

Further commentary on the OECD review of the quality and equity of schooling in Scotland

James Stanfield

University of Newcastle

In 2007, I authored a short report titled 'How Good Are Scotland's Schools: The Evidence from Home and Abroad', which found that despite a large increase in funding since 1999, in only nine of the thirty two authorities were more than 50% of S4 pupils receiving five good grades (including maths and English). In 2006/7 only 39.2% of S4 pupils achieved 5 good grades, which was down from 43.8% in the previous year. While recent international studies have provided a more optimistic account of the Scottish education system, with Scottish students performing well above average, there still remains a long tail of under-achievement which is largely concentrated in low income areas. While the Scottish Executive¹ appeared to be content that 'Scottish education is among the best performing in the world', I repeated Lord Leitch's less popular warning - that if the UK wanted to be a world leader in skills by 2020, then a doubling in attainment at most levels will be required.

First, a brief comment on the OECD review team itself. While it was clearly sensible to appoint a Rapporteur and a review team who were all supporters of comprehensive schooling and a government monopoly in the delivery of education, an international study would surely have benefited from having a slightly more diverse range of opinions. For example, while many in Scotland may believe that comprehensive schooling has been a remarkable success and is set to dominate Scottish education for the foreseeable future, there must be some members of the Scottish Government who are at least slightly curious as to why so many governments around the world, which have previously experimented with comprehensive schooling, are now moving in the opposite direction. As the review team is clearly one sided, this immediately limits the scope of the report as they are now restricted to proposing recommendations on how to improve standards within the existing institutional framework. No doubt this is possible, but it could also be argued that it has been the failure of reforms such as those proposed in the report over the previous three decades, which is now forcing many governments to experiment with alternative methods of financing and delivering education, especially to families living in low income areas. The report therefore ignores the vast number of reforms introduced from

¹ Now known as the Scottish Government

1980s onwards across North America and around the world, which have focused on increasing school autonomy, reducing political interference and introducing voucher schemes and tax credits. The widespread distribution of public subsidies to private schools across Europe is also ignored even though financial equality between public and private schools is now identified as a constitutional right in some countries (see Tooley *et al.* 2003).

Concerning the general focus of the report (OECD 2007), my key criticism is that it tries to do too much and as a result diverts attention away from the key area of concern, which is the ongoing failure of the Scottish Government to deliver world class educational opportunities to those children living in the most deprived areas across Scotland. Whatever the strengths of Scottish education may be, these should not be allowed to distract attention or diminish in any way the problems and challenges which still remain. Therefore, instead of attempting to review the system as a whole, the review team could have focused its attention on the problems facing the schools located in the most deprived areas across Scotland or in a city such as Glasgow, where almost every second child in S2 under-achieves in reading. As governments initially intervened in education to help those most in need, then perhaps we should start to judge governments more on how well they perform this specific and very important task.

The review team's support for the comprehensive model of schooling is made clear in Chapter 2 which identifies comprehensive secondary schooling as a major strength of Scottish education which has 'contained levels of social inequality, while supporting higher overall levels of attainment' (p. 34). As a critical researcher I would be very interested to find out what evidence this claim is based upon. The review team also make the bold claim that '[s]elective systems elsewhere in Europe have delivered 'choice' for some families, but at the price of greater inequality and lower standards' (Jesson 2001; Johnson 2003). While one might expect the review team to reinforce this claim by referring to a number of different studies from across Europe, this is unfortunately not the case. The Jesson (2001) reference directs the reader to a four page word document in which Jesson attempts to compare the performance of pupils in selective and non selective local authorities across England, by adopting what he refers to as a value added method which involves 'taking all the information about pupils gender, prior attainment and GCSE outcomes and 'modelling' this so that we can estimate what is the average (or expected) outcome for pupils with specific characteristics'. His calculations show that in the 116 non-selective LEAs 45.3% of students gain at least 5 GCSE grades A-C, while in the 15 selective LEA's the figure is only 43.1%. According to Jesson this proves that 'selective education depresses the performance of whole communities' (Jesson 2001) and therefore goes on to call for the abolition of all grammar schools. Although this research was carried out in 2001, Jesson is still refusing to provide details of the calculations which he made, claiming that the paper has since been developed and that the work is currently undergoing review. The reference to Johnson (2003), refers to a report published by the Institute of Public Policy Research, titled *Not Choice but Champion – A New Look at Secondary Admissions in London*, and provides no new evidence and

simply refers the reader back to Jesson's findings from 2001. If the original claim had been made in a working paper or a general article, I would be much more prepared to let this indiscretion pass, as I am sure that I am also guilty of referring to the work of others simply because other people have. However, because this claim was made in an official government sponsored OECD report, it simply isn't good enough. I also know that if I attempted to claim that 'selective systems elsewhere in Europe have delivered 'choice' for some families, combined with greater equality and higher standards', without providing legitimate references, then I would be heavily criticised, and rightly so. Jesson's four page document can be found at

www.york.ac.uk/depts/econ/documents/research/21pbrf3.pdf and perhaps the reader is best left to make up his or her own mind on this issue.

A revealing insight into the comprehensive experiment in Scotland can be found on page 33 of the OECD report, where the review team state that:

Many other nations use schools, particularly secondary schools, to divide children from each other. The gains that go to individual families from this practice by no means ensure that a nation as a whole gains. (OECD 2001, 2005a; Hanushek & Woessmann 2005; Willms 2006)

It would therefore appear that according to the review team, the vast majority of parents in Scotland must not be allowed to choose which school their children should attend, because they only take into account their own families interests, whilst neglecting the wider interests of the nation. However, what exactly does the review team mean when they refer to 'the nation' and how do they measure if it has gained or not? Following on from the above paragraph, the review team then provide the following explanation as to why parental choice may not benefit the nation as a whole:

This is because a high general standard hinges on exposing all children to challenge, but in shared settings where the presence of strong learners is a source of support and encouragement to weaker learners. To split the cohort and disperse students over many competing sites is to deny them access to each other—access to role models, to 'pilot' students (as the French call them), to the stimulus of difference, to the bonds of growing together. (p. 33)

I often wonder how the parents of a strong learner would react to being told by the review team that they must send their child to a local comprehensive school, where they will be used to help improve the performance of the slower learners. What if some parents couldn't care less about 'national goals' or strongly objected to their children being used as a teaching tool? Would these parents simply be dismissed as being ignorant and told to shut up and 'know their place'? And what would happen if the majority of parents in a local area believed that these views were both extreme and morally offensive? Would the review team still advise the Scottish Government to ignore the will of the people?

Just to confuse matters, while the review team identify comprehensive schooling as a major strength of Scottish education, they then proceed to heavily criticise comprehensive schools for their inability to meet the needs of children from less fortunate backgrounds. While the report suggests that the problem is not necessarily with the differences which exist between schools, it suggests that

'it is the relationship of schools in their generality to children from less well-educated and poor families that is problematic' which makes the goal of tackling low achievement 'more elusive and seemingly intractable' (p. 62). What is equally worrying is that the review team also claim that this kind of educational failure now appears to be 'embedded in the normal ways in which schools tend to work - schools independently assessed as generally good or very good' (p. 62). This suggests that there is a fundamental flaw in the way in which schools are independently assessed and it also shows how easy it is for a school to be recognised as being very good even though it continues to fail those most in need. However, it is important not to get carried away with statements such as these, because it could also be categorized as another sweeping generalisation which is based on evidence relating to only a small number of schools. The review team also claim that the 'Scottish Government does not have reliable information on the extent to which educational standards are being reached in each of the 32 local authorities' and that the information which is available 'points to very wide national variations in test scores and exam results' (p. 18).

Despite these criticisms the review team suggest that the problem lies in the fact that the potential of comprehensive schooling in Scotland has not yet been fully exploited. The report therefore suggests that '[i]n theory the pooling of financial resources in schools under local authority control should mean a wider range of programs and greater flexibility in how teachers are employed' (p. 35) and that 'the pooling of cultural resources should favour a school culture of high expectations and aspirations, strong positive peer effects on learning, and improvements in teacher morale and commitment' (p. 35). While I am familiar with totalitarian regimes referring to children as a 'cultural resource', which need to be utilised for the good of the state, I'm not sure if this kind of thinking or terminology has any place in democratic nations in the 21st century.

The majority of the reports recommendations are concerned with how to introduce a 'comprehensive, structured and accessible curriculum' and how to monitor this curriculum over time. In particular, the review team concludes that 'on the basis of both international and national evidence, important benefits can be gained where schools deliver vocational studies on site'(p.150) and so recommends that vocational courses be accessible to all young people in schools from S3' (p.150). However, if all government secondary schools in Scotland have previously been prevented from delivering vocational courses, then this perhaps helps to explain why so many children are losing interest in the traditional form of schooling and end up leaving school after 11 years with very little to show for it. Two graphs can be found on p.81-82 of the report which show that days lost to absences and temporary exclusions grow as deprivation increases. However, these graphs only show a correlation between the two and do not prove that increasing levels of deprivation directly cause increasing levels of absences and temporary exclusions. Instead it may well be that the number of days lost tends to grow as interest in the curriculum declines and levels of boredom and frustration dramatically increase. While the report suggests that the causes of under-achievement in school are complex (poverty, lack of parental support etc), perhaps the problem simply lies in the fact that schools in

low income areas have been forced to provide an education which nobody wants or has any interest in.

The report's most welcome recommendations are those which call for greater management responsibility to be given to schools, especially in the areas of staffing and curriculum. As noted by the review team:

Schools need flexibility both in the teaching resources available to them and in what programmes they offer. Greater management autonomy is needed in these two critical areas—the power to determine and differentiate the range of demands made on students through the curriculum and the power to determine and differentiate the mix of teachers responsible for expressing these demands and helping students satisfy them. (p. 148)

Recommendation 6 therefore states that local authorities should 'negotiate agreements with schools under which greater management autonomy in staffing and curriculum is established in return for progress on an agreed platform of improvement in learning opportunities and outcomes' (p.149). However, despite the positive nature of these reforms, it is clear that they will face opposition from those in Scotland who maintain a strong commitment to the principle of equality of education and in maintaining the status quo. For example, Raffe (2008) questions if it is possible to prioritise school-based innovation while at the same time protecting the existing strengths of Scottish comprehensive education, which include 'the low social segregation of schools and the consistency of school standards' (p. 29). Raffe therefore warns that the logic of the review teams argument 'could encourage schools to diversify to match their social environments, thus leading to a more stratified system of middle and working class schools' (p. 29).

The report also recommends that local education authorities should 'examine current approaches to gathering student feedback on quality of teaching' (p. 153) to help identify the most promising approaches and that 'rolling consultations be undertaken with teachers from a wide cross-section of schools regarding their classroom experience in delivering selected courses, the quality of course design, and learning outcomes for students' (p. 154). While these are welcome recommendations, I would like to have seen the report give at least some attention to those who I believe are ultimately responsible for children's education – parents. Despite their obvious importance in this debate, it is remarkable how little we know about what parents think about their children's schooling, what they would like to see changed and how they think matters could be improved.

The importance of parents in education is reinforced in a report published by Reform Scotland titled Parent Power² (Jan 2009). According to the report, if Scotland is to restore its reputation as a world leader in education, then priority must be given to improving opportunities for pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who are now being failed by the current system. Building upon the reforms introduced in Sweden, Canada and the Netherlands the report calls for more parental choice and the establishment of more diverse schools. It is hoped that this will increase competition and in turn drive up standards across the

² http://www.reformscotland.com/include/publications/parent_power.pdf

board. The importance of the process of competition in education is reinforced in the OECD's PISA 2006 study which reported the following finding:

Across OECD countries, 60% of students were enrolled in schools whose principals reported competing with two or more other schools in the local area. Across countries, having a larger number of schools that compete for students is associated with better results, over and above the relationship with student background. (OECD 2006)

As I am led to believe that the Rapporteur of the review team, Richard Teese, is a fan of most things French, I shall conclude with the following description of competition provided by the 19th century French political economist, Frederic Bastiat:

I do not hesitate to say that competition, which, indeed, we could call freedom - despite the aversion it inspires and the tirades directed against it - is essentially the law of democracy. It is the most progressive, the most egalitarian, the most universally leveling of all the laws to which Providence has entrusted the progress of human society. . . . The accusation that competition tends toward inequality is far from true. On the contrary, all *artificial* inequality is due to the absence of competition; . . . Therefore, while the socialists find in competition the source of all evil, it is actually the attacks upon competition that are the disruptive elements working against all that is good. (Bastiat 1850)

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