

## REJOINDER TO DAVID RAFFE

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Note: this rejoinder is a personal response from the rapporteur of the OECD review and does not necessarily reflect the views of the other examiners or of the OECD itself.

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### THE PURSUIT OF EQUITY

Social inequalities do not begin in school. But the gaps between children widen during school. As cognitive demands on children become more complex, the gaps widen still further. The OECD report does not claim that “social inequalities are primarily a phenomenon of late primary and (especially) secondary education”. Rather it is during these years that the gap widens, expands, opens up. These are sometimes called the “middle years”. Few researchers would believe that children wait till school to become different in speech patterns, leisure habits, interests and experience or in cognitive and emotional growth. The report does not assert this. On the contrary, it recognizes that early efforts must be made to prepare children for both the cognitive and the cultural demands of school. That is why the report praises the high level of pre-school participation (which has grown over the years), argues for “higher proportions of qualified and specially trained staff” in pre-school (p. 32), and commends Scottish efforts to tackle poverty on a broad front, including through joined-up services. However, the review was concerned with schools and about how well they are responding to diversity in their classrooms in an age of rising demands on quality of learning. Our conclusion, based on the evidence available to us, is that Scottish primary schools are very effective and inclusive. Moreover, they appear to be increasing their effectiveness on numerous measures, including notably an improving standard of children in poverty—a large group in Scotland.

Researchers who have highlighted the importance of good-quality pre-school and smaller class-sizes in the early years of primary school would predict that Scottish efforts on both these fronts would be rewarded by a lessening of achievement differences. They would not expect these differences to disappear—and the report draws attention to the many children who continue to under-achieve in the early years (pp. 72-73). Researchers would expect the gap to widen more slowly than in the past, and that appears to be happening. But they would also argue that unless schools serving the most disadvantaged communities are resourced to provide sustained support throughout the later primary years, the social gap will widen and inequalities will grow apace in secondary school.

### CURRICULUM

More resources alone will not stop the widening of the achievement gap. For it is how resources are used that matters, not simply their quantity. This is why the OECD examiners stress the importance of cultural and pedagogical change, and why they see the nature of the curriculum as so important. How the curriculum is constructed, how broad, how narrow, determines who is valued in school. Vocational studies, internationally, represent a most important avenue of reform. Scotland has been cautious. There is a risk that vocational education and training will be used as a relegation stream and will undermine working-class access to the academic curriculum. But weaker learners—drawn disproportionately from working-class homes—already experience relegation; they leave school with few or no qualifications, and they enter a labour market which offers few options and little future to unskilled and poorly schooled workers.

It is true that in other OECD countries, VET is taken predominantly by weaker learners, often from poor families. That is the case, for example, in Australia. But

there it is a structured and valuable alternative, and it is offered, not to depress, but to raise aspirations and boost motivation. Many VET students go on to university, many more undertake skilled, technician-level and advanced vocational studies in colleges. Of course, VET is no substitute for the continual reform effort needed to keep more academic subjects accessible, meaningful and satisfying. Merely expanding VET would be a one-sided strategy which the OECD examiners explicitly reject (p. 125).

#### POVERTY

Curriculum reform itself will not solve the problems Scotland faces, and contrary to what has been suggested, we do not see it as a “magic bullet”. How such a conclusion could be reached, given the very substantial coverage of poverty in the OECD report and the range of our recommendations is a mystery. The impact of poverty was a major concern to us. Improvements in curriculum and teaching will, we argue, not be enough to reduce social inequalities and raise levels of achievement in the context of an ambitious Curriculum for Excellence. “Without effective action to tackle both the environment of social deprivation and problems in the routine ways in which good schools work, other ‘attainment-based’ problems are likely to persist.” (p. 141). To tackle the effects of poverty, Scotland needs to be sure that resources are allocated between local authorities in the best manner, it needs national priorities funding to link funding to agreed goals, and it needs to assess the performance of its resource strategy against these goals.

While a big emphasis is placed on poverty, the OECD report is also concerned about the temptation to see all inequality as arising from social deprivation. There is a real danger in Scotland of hiding behind poverty as the source of all educational (and other) ills. The report offers a substantial discussion of the origins of social inequality, and this is intended to anchor the five broadly-defined strategies that are offered for discussion (pp. 143ff). Scotland has to tackle poverty—it has to get rid of it—but it also has to reform the normal ways in which high-performing schools work. That is the depth of the challenge.

#### TESTING

Scotland tests its school children, but it does not test all of them. Is this out of fear that the tests will drive teaching or that newspapers will create league tables? Or is it out of fear of seeing too much, of seeing what seems insuperable? Testing has become odious because it has been used elsewhere to bully schools, to shame and blame. Deep suspicion attaches it, and understandably so. However, this does not mean that Scotland should not test. National tests should be used to measure the progress of individuals and sub-groups of students against national standards, taking into account family attributes and the social context of the school. What can we expect, what can we reasonably ask, and can we be sure we are making progress? How do we ensure that all children are well-prepared to manage the demands of the curriculum if we do not have reliable test data over the different stages of schooling to alert us to weaknesses, help set goals, and frame strategies for improvement which are capable of evaluation? Good PISA results protect the reputation of the Scottish school system, but it is national curriculum and examinations that decide the reputation of Scottish children. What protects them from these institutional arrangements if there is poor national monitoring of student progress and no facility for strategic intervention, based on accurate and timely information? Not all the good work of schools can or even should be measured by tests. But are we to wait till the national exams at the end of compulsory school before we know how well our children fare at school in national terms?

National tests should also be used to assess how well educational policies work and how consistently over the 32 local authorities responsible for school education

in Scotland. There are complaints that Scotland cannot trust the test data produced by its current survey programme. The local authority concordat will not lessen the need for accurate information, but increase it, especially in the context of sharp regional variations in achievement related to social deprivation.