

This edition marks the start of a new period of editorial tenure. The new editorial team, comprising Greg Mannion and me, is based at the University of Stirling in the Institute of Education. Both of us are new to this game, and the process of putting together the first edition has been an eye-opener to say the least! Further changes include John Dakers (University of Glasgow), who has taken over from the long-serving Ian McPherson as Business Editor. We also wish to acknowledge and thank Janet McCurdie, who has provided invaluable and efficient secretarial backup to this edition, and David Miller, who, as ever, has done a superb job in providing a series of varied and interesting book reviews. So, onwards to our first edition! We have been helped in this by the quality and variety of submitted articles and book reviews.

The first article is the SERA key note address presented by Professor Penny Enslin at the 2006 conference. Professor Enslin argues powerfully that a paradox of globalisation – a tendency for local identities to be asserted more strongly in the face of increasing global connectivity – has led to a widespread scepticism towards universalism. In the light of these tendencies, she calls for a reconsideration of the notion of community and the acceptance of a qualified form of universalism that recognises the extent of connectivity, creating ‘conditions in which difference can be negotiated’. Such an approach posits a ‘universalist approach to difference’, predicated upon principles such as ‘acquaintance’, ‘understanding’ and ‘consideration’, which Professor Enslin argues should permeate the official and hidden curricula of our learning communities, for example schools and universities.

The second paper continues the theme of connection. The article, by Arshad, Forbes and Catts, draws upon the work of the *Schools and Social Capital Network* of Scotland’s *Applied Educational Research Scheme* (AERS), to explore the relevance of the notion of social capital to the construction of education policy. The paper refers in particular to three recent policy documents (*A Curriculum for Excellence*, *It’s Everyone’s Job to Make Sure that I’m Alright* and *Poverty and Social Inclusion in Rural Scotland*), examining the value and extent of the application of key social capital concepts to the policies in question. The authors argue that such a process has the potential to improve the lives of the most marginalised members of our society, but that the application of the concepts to education and social policy is at best patchy, and that more needs to be done to promote, for example, notions of *mutuality*, *trust* and *reciprocity* in the development of policy and its enactment into practice.

The article by Canning is an important contribution to a neglected debate in Scottish education. The issue of core skills is a key educational dilemma facing all modern education systems. Canning’s paper provides a well informed overview of the history of core skills development in Scotland, identifying several distinct phases in their evolution. These are: *Deficit* (1979-84); *Divergence* (1982-92); and *Embedding* (1994-present). Canning argues that recent developments have led to a more sophisticated approach to core skills than was previously the case, entailing levels contextualisation and integration that allow for a greater degree of responsiveness to local needs than is the case in England. He concludes by suggesting that Scotland is at a ‘crossroads’ in core skills development and suggests two options for the future.

In contrast to this historical overview, is the article by Davidson, McQueen, McConnell and Wilkinson, which focuses on classroom-based research. The paper draws upon a qualitative evaluation of a Scottish Executive funded Future Learning and Teaching (FLaT) project in a remote rural school in the Scottish Highlands.

This project focused on the use of digital technology to enhance learning. The authors argue that participation in the project has led to improvements in the ICT skills of both students and teachers and an improvement in the ability of students to work cooperatively with others, and independently of the teacher. They conclude by reflecting upon the difficulties inherent in enacting and sustaining change within educational settings, even where such change is devised and promulgated from the bottom-up by enthusiastic participants.

Structural and cultural barriers to change, as well as to learning and teaching, are themes picked up by Ross, Higgins and Nicol in their paper about outdoor learning. The authors draw upon empirical data in their analysis of the decision-making factors that teachers consider in their day to day practice. They argue that our understanding of such processes is enhanced if we frame teacher decision-making as a balance between the effort and costs of organising out of school trips and a range of non formal or 'unofficial benefits' of such activities. This, they argue, contrasts with a prevalent view that teachers balance the requirements of the official curriculum with issues of child safety, particularly in the light of adverse media publicity when things go wrong. The authors suggest that a focus on resources and the legitimisation of outdoor study 'are appropriate policy responses' to tip the balance in favour of the benefits of such study.

This edition sees the welcome return of former SER Editor Gari Donn. Together with Salha Issan, she writes about the development of Oman's higher education sector – a practical response to the demands of globalisation – and its implications on the participation of women in Omani society. Issan and Donn examine recent policy development to extend the scope of higher education, and to encourage wider participation and the greater take up of jobs within Oman by Omani nationals. The authors argue that this is producing provision that duplicates that found in private colleges and, as these tend to cater for professions that have been traditionally seen as male career pathways (for example in management), then the policy is serving to reinforce rather than break down gender inequality in Oman.

The paper by Stead, Lloyd, Munn, Riddell, Kane and Macleod returns us to a focus on Scotland's classrooms. The authors examine the increasing use of additional staff, for example classroom assistants, in schools to provide pupil support and promote positive behaviour. They draw upon the findings of a Scottish Executive funded research project, which explored the views of teachers, pupils and parents, as well as additional staff themselves, regarding the role. The authors highlight the continuing low status of additional staff, marked by insecure job-tenure, low pay, and limited access to professional development, but argue that this low status paradoxically may contribute to the formation and maintenance of successful relationships with pupils and parents.

The final paper relates to the contentious issue of class size, and is written in the context of a systematic review of literature commissioned by the former Scottish Executive Education Department. In the article, Wilson argues that the policies on class size, pursued by the former Labour/Liberal Democrat administration, were only partially supported by the somewhat mixed research evidence on this topic. The article provides a comprehensive overview of this research evidence, and concludes by noting that the apparent policies of the incoming Scottish Nationalist Party government, in respect of class size, are more in tune with the tentative conclusions from the review, than those of their predecessors. The article thus provides a timely contribution to this topical policy debate.

Morag Redford's regular feature, *Education in the Scottish Parliament*, is of especial interest in this edition, due to the recent change in government, and the subsequent reorganisation of the committee structure of parliament. As ever, Redford provides a systematic and readable account of the committee proceedings, and their input to Scottish Government policy. Finally, this issue provides interesting and

informative reviews of a number of books, covering a range of topics as diverse as the 'feminisation of the teaching profession', the apparent divergence of Initial Teacher Education in England and Scotland, citizenship and technological literacy.

I conclude this editorial with a couple of announcements. First, the long heralded website is expected to be up and running by the time of the next issue. This will include an archive of past articles, and we hope this will serve to raise the profile of the journal, both at home and abroad. It will certainly improve accessibility to the journal. Second, the Editorial Board are pleased to announce that the November 2008 issue will be a special edition devoted to the subject of *Curriculum for Excellence*. This has been widely welcomed as a potential departure from recent worldwide policy trends towards top-down prescription of curriculum, being a centrally driven national project, utilising a development methodology more usually associated with smaller scale pilot projects (a combination of central impetus, supported by CPD, resources and a national framework, and local flexibility to enable innovation and co-construction of the curriculum in individual schools). While international research, especially from the United States, suggests that this general approach is likely to be effective, there is much that we do not know about this form of curriculum development. Moreover, there has been little specific commentary from Scotland's academic community on *Curriculum for Excellence*, therefore it is hoped that the special edition will provide a forum for such debate. I therefore welcome ideas from colleagues, both from within Scotland and further afield, about potential contributions to the issue.

MARK PRIESTLEY