

University of Glasgow – Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change

‘Unlocking the Potential’

A manifesto for educational reform in Scotland prepared by researchers at the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change at the University of Glasgow

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Over the last eight years or so a team of researchers from the Robert Owen Centre for Educational Change have worked alongside a range of partners across the Scottish education system to explore how greater equity can be achieved in schools. This has revealed how, despite the serious national commitment to enhancing excellence and equity and a huge range of well-intentioned initiatives, the most vulnerable children and young people still lose out, and that the established links between education and disadvantage have yet to be broken.

A change in government provides a valuable opportunity to reflect on what can be learned from this ongoing development and research process. With this in mind, this document takes the form of a ‘manifesto’ for the equitable reform of the Scottish education system. In it, we address the following questions:

- What else can be done to promote equity within the Scottish education system?
- What are the barriers to progress and how might they be overcome?

To be clear, our purpose is to set out the foundations for what we see as a major new policy effort within Scottish education. In other words, we are not presenting short-term, quick-fix solutions to ingrained problems – ‘Friday morning policies’ to be implemented straight after an election. Rather, we are concerned with what might be achieved in the course of a five to ten-year period, which, while it may be a long time in politics, is still only a short time in the context of whole-system reform. We believe that anyone who is serious about creating a more equitable education system must commit, alongside us, to this long-term view of transformation, and to fostering the political consensus needed to see it through.

The challenge of equity

The Robert Owen Centre programme of work has involved a series of collaborative action research initiatives carried out with practitioners and policy-makers across Scotland¹. Its focus has been on finding more effective ways of improving outcomes for all children and young people, particularly those from economically poorer

¹ See: Chapman, C. & Ainscow, M. (Eds.) (2021) *Educational Equity: Pathways to Success*. Routledge (in press)

backgrounds. This has involved work with networks of schools and their communities, as well as with local authority colleagues. These developments have focused on making better use of human resources *within-schools*, *between-schools* and *beyond-schools*.

Building on the much-quoted adage, '*the best way to understand an organisation is by trying to change it*', our analysis of these experiences leads us to believe that there is massive untapped potential within Scottish schools and their communities that can be mobilised to address the challenge of equity. With this in mind, we propose five interconnected actions that need to be taken in order to make the Scottish education system more equitable:

Action 1: Improvement strategies must relate to the challenges and resources within particular contexts

As far as educational change is concerned, *context matters*. This means that, in determining improvement pathways, evidence is needed about the way that local education systems work. In this way, it is possible to identify barriers that limit the progress of some learners and resources – particularly human resources - that can be mobilised to address these difficulties.

The insider knowledge of key players at different levels of an education system is an essential means of carrying out such a contextual analysis. In particular, the views of colleagues from other schools, plus those of local authority staff, can provide a different set of perspectives. The involvement of children and young people, and the wider community, is also important, as we have seen through the work of our Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland initiative.

All of this requires schools to have greater flexibility to determine how resources are used to address local circumstances. It also builds on international research which suggests that when teachers are involved in decision-making this is likely to promote a stronger culture for learning within schools.

Action 2: Collaborative action research should be used to stimulate collective action

We have documented how forms of collaborative action research have the potential to draw people together in relation to challenges facing schools, as well as generating evidence that can stimulate innovations aimed at improving thinking, policy and practice. In particular, we have shown how *the use of evidence* collected by practitioners to study teaching within their school can foster the development of practices that are more effective in reaching out to all learners.

The evidence needed to create this stimulation can take many forms and involves the use of a variety of techniques. What is common among them, however, is the way they create 'interruptions' that make the familiar unfamiliar. During the busy school day, this can lead to the sharing of ideas and practices, as well as encouraging collective problem-solving.

In terms of evidence, the obvious starting point is usually with statistical information regarding student attendance, behaviour and progress. In recent years the extent and sophistication of such data have improved, so much so that the progress of groups and individuals can now be tracked in considerable detail, giving a much greater sense of the value that a school is adding to its students. However, statistical information alone tells us very little. What brings such data to life is when 'insiders' scrutinise and ask questions together as to their significance, bringing detailed experiences and local knowledge to bear on the process of interpretation.

Action 3: School partnerships that encourage mutual support and challenge must be encouraged

Our experiences have demonstrated that *school-to-school collaboration* can strengthen the capacity of practitioners to respond to learner diversity. Specifically, collaboration between schools can help to reduce inequalities of provision, to the particular benefit of those students who are marginalised at the edges of a local education system.

In particular, there is evidence that when schools develop more collaborative ways of working, this can have an impact on how teachers perceive themselves and their work. Specifically, comparisons of practices in different schools can lead teachers to view underachieving students in a new light, in ways that encourages a move away from deficit thinking. In other words, those learners who cannot easily be educated within a school's established routines are seen less as 'having problems' but as challenging teachers to re-examine their practices in order to make them more responsive to learner diversity.

There are important implications here for national accountability systems. In particular, our research on the benefits of school-to-school cooperation suggests that it is time for school evaluation to be carried out mainly *by schools for schools* in ways that can act as a stimulus for improvement. However, this has to be challenging and credible. In other words, it must not involve forms of collusion within which partner schools endorse one another in an acceptance of mediocrity.

This requires a move away from a heavy reliance on top-down accountability, towards an investment in the professional capital of teachers and school leaders. A reformed national system of inspections would be the means of ensuring this does not happen. This requires *an inspection service that is recognised as being independent*.

Action 4: External support has to be coordinated at a local level

In order to foster equitable education, policy-makers have to mobilise human and financial resources, some of which may not be under their direct control. This means changing how families and communities work, and enriching what they offer to children.

In this respect, we have seen many encouraging examples of what can happen when what schools do is aligned in a coherent strategy with the efforts of other local players within a particular district – employers, community groups, universities and public services. This does not necessarily mean schools doing more, but it does imply

partnerships beyond the school, where partners multiply the impacts of each other's efforts, leading to collective impact.

All of this has implications for the various key stakeholders within the education system. In particular, teachers, especially those in senior positions, have to see themselves as having a wider responsibility for all children, not just those that attend their own schools. They also have to develop patterns of internal organisation that enable them to have the flexibility to cooperate with other schools and with stakeholders beyond the school gate, not least representatives of the social care and health services. And, of course, it is here that local authority representatives can have key roles as facilitators of such cooperative ways of working.

Action 5: The support of key players at the local and national levels must be provided

Within our projects, progress was more evident where those leading improvement efforts had the backing of key players. In particular, there is a need to identify and engage the support of those who can make things happen, as well as those who might block things from happening.

In the Scottish system, where local authority officials have considerable influence, their support is particularly crucial. One of the distinctive features is that, although the system is relatively centralised, it allows local authorities a fair degree of flexibility to implement policies in partnership with others in ways that suit local contexts. However, the introduction of the approaches we propose will necessitate *changed roles for local authority staff*. Put simply, they have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led from within schools or, in some contexts, by other community organisations.

In taking on new roles, local authority staff can position themselves as *the conscience of the system*: guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families, and champions of a more collegiate approach. Put simply, the job of schools is to improve themselves and the role of the local authority is to make sure that this happens by coordinating the development of a networked learning system.

Addressing barriers to progress

Evidence from our programme of development and research has thrown light on barriers that are likely to limit progress in implementing our recommendations. It also suggests ways in which they can be addressed. Underpinning these barriers is an over emphasis on centralised decision making, such that limited space is available for senior staff in schools to work with their colleagues to develop improvement strategies that fit their own contexts.

In summary, barriers are created by:

- **National policies that encourage schools to narrow the educational diet.** This involves a focus of attention on ways of improving a narrowly conceived range of outcomes, as signalled by the continual emphasis placed by Scottish Government on 'raising attainment'. This has led to a

tendency to narrow the curriculum and allocate teaching time on those areas of learning that are seen as being most important. Our argument is that educational equity assumes that all learners have a right to a broad range of learning experiences that will enrich their lives and improve their life chances, as defined by Curriculum for Excellence.

- **Local administrative structures that limit the freedom of practitioners to experiment.** Where there is a tradition of rigid local authority 'line management', this constrains decision-making amongst school leaders, particularly those who feel under pressure to adhere to local policy. This means that, in some instances, 'guidance' is interpreted by practitioners as 'prescription'. Our experience leads us to favour the idea of subsidiarity. Put simply, that which individuals can accomplish by their own initiative and efforts should not be taken from them by a higher authority.
- **Fragmentation within education systems that limit opportunities for sharing expertise.** Too often, practitioners continue to work in isolation from one another. Meanwhile, middle managers may see themselves as mainly having a maintenance function, as opposed to being change agents. On the other hand, the best examples in our studies were characterised by a consensus amongst adults within a school around values of respect for differences and a commitment to work together in order to offer all students access to rich learning opportunities. The implication is that senior staff have to create a climate within which this takes place.
- **Changes in senior leadership that make sustained activity more difficult.** For a variety of reasons, the temporary absence of senior staff can create particular challenge in respect to development activities. This makes sustainable change more difficult. We have found that collective responsibility in schools and within local networks is a means of mitigating the effects of this.
- **Factors beyond the school gate:** These include geographical isolation, economic pressures and community attitudes. Our work has highlighted the benefit of providing opportunities to minimise isolation through the creation of forums for tackling wider contextual issues, such as local unemployment, poverty and wellbeing. Furthermore, we have seen how schools can make important contributions to making this happen.

In addressing these factors, there is a need for innovative thinking regarding the barriers experienced by some children and young people that lead them to become marginalised. These can include: inappropriate curricula and forms of assessment; inadequate teacher preparation and support; and forms of teaching that do not take account of learner diversity.

Given the concern with the principle of equity, there also has to be focus on the thinking that is *behind* actions and the impacts of such thinking on practices. In particular, there needs to be a concern with the attitudes and assumptions that influence what teachers do, some of which may be unconscious, and how these can be modified through

dialogues with others, especially with learners themselves. All of which points to the importance of forms of leadership that encourages colleagues to challenge one another's assumptions about particular groups of students.

It is worth adding, that it is barriers such as those listed here that have contributed to the difficulties involved in implementing Curriculum for Excellence. In this respect, it is worth recalling the work of the influential educationalist Lawrence Stenhouse, who argued that *curriculum development must rest on teacher development*.

New challenges

At the time when this manifesto for reform was being prepared, further significant barriers exist within education systems across the world as a result of the *impact of the coronavirus pandemic*. These new challenges point to the need for an even greater emphasis on the sorts of approaches we have presented.

Support for this is presented in a recent UNESCO report², which states:

The educational response to the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the capacity of educators to draw on their professional knowledge and collaboratively mobilize with a resourcefulness and creativity that could not have been achieved by a public authority simply issuing top down orders. In fact, over the last several months, the education sector which is often unfairly critiqued for its conservatism has shown itself to be among the most robust and adaptable of all social institutions. This is an important lesson from this crisis and one which should lead us to grant teachers greater autonomy and freedom.

The report concludes:

Teachers need to be more recognized and more highly valued; they are essential participants in defining the futures of education.

It is therefore the time for the whole Scottish community to get together with teachers in ensuring high quality educational opportunities for all of our children and young people. We also believe that universities have important contributions to make, particularly if they work in partnerships with one another. With this in mind, members of our team are currently working with colleagues in various parts of the country to take this thinking forward.

It is important to emphasise, however, that the sorts of approaches presented in this document cannot of themselves overcome the impact of the massive community inequalities that exist in Scotland, as in most other developed countries. What they do offer, however, is a way of working that has the potential to make significant differences to the life chances of children and young people from low income families, whilst, at the same time, contributing to improvements in the overall performance of the education system.

² https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/education_in_a_post-covid_world-nine_ideas_for_public_action.pdf

Final thoughts

Recent debates in Scotland have made reference to there being a risk-averse culture across the national education system that discourages innovation. We believe that the findings of the Robert Owen Centre's programme provide the basis of an agenda for reform in Scotland that addresses this concern. In particular, they show how local pathways to success can be determined that fit the challenges that exist within specific contexts. They also point to the importance of giving practitioners much more opportunities to lead this process. Put simply, it is time to give teaching back to teachers.

There are important implications in all of this for the future roles of local authority staff. They have to adjust their ways of working in response to the development of improvement strategies that are led from within schools. Specifically, they must monitor and challenge schools in relation to the agreed goals of collaborative activities, whilst senior staff within schools share responsibility for the overall management of improvement efforts. In taking on such roles, local authorities can, as we have argued, position themselves as guardians of improved outcomes for all young people and their families - protectors of a more collegiate approach but not as custodians of day-to-day activities.

If this thinking is to be implemented, there are significant implications for national policies. Put simply, there is a need to foster greater flexibility at the local level in order that practitioners and other stakeholders have the space to analyse their particular circumstances and determine priorities accordingly. This means that policy makers must recognise that the details of policy implementation are not amenable to central regulation. Rather, these should be dealt with by those who are close to and, therefore, in a better position to understand local contexts.

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