

# EDUCATION, LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT

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## SUMMARY

Education will be one of the main areas of policy for the Scottish parliament. The paper discusses some of the implications of this for comprehensive secondary education and for citizenship, and assesses the role of local government in education in the context of the new parliament. It argues, on the one hand, that the principles of comprehensive education are no longer being fully met by the structure of secondary schools which Scotland has inherited from the 1960s, and so that radical renewal is required. On the other hand, it argues that fulfilling the comprehensive ideal requires now that attention be given to developing active citizenship through education. Local government is the best agency to lead these renovations, essentially because of its rootedness in local culture, but it itself will have to acquire new capacities of policy development and of redistribution if it is to be able to fulfil that potential.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is bound to be one of the main areas of policy for the new parliament. This is not only because, in surveys across the UK, people frequently rate education as among the top two or three priorities for government action. It is also because, in Scotland, people have high expectations that the parliament will improve education (Surridge *et al.*, 1998), but above all because of the symbolic importance which education has in Scotland—one of the famous three pillars of Scottish identity. More generally, right across the globe these days, education is believed to be the key not only to economic growth but also to a vibrant democracy.

I will deal here with two consequences of these attitudes to education: how education relates to issues of social inclusion, and how education relates to citizenship. These are not the only ways of considering the place of education in the new Scotland, but they are certainly among the more important ways. They also raise difficult problems for the relationship between the parliament and local government.

## 2. THE SUCCESS OF COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION

The starting point for any debate about social inclusion and education in Scotland is the relative success and relative popularity of comprehensive secondary schooling. By success, I mean the facts that comprehensive schools have:

- continued to provide a high quality of education, especially in S3-S6: that is, examination pass rates as a proportion of the age group have risen while research shows that the standards of the examinations have not fallen (SED, 1991, table 1; SOEID, 1996, table 6; Devine *et al.*, 1996);
- encouraged growing rates of staying on into post-16 education and post-school education (Paterson and Raffe, 1995; Paterson, 1996a);
- reduced social class differences in access to schooling (McPherson and Willms, 1987), in access to the curriculum (Gamoran, 1995), in examination pass rates (McPherson and Willms, 1987; Croxford, 1994), in staying-on rates (Paterson and Raffe, 1995), and in entry rates to higher education (Paterson, 1996a);

- provided such an encouragement to the attainment of girls that they have now overtaken boys in almost all areas of the curriculum (Croxford, 1994).

That comprehensive education is popular in Scotland is shown in repeated surveys: between two thirds and three quarters of respondents (and about the same proportion of parents of current school children) praise non-selective schooling and teaching standards (Paterson, 1997; the same conclusion can be reached from analysis of the Scottish and British Election Surveys, 1997: see Brown *et al.*, forthcoming, chapter 5). It is also evident in the refusal by almost all Scottish parents to take their schools out of local authority control: when the few self-governing ballots that did take place were genuinely about that issue (and not about disrupting plans for closure), in nearly every case the majorities against opting out were overwhelming.

This should all be greatly encouraging to local authorities. Not only was the initial move to comprehensive education led by them (McPherson and Raab, 1988; Benn and Chitty, 1996); they also were responsible for sustaining the momentum through the Thatcher and Major years, and—in many authorities—for linking the specifically educational strategy to a wider social strategy. The three non-Tory political parties in Scotland have stuck firmly with comprehensive education, as have many influential Conservatives: for example, Alick Buchanan-Smith spoke in favour of it during the House of Commons debate in 1989 on the Self-Governing Schools Bill, and Raymond Robertson insisted repeatedly when he was education minister that selection between schools was not part of the Conservative agenda in Scotland (although Michael Forsyth changed that about a week before the 1997 general election).

### 3. THE RENEWAL OF COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION

Having said all that in praise of comprehensive education, it must also be said that the ways in which the principle is implemented need to be renovated, and that how to do that poses big challenges to local government. By the comprehensive principle, I mean three points above all:

- that children's access to education should, as a matter of legal right, be independent of their social circumstances so far as is practically possible;
- that the first point is quite consistent with continuing to hold effectiveness as a valid goal of the education system;
- and that, therefore, it is quite possible for an education system to promote both excellence and equal opportunity at the same time.

The reason why riders like 'so far as is possible' have to be added is that schools are not in full control of the influences on children's abilities, and so cannot determine fully the reasons why a child is or is not in a position to take advantage of the opportunities that might be made available. I will return to this point about social justice later.

There are three particular reasons why the renewal is needed. The first is social polarisation. Neighbourhood schools were always a bit of a problem in the cities anyway: even in the late 1970s and early 1980s, social segregation among schools was far higher there than in small town and rural Scotland, essentially because of residential segregation (Willms, 1995). But at least that was at a time when some jobs were available in these areas, and when unemployment was more often short-term than it became later. By the late 1980s and 1990s, the gulf between the big city housing schemes and the other parts of Scotland had started to widen alarmingly (Paterson, 1997). For example, it has been well-publicised that Glasgow apparently has problems of low attainment. But, if you look at local authority schools in

Glasgow serving affluent or even moderately affluent populations of pupils, the city has attainment that is at the corresponding national average or better. The reason why the overall Glasgow average is low is that around 40% of its children live in poverty, in the sense of being entitled to free school meals, and that this poverty is increasingly concentrated into a few areas (Willms, 1995). With such growing residential segregation, neighbourhood comprehensives can reinforce educational divisions instead of healing them: the research shows that one of the main ways in which comprehensives can have a beneficial effect on attainment is through social mixing (Willms, 1986). The problem for local government is that such extreme social polarisation is not within its power to overcome, especially when the new unitary authorities have lost significant capacities to redistribute along the lines of, for example, Strathclyde's social strategy.

The second new problem for comprehensive education is that the key point of selection is now not age 12 but age 16. However imperfectly, that is what Higher Still is all about: it is an attempt to adapt the comprehensive principle to post-16 education. I don't need to rehearse all the reasons why a response was necessary at these stages (rising staying-on rate etc., see Raffe (1997)); what is important here is that the policy community's intention with the reform has been to respond in a way that is inclusive rather than divisive. But then that illustrates the third new problem: what the responses are to the principle of comprehensive education is no longer solely within the province of local authorities. Higher Still itself is bound to involve much more partnership than Standard Grade ever did, and what happens after S6—in FE or HE—takes the issue of social inclusion right out of the hands of local authorities altogether.

So the challenge for local authorities is to keep command of the debate while also finding ways of introducing the comprehensive principle into policy areas where they have to work in partnership. For example, although Higher Still will force partnerships on local authorities, it will also, likewise, force them on selective institutions which have traditionally dominated post-16 education, notably the universities. So Higher Still could actually strengthen local authorities' influence if they take the opportunity, and if they are imaginative enough to acquire the appropriate capacity to develop policy. The local authorities are the guardians of the comprehensive principle, and, to date, the most influential scepticism towards it has come from the SOEID. It would be useful, therefore, if the local authorities could clarify the debate before the parliament comes along, so that the new parliamentarians are clear just where the Scottish experience has got to. Otherwise they will be susceptible to possibly inaccurate impressions from the SOEID, from some parts of the universities, or even from a media that pays too much attention to what is going on in England.

Towards this clarification of the debate and its new starting point, it would be helpful to distinguish between what is definitely inconsistent with comprehensive principles, and what it might be worth trying out experimentally in order to see if it could work in harmony with these principles. As a starting list of what is definitely at odds with comprehensive education, I would mention:

- any form of selection into different schools (Gamoran, 1992; Oakes *et al.*, 1992; Hallam and Toutounji, 1996; Harlen and Malcolm, 1997);
- any form of streaming by some general measure of ability (Gamoran, 1992; Oakes *et al.*, 1992; Hallam and Toutounji, 1996; Harlen and Malcolm, 1997);
- any form of post-16 selection, for example into sixth-year colleges (Benn and Chitty, 1996).

But there are other ideas that might be worth testing, because there is some evidence—notably from North America—that they could in fact be more consistent with comprehensive principles than the current system of undifferentiated neighbourhood comprehensives:

- specialist schools: there is some evidence that they can be more effective and more egalitarian than unspecialised comprehensives (and than most types of selective private school) (Gamoran, 1996);
- limited setting by sex—limited both by subject area and by duration (and this must be shown to be in the interests of both sexes before it can be acceptable, and it would have to allow that some individual boys or girls learn better in mixed groups even though it is possible that, on average, boys or girls might gain some advantage from being educated apart for a while in some subjects) (Howe, 1997);
- larger schools (but it would not be enough to take account only of attainment and access to the curriculum: effects on motivation and discipline would have to be considered as well; and in rural areas large schools will never be feasible) (Lee and Smith, 1997);
- a reinterpretation of ‘neighbourhood’, especially in urban areas, to include whole segments of cities, so as to reduce the effect of social segregation among small neighbourhoods.

These are just illustrations. The point is that, of all the agencies involved in planning and evaluating education in Scotland—and I include here government and educational researchers—local authorities are best placed to demonstrate what works and what doesn’t, and therefore ought to be the first source of advice on which the parliament can draw.

#### 4. CITIZENSHIP

Comprehensive education has served many purposes—for example, providing a more skilled workforce, enabling individual social mobility, and promoting social cohesion. But one of its primary justifications is as a way of creating a common citizenship. That was an original aspiration of the reformers in the 1950s and 1960s. When Tom Johnston asked the Advisory Council on Education during the war to consider the type of secondary education that would best serve a democracy, they responded in 1947 with proposals that look very like the system of neighbourhood comprehensives that we have today (McPherson and Raab, 1988; Paterson, 1996b; Hogan, 1997).

The development of the idea of comprehensive education thereafter always placed as much emphasis on developing a common citizenship as on promoting national economic effectiveness: in the words of Stephen Ball (1981, pp. 7–8), ‘the integrative school model ... stresses improved qualities of citizenship and the achievement of a tolerant or socially conscious society’. The first and most important step towards that was simply ending selection. But the curricular reforms which ensued have become at least as important in securing common citizenship as that structural one. The development of the child-guidance system, for example, began to give reality to the idea that good citizens had to have self-respect (Darling, 1994). The invention and expansion of Modern Studies gave Scotland the most advanced programmes of civics education in the UK. The question now, however, is whether these features of education for common citizenship need to be renewed just as much as the structural aspects of comprehensive schooling. What should citizenship education try to do as Scottish democracy is renewed over the next decade?

A natural starting point for a discussion of citizenship education would be a definition of citizenship. But—perhaps more than for any area of the curriculum—the consensus of writers on this subject seems to be that an agreed definition is unattainable, and so that what matters is process not outcome. Carr (1991, p.374) says that citizenship is ‘essentially contested’ in the senses that ‘the criteria governing its proper use are constantly challenged and disputed’ and that ‘arguments about these criteria turn on fundamental political issues for which a final rational solution is not available’. The students who go through a programme of citizenship education should therefore acquire certain capacities rather than merely knowledge of a set of facts, although they would have to know the facts of democracy in order to have had an opportunity to exercise the capacities. Indeed, citizenship can be thought of as residing in these capacities more fundamentally than in the facts. For example, it seems much more relevant to a person’s citizenship that she knows how to engage in democratic argument than that she knows (say) the exact distribution of powers between the Scottish parliament and Westminster, although clearly such knowledge is necessary for her being able to argue effectively. There is, perhaps, an analogy with thinking skills, to which educators are turning increasingly for means by which students can learn effectively: the attention is to the skills, but they are best exercised in a specific domain of knowledge (Lipman, 1993; Nisbet, 1993).

Avis *et al.* (1996, p. 157) suggest that there are three important aspects of education for citizenship:

- The first is the facts of democratic life, and also some understanding of what to do with these facts. This we can call political education. Thus, in the new Scotland, it will be important not only that children and adults learn about the new governing institutions, and their possibly new ways of working, but also that they develop critical capacities to question these institutions. It should be said that the referendum was quite an encouraging start: survey evidence shows that people were quite well-informed about the proposed parliament’s powers, that around 70% of them cared about the outcome of the referendum, and that about 40% of them read the government’s information leaflet. (This information comes from analysis of the Scottish Referendum Survey, conducted in September and October 1997 by the Centre for Research on Elections and Social Trends and Social and Community Planning Research, and funded by the ESRC.) But, of course, that still leaves 60% not having done so; moreover, even when account is taken of the inadequacies of the electoral register, we have to acknowledge that no more than about two thirds of the adult population bothered to vote.
- The second is general education. This is a very old Scottish principle—that education can help us to understand and to cooperate with each other in society (Davie, 1991; Paterson, 1993). Early specialism divides people, and, in the end, many decisions of government are then abdicated to committees of experts.
- The third is that the process of learning should itself give students the experience of being independent. Fairly obviously, this was not an old Scottish principle, but it has become firmly established in Scottish education (as elsewhere) since the 1960s (Darling, 1994). One writer has called it ‘education for studentship’, and by studentship he means the ‘capacity for independent study and for recognising the problematic nature of knowledge’ (Bloomer, 1996, p.140).

The contested nature of citizenship is clear from these three principles. This is where, it seems to me, local authorities come in. While it would, of course, be desirable that the new parliament should set aside resources to promote citizenship education, and while it would be helpful to teachers if the Scottish Consultative Council on the

Curriculum would make the necessary materials available (maybe in partnership with the broadcasters who will be covering the proceedings of the parliament and its committees), we need some way of guaranteeing scepticism. A centrally defined curriculum for citizenship is almost a contradiction in terms (except in the hands of personnel that have a detachment and enlightenment that are rather greater than is usually shown by the leadership classes of Scottish education): citizenship is always defined both against the state as well as in support of it (Hall and Held, 1989).

So, if the parliament is truly intent on promoting democratic participation and responsibility, then it should allow for significant variation in what counts as citizenship. Here are just some examples of what that could mean:

- Part of the meaning of citizenship is defining who is a member of which political community (Hall and Held, 1989). The question of which community is likely to be quite controversial in Scotland. Although all areas voted clearly in favour of the parliament in the referendum, there are undoubtedly some suspicions of it based on the long-standing sense that Scotland is a nation of strong regional communities. Although this can be exaggerated—for example, political values do not vary more among Scottish regions than they do among the regions of England (Brown *et al.*, 1996, chapter 7)—nevertheless Scottish politics are likely to evolve with conflicting as well as complementary loyalties to different levels of government. The curriculum should allow for these varying loyalties to be expressed, and so there need to be local agencies which can develop appropriate curricula for their own communities.
- Defining who is a member of the Scottish political community will also be controversial. I do not mean that there will be any significant political pressure in Scotland to exclude any adult social groups from democratic participation, but I am thinking more of the ways in which minority views of citizenship can be brought to bear on the political process. For example, just how much cultural autonomy is the Scottish majority prepared to allow to Muslims? Does this extend to there being a distinct Islamic curriculum or separate Islamic schools (Kelly and Maan, 1998)? Although local authorities do not have any more of a monopoly of the wisdom on this than other agencies of Scottish government, some of them do have a better record of paying attention to these issues than the Scottish Office. This, too, could therefore be an area in which local authorities could give a lead.
- Are children members of the political community? In terms of formal rights to vote or hold office, our society has, mostly, decided that they are not. But attention to children's rights has grown recently (Cleland, 1995). We have begun to accept that they have rights to speak and to be heard, along the lines of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. We have also given children some limited influence on policy, for example through the occasional co-option to school boards or through the activities of children's services in local government as a consequence of the 1989 and 1995 Children Acts. But some people would argue that this has not gone nearly far enough: for example, the depute rector of Queen Anne High School in Dunfermline has argued that there should be some structured way in which the views of young people could be brought to influence the new parliament (Bonnar, 1997). The Liberal Democrats unsuccessfully moved an amendment to the Scotland Bill at Westminster to lower the voting age to 16 for elections to the parliament.
- Most fundamentally of all, if we take citizenship seriously, then there is likely to emerge a tension between so-called positive and negative conceptions of liberty. Negative freedom is freedom from constraints; positive freedom is

being genuinely in a position to exercise certain rights. The negative version has traditionally been most favoured by political conservatives. The radical political left has coupled rights with justice when they have argued for positive freedoms: in the present context, the radical left would argue that there is no point in having citizenship rights if you don't have the education or the financial resources to be an active and articulate citizen (Marshall, 1950). (The Labour government draws some ideas from this radical critique, for example in its concern to reduce social exclusion, but has also accepted much of the Conservatives' definition of rights as individual, for example in currently having no proposals to modify the placing requests legislation.)

The majority Scottish view is likely to continue to favour the promotion of positive freedom, and therefore is likely to favour redistribution to help secure that for most people. Comprehensive education is itself such a measure of redistribution (of resources, but almost certainly also of outcomes, insofar as it has encouraged social mobility that probably would not have happened otherwise).

But what if some parts of Scotland prefer a less interventionist view? This does not necessarily have to take the form of a shift unambiguously to the political right. For example, what if the political preferences of one area were for voluntary types of redistribution, through credit unions, community enterprise, and voluntary schools? If some element of statutory redistribution were to be retained, the schools could be offered local authority grants in return for their community's demonstrable willingness to manage things for themselves. The politics that could lead to this would be the view that, provided the whole community has access to a certain minimum level of provision, then the state should not stand in the way of others' doing things differently. The meaning of citizenship would be different in an area which followed that course: there would be greater emphasis on active involvement, and thus on the negative view of liberty, and less on the positive view. Would that kind of deviation from the national norm be acceptable? In other words, could the meaning of a good citizen be defined locally, at least in part? If so, then the appropriate forum for deciding on that local meaning is the elected local authority, and the appropriate agency for devising an education that would prepare for it would be the local authority.

Nevertheless, although local authorities must be involved in redefining citizenship, they will have to have a greater capacity to develop policy than has been bequeathed to them by the re-organisation of 1995–6. That would require not only that they build up independent means of making policy, locally as well as nationally (through the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, etc.). It also requires that they have the autonomy—both financial and constitutional—which would allow that to matter (Fairley, 1997; Midwinter, 1997). At the moment, local authorities clearly have very little autonomy in relation to the curriculum, and yet the proposals here for a devolved programme of citizenship would require that the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum and the Scottish Qualifications Authority no longer have a monopoly, in practice, of ideas on what to teach. If, moreover—as argued at the beginning of this section—building common citizenship requires that the comprehensive system be reinvigorated, then local authorities must also have significant new powers to redistribute resources. It has to be said also that local government also probably needs to be renewed politically if it is to have the legitimacy to take on these new roles, especially when confronted with a new parliament which has been elected by proportional representation and for which all the political parties will have been stringent in selecting good-quality candidates.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

It is taken for granted now that the new parliament will pose some challenges to local government. Education will provide a clear instance of that, not only because it is expensive, but also because it is a prime cultural and economic reason why people have campaigned for a Scottish parliament at all. But local authorities have the experience and the local democratic legitimacy to resist some of the pressures that might come from the parliament. So the willingness of the parliament to cede real autonomy to local government in education will be a real test of its general willingness to decentralise. It is not even a matter of education being a partnership between local and central government (although it is). The point is that it is also, unavoidably, a matter of dispute. It will be the duty of local authorities not only to teach the parliament and its permanent staff some lessons in social inclusion. They will also have to acquire the capacity for curricular development that will encourage the next generation of citizens to subject the parliament to informed and critical scrutiny.

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