

RESPONSE TO RICHARD TEESE

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The OECD review has provided a valuable stimulus to Scottish educational debate. It has placed key issues on the future agenda, challenged the school system's view of itself and made constructive suggestions for reform. It has provoked debate among Scottish educationists, but this debate already seems to be focusing on the next steps - on what to do about the review's findings - while taking these findings as given. An adequate response needs to start with a detailed scrutiny of the evidence, interpretations and conclusions of the review team, which made no claim to have conducted the definitive analysis. My commentary responded to its invitation to continue the process of enquiry that it started, and I am grateful to Richard Teese for his reply. He focuses on points where we disagree, but I would stress that there are many more points on which we agree. However, I do wish to comment on the two issues in his reply which have the greatest practical significance.

First, Teese acknowledges the potential ill-effects of national testing but he does not say how the national tests recommended by the review would avoid these ill-effects. Current Scottish policies aim to separate assessment for learning from assessment for accountability; they also aim to increase teachers' ownership of assessment for learning. The review's recommendations would undermine these aims. It is not clear whether this is inadvertent, or whether the team reviewed current assessment policies and found them wanting. What is clear is that a programme of high-stakes national testing would have two very predictable consequences. First, it would discourage pedagogical innovation and encourage 'teaching to the test'. Second, it would focus attention on those curricular outcomes which are most reliably assessed. In other words, it would stifle innovation and inhibit the pedagogical and curricular breadth that Curriculum for Excellence, with the endorsement of the review team, seeks to promote.

Second, Teese is right when he says that the report refers to inequalities throughout children's pre-school and school careers. However, the report's explanation of the problem focuses on late primary and secondary schooling, and so do its proposed remedies. Its executive summary depicts the problem as an 'achievement gap that opens up around Primary 5 and continues to widen throughout the junior secondary years' (p.15). The evidence to support its analysis refers to the gap between high and low achievers - an achievement gap which is *narrower*, according to the review's own evidence, than in most other countries. The serious achievement gap in Scottish schooling is not between high and low achievers but between children from different socio-economic backgrounds, and the review presents no evidence of how these social inequalities vary over the stages of schooling. This was the main argument of my critique, but Teese does not address it. It is not academic nit-picking: the notion that social inequalities are primarily a problem of the later years of compulsory schooling has entered the urban mythology of Scottish education, and it has been used to question the government's priority for the early years (for example, in the Parliament debate on the OECD Review).

Finally, a comment on the process of the review. The challenge for any international review team is to acquire the evidence, contextual understanding and interpretive insight with which to interrogate the beliefs and perceptions

of those hosting the review. It is much to the credit of the review team that it achieved the independence and clarity of thought to challenge Scottish schooling and to offer alternative perspectives on its image of itself. Nevertheless, although the review team visited schools and local authorities, for the national picture it depended heavily on inspectorate, government and other official inputs. The irony is that it criticised the evidence base for policy-making in Scottish education, and it questioned the system of governance and its capacity for policy and practice learning and for evidence-informed innovation, but it was itself constrained by this same evidence base and the same system of governance which managed and mediated its enquiry. To my knowledge, the team heard presentations from only two educational researchers, and one of these described research capacity-building rather than discussed the school system more directly. The team had access to published research, but only limited time in which to review it. If educational researchers were marginalised in the conduct of the review, it is all the more important that they be engaged in the debate that follows, and that they subject the review's evidence and interpretations to the same scrutiny that they would apply to any official account.