

As I write this editorial, a drama unfolds in Switzerland, as the much heralded Big Bang Experiment gets underway. The experiment has been surrounded by media ignorance and hyperbole, including doomsday predictions and comparisons with the first moon landing. However, the excitement of the participating scientists is palpable; clearly, whether one believes the hype or not, this is a truly significant event that has the potential to change the ways in which we see the universe. An important aspect of the experiment is the process of inquiry that is set in motion by the switching on of the particle accelerator; as Stephen Hawking has stated, in many ways, it would be better if the so-called God Particle is not discovered, as this opens up endless possibilities for open-ended and unfettered exploration of the laws of our universe.

In some respects, Scottish education has been experiencing its own Big Bang Experiment, namely *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE). The exciting aspect of CfE lies not in its methods of specifying curriculum – through content expressed as outcomes – with the attendant risks of a new teleological straitjacket for teachers, but in the possibilities of educational development offered by its transformational change model. As such the launch of CfE is a switching on of the machine, and should be seen as such by those engaging with it. It is now up to the people working with CfE to make something of it, to work with an opportunity to unlock human potential, amongst both young people and education professionals; as Lawrence Stenhouse stated many years ago,

men are relatively predictable, limited and uncreative. It is the business of education to make us freer and more creative. (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 82)

CfE has been heralded as ‘one of the most ambitious programmes of educational change ever undertaken in Scotland’ (Scottish Government 2008: 8). It has been described (LTS 2007) as the ‘biggest educational reform programme for a generation under the Scottish Executive’s *Ambitious, Excellent Schools* agenda’. There have been many CPD events nationwide to spread the message. The *Curriculum for Excellence* roadshow has come to many towns, with at times the feel of a revivalist convention, and the message is unequivocal: CfE is intended to transform learning and teaching in Scotland’s schools. And yet despite this high policy profile, the vision of CfE is less clear nationally, in schools. Many teachers have complained about a lack of clarity and purpose and a mythology of CfE has developed, often erroneous or only partially informed. CfE raises many key questions. What does it mean for teachers? How will it change their practice? What are the key messages? Will it lead to the death of traditional school subjects? Moreover, the much touted four capacities – *successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, effective contributors* – have become a sort of mantra, regularly cited at CPD events and seen adorning noticeboards in classrooms and in school corridors, but often subject to little critical interrogation. Perhaps in some schools, CfE is less a Big Bang than a creeping sense of inevitability.

Nevertheless, at least schools are starting to engage with this major innovation – in some cases very proactively, as they make sense of the new framework and, in the best cases, utilise this opportunity to reconfigure learning and teaching according to first principles. However, it is not yet clear whether Scotland’s research community has engaged with CfE to any great extent. To paraphrase Tom Conlon (2008), one of the contributors to this edition of SER, there has been a ‘deafening silence’ from the academic community on the subject of CfE (he was talking about GLOW, but the same

could be said about CfE). To be fair to Scotland's education researchers, there has been little implementation activity until recently, upon which to base empirical study. However, it is puzzling that there also has been so little academic debate about the proposed curriculum and its model for implementation. This perhaps reflects the poor status of curriculum development theory in modern day educational discourse; gone are the days when such theory was prominent in the writings of the likes of Paul Hirst (1974), Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) and Dennis Lawton (1975), and in turn influenced the formation of policy and the actions of teachers engaging in school-based curriculum development. I suspect, also, that the lack of writing on the school curriculum reflects the manner in which teacher autonomy in curriculum making has been successively eroded – a process described by Goodson (2003; xiii) as 'brutal restructuring' delivered in 'ignorance or defiance of teachers' beliefs and missions' - to the point where teachers have been construed by some (e.g. Ball 2008) as little more than technicians delivering teacher proof curricula. Thus, a narrow focus in school-based curriculum development, perhaps explains a concomitant lack of theorising around this subject.

There would seem to be many fruitful avenues for such engagement by Scotland's academics. For instance, the structure of the curriculum could be subjected to sustained critique; early documentation seemed to imply a process curriculum, particularly the four capacities, which seem to have many of the hallmarks of intrinsic curriculum purposes (cf. Kelly 1999). One might then pose the following questions. To what extent are later developments congruent with such a vision?; How do the specification of outcomes and the sub-division of the curriculum into Hirstian domains of knowledge (Hirst 1974) fit with the four capacities and a wider view of the sorts of young people that the curriculum architects seek to develop through CfE? Another potential area for discussion involves the transformational change model that is said to underpin CfE. Does this model work? What are the precedents elsewhere? Does the model invite genuine curricular autonomy in schools, or simply a narrow 'procedural autonomy' (Bates 1989), regulated by outcomes and targets? Does the Scottish education system have the capacity to engage with curriculum development in an autonomous manner, especially following a decade or more of centralised and bureaucratic control of schools? As Elliott Eisner reminds us,

If a bird has been in a cage for a decade and suddenly finds the door open, it should not be surprising if the bird does not wish to leave. The familiar is often more comfortable than the uncertainty of the unknown. (Eisner 1992: 617)

Whether or not schools have the capacity to engage with CfE, one must also ask if there is the will to engage with what are potentially major changes in practice. School culture, especially in the case of secondary schools, is a powerful determinant of action and is, moreover, held in place by strong structural elements of the system, notably examinations and quality improvement mechanisms. According to Smyth *et al.* (2003), school culture comprises the following features:

- the abstract division of knowledge into subjects;
- a hierarchy of subjects with maths at the top;
- a hierarchical ordering of knowledge within each subject;
- teacher centred pedagogy;
- individualised learning;
- formal competitive assessment.

Exploring how such features of schools might help or hinder the development of CfE must surely be a theoretical as well as an empirical exercise, and it is disappointing that there has not been more debate to date. We would of course welcome papers on this theme, and others, at SER.

The contributors to this edition of SER make a worthy contribution to such debate, and one that I hope will stimulate further discussion about CfE. We have taken the opportunity presented by the availability of a rich set of articles around an important

issue at a key stage in its development to put together a ‘bumper’ edition. This edition is structured around a broad theme of *Curriculum for Excellence*, although the articles do not deal exclusively with this issue. The paper by Jenny Reeves offers a perceptive analysis of policy documents that are relevant to the enactment of CfE. Reeves’s paper goes well beyond a focus on policy, though, offering insights into the structural and cultural influences that come to bear on classroom decision making, and ultimately on the form that teaching (and learning) will take in many classrooms. Reeves argues that CfE contains many features that are incompatible with the *Quality Initiative in Scottish Schools*, as articulated through the various incarnations of HGIOS, and that such tensions create impossible contradictions for teachers in their day to day practice. She makes that case that while *Quality Initiative* represents a hard version of managerialism, CfE is a softer variant, with the potential for greater levels of teacher professional engagement with curriculum and pedagogy. By continuing to subject teachers to the demands of the former, Reeves believes that the latter is compromised – that CfE will not be enacted meaningfully while teachers continue to be subject to the hard managerialism of *Quality Initiative*. This paper thus contains some important messages for policymakers, for schools and Education Authority managers, and for teachers.

The article contributed by Christine Stephen, Peter Cope, Iddo Oberski and Peter Shand picks up a theme of CfE and learning, which is continued in the following papers. Their article draws upon data from an AERS research project to investigate teachers’ and learners’ views about engagement. The paper offers a useful review of the literature relating to engagement before drawing on empirical data to interrogate the notion further. The authors conclude that, from their research, there are widely differing, and arguably mutually incompatible views of engagement expressed by teachers and learners. While the teachers in the study tended to view engagement as participation in tasks specified by the teacher, pupils saw it, in contrast, as active involvement, ‘enhanced by a perception that there is some scope for freedom of action and opportunity for choice’. There is thus clearly some tension between the views of engagement with learning held by teachers and learners; a tension that is perhaps also inherent in the culture clash threatened when teachers used to particular ways of working seek to enact a new curriculum predicated on more active modes of learning.

The paper by Effie McLellan and Rebecca Soden takes a look at CfE from the perspective of cognitive psychology. The article provides a comprehensive overview of relevant literature from this field, before analysing the ways in which such theory relates to CfE. The authors ‘characterise learning in terms of four broad aptitudes (*knowledge, strategy, metacognition and beliefs*)’ and make the case that these are ‘fundamentally dependent on the individual learner’s regulation of mental processes’. This individualistic view of learning is very much in tune with the four capacities, which define learning in terms of attributes that individual learners will develop through the course of their schooling, for example critical thinking and communications skills. McLellan and Soden offer the pertinent observation that teachers will need to engage more thoroughly with learning theory, especially theories about how learners construct knowledge, if the four capacities are to be realised in Scotland’s classrooms.

Tensions between individual and socially-embedded views of learning are developed in the next article by Gert Biesta. From a starting point of the 2002 publication, *Education for Citizenship in Scotland: A paper for discussion and development*, Biesta offers an analysis of official documentation relating to citizenship, including CfE publications. He poses the questions: ‘What kind of citizen?’; ‘What kind of democracy?’. He identifies four key features of the conception of citizenship as it is articulated in Scotland: an *individualistic tendency* – citizenship as ‘a capacity or capability... understood in terms of individual responsibility and choice’; a *broad*

*conception of the domain of citizenship*, encompassing ‘political, economic, social and cultural life’; activity, both ‘the exercise of citizenship as active citizenship and ... the ways in which citizenship can be learned ... through engagement in citizenship activity’; and an emphasis on the notion of *community*. Biesta, placing his analysis within a framework developed by Westheimer and Kahne, argues that as CfE has unfolded, conceptions of citizenship have taken on an increasingly individualistic slant, framed around notions of personal capacity and responsibility, and individual values. It is Biesta’s view that this trend is especially evident in the HMIE publications surrounding citizenship.

Together, these articles raise some important questions about the nature and purposes of education and the sorts of pedagogies that may be necessary to engage with the new curriculum. Moving away from the *Curriculum for Excellence* theme, the edition also contains several papers that are of topical interest, and moreover which relate indirectly to CfE, especially in respect of the area of educational change. Gillean McCluskey presents some conclusions from a collaborative research and development project, in which researchers worked with teachers and managers to manage the implementation of the *Education (Additional Support for Learning)(Scotland) Act (2004)*. Her paper ‘explores the experiences and changing understandings of key staff (pastoral care, learning support, behaviour support) in three mainstream secondary schools as they worked to translate the new legislation into a coherent, holistic and sustainable set of practices’. McCluskey points to the importance, when managing the introduction of such a large scale and complex policy, of the following factors: sharing *responsibility* for the innovation; sharing *information* through dialogue, an explicit focus on *change* processes; and attending to the needs of *teachers* as learners. In similar fashion to CfE, the ASL Act has required a cultural change in many settings, and it would appear that the author’s conclusions are extremely relevant to those seeking to enact CfE.

Tom Conlon provides a timely and thought provoking article about GLOW, Scotland’s emerging web-based learning environment that seeks to integrate a range of IT-based learning resources. Conlon suggests that there is a dark side to GLOW that has been neglected in much of the dialogue which has accompanied its implementation. This includes opportunity costs (i.e. money that could have been spent elsewhere), as well as the dangers that have been documented in other centrally driven IT projects: data protection issues, hacking and viruses, and overspend. In tune with other articles in this edition, Conlon’s paper provides insights into the difficulties facing the implementation of large, central-driven education policies, especially in terms of the cultural shifts that are required for such implementation.

Valerie Wilson’s paper reports on some research commissioned by the former Scottish Executive into the operation of small primary schools. The article suggests that while such schools are under pressure to close, due to issues of economic viability, they serve a valuable social function in small, and often remote, communities. According to Wilson, ‘small schools’ headteachers need adequate support if they are to maintain the role effectively for the benefit of the children who live in some of Scotland’s more remote communities’. She suggests that this might be best served through the wider establishment of federated schools, where one headteacher manages two or more locations.

Ashley Reid and Douglas Weir offer a paper that raises uncomfortable questions about the received wisdom of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). At a time when the *General Teaching Council for Scotland* has recently overhauled the occupational standards relating to teaching, their analysis is timely, as well as being potentially controversial. The authors are sceptical about the efficacy of the dominant approach to ITE in Scotland, the one year PGDE route, suggesting that four year routes (B.Ed. and concurrent subject/ITE degrees) potentially offer a more comprehensive preparation for a career in teaching. Their analysis draws upon an empirical study

carried out within their own university.

Last, but by no means least, the edition contains Morag Redford's regular feature, *Education in the Scottish Parliament*, and a number book reviews. These include several books relating to primary and early years schooling: behaviour management, assessment for learning, child development the building of learning communities. On a different note, we are pleased to announce that the SER is due to go online. While current articles will continue to be available by subscription, in paper form only, the website will provide an archive of back issues, as well as updated and more easily accessible directions for authors. We are confident that this development will make the SER more accessible to an international audience, and will in turn raise the profile of Scottish educational issues internationally. We hope that the site will be up and running by the end of the year.

Mark Priestley (September 2008)

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