

RESEARCH ABSTRACTS

SOEID-FUNDED PROJECTS

FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN THE UPPER SECONDARY SCHOOL: A STUDY OF THE CAUSES OF DECLINE

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In November 1996, researchers from the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) and the Institute of Education at the University of Stirling began a study of the causes of decline in uptake of Higher courses in modern languages in Scottish secondary schools. The study was funded by The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) in response to evidence from the Scottish Qualifications Authority that the numbers of students entered for Higher examinations in modern languages had fallen by approximately 50 per cent between 1976 and 1996, and the consequent widespread concern about the effects of declining capability in modern languages on Scottish industry and trade and on Scotland's role within Europe. The findings from the research are based on a survey of a random sample of secondary schools conducted in the spring of 1998, a preliminary study of 12 case-study secondary schools and a telephone survey of a range of Scottish businesses to gather information about the foreign language needs of different types of employers.

The researchers addressed the question 'why has uptake in modern languages declined' and quickly concluded that everyone they interviewed had strong ideas about the causes of the decline, but there were many different explanations. These they grouped into three categories: explanations relating to the national structure and policies for language learning in Scotland, for example Modern Languages in the Primary School); explanations related to school policies and practices, for example timetabling; and, finally explanations relating to students' attitudes and motivation for learning modern languages. All of these, the researchers argue, come together to create the current climate of negativity.

Given the Ministerial commitment to reversing the trend of decline, the researchers consider ways in which this might be reversed. They suggest that the principal objective must be to improve student motivation for learning languages. This means, firstly, making clearer than before the importance of being able to communicate in another language for business and for wider social and cultural reasons. Furthermore, a more positive attitude towards what students achieve at school is needed. More positive views of students' achievements are likely to develop if we are realistic about what can be achieved with our current level of resources.

The researchers point out that at present, language study at school is compulsory for four to six years: this equates to approximately 400 hours of compulsory language learning. What is it feasible for students to have achieved at the end of this time? How do students' achievements currently compare with those of their counterparts in other European countries after a similar amount of time learning a foreign language? To what extent are students, their parents, and their future employers informed about what is expected? These are all questions which, the researchers believe, should be addressed if the decline is to be reversed.

TEACHERS' ICT SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE NEEDS

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In the light of current developments such as the National Grid for Learning (NGfL), and funding for training recently becoming available for teachers and librarians, it is clearly vital to understand teachers' ICT skills and knowledge needs, to discover their priorities for future development and to establish what will encourage teachers to adopt ICT where appropriate in their professional lives as classroom practitioners, as planners and managers and as learners. To this end, The Scottish Office Education and Industry Department commissioned this research project which was conducted between October 1997 and April 1998. Its primary aim was to investigate teachers' ICT needs and suggest ways of enhancing the future design and delivery of self- and staff-development in order to increase and improve the level of ICT use in Scottish schools. The study was conducted in two parts: first, a survey of a sample of primary and secondary schools to provide an overview of teachers' attitudes and uses of ICT; and, second, a number of scenario interviews were conducted to explore the contextual factors which affect teachers' responses to ICT and ICT training.

The study highlighted a number of issues relating to teachers' use and requirements of, and attitudes to, ICT. These the researchers grouped under four headings: use of ICT; problems and challenges associated with its use; attitudes, skills and training for use of ICT, and finally, the organisational culture of the schools in which teachers work. Overall, the researchers discovered that the use of ICT was relatively low and was focused in a fairly narrow range. The most frequent use in both primary and secondary schools was for word processing; very little use of the internet and World Wide Web or e-mail was found. A number of problems and issues emerged which may help to explain this. Some, as would be expected, centred around the lack of access to, or problems with the availability of hardware or software, and the users' own lack of familiarity, skills and knowledge. However, more importantly, many teachers were failing to integrate ICT into the core activities of teaching and learning within schools.

In conclusion, the researchers argue that teachers have different kinds of needs in relation to ICT development. To be skilled and knowledgeable is the key to effective implementation of ICT in teaching and learning and there is no doubt that Scottish

teachers are motivated and interested in developing their own skills and knowledge. Messages from the research indicate that to enhance the use of ICT requires:

- appropriate training (in terms of the skills, knowledge, relevance to educational goals and priorities and delivery)
- ready access to ICT
- ongoing support and advice to encourage progression beyond initial training.

Each of these needs to be set within a culture which encourages change within schools but at a pace appropriate to teachers and their schools.

SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION FOR THE LEARNING AGE

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This study is the first major research project to examine the relationship between schools and community education in Scotland. It was undertaken between September 1996 and April 1998, a period of considerable change following local government reorganisation which affected the administration of both the school system and the community education service. The research was designed to provide a national overview and to identify examples of effective practice in collaboration and joint provision between schools and community education. Community education was broadly conceived to include voluntary agencies and other organisations as well as local authority community education services. The research was undertaken in two stages to provide both breadth and depth to the findings. The first stage provided a statistical overview and a map of local community education initiatives within the changing local authority contexts. The second stage of the project selected and studied in depth the links formed between the ten case-study schools and their local communities. Detailed findings are discussed in the full report.

The researchers suggest that the main argument arising from the research is essentially this: schools and community education have distinct but complementary roles to play in the new Scotland in promoting active and inclusive citizenship and in combating social exclusion. Although schools and community education have different kinds of 'core business', they are both formed by a fundamental commitment to the comprehensive principle which requires that the ideal of education for all is supported by a commitment to selective intervention which ensures that education can indeed be for everyone. Democratic renewal depends on a dual commitment by the new Scottish state: to use schooling to help to prepare young people to become democratic citizens, and to support and enhance people's capacity in civil society to

be active citizens in a democracy. In order to promote active citizenship and combat social exclusion in the learning age, any consideration of the evolving relationship between schools and community education in Scotland must be placed firmly in the dual context of both globalisation and democratic renewal. Schooling is a necessary but not sufficient condition for this civic and political reconstruction.

The researchers conclude by suggesting that the full potential of schools and community education can only be realised when they are both seen as essential elements within a coherent and comprehensive community education system, i.e. understood as a way of organising education and making available relevant and responsive opportunities for life-long learning which meet the needs, interests and aspirations of individual communities. This, they argue, has always been part of the philosophy and pedagogy of community education and of the distinctive Scottish traditions of democratic intellectualism and common sense. This, in essence, is the revisioning of community education which the research team advocates.