in social attitudes. The evidence can also be interpreted in a less positive light: have schools simply become more effective at socialising children to know their place in the pecking order?

Nevertheless, we believe the role of the community-based comprehensive is particularly significant. Its social and cultural diversity puts it in a very different position to that of an independent school, where parents have

exercised an element of choice in placing their children and have, in effect, already signed up to its particular culture (the same is true, to an extent, of denominational schools within the state system). The community comprehensive has greater challenges – varying according to the social and cultural mix of the school – but also greater opportunities to advance fraternity. The relatively low levels of social segregation in Scotland, and the findings of successive Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reports that in Scotland a pupil's educational achievement depends less on the school attended than on other social factors, can be attributed in part to the comprehensive system (OECD, 2007, 2015).

But we were cautious in our overall judgement. Many of the trends observed in Scotland can be seen in other countries with different school systems. Substantial inequalities in educational outcomes remain, while some of the key tensions in curriculum, such as the relative status and relationship of 'academic' and 'vocational' learning, remain unresolved, despite successive reforms of the upper-school curriculum. Moreover, too often Scottish policy has focused on the comprehensive school, with consequently less attention being given to the educational entitlements of those who choose to leave school at 16 or 17. Scotland still has not defined the characteristics of the educated 18-year-old to which all post-compulsory provision should contribute. Overall we therefore argued that 'the Scottish comprehensive system has enjoyed a measure of success' in 'some aspects of liberty, equality and fraternity ... delivered rising levels of attainment ... and increased rates of participation' while its teachers, who work to nationally defined standards, provide relatively consistent standards across schools (Murphy et al, 2015, pp. 198-199).

### **What Lessons Can Be Learned from the Scottish Experience?**

We conclude that there are lessons to be learned from the Scottish experience of comprehensive education that are broadly applicable in any comprehensive system as well as in Scotland. These include:

- The need for a clear shared vision – a vision for comprehensive education should balance in a more direct and explicit way the competing tensions of the different forces at work in the system, rather than the 'fudge' which often characterises the Scottish approach.[4]
- Among the tensions needing to be balanced is the tension between uniformity of provision and diversity and choice. Diverse provision can increase engagement, cater for different needs and allow room for experimentation and system learning. However, uniformity has been a source of many of the strengths of the Scottish system, such as its comparatively low level of social segregation across schools, and the consistency of standards recognised and endorsed by international reports. A uniform system is more transparent, more easily navigated by learners and more open to democratic control. It can be more efficient and more effective: diverse systems are

typically more expensive to provide. Diverse systems can, moreover, easily turn into hierarchical and unequal systems.

- The system must be realistic in its recognition of the wider social determinants of inequality, both the 'push' factors of differing social backgrounds and the 'pull' factors of unequal post-school destinations. Individual schools can and do make a difference, but current policy rhetoric tends to place *all* responsibility for unequal outcomes, and define all solutions, at the level of the school, which burdens schools with unrealistic expectations while shielding from view the roots of educational inequality in wider society.
- The system must be clear about what it expects of its graduates. Scotland has a unifying framework for some aspects of education. But while government policy states that all are entitled to a balanced education to age 18, this requires elaboration into a more comprehensive statement of the knowledge, skills and understanding expected of all its graduates. If the entitlement is to be delivered for all to age 18, it would also require enforcement across the range of post-school provision.
- The system should empower students and parents. The conceptualisation of education as a 'service' delivered by government and expert professionals to 'consumers' misrepresents education. Education is co-constructed by family, student and the school community, within a broader context set by government. All 16 and 17 year-olds in Scotland will be able to vote in Scottish elections from 2016, as they did in the energising 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. It is a failure of the current complicated system of governance that it does not sufficiently capture the voice of young people.
- The system should evaluate itself with reference to all its intended outcomes. Current models of improvement – nationally and internationally – are dominated by comparisons of pupil and school performance in terms of standardised tests and examinations. These have a role, but the aims of a comprehensive system are wider, balancing liberty, equality and fraternity in fair and just communities and contributing to civic health. Such outcomes reflect the broader ambitions of the system. They define education in terms of the whole person, learning to live in and contribute to, the wider community (Fielding, 2012). They do not value an individual only by how well she or he 'performs' in pre-specified competitive tasks, or how well she or he fits into a pre-defined slot.
- This kind of intelligent evaluation demands the strategic development of a historic and longitudinal knowledge base and a capacity for independent scrutiny. An independent research capacity, maintained and developed over time, counters the tendency to complacency or to seek a political or pragmatic consensus and can contest the 'narrative privilege' of those in charge of the system. This task cannot be allocated to national government or its agencies, whose short-term interests may conflict with the long-term goals of the system.



## Notes

- [1] <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/School-Education>,  
<http://www.scis.org.uk/facts-and-figures/pupil-numbers/>
- [2] <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2010/03/19130022/21>
- [3] <http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/>
- [4] The issue of ‘policy fudge’ will be explored in a future article on the governance of the Scottish system.

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