

Education Governance in Scotland: A Response

By Jim Crowther, University of Edinburgh

Background

In 2016 the Scottish Government began a major review of governance in Scottish education. In June 2017, based on the findings of this review, the Scottish Government produced a plan for improvement and change titled '*Education Governance: Next Steps - Empowering Our Teachers, Parents and Communities to Deliver Excellence and Equity for Our Children*'.

According to the Scottish Government, this publication sets out their '*...vision for education and the reforms it will take forward...The purpose of those reforms is to drive improvement and to enable our education system to realise our ambition of excellence and equity for all*'. Whilst the Government's vision of striving for excellence and equality, and their recognition that '*...the people best placed to work with parents and communities to drive improvement for our children are our teachers, practitioners and learning professionals*' are to be welcomed, the way this vision will be achieved has stimulated debate in the field as well as causing some concern amongst education practitioners, particularly from community educators. See for example the discussion and debate which is hosted by the CLD Standards Council for Scotland <http://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/>

In this article Jim Crowther gives his own individual response to the Government's review and reforms. CONCEPT Journal would welcome other contributions on this important topic. Please contact the editor at stuart.moir@ed.ac.uk

Stuart Moir, Concept Editor

The Government's publication, *Education Governance: Next Steps*, can be found here <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/06/2941>

The Review

The review understands excellence in terms of improving literacy and numeracy standards along with skills, qualifications and achievements. Equity is framed in terms of children having the same opportunity to succeed by closing the poverty-related attainment gap.

These fundamental purposes are claimed to be shared and are greatly influenced by OECD analysis of slippage in educational standards in Scotland as measured by PISA league tables. The policy is a high-stakes one as the SNP Government have committed their political reputation on making a significant difference to educational attainment over the course of their period of office.

Purpose

The purposes of education in terms of excellence & equity says nothing about delivering social justice. Whilst equity rightly recognizes the fact that people may not start from a level playing field, and therefore may need additional support and resources to have a fair chance of succeeding, it stops short of seeking a broadly level outcome. In an equity model, unequal outcomes are legitimate as long as compensation for different starting points is introduced. It therefore aligns itself with a meritocratic model of achievement. A focus on social justice would seek to rectify the imbalance that derives from social inequalities by addressing the end point as well as the starting point of education.

A social justice model of education is incompatible with a private system of education which ensures educational privileges through wealth. This policy document says nothing about the wider educational context and how the private sector impacts on the public sector.

False claims

The proposals aim to put 'pupils at the heart' of the system by giving head teachers and teachers greater autonomy. At the same time, pupils, parents and communities are

going to be empowered. How the latter interacts with the former is simply asserted rather than explained and justified. The role of communities is given three short paragraphs. Pupils will be 'listened to' but how this happens is unclear and presumably they can be ignored as schools or teachers see fit. There appears to be little evidence of a thriving culture of pupil and parental participation in Scottish schools so it is hard to see how this change will come about.

Moreover, what schools have to achieve – improved literacy and numeracy etc is not up for debate. Pupils and parents may agree with these objectives but may not value them in quite the same way or, indeed, they may have different views about how they are arrived at. These possibilities are off the agenda. Empowered pupils? Empowered parents and communities?

Funding and resources

Whilst head teachers and teachers are tasked with reducing the attainment gap how they will do this is largely through structural changes – regional groupings to collaborate which is presented as 'a revolutionized offer of support and improvement' – with little or nothing in the way of extra resources. Class sizes, for example, is not mentioned. Classroom assistants lost in local authority budget cuts not mentioned. There is a Pupil Equity Fund but how adequate this is in relation to the scale of the task is unclear.

Each school will have *access* to a home-school link person who might be a teacher or another professional. How frequent such access will be and what role this new position will have in individual school decision-making is not mentioned. Also home-school work has been done before but there seems to be no evidence presented in terms of the conditions which have to be met for this work to be effective. As most of the decision-making structures will be dependent on what head teachers decide we can safely assume that the impact of the home-school link worker will depend on the head.

The issue of funding for schools with low attainment levels is left for a further period of consultation. It is difficult to see how equity can be claimed without some skewing of resources towards more disadvantaged schools but the review is coy about this subject.

Autonomy

The freeing up of head teachers to get on with the business of learning in the school will occur at the same time as they take on more responsibility for staffing, budgeting and data management at school level. Whilst local authorities will still shoulder some of the burden of HR activities and pupil placement it is clear that more personnel related work, professional activity and data management is being driven down to school level. The proliferation of performance measurement systems across the public sector generally involves copious amounts of time in form filling and accountability mechanisms. These proposals seem to indicate more of this going to schools and more monitoring and inspections of schools by external agents.

One of the clever moves of the proposals is to make Head teachers responsible for closing the attainment gap. Various OECD reports cite the importance of leadership in student attainment to justify this shift in responsibility. The Government claims the reforms will hand over more responsibility to them and there will be more emphasis on training leaders and fast tracking them into lead positions. Presumably educational failure at school level can then be attributed to poor leadership.

Whilst the Scottish Government is still committed to national pay and conditions for teachers it would be no surprise if teachers didn't sniff performance related pay in the air. As Heads seek to incentivise staff and penalize those lagging behind pay might be seen as a crucial instrument in an atomized system of schooling.

Without new Government resources for education where will they come from? The pattern in England and Wales has been to ask parents to provide more. Charged with more responsibility, but not resources, head teachers may well be tempted to go in this direction.

Democratic accountability

There is nothing in the policy proposals which will enhance democratic accountability of schools to their communities. The opposite is more likely particularly as democratically elected local authorities have a reduced role in the provision of education. The concentration of power and responsibility to schools and head teachers – not particularly renowned as centres of democratic life – are cases in point. In fact, more power at the ‘middle centre’ (in OECD speak) might just as likely lead to greater degrees of cronyism in schools.

Whilst parental participation and consultation will be improved, along with pupil voice, the structures and processes for this are not explored and there are no recommendations for best practice in this respect. In short, there is nothing in the document which is convincing.

It is also worrying that there are repeated references to the fact that the initial consultation on these proposals was poorly received with few instances of agreement with the Government. Needless to say, these have been ignored which is itself a good example of the problem of consultation without decision-making power. Presumably head teachers can do much the same with pupils and parents i.e. ignore them when it suits.

Professional collaboration

One of the lynch pins of the proposals is the need for greater professional skills and joined up professional practice focused on improving the learning and teaching in the classroom. There is to be a new body of registration, which will be compulsory, for the educational workforce which will include teachers as well as community learning and development staff. Incompetent staff will be dealt with more swiftly, although this is light on detail and due process.

So-called ‘regional improvement collaboratives’ of various personnel from local authorities, Education Scotland staff and others will provide the back-up for school development. How well these will work is debatable in that professional collaboration

doesn't easily bring forward shared agreement on what needs to be done. A community educator and a teacher, for example, might have a shared aim of improving educational outcomes but have very different priorities and approaches on how this is achieved. In a system stacked towards schools and teachers it is clear that the teaching profession will have the loudest voice.

Education Scotland will take on an enhanced role in inspection to monitor progress so we can anticipate this will involve more scrutiny of what teachers do, how they justify their practices and how they measure their outcomes. In short, more paperwork involves less time in preparation and working directly with pupils so that the 'tail' of inspection 'wags the dog' of teaching and learning. Whilst the document sees bureaucracy as a problem the proposals it is putting forward shows no indication of addressing it and, indeed, might make it worse.

Conclusion

1. Excellence and equity presented in the terms of this review – even if it succeeds - will underpin greater educational inequality of outcome. What education should address is the need for social justice.
2. The focus on putting head teachers and teachers at the centre of policy reforms will fragment the system even further. Whilst regional variations in school performance are unacceptable the outcome of further fragmentation will make the patchwork within regions, of 'succeeding' and 'failing' schools, even greater. The problem is therefore compounded. These proposals will lead to further marketization within the schooling sector as parents' scramble for pupil places in the 'succeeding' schools.
3. The increased role of inspection and monitoring in the system will lead to more bureaucracy not less and will detract from time teachers have in the classroom.
4. The focus on empowering head teachers without any focus on how pupils, parents and communities are to be empowered shows scant regard for the latter groups.

5. Whilst improving schools is a good thing education cannot compensate for society. In a context where there are growing inequalities in Scotland these measures will do nothing to address their impact without significant changes in social, economic and fiscal policy areas too.
6. The failure to address resourcing issues squarely indicates a lack of political will to redistribute to schools in greater need. Presumably this is because the Scottish Government is unwilling to raise revenues to fund redistribution. Too much misguided hope is put in *how* things are done rather than the *resources* to do them.