Scottish education

A crisis of confidence and trust

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Abstract

This article explains how education in Scotland is different from that in other parts of the United Kingdom, noting the importance of both traditional values and the current political context. Concerns about standards are discussed in relation to three main issues: the Scottish curriculum; the comprehensive principle; and attempts at structural reform. It is argued that, while the need for cultural change is acknowledged, it has not yet been adequately addressed. Restoring confidence and trust among teachers will require stronger intellectual leadership, a redistribution of power and an invigorated policy community.

Keywords: Curriculum for Excellence; comprehensive education; attainment gap; structure and culture; discourse; intellectual leadership

Introduction

Scotland has a proud educational history, often said to embody the principles of democracy and equality, but in recent years its reputation has been subject to critical scrutiny by both internal and external observers. In 2016, Sir Michael Wilshaw, then head of Ofsted in England, said that 'Scotland used to be a beacon of excellence – it's not any more'. More recently, the author of *Class Rules: The truth about Scottish schools*, himself a Scot, said that 'we have a school system that is both in need of and ripe for radical – even revolutionary – reform'.[1] Comparative surveys, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), have suggested that standards in key areas (language, maths and science) show evidence of decline. Scotland has withdrawn from other international studies, which means there is a lack of reliable longitudinal data on which to assess progress.

Arguments about the quality of Scottish education have taken place against an unresolved political debate about the constitutional position of Scotland. Nationalists want Scotland to become an independent country, while unionists favour remaining part of the United Kingdom. A Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, with a number of responsibilities, including education, devolved from the UK Parliament in London, though the system's distinctive character long predated devolution. Since 2007, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has been in power, with the main aim of achieving independence. A referendum in 2014 failed to produce a majority in support of this aspiration, but the subject continues to be a source of tension between nationalists and

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unionists within Scotland, and between the Holyrood and Westminster parliaments. Education has featured prominently in the exchanges between the two camps, with nationalists saying Scottish education remains fundamentally healthy, despite some areas of concern, and unionists saying that successive SNP administrations have been responsible for a series of failed policies.

This article will first comment on the distinctiveness of Scottish education within the United Kingdom. Scots are sensitive about careless references to 'the British educational system' and are quick to point out that their country's schools have developed in different ways from those in other parts of the UK. One important area of difference can be seen in the Scottish curriculum: the second part of the article will look at Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) which has served as the framework for all three to 18 provision since 2004. The third part will examine the extent to which the comprehensive principle is still embodied in secondary schools, noting particularly attempts to address the 'attainment gap' between socially advantaged and disadvantaged communities. The final section will discuss the need for cultural, not just structural, reform in Scottish education and argue that stronger intellectual leadership is required if public confidence and trust are to be restored.

Distinctiveness

One account of the distinctiveness of Scottish education links its underlying values to a sense of national identity and commitment to social equality:

> This takes the form of a story or 'myth', shaped by history but not always supported by historical evidence, to the effect that Scotland is less class-conscious than England, that ability and achievement, not rank, should determine success in the world, that public (rather than private) institutions should be the means of trying to bring about the good society and that, even where merit does justify differential rewards, there are certain basic respects – arising from the common humanity of all men and women [*sic*] – in which human beings deserve equal consideration and treatment.[2]

Viewed from this perspective, Scottish state schools are often perceived as presenting a very uniform picture. The independent sector is small compared with England and the vast majority of children attend primary and secondary schools run by local authorities. All state secondary schools are comprehensive. Unlike in England, there are no academy trusts, selective grammar schools, church-run schools or boards of governors (though the words 'academy' and 'grammar' still appear in the names of some schools which existed before 1965). Statutory responsibility for the provision of educational services and the employment of teachers resides with 32 local authorities, to whom headteachers are directly accountable. Local authorities, in turn, are subject to national priorities set out by the Scottish Government, reviewed each year, which may be reinforced by

funding incentives for particular projects. To outsiders, the system can seem centralised and directive, with little scope for variation.

This impression of uniformity, however, needs to be qualified. Roman Catholic schools exist within the state system, their position permitted under the provisions of the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act. But they too are run by local authorities, though the church retains some powers over the appointment of teachers, particularly to senior positions. Moreover, the argument that denominational schools have a distinctive ethos appeals not only to adherents of the Catholic faith but to a significant number of Muslim parents, who choose to send their children to Catholic rather than non-denominational schools.

Geographical variation also serves to qualify the overall impression of uniformity. This extends beyond the simple contrast between small rural schools in the Highlands and Islands and large establishments in the heavily populated central belt. Although the independent sector is small, it is heavily concentrated in the capital, Edinburgh. There, some 25 per cent of pupils receive their schooling outside the state system, within a well-established group of private institutions, some originally modelled on English public schools. Although these schools attract limited attention, their existence can be seen as a further qualification on the extent of commitment to equality. Edinburgh is the most Anglicised part of Scotland and the centre of political and economic decision-making. The legal, medical and academic establishments are prominent in the city and provide plenty of scope for advantageous networking. Although not as marked as in England, intergenerational privilege can certainly be detected in Scotland.[3]

But even within the state system, it would be misleading to conclude that all Scottish schools are much the same. Unsurprisingly, there are large variations in educational attainment, as measured by public examinations, between schools in socially advantaged and disadvantaged areas. For example, the prosperous area of East Renfrewshire, south of Glasgow, has nearly all of its secondary schools appearing high in unofficial exam 'league tables', while most schools in a city like Dundee struggle to achieve average results. It is estimated that more than 25 per cent of Scottish children live in poverty.[4] Schools and teachers can still make a difference to the ambitions and achievements of individual pupils, but they alone cannot remedy the deep social inequalities that persist. The findings of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) highlight the endemic problems associated with poverty, unemployment, poor health, inadequate housing, family dysfunction and community despair, which continue to adversely affect the life chances of many youngsters.[5]

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

Since 2004, the flagship policy of Scottish education has been Curriculum for Excellence.[6] Unlike the National Curriculum in England, it is not prescribed by statute

but a long-standing habit of 'looking to the centre' for direction has meant that almost all headteachers are content to follow its guidelines. CfE is an ambitious programme of curricular and assessment reform, covering the age range three-18.[7] Its key features include: a desire to promote four generic 'capacities' (successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors, responsible citizens); a description of the learning process in terms of 'experiences' and 'outcomes', set out in a framework of linear levels; 'progressive' and 'active' pedagogy, placing the learner centre stage; an aspiration that teachers should become curriculum developers and change-agents.[8] The initial proposals were generally well received by teachers and other stakeholders, and a substantial amount of development work was undertaken before new courses were introduced in 2010. However, a number of concerns about aspects of the innovation arose. There were mixed messages from government about the nature of the reforms, sometimes described as 'transformational', at other times as merely requiring teachers to adopt existing 'best practice'. Certain key concepts, such as 'active learning' and 'interdisciplinary learning', were not clearly defined at first. New national examinations were slow to emerge (on the understandable grounds that decisions about curriculum should come before decisions about assessment): this created uncertainty among teachers and a later perception that there was a mismatch between the broad general education offered in primary and early secondary schooling and the examination-driven nature of teaching and learning in the upper secondary stages. A national review of qualifications and assessment is currently under way, with a report expected early in 2023. There were also complaints about the management of the CfE programme, the quality of in-service training, and excessive bureaucracy (teachers lacked time to read the avalanche of documentation descending on schools). The Scottish Government and national agencies (such as Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority) sought to respond to these concerns, while maintaining that the fundamental principles of CfE were sound. Critics suggested that too many political and professional reputations were at stake to admit that the programme might be ill-conceived. Persistent critics were marginalised.

The official line gained a measure of support from external reviews of the reform. Two reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development concluded that, while improvements were certainly needed, Scotland deserved credit for its efforts to redefine the priorities of schooling in the 21st century.[9] The 2021 report described CfE as 'an inspiring and widely supported philosophy of education', at the same time stressing the need 'to enhance the coherence of the policy environment'. The Scottish Government also received reassurance from its International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA), which described CfE as 'the cornerstone of educational transformation in Scotland'.[10] The ICEA report did, however, have some cautionary observations to make about the need to make cultural, not just structural, changes if the intended benefits of CfE were to be fully realised. This point will be discussed further below.

The Scottish experience has attracted interest from other jurisdictions. Within the United Kingdom, the clearest example is in Wales, where an independent review led to a report which echoes many of the issues raised in Scotland.[11] This is not surprising since the reviewer, Professor Graham Donaldson, was formerly the senior chief inspector of education in Scotland, and was closely involved in the early stages of CfE. The engagement of Professor Donaldson as a consultant by the Welsh government has an interesting political dimension, setting two of the smaller UK countries on a different educational trajectory from that being pursued in England.

CfE has now been centre stage in Scottish education for nearly 20 years. Some countries (e.g., Finland and Japan) automatically review their curricula every 10 years and, given the pace of change in the wider world, there is a danger that Scottish schools could fall behind in making the necessary responses to technological advances, geopolitical pressures and economic challenges. One observer (educated in Scotland but now working in England) has described Scottish education as 'cautious, conformist, risk-averse and stuck in its ways'.[12]

The comprehensive principle in Scotland

The most detailed study of the impact of comprehensive education in Scotland was published in 2015 with the subtitle 'Lessons from fifty years of comprehensive schooling'.[13] This drew on a range of evidence relating to inequality, staying-on rates beyond the age of 16, pupils' views of their experience in comprehensive schools, gender differences in attainment, and the governance of the system. It also contained perspectives from England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The final chapter sought to sum up what can be learned from the Scottish experience, expressed in seven propositions: [14]

- a comprehensive system needs a clear vision
- a comprehensive system should achieve a fair balance between uniformity and diversity
- a comprehensive system needs to recognise the wider determinants of inequality
- a comprehensive system should be clear about the knowledge, skills and understanding it expects all of its learners to develop
- a comprehensive system should empower its learners and teachers
- improvement needs to be defined in terms of all of the aims of a comprehensive system
- a sound knowledge base and capacity for independent scrutiny are essential to a successful comprehensive system.

While acknowledging that many pupils have had opportunities that were denied to them under the old selective system, the book is careful to avoid a self-congratulatory

interpretation of what has been achieved. Official accounts tend to emphasise the importance of partnership and collaboration among the Scottish policy community. Murphy et al., however, caution that 'this may make it prone to complacency and a pragmatic desire to seek consensus – especially among the most powerful stakeholders – rather than pursue policies informed by more systematic evidence'.[15] Thus, they stress the importance of independent data collection and analysis, transparency and peer review, not the 'positional authority' of powerful players, such as the inspectorate. They also draw attention to 'the complexity and dynamic tensions in competing valuations of liberty, equality and fraternity'[16] which are often cited as underpinning principles of comprehensive education.

In 2016, Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, declared that closing the attainment gap between pupils from 'advantaged' and 'disadvantaged' backgrounds would be 'the defining mission' of her government. A Scottish Attainment Challenge was set for schools, with substantial additional resources for those serving deprived communities. This was undoubtedly well-intentioned and headteachers welcomed the extra funding. It was hoped that substantial progress would be seen by 2026, but the coronavirus pandemic and the abandonment of the normal examination diets in 2020 and 2021 (replaced by teacher assessments) meant that measuring improvement was highly problematic. Insofar as conclusions can be drawn, it seems that some modest progress has been made but there is still a long way to go. The government has now retreated from the 2026 target.

This episode illustrates a recurring feature of recent Scottish policy-making. The initial launch of the Attainment Challenge was overambitious and failed to take account of the decades of evidence that schools alone cannot compensate for the big structural inequalities in wider society. It created a level of expectation that was likely to be disappointed and could be regarded as an instance of what the American political theorist Murray Edelman has called 'policy as spectacle'.[17] Thanks to the pervasive influence of PR 'experts', boasting has become the default position of many public and private organisations (just look at their websites). Appearance is seen as more important than substance and anything that might detract from the headline message is simply disregarded. The language in which many Scottish educational policies have been framed is often emotionally appealing – who wouldn't be in favour of reducing the poverty-related attainment gap? – but that can conceal the substantial barriers that exist between intention and achievement.

Structure and culture

Since the 1960s, the institutional structure of Scottish education has increased in size and complexity. There are now many arenas in which policy can be discussed, frequent

opportunities for consultation, and a steady stream of reports. One consequence is that decision-making is often slow. Bureaucratic organisations seek to defend, and sometimes extend, their territory and are adept at using their narrative privilege to give positive accounts of their achievements and resist calls for major change. A further complication is that, in the relatively small Scottish system, senior members of the policy community tend to know each other, often attending the same meetings and revisiting the same issues. It might be thought that this could promote vigorous debate. But one of the striking features of the leadership class in Scottish education is the high level of conformity within it. Its members have learned to 'go with the grain' of current orthodoxies and avoid controversy. The aim is often to reach a comfortable consensus which does not encourage critical interrogation of official policies. A form of 'groupthink' is evident in the recycling of approved forms of discourse.

Where the need for educational reform has been recognised, Scotland's response has usually been to introduce structural changes, reshaping existing institutions and establishing new ones, but often involving the same people in leadership roles.[18] The period 2016-2020 was marked by a reconfiguring of the educational landscape, including the creation of six regional improvement collaboratives, designed to encourage better coordination between national and local bodies through more effective sharing of expertise. However, this initiative has already been overtaken by the Scottish Government's decision, influenced by the 2021 report of the OECD, to replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland, both of which had been subject to criticism by teachers. The inspectorate, currently part of Education Scotland, will be given independent status and its role subject to redefinition. A subsequent review of what form these changes might take has been broadly accepted by the Scottish Government,[19] but legislative changes will be required, and the new agencies will not be in place until 2024. Concern has been expressed that the reforms will be managed by the same people who have been perceived as part of the problem: the traditional policy community in Scottish education has been skilful at defending its own interests over a long period.[20]

Cultural reform is arguably more important than simply changing structures, but it is not easy to achieve and takes time. Many observers, inside and outside the world of education, perceive the system as authoritarian (despite the use of a soothing rhetoric of 'empowerment'). Teachers have reported a loss of trust and confidence in both Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority, a feeling intensified by problems encountered during the pandemic. This has caused a degree of scepticism about the language promoting the CfE programme, which emphasises the opportunities for teacher 'autonomy' and the exercise of professional 'agency'. Some have started to suggest that politicians, civil servants and senior officials in national agencies themselves need to show a willingness to change how they operate in framing and promoting

policies. In other words, there needs to be a shift in the balance of power so that more weight is given to the experience of those at the front line of educational provision. The traditional deference given to senior civil servants, who move from one government department to another without having to live with the consequences of some of their advice, can no longer be guaranteed. While this is understandable, it carries the risk of strengthening the traditional conservatism of the teaching profession. Teachers' organisations, such as the Educational Institute of Scotland (formed in 1847), like to position themselves as politically radical, but in professional matters they are often deeply conservative. Effective cultural change will require all stakeholders to question their assumptions and procedures.

Future

All governments like to hear good news about their achievements and seek to play down or dismiss unfavourable reports. The political context in Scotland has encouraged an unhelpful degree of polarisation in accounts of what has been happening in education. Unionists, who oppose independence from the rest of the UK, highlight evidence that suggests that standards are falling and argue that traditional claims that the Scottish system is superior to the English are no longer valid. Nationalists assert that apparent weaknesses have been exaggerated, that strenuous efforts have been made to address problems, and that in a fully independent Scotland the education system would be 'world class'.

It is important to note, however, that although Scottish education has been going through a period of uncertainty, there have been some encouraging developments: e.g., improved provision for early years; greater recognition of children's rights, including the establishment of a children's parliament; better use of the potential of outdoor learning; efforts to address mental health issues; and strategies to promote global understanding among the young. With regard to the last of these, Scotland showed up well in a 2018 PISA study comparing the global competence of young people in 15 countries.

These developments deserve credit but, in relation to broader questions about aims and values, Scottish education needs stronger intellectual leadership. The policy community has become too inward-looking and insufficiently open to thinking from outside its own ranks. Similarly, the academic community, which should have been a major source of ideas, has too often been complicit in its own containment: the drive to secure research funding and the kudos attached to serving on government committees have served to encourage caution. Too few academics have been willing to speak truth to power.

We need to escape from the 'parochialism of the present' and learn from our past. In the last 70 years, there has been no policy document to match the quality of the

1947 Advisory Council report on secondary education. Its principal author was Sir James Robertson, rector of Aberdeen Grammar School.[21] The report was visionary, written in a style that puts the corporate 'officialese' of most current documents to shame, and should have paved the way for an earlier introduction of comprehensive education. The Scottish Education Department, known at that time as 'sleepy hollow' within the Scottish Office, missed the opportunity, first delaying a decision and then shelving the report.

Citing the 1947 report should not be seen as an attempt to recapture some imagined 'golden age' of Scottish education. Rather it is an attempt to assert the importance of deep intellectual engagement with the purposes of education, viewed in relation to current social circumstances. In the case of the 1947 report, the context was post-war reconstruction. Educational thinking now needs to engage with a series of daunting challenges: the assault on knowledge and truth by populist politicians; the potential of the internet both to improve access to information but also to serve as a vehicle for dangerous misinformation; the threat to the environment; the longer-term effects of the pandemic; the capacity of multinational companies to exercise power over democratically elected governments. The last of these includes the steady expansion of involvement by global corporations in the marketing of educational 'packages', some embodying particular ideologies.[22] Scotland has so far shown greater resistance to educational entrepreneurs than England, but economic pressures could force it to compromise the extent of its commitment to public sector provision.

Finally, one of the outcomes of the Muir Report was that the Scottish Government agreed to promote a national conversation about the direction of Scottish education (similar to the national debate which took place 20 years earlier). This was launched in September 2022, with the cabinet secretary for education, Shirley-Anne Somerville, stating that: 'Our reform programme will build on all that is good in Scottish education and deliver real change and improvement'. It will be interesting to see what emerges when the results are reported in the spring of 2023. The exercise is being co-convened by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), both of which might be regarded as having a vested interest in defending their stewardship of the system hitherto. Two academics from outside Scotland will help to 'facilitate' the process, both of whom were members of the International Council of Education Advisers appointed by the Scottish Government in 2016. One of the means of encouraging responses is an online survey. It consists of 10 questions, most of which focus on children's learning and their needs in the future. This is an appropriate priority, but there are no questions about governance, leadership or culture. Already some of the responses are expressing scepticism about whether the exercise will address the deep issues of confidence and trust which have been a feature of recent years. For Scottish education to flourish, policy-makers need

to reflect critically on their own role, listen to dissident voices and be receptive to fresh, creative ideas.

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