STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN SCOTLAND, 1980-1995

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SYNOPSIS

The paper examines statistical evidence relating to educational expansion in Scotland since the early 1980s, concentrating on the secondary sector because that is where the Conservative government's main policy initiatives took place, and because the statistical evidence is more thorough there. It illustrates attainment and participation, both their levels and their social distribution. It also looks at evidence on students' experience of schooling and on the attitudes of the wider community towards schools. Its main conclusion is that Scottish expansion has been accompanied and supported by a deeply embedded social philosophy of public provision which has, on the whole, resisted political challenge from the New Right.

INTRODUCTION: EXPANSION AND INCLUSION

The dominant theme of educational policy in the western democracies this century has been expansion (Archer, 1979; Gray, McPherson and Raffe, 1983; McPherson, 1992). In the UK, this has proceeded almost unaffected by political regime, partly because it has been justified in two quite different ways (Ball, 1990; Williams, 1961). On the one hand, there have been arguments based on promoting national economic effectiveness, a case that has appealed to modernisers across the centre of politics. On the other, there has been the idealistic argument based on ensuring the rights of citizens in a democracy. The intellectual energy for the expansion and for what happens in the classroom has drawn on this idealism, even though it has depended on the first argument for resources and political sanction.

This paper examines statistical evidence for what has happened to the expansion in Scotland during the period between the election of the Conservative government in 1979 and the mid-1990s. It concentrates on secondary education, which provides a good case study, partly because, for most of the period, the government's legislation and public concerns paid most attention to that sector, and partly because the statistical evidence relating to the secondary stage is more extensive than for anything earlier or later. The conclusion reached is that, despite the radical rhetoric of Conservative politicians and the fears of their opponents, the expansion has continued, has also continued to command consensus support, and has, moreover, incorporated into secondary schools more thoroughly than ever before some of the central tenets of student-centred education. The paper is mainly an exercise in mapping — a socio-graphic analysis, rather than, say, a detailed study of policy changes or of qualitative evidence. These other approaches would be required if we wanted to develop a full understanding of how people had reacted to the broad trends described here.

The paper is in three main parts. In the first and longest section, the story of recent expansion is told in terms of attainment in Ordinary and Standard Grade, staying on in full-time education beyond fourth year, attainment in Highers, and entry to higher education. For each of these, the social distribution of achievement is described as well as the absolute level. In the second part, there is a consideration of some of the other ways in which the school system has contributed to equal citizenship, and of the attitudes of students and the wider community to the work of the education system. In the third main section, there is a consideration of the problems for education caused by some of the policies of the Conservative government, and of the attempts which the system has made to overcome these. At the end, there is a

brief conclusion, relating the statistical evidence to some of the broader issues of longer-term expansion, and to the prospects for education policy following the 1997 general election.

EXPANSION

However we look at the statistics, the system has expanded strikingly in the last two decades. Consider four indicators: attainment in Ordinary and Standard Grade; staying-on rates; attainment in Highers; and rates of entering higher education.

Ordinary and Standard Grade

To illustrate the expansion at this level, we can look at the proportion of school leavers who had obtained a fairly good outcome from their Ordinary or Standard Grade assessment. Among leavers in 1981, 37% had obtained 5 or more O grades at levels A–C. In 1995, the corresponding proportion having obtained 5 or more Standard Grades at levels 1–3 was 54% (SED, 1991, table 1; SOEID, 1996a, table 6). There is evidence that the introduction of Standard Grade was itself partly responsible for the rise in attainment (Gamoran, 1995a, 1995b).

The official target for this level of attainment is 85% of young people achieving it by age 19 by the end of the century, a target set consensually by government, employers, trades unions, and local authorities in the Advisory Scottish Council on Education and Training Targets (ASCETT, 1996). Scotland is ahead of the other countries of the UK in this respect: at age 19 in 1995, the proportions having attained the target were 70% of people in Scotland, 70% in Northern Ireland, 67% in England, and 62% in Wales.

Accompanying the expansion in attainment at Standard Grade has been an expansion in access to the associated curriculum: thus, by the early 1990s, nearly all students were studying English, Mathematics, a science, a technological subject, and a social subject (Croxford, 1994). Broad access to languages has been developed since then. Thus, from certificated courses and attainment at age 16 being still essentially for only a minority in the late 1970s, they are now clearly for the overwhelming majority.

The overall expansion has also gone along with notable changes in some of the old social inequalities in attainment. The best-known example is with respect to gender. At Ordinary Grade, girls had already overtaken boys by the early 1980s: thus, in 1981, 39% of female leavers and 34% of males had obtained 5 or more passes at levels A–C (SED, 1991, table 4.2). The gap has steadily widened since: in 1995, 60% of girls had this level of attainment, compared to just 48% of boys (SOEID, 1996a, table 7). The extension of the curriculum has also given girls improved access to areas in which they were previously in a minority — notably science and social subjects (Croxford, 1994). The curriculum framework which has accompanied Standard Grade has been the most important influence here.

There have also been some inroads into social-class inequalities. Research by Adam Gamoran, using the Scottish Young People's Survey of fourth-year students, has shown that the curriculum framework sharply reduced such inequalities in access to certificated courses (Gamoran, 1995a).[1] In English, in 1984, 95% of S4 students from advantaged social backgrounds obtained any award (A–E) in O Grade, but only 48% of students from disadvantaged backgrounds did so. In 1990, following the almost complete adoption of Standard Grade English, the gap had narrowed substantially: 97% of advantaged students had obtained an award at levels 1–7, and 68% of disadvantaged students. An even sharper change took place in Mathematics. In 1984, 86% of the socially advantaged obtained an award, compared to just 20% of the disadvantaged; by 1990, this had become 97% of the advantaged and 68% of the disadvantaged.

Gamoran's analysis also suggested that the narrowing was in fact caused by Standard Grade (rather than being merely an incidental accompaniment to it), insofar as it happened more quickly in schools where the new courses were introduced earlier. His research did not, however, find evidence of any narrowing of the social class gap in attainment at levels 1–3 (or A–C), and so these results are best described as showing evidence about the curriculum rather than about attainment.

Staying on

Probably as a result of the relative success of Standard Grade, staying-on rates have been rising sharply. For example, whereas in 1983 only 52% of S4 students stayed on into full-time education beyond age 16, by 1994 this had risen to 70% (SOED, 1994, table 2; SOEID, 1996a, table 2). This is not mainly a result of increased unemployment: it has happened in all areas of Scotland, regardless of the level of local unemployment (Paterson and Raffe, 1995). Although in some localities high levels of unemployment may have given staying-on rates a boost, there is evidence that, for at least the earlier part of the period, staying on did not decline again when unemployment fell (Raffe and Willms, 1989).

What is more, social-class differences in staying-on rates have narrowed somewhat, and — again — girls have become much more likely than boys to stay on (Paterson and Raffe, 1995).

Highers

Beyond the end of S4, at Higher Grade level, there has been a fairly steady expansion too. The index that is most often used — because it is informally seen as the threshold for entry to higher education — is the proportion of school leavers passing 3 or more Highers. That was 20% in 1981, but 29% in 1995 (SED, 1991, table 1; SOEID, 1996a, table 6); furthermore, recent research has shown that the standards of the Highers have, broadly, been maintained (Devine *et al*, 1996). Here again, as with Standard Grade, Scotland is performing quite well compared with the other countries of the UK. The ASCETT target is 70% achieving this level by age 21 by end of the century. In 1995, the proportions reaching it were 51% in Scotland, 44% in England, 44% in Wales, and 39% in Northern Ireland.

Social class inequalities in school attainment as a whole narrowed in the early 1980s, as a result of comprehensive education, but have remained fairly constant since (McPherson and Willms, 1987; Paterson, 1995). Girls' attainment in Higher Grade started to surpass boys' in the late-1970s, and has moved ahead steadily since.

Entry to higher education

The final index of expansion to be described here is entry to full-time higher education. In 1981, the official measure showed that 18% of the age cohort entered such courses by the age of 21; in 1994, the proportion was 43% (SOEID, 1996b, table 11). This is a remarkable rise, considering that, as recently as the early 1960s, the proportion was just 6% (Gray *et al*, 1983, p.204).

Once again, Scotland is performing better than the other countries of the UK. The different education departments use different techniques for measuring participation, the discrepancies arising from different ways of expressing, as an estimated fraction of one particular age cohort, a total number of entrants coming from several adjacent age-cohorts. However, Parry (1997) has recently recalculated them all on the same basis, and found that, in 1993, the proportions entering full-time higher education by age 21 were 35% from Scotland, 33% from Northern Ireland, 32% from Wales, and 28% from England. This recalculation shows, incidentally, that the official participation rates reported by the SOEID are about three percentage

points higher than would be shown if they used the same method as the Department for Education and Employment in England: in 1993, the SOEID reported the rate as 38%, not 35%.

Within the broad expansion, young women's participation has risen more rapidly than young men's: in 1981, the proportions entering were 19% of men and 16% of women; in 1994, the proportions were 45% of women and 41% of men. Extrapolating these trends suggests that, by now, more young women may be entering higher education than do not.

Furthermore, for the first time probably this century, social class differences in entry rates have begun to narrow (Paterson, 1997, pp. 32–34). For example, whereas in 1981 the entry rates were 27% among school leavers with fathers in professional occupations and 4% among those with fathers in manual occupations (a ratio of nearly 7:1), in 1994 the proportions were 37% and 15% (a ratio of 2.5:1).

Entry to higher education is one of the few points at which anything like systematic evidence is available for Scotland on differences among ethnic groups. It appears that young people from minority ethnic groups in Scotland are substantially more likely to enter than their white counterparts. For example, a survey of Glasgow school leavers showed that 33% of people from minority ethnic groups entered higher education, in contrast to just 14% of white leavers (Glasgow Careers Service, 1996). This level of participation may be because most Scottish minority groups are Asian, groups which — according to evidence from elsewhere in the UK — have academic performance ahead of all other ethnic groups, including whites (Gillborn and Gipps, 1996).

A somewhat analogous point can be made about Roman Catholic schools — analogous insofar as, historically, they have been the main way in which people of Irish origin have been integrated into Scottish society. In the last 15 years, there has been a pronounced coming together of performance in Roman Catholic and non-denominational schools (Willms, 1992). This is related to social class, because the Catholic schools still serve communities that are, on average, more socially deprived than the country as a whole. For several decades (at least), Catholic schools had better attainment than non-denominational schools for each social class separately, although their overall social composition gave them an average attainment that was below the national average. But in the late 1980s even the simple average attainment reached the national average (Paterson, 1997, pp. 34–35).

In summary of recent expansion, then, there are three main points to make. It is quite striking; it has made inroads into some long-standing sources of social inequality; and it is the latest phase in a process of expansion that has gone on for most of this century.

EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOLING

One of the ways in which the school system has expanded its provision is through the development of student-centred education (Paterson, 1996), a part — but only part — of the agenda of progressive education from the early part of this century (Darling, 1994).

The most obvious example is in guidance, which recent surveys have shown to be valued by students (Howieson and Semple, 1996). But it is also evident in a change in the attitudes of teachers as a whole, and students have responded by expressing broad satisfaction with school. From the Scottish School Leavers' Survey of 1994, we can find, for example, that 63% of leavers agreed with the statement that 'school has helped give me confidence to make decisions', and that 64% agreed that 'school has taught me things which would be useful for a job'. In contrast, only 10% agreed that 'school has been a waste of time' (Lynn, 1994, p.14). Continuity of these measures with earlier surveys is not available, but results from the late

1980s, when compared to the first part of that decade, showed an increased interest in education for its own sake — not in place of a vocational motivation, but as well as it (Paterson and Raffe, 1995, pp. 15–16). Nevertheless, as many as 41% in 1994 felt that school had done little to prepare them for life after they left (Lynn, 1994, p.14), a figure which would not have impressed the advocates of radical progressive education earlier this century (for example, A. S. Neill).

In the 1994 survey, high proportions had good opinions of what goes on in the school (Lynn, 1994, p.16). For example, 81% felt school work was worth doing, 72% said teachers helped them to do their best, and 79% said teachers often gave them homework. Moreover, schools had become student-centred places: thus, as well as the evidence on guidance in particular, we can also cite the 63% in the 1994 leavers' survey who felt there was a teacher they could talk to if they had a problem.

None of these figures differed between male and female leavers. Although people who have high attainment tend to express most satisfaction, a majority even of low attainers are satisfied (Lynn, 1994, p.15). For example, among people who at best had some Standard Grades at levels 4–7, 53% believed that the school had given them confidence to make decisions (compared to the 63% for all leavers), 55% said that school had taught them things that would be useful for a job (compared to 64%), only 26% said school had been a waste of time (compared to 10%), and 49% said school had done little to teach them things that would useful for later life (compared with 41%).

This satisfaction is mirrored in the wider community. Among students themselves, 68% felt that their school was well-respected in the community (Lynn, 1994, p.16; see also Macbeath, 1989). Analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey by Arnott (1993) found that 64% of people in Scotland had faith in a free public system, in the sense that they did not support parents' being able to pay for higher quality education, and that 68% believed that public secondary schools teach the basics 'very well' or 'quite well'. (In these respects, Scottish schools commanded greater respect than those in England: only around one half of parents in each region there supported a free public system, and no more than 55% believed that the basics were being taught well). In a survey conducted by System Three Scotland and sponsored by the EIS in the spring of 1996, 74% of Scots believed that standards of teaching are 'very good' or 'fairly good' (an opinion shared by 72% of Scottish parents), a proportion that is close to the 68% from the British Social Attitudes Survey. This same System Three survey found opposition to selection, especially among people aged under 45 (who themselves, of course, would mostly have been educated in a non-selective system), and a belief that Scottish standards are better than elsewhere in UK (see McCrone, 1996).

Thus the evidence from these surveys suggests that we have a secondary-school system which has adopted to some extent some (but by no means all) of the central tenets of student-centred education without losing the respect of the community or of parents. A moderate and partial progressivism in Scotland has not led to a crisis of public confidence either in the public system itself, or in that educational method in particular.

SOCIAL SEGREGATION AND SOCIAL POLARISATION

So in Scotland we have seen expansion accompanied and supported by a social philosophy that believes in public provision. But that philosophy was brought into question by the Conservative government — not enough to have interfered with the trends I have been describing, but certainly enough to produce severe problems at the margins of the system, problems that ought to be of concern to anyone who cares about social justice, and which could spread to affect growing proportions of schools if the inclusive philosophy continues to be undermined at the level of national policy making.

The most notable trend has been a growing polarisation of schools, especially in the cities, and above all in Glasgow. Doug Willms, for example, has shown that social segregation among schools in Glasgow rose sharply in the 1980s, to reach the same level as in Edinburgh by the early 1990s (Willms, 1995). This has happened partly because of parental choice: middle class students are more likely to exercise placing requests and to send their children to independent schools (Adler et al, 1989; Willms and Echols, 1995). But it is also because of social polarisation: in other words, even if there had been no parental choice and no independent sector, there would still be growing polarisation among schools because the communities they serve are increasingly separated from each other by affluence and poverty.

The most thorough study has been done in Glasgow. The sheer scale of poverty there is still shocking. In 1995, 41% of secondary school students were eligible for free meals, compared to 16% in Scotland as a whole (SOEID, 1995, table 4). In the 1991 Census of Population, 67% of households in Glasgow had no car, compared to a Scottish proportion of 43% (Scottish Office, 1995, table 10.1). And, in the House Conditions Survey of 1994, 7% of dwellings in Glasgow were below tolerable standard, nearly double the Scottish proportion of 4% (Scottish Office, 1995, tables 5.2 and 5.5).

The growth of polarisation shows, however, that this poverty is not spread evenly across the city. The educational results are seen if we group schools according to the extent of the social disadvantage among their pupils[2] (see Croxford and McPherson, 1992, for a fuller discussion of this). From the Scottish School Leavers' Survey, we then find that schools serving the most deprived social groups in the city had S4 attainment in Ordinary or Standard Grade which stagnated in the 1980s (just 10% gaining 5 or more awards at levels 1–3 in S4, compared to a national average for S4 of two or three times that). For the rest of Glasgow, the rise in attainment was at or above the national rate: for example, in schools serving groups of middling affluence, attainment was exactly on the national average (some 23% attaining this level in S4 in 1985, rising to some 30% in 1991), and in schools serving the most affluent, attainment rose much more sharply than nationally, from 41% in 1985 to 60% in 1991.

There are also problems in relation to gender. The best-known of these problems concern the apparently increasing alienation of boys from school. In the Forth Valley area, for example, a study in the early 1990s showed a significant problem of under achievement by boys (Croxford, 1991). They had less positive attitudes towards school than girls there, or than boys elsewhere; they had less opportunity to undertake work experience than boys elsewhere; and they therefore had lower staying-on rates.

But the issue is not straightforwardly or only about boys, so much as about the interaction between gender and the social context. In the former Grampian Region, girls have lost their previous position of being above the Scottish average in attainment (whereas boys have not), and both boys and girls there tend to leave school earlier than elsewhere in Scotland (Croxford and McPherson, 1991). This may have been because of a stronger labour market for boys, as evidenced by better employment prospects and a male earnings level that is well above the Scottish average — but that cannot be the whole explanation, because female earnings as a whole in Grampian are not ahead of the Scottish average (see Gillespie and Brown, 1993).

Insofar as the Conservative government favoured choice and competition, there is evidence from the research literature that their social policy is likely to have created social problems for a universal public service such as education. Competition exacerbates inequalities: as Michael Barber argued in 1993, 'markets have a tendency to redistribute resources from the weaker to the stronger' (Barber, 1993). This is true as between social institutions, such as schools: the schools which have flourished under the parental-choice legislation have been the ones that are large, that have a long record of high academic achievement, and that (on the whole) serve socially

advantaged communities — the former senior secondaries, above all. The schools which have suffered are small, former junior secondaries, serving mainly council-housing schemes (Echols *et al*, 1990). The harmful effects of excessive competition are also evident at the individual level: international research shows that selection of any sort increases inequalities, which in turn are strongly correlated with social background (Oakes *et al*, 1992). At the same time, selection fails to improve the average level of attainment (because any benefit it brings to students in the top ability group is offset by the harm it does to students in middling or low groups).

Barber also notes that schools in deprived urban areas are more likely to require the kind of external support that only well-funded and fairly large education authorities can offer. The former Strathclyde Region's social strategy is a well-known instance of that, a policy which could be afforded at the level which it reached only because of the scale of that authority. Tackling the problems of disadvantage requires education to be integrated with other social agencies, for example health, housing, and transport.

Three more particular examples illustrate the kinds of things which public agencies can do to mitigate the effects of social polarisation, possibly working in partnership with private supporters: school-based access to higher education; supported study; and early intervention.

School-based access to higher education

The scheme of school-based access which was set up in the Renfrew division of the former Strathclyde was a partnership between the local authority and BP. It was aimed at encouraging students who were expected to attain at levels 3–4 in Standard Grade to see entering higher education as a realistic goal. The evaluation conducted by Croxford *et al* (1994) showed that it raised the average level of attainment among boys by about 1 Standard Grade awarded at levels 1–3. (There were too few girls in the project to provide reliable statistical evidence of the effect on them.)

Although not usually included under the heading of school-based access, the special entrance schemes for university are of the same broad type, being based on summer schools and on university students' going into schools as tutors (Nisbet and Watt, 1994, p.93).

Supported study

Evaluations of supported study consistently find marked effects, especially for students who have limited space and opportunity for study at home. The most thorough research on this in Scotland has been carried out by the Quality in Education Centre at Jordanhill (Macbeath, 1992a, 1992b). John Macbeath, its director, summed up the work by commenting that 'I do not think there has been any other single intervention — apart from early intervention in nursery or the first few years of primary — which has shown such promise in improving pupils' performance' (*The Scotsman*, 29 November 1995).

Early intervention

Macbeath's comment also reminds us that mitigating the effects of social disadvantage requires that action be taken much earlier than S4 or even than secondary school.

A well-known example is the Pilton reading scheme in Edinburgh (Lothian Regional Council, 1995). Pilton is an area of multiple social deprivation — a lot of unemployment, large families, one-parent families, and therefore general poverty. In 1992, for example, 85% of Primary 4 children living there were over a year delayed in reading age. In response to these problems, the Region put in some extra teachers and support staff. The main strategy was to get children in P1–P4 to spend

more time reading. To this end, teachers were encouraged to see reading as a central task of these years, and 'home-link teachers' were employed to liaise with parents, encouraging them to encourage their children to read. The results were impressive: for example, the 85% of P4 children who were a year behind in reading had dropped to 45%, and the proportion reading at 2 years ahead of the average level had risen from 3% to 20%.

These three examples have in common a move beyond the structural approaches to dealing with the problems of social deprivation to techniques that can be developed by individual schools or even individual teachers. In Scottish education, as elsewhere, over the last three decades there has been a contrast between strategies for dealing with socio-economic problems and strategies in relation to gender or ethnicity. Broadly speaking, the socio-economic problems have been tackled by structural reforms such as comprehensive education and common courses; and, again very broadly, the other two have been dealt with more by individual action and exhortation. Thus the gains in attainment made by girls and young women have come when official programmes of equal opportunities have been limited and of only very recent provenance (Turner *et al*, 1995). In some respects, the individualistic approach to equal opportunities has had advantages: it has offered schools and teachers a way of responding pragmatically to gender or ethnic disadvantage, providing them with guidelines on how to encourage individual girls or individual children from minority ethnic groups. It has had the disadvantage of not explicitly dealing with structural conditions which women or minority groups face. Socio-economic disadvantage has suffered from the opposite problem: the structural reforms of the 1960s and 1970s have largely not been followed through with pragmatic programmes for ameliorating the situation of individuals. That is why the three examples are an interesting sign of change: they do offer schools the same kind of approach to socio-economic disadvantage as has been available for some time for gender and ethnicity.

CONCLUSION

The Scottish system has quite successfully expanded in a way that has gradually raised the level of education among socially disadvantaged groups: this is true whether we look at the whole of this century (as we have not done in detail in this article) or at the last two decades. This very success gives grounds for optimism that further action by public agencies can continue to extend the benefits of education to broader social groups.

Indeed, we must expect that popular pressure for further expansion will continue. One of the reasons for the recent expansion in participation is now the second-generation effects of its first phases. An increasing proportion of the parents of today's school students were themselves educated in the comprehensive system, have acquired a respect for education as a result of a generally good experience there, and have therefore handed on high educational aspirations to their children (Burnhill *et al*, 1990). In that sense, pressure for continued expansion is now entrenched in society: politicians who tried to stem it would be faced by a great deal of parental frustration.

The expansion was achieved as part of a social philosophy which believed that public agencies were the best way to achieve social improvement. A consensus around that remains in Scotland, as we have seen for education, and as can be shown also for other areas of public policy (Brown *et al*, 1996). The reason why the consensus has lasted is partly because the idealistic reformers can still draw on the support of people who advocate expansion on the grounds of economic effectiveness. The consensus would provide a firm basis on which a Scottish parliament could seek to reinvent a public policy that was more closely attuned to Scotland's traditions and political preferences.

NOTES

1. Gamoran defined socio-economic status in terms of a composite measure based on parental occupation, parental education, and family size.
2. The categories are defined using data from Strathclyde Region on the percentage of the school roll who were receiving clothing grants in 1991. 'Deprived' means the school had more than 33% receiving clothing grants (and such schools contained 48% of all students in Glasgow), 'mixed' means 20–33% receiving clothing grants (containing 25% of all students), and 'affluent' means fewer than 20% receiving clothing grants (containing 27% of all students).

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