

FROM THE EDITORS

Scotland's new Minister for Education and Young People, Cathy Jamieson, has called for a National Education Debate. In announcing the initiative, she praised the quality of education currently being provided for many of Scotland's young people. While there is more that could be done to build on good practice, there is, she asserted, also a need to "take stock and consider what we want from our education system" (Scottish Executive News Release: SE5070/2001 19/12/2001). It is to be welcomed that several quite fundamental questions have been offered by the Minister in order to stimulate the debate.

Questions about the starting age for formal schooling and how to create the optimal conditions for children's learning are certainly worthy of consideration. Some of the answers are really quite easy to find if one is prepared to look into the research literature – now there is a novel idea! For instance, class size, an issue which has received intermittent attention over the years, has recently come to the fore with the Scottish National Party according it a central place in its manifesto for primary education. The evidence on the educational effects of reducing class size is now overwhelming (e.g. Biddle and Berliner, 2002). Where class size is substantially reduced – to less than 20 children per class – significant advantages accrue. Smaller reductions, however, yield no such gains. The effects are so significant that Biddle and Berliner (2002) conclude "no other educational reform has yet been studied that would produce such striking benefits" (p. 22). This is an uncomfortable finding for the political decision makers, since to apply the logic of such evidence across the whole education system would not be economically viable, unless the Government were willing to devote a much larger share of GDP to education. One part of a possible compromise may be to develop the use of para-professional staff in all schools to reduce the adult child ratio. Another may be strategically to target significant reductions in class size using a range of approaches in areas of social disadvantage. The results would be highly beneficial and would contribute to the Scottish Executive's avowed main priority, namely, to foster social inclusion.

The problem with many recent Scottish educational initiatives aimed at social inclusion, is that they have failed to close the huge gap which exists in terms of social inequality by reducing the level of child poverty in Scotland, which remains among the worst in the 'developed' world. The Early Intervention Programme, aimed at improving literacy and numeracy, is an example of a well-intentioned initiative which has enjoyed a degree of success in that there have been some significant educational gains overall, but socially disadvantaged pupils have not 'caught up' with those from more affluent and stable backgrounds.

The link between social background on the one hand and educational opportunity and attainment on the other is explored in two articles in this issue of *Scottish Educational Review*. Firstly, Rebecca Smees and her colleagues from the Institute of Education, University of London, examine the effect of pupil background on primary and secondary pupils' attainment, in their analysis of key findings from the Improving School Effectiveness Project. They reach interesting and important conclusions, which are highly relevant to the current Education Debate. As a fascinating counterpoint, the second article by John Stocks is a historical analysis of social class and secondary school structures in Scotland in the 1930s. Stocks clearly shows the pervasive and disproportionate influence on the education system exerted by the Scottish middle class at that time. In 2002 the message remains the same, although the ways in which the middle class now exerts its influence have multiplied and sometimes have become more subtle.

In this issue of *SER* we welcome three articles which adopt a comparative perspective. Ian Menter explores similarities and differences between England and Scotland in teacher supply and retention and attempts to explain the apparently more favourable position in Scotland in the context of broader historical and political questions. Estelle Brisard compares 'national visions' of initial teacher education in France, England and Scotland. Tina Besley discusses possible directions for the introduction of full-time counsellors into Scottish schools by analysing the developing policy framework in Scotland and presenting the model of full-time, professional school counselling which already applies in New Zealand secondary schools.

Post-compulsory education and training and lifelong learning are the topics addressed in the final two articles. The article by Martin Cloonan and Beth Crossan is concerned with barriers and motivations to learn in a community characterised by social deprivation. Greg Mannion's article analyses the accounts of young people's experiences of transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education and training. These articles are timely in that they appear at the time when consultation on the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee's Interim Report on the Lifelong Learning Inquiry has just taken place and the final report is imminent.

We are pleased to announce that David Miller, University of Dundee, has joined the Editorial Team as Book Reviews Editor. Among the reviews in this edition is a review by Paul Standish of a monograph by John Darling, one of a series of research papers published by the University of Aberdeen. Editing this series jointly with John Nisbet was one of the projects on which John was working before being taken ill a little over a year before his death in January 2002.

We are grateful to John Nisbet for his eloquent appreciation of the life and work of John Darling, former editor of the journal, which opens this issue of *SER*.

REFERENCE

Biddle, B.J. and Berliner, D.C. (2002) Small class size and its effects: What does the evidence say about the effects of reducing class size? *Educational Leadership*, 59 (5), 12-23.

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