

FROM THE EDITOR

The social and political context of education in Scotland has been far from untroubled in the second half of the year 2000. An educational disaster of unprecedented magnitude struck in August when thousands of young people in Scotland discovered that their examination results were either not available, or not to be trusted, as the whole of the new flagship “Higher Still” assessment system unravelled before the eyes of an incredulous public. The political and professional ramifications of the whole affair will undoubtedly be far-reaching and few of the protagonists are likely to emerge unscathed. Questions have been asked why HMIs had not done more to convey the clear concerns of schools about impending failure of the new system. Therefore, as well as wholesale changes within the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) itself, the role and future functions of Her Majesty’s Schools’ Inspectorate are likely to come in for close scrutiny. Given the significance of the examinations crisis, this issue of *SER* carries as a special feature an extended Parliamentary Report by Gari Donn, in which she documents with great care and precision the proceedings of committee meetings and parliamentary debates which have been dominated by issues arising in the aftermath of the SQA debacle.

The whole of Scottish society was shocked by the sudden death of the First Minister, Donald Dewar. The immediate ramifications for education have centred on the cabinet reshuffle carried out by his successor, Henry McLeish, which has resulted in new Ministers being placed in charge of both the relevant departments. The opportunity was taken to move Sam Galbraith, Minister for Children and Education, after he had taken a good deal of criticism for the handling of the examinations chaos, even though direct ministerial responsibility for the SQA had resided with the former Minister for Enterprise and Lifelong Learning, Henry McLeish himself. Gari Donn’s report shows that this structural complexity may have caused ambiguity in channels of communication and lines of accountability for the SQA which, it could be argued, may have contributed to the scale of the disaster.

Meanwhile a significant shift may have taken place with the change in title adopted by the new Education Minister, Jack McConnell, away from the former designation, “Minister for Children and Education”, to “Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs”. Despite assurances, fears have already been expressed that this represents a diminution of the political priority being attached to early education and childcare. It will be interesting to see whether this change will signal a slowing down of the moves in many of the Scottish local authorities, which have not already done so, to integrate traditionally separate departmental specialisms by setting up political and operational structures for “children’s services”.

Among the many lessons that will be learned from the SQA affair, there is, perhaps, one very simple message, namely, the need to avoid complacency. Self-congratulation about the quality of Scottish education has often been based on nothing more than the sometimes ill-founded assertion that at least “our” system avoids the mistakes made south of the border! The level of educational debate needs to rise, if we are to see significant improvements in the quality of education provided in Scotland. Several important documents have appeared in recent months which demand wide debate and reflection. The newly formed Learning and Teaching Scotland published its consultation document on Education for Citizenship which seems set to become the overarching aim for all of Scottish education. Issues associated with this initiative were discussed at one of the symposia organised by SERA as part of the European Conference on Educational Research in Edinburgh in September (see SERA News). This issue of *SER* contains an article by David McLaren based

on the paper he presented at that symposium. The article takes a historical look at the concept of education for citizenship by comparing present developments with the millenarian model of the “new moral world” developed by Robert Owen in his system of education at New Lanark two hundred years ago.

There are, perhaps, some positive signs of the development of a participatory democracy in the new Scotland. The Standards in Scotland’s Schools, etc. Act was passed in July 2000 requiring education authorities to have “due regard” to the views of children and young people in decisions that significantly affect them. The Act also requires headteachers in their school development plans to indicate how they will consult pupils and seek to involve them when decisions need to be taken on the everyday running of the school. The Scottish Civic Forum is now providing a means by which a wide spectrum of views can be expressed on political, social and cultural matters, including educational issues. It is developing exciting new channels of communication to facilitate the sharing of views more widely and more immediately than has been possible ever before. *SER* is also currently exploring alternative ways of establishing itself as a presence on the internet. The Editorial Team and the Board would particularly welcome any suggestions and offers of practical assistance with this task.

There is again a healthy diversity in the nature of the topics addressed and in the approaches adopted by the contributors to Volume 32, Number 2 of *SER*. Margaret Nicolson tackles the notion of the often-cited reluctance of Scots to take up the learning of languages. This is a phenomenon which is thrown into sharp relief by such events as the ECER 2000 Conference in Edinburgh when delegates from more than 40 countries were able to engage in high-level academic discourse in a language other than their own. Alison Closs tackles the “neglected issue” of absence from school for medical reasons and argues both for a clearer distinction to be made between authorised and unauthorised absence and for greater attention to be paid to former in educational policy. Shifting the spotlight to psychological health, the factors influencing stress among students undergoing initial teacher education is examined in an article by David Miller and Edna Fraser. Career decisions taken by promoted staff in secondary schools is the focus of the article by Janet Draper and Paquita McMichael. Finally, a case study of curriculum development in the area of Environmental Education by Moira Laing and Marie-Jeanne McNaughton provides some topical food for thought in the context of widespread concerns about climate change and sustainable development.

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