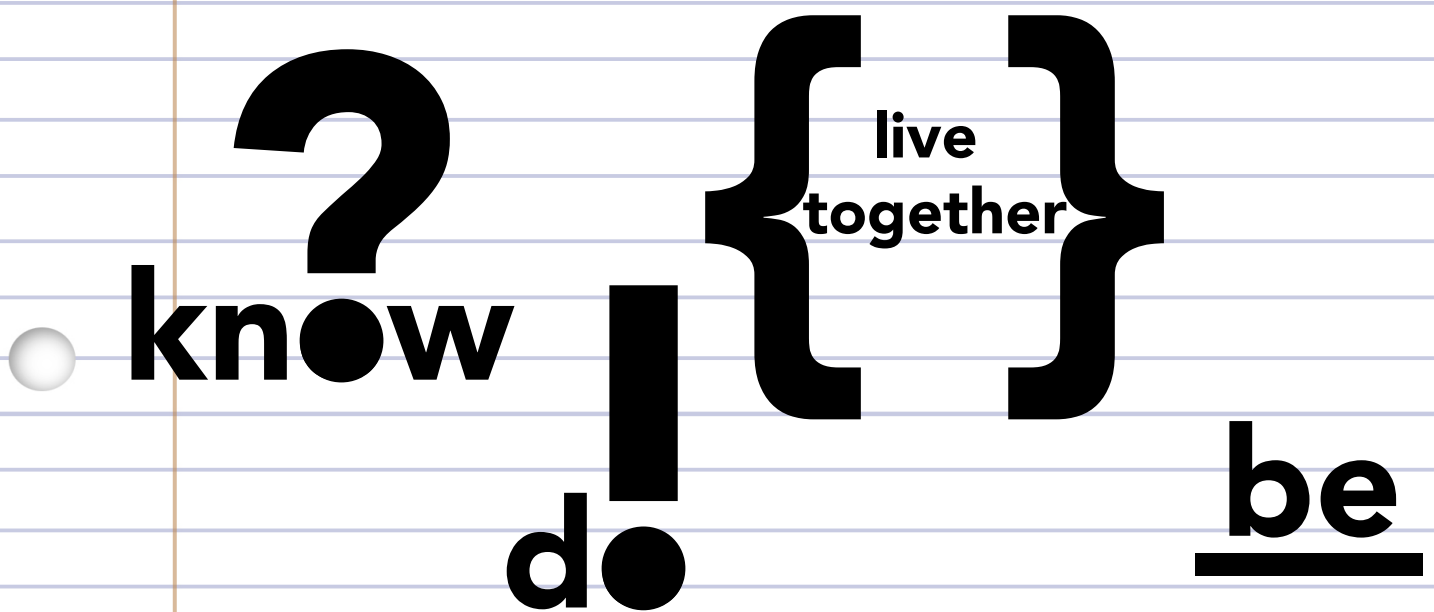




The Jimmy Reid
Foundation

A Common Weal Education

How schools could deliver transformational change and put
equity at the heart of education



Brian Boyd

February 2014

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Preface

Over the last 100 years, Scottish education has been on an upward trajectory. My parents, both educated in the 1920s and 1930s, did not receive a secondary education, being deemed unable to benefit from it on the basis of 'ability'. They both left from the Advanced Division of a primary school. After the Second World War, secondary education became universal and compulsory, and I was a beneficiary. My primary education in Partick and Drumchapel, paved the way for a journey to a Senior Secondary school and then to university, the first in my extended family to do so. But it was at a price; only 35 per cent or so of pupils attended such schools, the rest being deemed unsuitable to benefit from an "academic" education. By the time my son was ready to go to school in 1991, more progress had been made. Primary education, transformed by the Primary Memorandum in the 1960s and 1970s, was excellent and, with selection abolished, he was able to move to his local comprehensive school, with his peers, and benefit from a broad, general, challenging and enjoyable education, culminating in a wide range of achievements of which his parents could only have dreamt.

This paper is a personal, and professional, view of how the next steps might be taken in Scottish education to continue the trend of raising achievement while preserving an egalitarian ideal. It will argue that the Nordic model where children start formal learning later, where examinations and internal selection do not distort children's experience of school, where creativity sits comfortably alongside critical thinking and where closing the gap in achievement across the population is seen as essential in creating a fair and just society, is a model worth aspiring to.

It will challenge certain assumptions and practices which follow from them, not least outdated notions of intelligence and the related practices of 'setting' and 'streaming', also known as 'internal selection' which have no valid evidence-base and which can result in the 'bottom' sets having a disproportionate numbers of boys from disadvantaged background. It will also call into question the continuing dominance of traditional examinations, and the use to which the results are put, not least to judge and compare schools. In the 21st century, where the pace of change shows no sign of slackening, examinations must be sophisticated enough to allow us to judge whether pupils are, or are not, on their way to becoming, successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens. Pencil-and paper tests, under timed conditions, in silence are not fit for these purposes.

Summary

The report examines the role of schooling in creating a civilised society.

It looks at the aims of education and emphasises the importance of 'the New Basics' like the ability to think – critically and creatively - empathy, working with others, problem-solving and resilience in a modern economy and society.

The Finnish education system provides a Common Weal model of education we can learn from. They finished top of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranking. The key characteristics of Finnish education are:

- formal schooling begins at age seven; up until then, play is the core activity;
- all children attend comprehensive schools until age 16;
- there is no 'internal selection' (setting and streaming);
- there are no 'private' schools and fee-paying is banned;
- the curriculum is not prescriptive, offering professional autonomy within guidelines;
- formal exams do not take place until age 18;
- league tables do not exist;
- teachers take five-year degree courses covering theory and practice and teach no more than four lessons daily; and
- there is no schools inspectorate.

The report then assesses schooling in Scotland at the level of early years, primary education, secondary education and additional support needs. The potential for radical renewal of the curriculum is identified as a key area for improvement. Rather than subject and exam based criteria, a prioritisation of inter-disciplinary topics, focusing not on memorisation and pencil-and-paper tests, but on creativity, problem-solving, group work as well as individual learning, and applied as well as 'pure' learning.

We should move to a system of 'exit exam' only in the last year of school which is designed to assess how well a pupil has learned and how well they are able to apply their learning in new and different contexts. These could be different exams for different purposes, taking into account the proposed destinations of the student.

The commonly held idea that parents are resistant to any change is not played out by the facts. When parents are asked for their views they are capable of taking a broad view of education and are capable of participating in debate about fundamental issues affecting not simply their own child but children as a whole. Parents and students are both key stakeholders in the education system but are under-represented at decision-making levels.

The transition from school to post-school education is often made more difficult, especially for those from deprived backgrounds, by a lack of communication between schools and FE's/ universities and a focus on attainment rather than achievement. Glasgow Caledonian University has shown that it is possible to drastically improve the number of school students from deprived backgrounds going to University simply by improving the link-up between the University and local primary and secondary schools.

The importance of learning being considered a life-long objective rather than finishing at the end of school years is emphasised. New ways to encourage and nurture adult learning like 'life skills' and non-formal learning could be integrated into the accreditation system of learning qualification.

The report finishes by arguing that if Scotland were to look for models of schooling which offer the greatest likelihood of building a successful and equitable society, the Nordic countries, particularly Finland, are the most fruitful. England, under the leadership of Michael Gove MP, the Education Secretary, appears to be determined to dismantle the comprehensive system, removing the requirement to deliver the national curriculum from Academies and fast-tracking graduates into teaching with only six weeks' training. The choice is clear: a comprehensive system with the highest expectations of all children, taught by the best teachers with a mission to educate the whole child in a system which is not dominated by formal exams; or one which is elitist, discriminatory and focused on examination success as the main measure of effectiveness.

Introduction

The ongoing debate about the future of Scotland creates an opportunity to explore the contribution which schooling should make to civil society. If the Common Weal is principally about a Nordic- style, fairer, more equitable society, underpinned by institutions which empower and enable Scots to fulfil their potential and contribute to the common good, then schools, as a universal service, must have an important part to play. Can we focus on the whole child and allow schools to develop citizenship and promote wider achievement? Can schools, in turn, help civilise society by encouraging creativity, celebrating diversity and reconciling the demands of quality and equality?

In the not too distant past, there was a pessimistic view of the contribution schooling could make. "Education cannot compensate for society" (Berstein, 1965) was a view based on the relatively short time individuals spend at school and the disproportionate influence of social factors such as socio-economic status (SES), peer pressure, cultural expectations and aspirations. In the late 1970s, this view was challenged, and the 15,000 hours (Rutter, 1979) which most people spend at school were shown to be influential. Schools make a difference and some make a greater difference than others.

However, if the Nordic countries are to be the model for the Common Weal, the challenge is to have a society in which prosperity and opportunity are more equitably distributed. The success of the Scottish comprehensive system has been achieved *in spite of* the inequalities in Scottish society. Policy-makers and academics alike analyse the comprehensiveness of schools by measuring the percentage of students entitled to free school meals. It is undoubtedly the case that, based on this measurement, variations between schools across Scotland is unacceptably high. Schools, quite simply, do not always have a comprehensive intake.

Against this background, what can schools do to help civilise society? What needs to change if they are to close the gap in achievement, in aspirations and in outcomes between the advantaged and the disadvantaged? How can schools contribute to the eradication of the disparities in terms of the proportion of young people from different social classes represented in universities... and in prisons?

These questions are asked not as criticisms of schools but in acknowledgement of the fact that, against the odds, they continue to provide a good education for the majority of young people. The aim of this paper is to suggest how an already successful system can be improved so that it makes a positive contribution to the goal of a fairer, more equitable society. It is designed to stimulate debate – rational and evidence-based.

What are our aims?

In 1998, UNESCO offered a set of aims for schooling, world-wide:

- Learning to know
- Learning to do
- Learning to live together
- Learning to be

Scotland, as a country with an outward, international perspective, aspires to offer the best educational opportunities to all of its children and young people and these aims offer a useful starting point.

The Ministerial Review Group (2004) considered these aims and produced what it saw as an uplifting vision for the school curriculum, 3-18 - the first time the curriculum as a whole had been reviewed since the Advisory Council report of 1947. Now, almost a decade since this publication, the question of aims appears to have been lost amongst controversy over 'age-and-stage' targets, national assessments and subjects versus interdisciplinary study.

Every school in Scotland has a published set of aims...yet few staff, parents or pupils would be able to say what they are. The UNESCO aims offer a useful starting point for discussion:

Learning to be is about educating the whole child, exploring what it is to be human, what it is to be a citizen, what it is to be a learner. It allows the big questions to be addressed; 'who am I?', 'why am I here?', 'what is my identity?', 'what am I capable of?' It encompasses cultural identity and notions of value attached to individuals and society. A key question for all with an interest in education is 'are all young people valued equally in our schools?'

Learning to live together has epistemological and social imperatives. Vygotsky (1978) famously argued that "social interaction promotes cognitive development" and we can see, as we look at our own society and the world in general, that learning to live together, celebrating rather than fearing and despising difference, is a crucial aim of schooling. Nurturing children and young people, promoting empathy and building confident, resilient individuals has implications for the way we value subjects within schools too. Many of the subjects which are most likely to enable schools to promote a positive ethos – music, drama, art, dance, outdoor and physical education – are regarded as non-academic, minority subjects. The time is right to re-evaluate what is important in our schools and to challenge the false dichotomies of academic/vocational, core/minority and classroom/practical as applied to subjects.

Learning to do, in a school sense, has long struggled to be valued. Parity of esteem between the academic and the vocational (or practical) has proved elusive and has bedevilled efforts to reform the senior phase in secondary schools. Universities are the tail which wags the dog in this regard and more dialogue is required between the sectors. So, learning to do needs to be seen in a wider context. Put simply, if deep learning and understanding are the goals of schooling, then a powerful way of demonstrating it is to be able to apply learning to new and unfamiliar contexts. In some respects, this is the opposite of what our current examination system does, encouraging teachers and pupils to second-guess what will be in the exam and to learn by rote.

Finally, *learning to know*, in the digital age, may now be the least important aspect of schooling. Knowing 'stuff' has a value (cf. the proliferation of general knowledge games shows on television) but it is no substitute for critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving. Historically, the balance has been wrong; as one commentator put it: "it seems unlikely [in the digital age] that remembering large amounts of information and writing it down quickly" (Burgess, 2013) is what employers value most.

So, how can schooling recalibrate its core business of 'teaching for effective learning'? How can schools contribute to civil society by producing young people who are seen as much more than the sum of their exam passes? How can schools promote values which help civilise their students? When Queensland reformed its curriculum in 2000, it used the term "New Basics" to signal that in the 21st century it might still be necessary to be competent in numeracy and literacy but it would not be sufficient. Other attributes, skills and dispositions would be necessary, not least the ability to think – critically and creatively - empathy, working with others, problem-solving and resilience.

Thankfully, we are not starting from a blank page when it comes to rising to the challenges of the 21st Century in school education.

Finnish Lessons: a Common Weal education in action

Pasi Sahlberg, formerly Finland's chief inspector of schools, has argued that equity is Finnish schools' greatest achievement. The concept of 'failing schools' does not arise because the difference among schools is small and the gap between high and low achievement is the smallest in the world.

But, it hasn't always been so. In the 1990s, there was an 11+ and fewer than 25 per cent went on to grammar schools, which were fee-paying. By the end of the 1970s, influenced by the comprehensive movement in Britain, Finland followed suit and, unlike England and Wales, did not suffer the dilution of the comprehensive ideal. Instead, like Scotland, it stuck with the notion of the 'common school'.

By the beginning of the current century, the Finnish system was able to silence its critics by coming top of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranking. According to Sahlberg, the key characteristics of the Finnish system include:

- formal schooling begins at age seven; up until then, play is the core activity;
- all children attend comprehensive schools until age 16;

- there is no 'internal selection' (setting and streaming);
- there are no 'private' schools and fee-paying is banned;
- the curriculum is not prescriptive, offering professional autonomy within guidelines;
- formal exams do not take place until age 18;
- league tables do not exist;
- teachers take five-year degree courses covering theory and practice and teach no more than four lessons daily; and
- there is no schools inspectorate.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) produced a report on Finland's education system in 2010, entitled "Finland: slow and steady reform for consistently high results". It took a historical perspective in order to illustrate how this small, relatively young country, faced with economic and social challenges, saw education as a basis for sustainable improvement. A series of post-war National Commissions produced, in the late 1960s, a vision for education as a way of creating a prosperous and fair society, based on the comprehensive school (*peruskoulo*). Sahlberg points out that "[T]he comprehensive school is not merely a form of school organisation. It embodies a philosophy of education as well as a deep set of social values about what all children need and deserve."

In the 1990s, Finland suffered a severe recession and, once again, looked to education to provide the solution. Sahlberg also quotes a director of Nokia who offered advice to those who manage education: "Do what you have to do to keep our education system up-to-date, but don't take away the creativity and open-mindedness that we now have in our fine *peruskoulo*".

The OECD report identified several factors behind the success of Finland's education system, including political consensus, high expectations of all children, a pursuit of excellence in teaching, collective responsibility for pupils with additional support needs and a climate of trust between educators and the community.

The key to Finland's success lies in the fact that it is a very homogeneous society. Child poverty is low and the gap between rich and poor is small. While this undoubtedly presents a challenge for Scotland, other elements of the Finnish culture have resonances. Adults in Finland take out more books from libraries, read more newspapers and own more books than any other country. The roots of this phenomenon lie in the Lutheran church's insistence on the reading of the bible.

But, no system is perfect. Exams, competition and a form of selection – into 'general' and 'vocational' streams kick in at age 16. While 95 per cent of students stay on at school, there is little cross-over between the two streams.

Finland's challenges for the future include fighting against complacency, improving pedagogy by having less formal, class-based teaching and more personalised learning, and having more of a focus on social and team-based learning.

For Scotland to have a more equitable school system, it is not necessary to copy the Finns wholesale. The challenge set by Finland is this: are our schools flexible enough to change in ways which reflect our aspirations?

Schooling in Scotland

Early years

Curriculum for Excellence set out to address the needs of the whole range of school students, 3 - 18. It encompasses early education, wherever it takes place, in nursery schools, in pre-five centres and in the home. Historically, early years education has been the Cinderella of the system, having the lowest per capita spend and, until recently, the lowest paid staff. The challenge is to see early years as the bedrock, the foundation upon which all future learning is built. Indeed, it has been argued that to achieve the educational gains one pound could make at pre-5 level in terms of promoting learning and closing the gap in achievement, one would have to spend some thousands on Higher Education.

Whatever the figures involved, there is consensus that early intervention is critical and there is growing evidence from nurseries in our most disadvantaged areas that their input is making a difference to children's life chances.

However, challenges remain. There has been, in recent decades, a creeping 'downward incrementalism' in curricular terms, where 'preparation for school' has been a focus. In the UK, we begin formal education earlier than in most of the rest of Europe, often distorting the work of the nurseries. Notwithstanding a concerted effort to introduce active learning in the early stages, this pressure persists. There is no evidence that early formal education is helpful, either from neuroscience or from international comparisons of school outcomes.

Indeed, there are powerful examples of successful alternative approaches, most notably, from Reggio Emilia in Italy. Its approach to early years education is "based on the principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum". Creativity, play, self-directed learning, the involvement of parents, the varying roles of the teacher and the importance of the learning environment are at the heart of this approach. Susan Hallam, of the University of London, has argued that music is particularly important in early years education, improving both cognitive and social development (2010).

Thus, investment in early years education, a re-evaluation of the age when formal learning is introduced and a commitment to a shared set of values, where every child is seen as having the potential to be a successful learner, would be a major step towards the achievement to a fairer, more equitable system of schooling.

There needs to be a debate on both the starting age for children to engage in formal (school-focused) learning and on the model of early years provision which is likely to be the foundation for creativity and for fairness in education. This is not a new issue, but it needs to be re-framed in the context of the Common Weal. The Nordic model is one which is familiar to Scottish educationalists. In a draft literature review for the Scottish Government (2008), the authors (Boyd, B. and Dunlop, A-W. et al) pointed to different perspectives in different countries as to the model of early years' education to be adopted and the emphasis favoured by the writers of *A Curriculum for Excellence* (2004) and suggested that:

"...a strong focus on the early childhood pedagogy moving up [to the early stages of primary] ... is more in keeping with the approaches sustained where countries have traditionally followed the social pedagogue model (Nordic and Central European Countries). Here kindergarten is viewed differently - more as a foundation stage for a lifelong approach to learning with a focus on adults "supporting children in their developmental tasks and interests" (OECD,

2006, p.57). Links are promoted in this model between kindergarten, leisure services and primary school, with a philosophy that the kindergarten approaches should influence early primary education. In *Starting Strong* (2001) one of the recommendations was that “[A] more unified approach to learning should be adopted in both systems, recognising the contribution that the early childhood approach brings to fostering key dispositions and attitudes to learning.”

There is widespread evidence that the transition process to primary school is made easier with widespread involvement from all stakeholders. A literature review undertaken for the van Leer Foundation towards the EFA Global mentoring process (Fabian and Dunlop, 2006) shows that, by paying attention to socio-emotional wellbeing during the transition process to school, learning is also likely to progress. Their review suggests that in order to achieve this, policy planners need to embrace all participants – teachers, parents and children – in the context of their own particular community. When families play a part in their child’s transition to school, the potential for continued family involvement in the life of the school is created.

Primary schools

Scottish primary schools are among the best in the world. They provide care, nurture, a broad curriculum and a stimulating environment for learning. The work done by primaries in our most disadvantaged areas is unsurpassed, and yet they struggle for parity of esteem with secondary schools. They have had an all-graduate profession for decades and yet primary teachers, as generalists, are less highly regarded than the secondary school specialists.

This dichotomy has surfaced most recently in the debate surrounding the Donaldson report into teacher education and in the controversy surrounding *Curriculum for Excellence*, with aspersions being cast not just on primary teachers’ knowledge of certain subjects but on their entrance qualifications and the quality of their initial teacher education.

Viewed historically, there is the unavoidable irony that nowadays, the specialist is more highly valued than the generalist. Nevertheless, the expectations placed on our primary teachers have continued to grow; they are expected to teach every subject in the curriculum, meet government-imposed targets for every child, meet the expectations of interest groups (from sport to music, from diet to vocational skills, from ‘the basics’ to creativity) and teach the same pupils all day every day!

Not only that, but primary schools maintain a close and productive relationship with parents, with external agencies and with their partner schools, managing to sustain and nurture pupils within an inclusive ethos. This kind of ethos has been acknowledged in formal reports, one Aberdeen primary school, Kirkhill, being praised for being a place where “children are confident, ambitious and increasingly taking responsibility for their own learning” (Education Scotland, 2012).

That they do all of this so well is to be commended but, can they continue to do so and for how long can they be expected to accept that much of what they do may not be known about, acknowledged or built upon by the secondary schools? Primary-secondary transition remains a challenge, notwithstanding repeated attempts to address the issue since the Advisory Council report of 1947.

It is time to take a measured look at this issue, and the related question of generalism and specialism. There could be more specialism in the upper stages of primary, and more generalism in the lower stages of secondary. The barriers between primary and secondary schools can be dismantled if we begin to see learning and teaching as a continuum. Glasgow City Council was

the first to employ primary teachers in secondary schools in a bid to improve the transition and there is no reason why the staffing complement of a community of schools could not be devolved to a management team of head teachers. Through a democratic process, involving professional associations and parents, and, within national guidelines, staff could be deployed creatively to meet the needs of local communities and of schools.

A 'family of schools', based on local communities, offers an opportunity for the professionals, parents and young people to be involved in the process of education in its widest sense. Family learning can support school learning and greater dialogue among the stakeholders will be supportive in helping to raise aspirations and expectations.

The key issue is that the so-called 'fresh start' approach in Secondary 1 must be a thing of the past. Indeed the colloquial term, 'First Years' to describe pupils who have just arrived at secondary school, is a misnomer; they are, in fact, Eighth Years, or even Tenth Years, if they have had 2 years in nursery of a pre-5 centre. Secondary schools need to know what these young people have experienced and achieved if their education is to be continuous and coherent.

Secondary schools

The transition from primary to secondary has been characterised as a pantomime horse; the two sectors would like to be moving in the same direction, harmoniously but it's dark inside the costume and external noises mean that one end can't quite make out what the other is saying. The pupils are in the 'big school' now, and the serious business of education can begin. Now, instead of one teacher there might be fifteen in a week; connections among these subjects are not necessarily made explicit; learning is parcelled into 50-minute blocks; bells ring at the end of each 'period' and pupils have to get from one end of the building to the next to get to the next subject...with no travel time built in!

So, it is easy to caricature the absurdities of a secondary school timetable, but, in reality, Scottish secondary schools are, in the main, excellent. They work hard at building a shared ethos, they offer a wide range of extra-curricular activities and, crucially, they prepare students for national assessments, the gateway to employment and higher and further education. So, within these parameters, Scottish secondary schools do well. But, it is the parameters which need to be challenged.

Examinations dominate secondary schools. They influence the shape of the school day, they are the starting point of the timetable, they dominate the discourse around pupil choice and, most recently, they dictate how many subjects a pupil may study. They distort the curriculum, they narrow the focus of learning and, as the exam diet draws closer, understanding – deep learning – becomes a luxury. The goal is to get through the syllabus and second-guess what the examination paper will contain. 'Prelims' provide a dry run, timed-pieces are practised in class and pupils' progress is meticulously tracked by teachers who care passionately about them and who go the extra mile to support, cajole and nurture them through the process. The stress is often palpable as the exams approach.

But, is there an alternative? The starting point has to be aims, once again. An observer of secondary schools might be forgiven for thinking that the single aim was to raise 'attainment' as defined by exam success. Everything else is reduced to a bit part. However, if we accept that attainment is a sub-set of 'achievement' and if we are prepared to acknowledge the limitations of our present approach to exams in measuring wider achievement, then things begin to become clearer. We are told by employers that they want young people to emerge from schools having basic skills – literacy and numeracy – but also being problem-solvers, self-starters, team-players,

creative thinkers. Thus, the so called 'soft skills' are, apparently, valued (though when it comes to recruitment, it is almost always exam results that matter). Howard Gardner of Harvard University (2006) outlines 'five minds for the future' – disciplined, synthesising, creative, respectful and ethical – while his colleague David Perkins (1995) suggests that schools "must prepare students for the unknown" and not simply reprise the knowledge of the past.

Now, if this hypothesis has merit and wider achievements are as important as conventional success in knowledge acquisition, then the balance has to shift. Interdisciplinary learning needs to have equal standing alongside subject knowledge; traditional extra-curricular activity needs to come in from the cold and its contribution to the education of the whole child acknowledged; the arts need to throw off their minority subject label and become part of the core; and the division between academic and vocational rejected as irrelevant. More fundamentally, the goal has to shift not just from attainment to achievement but it has to encompass closing the gap between pupils from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The challenge can no longer be seen as the responsibility of each individual school alone. Comprehensive schools have been the core of secondary education since the 1960s. But during that time public policy, specifically housing and welfare, have undermined the comprehensive ideal by skewing the intakes of schools. In the larger conurbations, there are some schools with truly comprehensive intakes, but there are also many schools which could be characterised as middle-class and working-class. One Council, where one in three household has no-one in work, may have a neighbour where some schools have very little social housing in its catchment area. And yet, these two Councils, at either end of the social disadvantage spectrum, are measured on the same, exam-based scale.

In Finland, society is less divided and, therefore, schools are more comprehensive. This must be our goal.

The situation in the UK was exacerbated when, in the 1980s, Mrs Thatcher introduced 'parental choice', a measure designed to undermine the comprehensive school. If our goal is a fairer and more equitable society, parental choice should no longer be the guiding principle. I would argue that for most parents having a good school in their neighbourhood is more important than having the right to choose. Thus, just as with the right-to-buy scheme, also introduced by Mrs Thatcher on ideological grounds, the right to choose a school, needs to go.

Additional Support Needs

There are children and young people who have additional support needs (ASN). Many of them are educated in mainstream schools; a proportion of them have needs which require more specialist provision. The default position should be one of inclusion; all children should have the right to be educated with their peers unless, after consultation with all the interested parties, it is agreed that specialist provision is necessary. Indeed, Inclusion is now seen as a human rights issue.

Inclusion, as a policy, remains controversial. There are many, teachers included, who believe it cannot work, that the success of the majority may be hindered by the needs of the minority. However, research has demonstrated (Hamill and Boyd, 2001, 2002) that the issue is rarely one of principle; rather it is about resources, continuing professional development (CPD) and the focus on narrow, exam-based 'attainment' – as opposed to wider 'achievement' – as a measure of school success.

A visit to an ASN school, or ASN provision within a mainstream school, is an experience which everyone with an interest in education should undertake. The dedication of staff, the commitment to nurture and to achievement and the ethos of the establishment, are inspiring. Some of the

most challenging young people are supported and their parents empowered. The most common comment made by parents is that their experience of these establishments is life-changing.

The drive towards inclusion is about equal value and recognition that difference is to be celebrated not feared. Put simply, if resources were adequate, if teachers and support staff were given access to the required CPD and if schools were measured on criteria which were much wider, more focused on added value and pupil progress, however small, inclusion would cease to be a major issue.

The curriculum

Curriculum for Excellence (2004) made the bold claim that the curriculum should be seen as not simply *what* is taught but *how* it is taught. So, what should young people be learning in the 21st century and what pedagogical approaches should schools be using?

Over the years, there have been many attempts to define the curriculum. Some have seen it as a selection of the culture of a society; others stress the totality of experiences offered by a school. *Curriculum for Excellence* sought to marry what is taught to how it is taught, and attempted to place pedagogy at the heart of the process of schooling. But, since the publication of the report, the debate about the concept of curriculum has been overtaken by the issue of examinations.

Perhaps we need to ask the questions in a more logical order: what is it that we want our children and young people to learn during their phase of statutory education and how will we know if they have been successful? And, in the context of civil society, how will we ensure that schooling contributes to the goals of fairness and equity?

At present, 'subjects' dominate the curriculum. They derive from attempts, over centuries, to place order and rationality on the world. They are not quite the same as the *disciplines* of universities, but they are close. At times we have organised them differently; the Munn report in 1977 grouped them into eight *modes*; the 5-14 programme in the 1970s produced five *subject* areas. Now we have *curriculum* areas – but they are not quite the same. The point is that all of these are social constructs. They are not fixed for all time. Some subjects have disappeared or are on the wane or have been subsumed by others or have changed their name. Latin, arithmetic, needlework, woodwork, all fall into one or other of these categories, while other subjects appear, often in response to advances in technology.

But what is largely missing is inter-disciplinary learning, focusing on the big issues affecting human beings and how they interact with one another and with their environment. Primary schools have managed to hold onto the concept of inter-disciplinary learning, but secondaries, constrained by the exam system, have largely rejected the concept, or have made it the preserve of the 'less able' students. Thus learning is at best fragmented, connections are rarely made explicit and, at worst, confusion is created when two subject teach the same skills, but differently. Exams, largely to serve the needs of universities – and possibly employers – are subject-focused and so the curriculum, particularly in the senior phase, has to follow suit.

Queensland, as well as coming up with 'new basics' also tried to devise 'rich tasks' – assessments based, in the main, on inter-disciplinary topics, focusing not on memorisation and pencil-and-

paper tests, but on creativity, problem-solving, group work as well as individual learning, and applied as well as 'pure' learning.

There is nothing to stop Scottish schools from devising a similar approach to learning and assessment, grouping learning around topics like:

- How do things work?
- The Silk Road
- Slavery and emancipation
- War and peace
- Countries; emigration, immigration and culture
- Books and their impact on civilisation
- New technologies; do they always replace the old?

The list could be endless. But, in order to pre-empt the charge of dumbing down, made by several prominent Scottish academics, there has to be a commitment to rigour. Howard Gardner makes the point that inter-disciplinary learning should strengthen the individual disciplines by making their unique contribution explicit. Whereas, at present, students can achieve success in Highers with the minimum of understanding of the defining characteristics of, say, Physics, or Mathematics, or History, an interdisciplinary approach would seek to make clear the different perspectives, philosophies and methodologies of the disciplines involved.

If this case is accepted, it follows that the present national assessment programme, with its heavy emphasis on timed, 'pencil-and-paper' exams, is no longer fit for purpose. At present, secondary schools, anxious to demonstrate that they can raise attainment, obsess about the senior phase. How many subjects should students study becomes a question which is as much about improving results as it is about students' needs. The time it takes to cover the syllabus becomes crucial. Can it be done by Christmas in S5, leaving four or five months for revision, past papers, timed pieces and prelims? Target-setting and tracking of student performance becomes crucial, and, ironically, stressed teachers and senior staff bemoan the fact that pupils are not taking responsibility for their own learning. It's a treadmill, and it is not in the long-term best interests of the students. But, as long as attainment is raised and grades achieved, all can appear well.

This is where the accent on pedagogy in *Curriculum for Excellence* comes up against the harsh reality of a narrow definition of attainment. Notwithstanding that many schools in Scotland are putting into practice the principles of *Teaching for Understanding* (Blythe et al 1998) *Assessment is for Learning* (Black and Wiliam 1998) and *Critical Skills* (Thomas, 2009) with their emphasis on deep learning, on peer- and self-assessment, and on feedback to students designed to help them learn more effectively, the proximity of high- stakes examinations effectively means that *understanding* becomes a luxury. Getting through the exam, with its built-in notion of *pass* and *fail*, wins the day.

Would parents accept a new approach?

Parents and pupils are the two most important stakeholders in the education system and yet their voices are often unheard or misrepresented. What would they make of the notion of the Common Weal? Do they want education to help create a fairer, more just society... or are they motivated only by narrow self-interest?

What we know is that those who wish to oppose change often use parents as a shield. 'Parents won't stand for it' is a common refrain and yet these same parents are rarely asked for their views. Pupils' voices are similarly absent from debates about pedagogy, examinations, internal selection or discipline; instead, through worthy channels such as school councils, they get to discuss matters of importance to them from time to time but rarely are consulted on the big issues. However, there is evidence to suggest that when parents and pupils are consulted or their views surveyed, they do not always conform to the stereotypes... and they have some trenchant comments to make on a whole range of issues.

Scotland has been at the forefront of this process in the recent past. *Ethos Indicators* were developed for Her Majesty's Inspectorate in the 1990s and were an attempt to equip schools with a range of instruments to ascertain what teachers', parents' and pupils' perceptions were on different aspects of school life. Every school in Scotland received a pack and they were used to positive effect up and down the country. They are still used in schools around the world. Strathclyde Regional Council produced a pack called *Parent Prompts* to enable schools to engage with parents, and parents to engage with their children, on what was at that time the new curriculum, 5-14.

Across the UK, in the context of research on *School Effectiveness* and *School Improvement*, 'listening to pupils' voices' was a key theme. The seminal work came from Scotland; *Tell them from me* (1980) provided a shocking insight by pupils of some of the inequalities experienced by so-called non-academic pupils. *School Improvement: What Can Pupils Tell Us* (1996) made a compelling case for any improvement process to listen to the views of pupils. In the late 1990s, when Michael Forsyth attempted to introduce what was known as *Primary Testing*, it was parents, supported by Local Authorities, who opposed it and caused the regime to be changed (albeit in ways which some felt did not improve the situation).

A recent ICM poll for *Drinkware* suggested that while issues like attainment and exam success were important to parents, they were not the most important. Safety, freedom from bullying, happiness and fulfilling potential were more pressing. This reflects similar surveys across the UK. It underlines an important principle; parents are capable of taking a broad view of education and are capable of participating in debate about fundamental issues affecting not simply their own child but children as a whole.

The same is true of pupils. *Schools Speak for Themselves* (1996) was a UK-wide study carried out by Strathclyde University and confirmed beyond doubt that pupils' views are, in the main, positive about school but their criticisms are perceptive and deserve to be heard. Studies by Hamill and Boyd in the early 2000s into the issue of *Inclusion* uncovered a degree of perceptiveness among pupils on difficult issues like indiscipline, teacher effectiveness and school expectations, which suggests that they need to be listened to.

The issue of trust is particularly important in the context of school-parent relations. In a section of the national curriculum document entitled *Finland: Home and School*, states that "it is important to provide parents and guardians with opportunities to participate in setting objectives for and planning and evaluating the schools educational work in cooperation with teachers and pupils.

The school must cooperate with parents or guardians so that they can, for their part, support their children's purposeful learning and schooling. Cooperation between home and school is implemented at both the communal and individual level."

Undoubtedly, if this investment in school – family relationships were to be implemented in Scotland, time would need to be built into every teacher's contract to enable it to happen. Parents' evenings as they are currently organised, especially in the secondary sector, fall far short of what would be required to aspire to Finnish levels of cooperation between parents and schools.

There is no evidence that parents in Scotland want to go the way of England and set up their own schools or have powers to remove headteachers. Instead, the evidence suggests that they want a supportive role, better informed and allowed to participate in their children's education.

If the Common Weal is to challenge the current system of schooling in Scotland and lead to change, parents and pupils must be at the forefront of the process.

Widening Access

The present comprehensive system in Scotland exists, in theory at least, until the end of secondary schooling. In practice, it gets less and less comprehensive as the students reach what is now called the 'senior phase'. A key element in this process is the effect that universities have on what happens in Scottish schools.

The distinction between so-called 'academic' and 'practical' subjects, and the lack of parity of esteem between them has already been mentioned and is widely acknowledged. What is less well-known is the role of the university sector in this process. By identifying certain subjects as more or less important for entry into courses, rather than accepting high achievement across any range of subjects, the dichotomy is reinforced. By frequently raising the level of qualifications required to enter certain courses, the downward pressure on schools to ensure that more students achieve five Highers, in S5, increases.

The effect on many schools is two-fold; the senior phase is dominated by the goal of raising attainment, i.e. performance in exams, rather than focussing on wider achievement, i.e. success across a range of academic, cultural, sporting and community-focussed activities. While some schools have realised that a focus on achievement can lead to improvement in attainment, the pressure, real or perceived, from parents, local authorities and Education Scotland, often results in a focus on exams.

The consequences can be significant. There is a perception that greater value is placed on certain subjects; pupils may feel that greater value is placed on those who are successful in exams than on others; and S5 is dominated by exams. Teaching to the test is difficult for teachers to avoid; past papers and exam practice dominate the classroom; preliminary exams (in some local authorities, two sets of each in S5) add to the stress on teachers and students and the real dangers that among this welter of exam preparation, real learning is sacrificed in favour of getting through the syllabus.

Thus, while life can be tough for S5 students following academic courses, those who are not may fare worse. Although there is the aim of increasing the percentage of young people at university, the law of unintended consequences applies. The lack of opportunities for young people to

experience in-work job-training and the lack of joined up thinking between the school system and employers and universities, means that articulation between in-school and post-school education is at best patchy and at worst non-existent.

It is the lack of communication among the school and post-school sectors which is the villain of the piece. Greater interaction among schools, universities and employers could, and should, take place.

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) – following their motto “For the Common Weal” – have been a model to follow in this respect. They have a recruitment and outreach team dedicated to widening access to University. Working within the guidelines of Universities Scotland, they are committed to “widening access for individuals who have the ability and potential to benefit from Higher Education, irrespective of their background or economic circumstances.”

GCU does this within the context of the Common Weal. Working with families from areas of economic disadvantage, working with communities and using student mentors, some of whom come from partner schools and colleges, the University places an emphasis on ‘public service values’ rather than an ivory tower approach.

The team works with Glasgow City Council nurseries, primaries and secondary schools, from Drumchapel to Maryhill and with Further Education colleges, pairing up school students with university students and running pre-university courses within FE colleges.

The outcomes are impressive:

- 37 per cent increase in students matriculating from FE to GCU
- 80 per cent increase in pupils from partner schools securing a place at GCU
- Establishment of an Advanced Higher Hub for 120 senior students from 19 Glasgow schools
- Working with 2515 senior school students and 422 parents across 15 schools
- Peer mentoring to help students adapt to University study
- Progression programme for senior school students moving to FE.

School students should not be limited in their aspirations or achievements by their postcode. While Glasgow City Council schools may be at the foot of so called ‘league tables’ for attainment as measured by examinations, it should not – and does not – mean that the young people who attend its schools are incapable of benefiting from a University education.

‘For the Common Weal’ could well be the motto for the whole of the education system in Scotland. The GCU experience demonstrates what can be achieved when the whole of the system pulls together and works in partnership. That, and having the highest expectations of our young people, may be a template for closing the gap in terms of educational achievement.

Life Long Learning

Adult and Further Education will be examined in more depth in a future paper, however it is important to emphasise that the *Curriculum for Excellence* set out to provide guidance for the 3-18 age group; those parameters need to change. Zero-90+ might be pushing it a little but it makes the point. We need to develop a life-long learning ethos that creates an all-encompassing 'Curriculum for Everyone'.

For varying reasons, many adults realise they want to (re-)engage in learning that they may have been uninterested in or unmotivated by during their school years. Others wish to learn different or additional skills from what they picked up at school. Furthermore, all of us should see learning as a continual process that spans across our life so that we can fulfil our potential. There therefore has to be a renewed emphasis on life-long learning which creates a continuum between school and post-school learning.

Some of the questions we have to address in relation to life-long learning are:

- for those attending Further Education, how does this fit with the *Curriculum for Excellence* ethos;
- how can the *Curriculum for Excellence* ethos be maintained for those leaving education and moving on;
- how does the nation develop a genuine lifelong learning culture;
- can this be incentivised through the workplace or through welfare or the taxation system;
- the current learning support excludes people earning even a modest amount (currently below £22,000pa) - can this be revised?
- how can organisations that currently provide learning opportunities be encouraged to link them to the *Curriculum for Excellence*; and
- how can those that currently don't, be encouraged to start?

One key element might be recognising 'life skills'; the working environment, social activities, communities and the environment as being part of the on-going learning experience. In Scotland currently the term Community Learning and Development (CLD) refers to the wide range of community-based adult learning, community capacity building and youth work outside of formal institutions. Community education is defined as a way of working which encompasses a variety of formal and informal learning opportunities and is involved in the development of core skills including adult literacy, numeracy and use of information and communication technology. Participation currently sits outside of the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) and raises the issue of how non-formal or informal learning is considered, assessed and credited.

This might be desirable for the individual simply for recognition of their work and achievement, but might also be suitable for providing a second chance at education for some or a reintroduction to learning for others. By allowing the recognition of learning to be transferable it could allow people facing educational barriers to re-enter the jobs market and meet the *Curriculum for Excellence* requirements. It also provides an incentive for people to maintain and improve their skills and understanding and can contribute to the development of the population which in turn has benefits for social cohesion and economic development. Incorporating informal learning is

an essential part of having a more holistic and inclusive definition of what education and learning mean in the modern world.

Conclusion

If Scotland were to look for models of schooling which offer the greatest likelihood of building a successful and equitable society, the Nordic countries, particularly Finland, are the most fruitful. England, under the leadership of Michael Gove MP, the Education Secretary, appears to be determined to dismantle the comprehensive system, removing the requirement to deliver the national curriculum from Academies and fast-tracking graduates into teaching with only six weeks' training. Meanwhile, Finland is seeking to make its system even more comprehensive, extending the principle to the post-16 stage.

The choice is clear: a comprehensive system with the highest expectations of all children, taught by the best teachers with a mission to educate the whole child in a system which is not dominated by formal exams; or one which is elitist, discriminatory and focused on examination success as the main measure of effectiveness. We should move to a system of 'exit exam' only in the last year of school which is designed to assess how well a pupil has learned and how well they are able to apply their learning in new and different contexts. These could be different exams for different purposes, taking into account the proposed destinations of the student.

Many of the ingredients required for transformational change are already in place. A highly qualified workforce, dedicated to their job; an aspirational curriculum which promotes deep learning; and parents who value education. The wider policy framework needs to be put in place to create a more equal society and there needs to be a shift away from an exam-driven culture to one which is holistic and has the whole child at the heart of the learning process. Recognising wider achievement and closing the gap should be what drives our education system.

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