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Citation for published version:

Howieson, C, Croxford, L & Murphy, D 2017, 'The experience of 50 years of comprehensive schooling in Scotland' *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 8-23. DOI: 10.1177/1746197916683465

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/1746197916683465](https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197916683465)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Education, Citizenship and Social Justice

Publisher Rights Statement:

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The experience of 50 years of comprehensive schooling in Scotland

Cathy Howieson, Linda Croxford and Daniel Murphy

(Institute for Education, Community and Society), University of Edinburgh,
UK

Centre for Educational Sociology, Moray House
School of Education, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Corresponding author:

Cathy Howieson, Centre for Educational Sociology,
St. John's Land, St John's Street, Holyrood,
Edinburgh, EH8 8AQ, United Kingdom.

Email: c.howieson@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

2015 was the 50th anniversary of the introduction of comprehensive schooling in Scotland. This paper outlines the two models of comprehensive schooling pursued over this period: the first which aimed to promote a universal, common system and the second, from around 2000, that has prioritised diversity and choice. Equality (in its various forms) is one of the underpinning principles of comprehensive schooling and the paper considers the impact of comprehensive reform on inequalities, in particular, in respect of social class. It concludes that Scotland has been largely successful in achieving equality of opportunity, has made some progress towards equality of value but equality of outcome has proved elusive. The paper highlights the continuing impact of the wider social determinants of inequality and of the selective function of education. It raises concerns that recent reforms, in particular the Senior Phase of Curriculum for Excellence, may be exacerbating social inequalities in outcomes.

(150 words)

Keywords

Comprehensive education, equality, equity, Curriculum for Excellence, social class

Introduction

During the 1950s and 1960s the belief that education systems could be designed in such a way as to address social inequalities and improve individuals' life chances became increasingly powerful in Britain. A central focus was opposition to the prevailing practice of the selection and allocation of young people at the end of the primary education (age 11 or 12) into different types of secondary schools (junior and senior secondary¹) which offered very different and unequal opportunities for education and future prospects. In response to this pressure to end selection, the UK government issued the two circulars in 1965 which introduced comprehensive secondary schooling: Circular 600 in Scotland (SED, 1965) and Circular 10/65 in England and Wales (DES, 1965).

Over the next 15 years, the comprehensive reform of secondary schooling was fully implemented in Scotland while the reform in England was only partial (Phillips, 2003). After some initial turbulence there has been considerable stability in the institutional structures of secondary schooling in Scotland (Murphy, 2015). There has also been continued civic support in Scotland for the principle of comprehensive schooling, evidenced, for example, in the National Debate on Education of 2002–2003 (Munn et al., 2004). This has been matched by an official commitment whereby subsequent educational reforms have been represented politically not as a move away from the principle of comprehensive schooling but as a development or a reinterpretation of it (Howieson, 2015). This is in marked contrast to England, where in 2001 the Labour Prime Minister's spokesman, famously predicted that 'the day of the bog-standard comprehensive school is over', associating comprehensive schools with mediocrity (Clare and Jones, 2001).

¹ Analogous to the secondary modern and grammar schools in England.

Currently around 94% of Scottish secondary pupils attend state comprehensive schools, the others are in the independent school sector. There is, however, considerable geographical variation in the proportion of pupils attending independent schools which are mainly concentrated in and around Scotland's major cities. Comprehensive secondary schools are all-through (12–18 years) co-educational institutions that largely serve a local geographical community or catchment area. It is fair to say that the comprehensive reform of 1965 has shaped publicly-funded secondary education in Scotland until today. The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, for example, in June 2016 reiterated continuing support for comprehensive schooling: 'We are committed to a publicly owned and run comprehensive education system in Scotland – a mutual system, not a market system – which supports every child to achieve.' (Scottish Government, 2016: 10)

Equality in comprehensive schooling

Many of the early proponents of comprehensive schooling were concerned with equalising access to the opportunities denied to those who had 'failed' the selection test at age 11 or 12. Today, attention focuses more on equality of outcome, in particular, outcome in respect of attainment in national examinations. This paper examines the extent to which the Scottish comprehensive system has been successful in respect of both equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. It also explores young people's views to consider a sometimes overlooked aspect of equality: 'equality of worth': what the educationalist Daunt referred to as according equal value or worth to different pupils, types of learning, experiences and qualifications (Daunt, 1975). For Daunt and many others, the previous unequal educational system had valued some pupils more highly than others and given higher status to academic learning and qualifications. He argued that 'the guiding defining principle of comprehensive education is that the education of all children is held to be intrinsically of equal value' (Daunt, 1975: 16).

Education's Abiding Moral Dilemma

Daunt and other proponents of equality of value asserted that in comprehensive schools 'equal value' should replace the 'meritocratic principle' on which the selective schooling system had been based. But from the outset there were many who also held to the meritocratic principle, particularly in Scotland where a strong meritocratic tradition exercised a powerful hold over the minds of many involved in school education (Davie, 1989; Anderson, 1983; Paterson, 2003). This tradition held that while education should be available to all regardless of social background or birth, individuals varied in their capacity to benefit from a liberal, academic curriculum (Gray et al., 1983; Humes and Bryce, 2003; Paterson, 2003).

Thus, in Scotland, whatever comprehensive schools were to be, they were not to imperil the highly developed programmes of study which schools had devised to lead pupils through to the 'Higher' examinations, the qualifications for entry to university. Moreover, as they had previously done, other powerful forces continued to demand meritocratic outcomes from the secondary school system. Universities and other end users of school examination results wanted pupils, whether from comprehensive schools or not, sorted into a hierarchy by examination performance. The new comprehensive schools had, from the start, to balance internally these two potentially competing principles. Historian Sheldon Rothblatt (2006), writing later about higher education, described this continuing unresolved conflict across education between 'merit' and 'worth' as 'Education's Abiding Moral Dilemma'. Comprehensive schools were challenged to deliver both equal value and to rank and select on merit.

In exploring the success (or otherwise) of comprehensive schooling in Scotland, this paper sheds light on how have these competing principles played out over the past 50 years. Articles'

In the next section we outline the key stages in the development of the comprehensive system in Scotland up to around 2000. We then move on to examine how far the comprehensive

system has succeeded in creating greater equality of opportunity, value and outcome. The final sections explore how the model of comprehensive schooling adopted in Scotland in its first 30 years has changed from a common, universal system to one that focuses on diversity and choice. We conclude that these changes may have serious – although unintended – consequences for all forms of equality.

Our examination of the impact of comprehensive schooling centres on its effect on inequalities in respect of social class. This is for several reasons. At a practical level it is not possible within the constraints of the article's word limit to examine other sources of inequality such as gender, ethnicity or disability in an adequate way, for example, there have been profound changes in the schooling of young people with disabilities to which we could not hope to do justice (see Murphy (2015) for an overview). Another factor in our decision is that apart from gender², the available data is limited or inconsistent. Differences in attainment by ethnic group were not recorded in government Statistical Bulletins until relatively recently (2008–2009). In relation to disability there have been frequent changes of definition, the identification of further types of disability and additional education needs as well as acknowledged variation across Scotland in how local authorities record disability and additional needs – all of which renders comparison over time extremely difficult. Finally, the comprehensive reform in 1966 itself concentrated on social class with no mention of other forms of inequality. In making the decision about how to limit the scope of the article, it therefore seemed most appropriate to focus on the extent to which comprehensive schooling has made a difference to social class inequalities.

² See Croxford 2015 for evidence on the impact of comprehensive reorganisation on inequalities by gender.

The development of the comprehensive system 1965–2000

Following the publication of Circular 600 in 1965, comprehensive secondary schooling was developed in several stages through several associated reforms.

Ending selection to secondary schooling

The purpose of comprehensive reorganisation was most easily stated in 1965 in terms of opposition to existing procedures for selection at age 11 or 12. All that Circular 600 required of local authorities was that they should no longer select young people at 12 for different types of schools and that on entry to secondary school they should not allocate pupils to certificate and non-certificate courses i.e. courses that pre-determined whether or not pupils would be able to access national certification and qualifications later in their school career (Scottish Education Department, 1965). It thus focused on equality of opportunity in relation to pupils' social background.

Raising the school leaving age

A second step was the raising of the school leaving age in 1972. In the first years of comprehensive reorganisation, education was compulsory until the age of 15 (the end of the third year of secondary schooling). However, the national academic examinations were not taken until the following year, by which time a significant proportion of pupils had already left. Thus the raising of the school leaving age to 16 was a vital development in extending opportunities for all young people to gain national certification.

Creating a common universal curriculum and assessment system in the compulsory stage

Comprehensive schooling is as much about the curriculum as it is about selection and structures and the third stage in its development addressed this. Circular 600 had not given any guidance

about the type of curriculum to be offered in the new comprehensive secondary schools or about the preferred approaches to pedagogy, assessment and certification. Educational sociologists highlighted the continuation after comprehensive re-organisation of an academic curriculum and its approaches to teaching and assessment (Gray et al., 1983). While Circular 600 had ended selection on entry to secondary schooling, it had left open the question of later selection within the comprehensive school. In fact only a minority of pupils were selected to study for national certification, and provision for the other, so-called 'non-certificate' pupils varied greatly in quality. As we discuss later, many of these non-certificate pupils felt marginalised and alienated from school, a situation described as being 'tantamount to exclusion from the moral community of the school' (Gray et al., 1983: 303).

The raising of the school leaving age added to the pressure for reform of the curriculum and certification system in the compulsory stage. Two government committees reviewed possible approaches, reporting in 1977 although it was not until the later 1980s that the new Standard Grade system was fully implemented (SED, 1977a, 1977b). The Standard Grade reform offered national assessment based on common curriculum guidelines covering virtually all pupils. Differences of ability were accommodated not by separate types of provision but by means of access to different levels of study so that all pupils studied a broadly similar curriculum albeit at varying levels of demand. Standard Grade can be seen as emblematic of comprehensive principles in Scotland: young people attending the same school, studying roughly the same subjects and receiving the same (differentiated) certificate. Standard Grade was complemented by a new Curriculum Framework for secondary schools (CCC, 1987) and these were enforced through the inspection system. Scotland thus rejected the notion of a different type of curriculum for different young people (academic and vocational), instead offering all young people access to a liberal or

general education; in this it was drawing on the Scottish education tradition referred to earlier in this article

Comprehensive principles in post compulsory schooling

Comprehensive education in Scotland has been defined and organised in terms of its institutional basis i.e. the secondary school, rather than, for example, in relation to a stage of learning. This section therefore discusses comprehensive principles in terms of the post compulsory stage of secondary schooling although only some young people (an increasing minority over the period) leave school at this point to enter further education college or a work-based programme. These alternative destinations are perceived, funded and managed as quite distinct from school education and this is especially true of work based training.

Irrespective of its particular basis, a challenge for any post-compulsory education system – and one that is especially acute for a comprehensive one – is how to manage differentiation at a stage when young people’s aspirations and needs are increasingly diverse and when the ‘moral dilemma’ of education becomes more acute as its selective function comes increasingly to the fore.

Studies of European post-16 systems distinguish three broad strategies for managing differentiation: tracking, unified and linked (Lasonen and Young, 1998; Howieson and Raffe, 1999). In Scotland, a unified system strategy has been the means to achieve comprehensive values at the post-compulsory stage. A number of reforms to the post-compulsory curriculum and qualification systems have aimed to make courses available to a wider range of abilities, to bring together academic and vocational provision, and to enable easier access to an appropriate level of qualification, and progression through the different levels.

A key step was the *16–18s Action Plan* which introduced the modular National Certificate system in 1983 (SED, 1983). The *Action Plan* sought to update and expand vocational learning

while arguing for the integration of education and training and a 'broad-based general education' for all 16–18 learners. It was seen by its authors as a step towards a wider unification of all academic and vocational provision at 16-plus (Raffe, 2009, 2015). Within a few years modules were available in a range of general and 'academic' subjects as well as vocational ones. Modules were used widely in secondary schools by pupils of all abilities for a range of purposes – vocational study, general education and to add breadth and interest to their curriculum.

It is notable that in the early 1990s when the government commissioned review of upper secondary schooling in Scotland (the Howie Report) recommended a 'twin track' approach (an academic track for some pupils and a modular vocational track for others) (Scottish Office Education Department, 1992), this was rejected, at least in part because it was perceived as incompatible with the principles of comprehensive education. The reform programme which was instead introduced in 1994 – 'Higher Still: Opportunity for All' – took a unified approach combining aspects of the two existing systems (Scottish Certificate of Education (SCE) and National Certificate modules): units and courses were available in academic, general and vocational subjects; assessment was also a hybrid of the two systems (Scottish Office, 1994; Raffe et al., 2007). Higher Still specifically aimed to provide opportunities for all pupils through a system of five levels of study.

Subsequently in 2001 they were brought together with Standard Grades and other Scottish qualifications into one comprehensive qualifications framework as a further step in providing a more unified system (SCQF, 2001).

The impact of comprehensive reorganisation and associated reforms

Success in reducing social segregation

Prior to comprehensive reorganisation, selection created a segregated school system: different social classes tended to be separated because pupils from working class backgrounds were more likely to attend junior secondary schools while those from higher social class background were concentrated in senior secondary schools. This was a situation comprehensive reorganisation explicitly aimed to address:

[The Secretary of State] believed that...young people will greatly benefit in their personal and social development by spending formative years of early adolescence in schools where the pupils represent a fuller cross-section of the community (Scottish Education Department (SED), 1965: 2).

A series of research studies by educational sociologists found that comprehensive reorganisation reduced social class segregation across Scottish secondary schools generally although the extent of this varied geographically: it did not reduce segregation in cities to the same low levels as in the smaller communities – partly because of the continuing private independent school sector (McPherson and Willms, 1987, 1989).

However, the research also identified how subsequent legislation undermined the downward trend in social segregation: the introduction of parental choice of school in the 1980s, resulted in some increases in between-school segregation in some cities in Scotland (Willms, 1996). Nevertheless, in Scotland as a whole, relatively low levels of segregation have been maintained and, overall, between-school segregation in Scotland is relatively low compared with England (Croxford and Paterson, 2006) and most other industrialised countries. Analysis of data

from the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) has consistently identified the low level of social segregation as one of the strengths of the Scottish system:

Scottish schools are highly inclusive as shown through an international index of social inclusion of the degree to which students of different socio-economic backgrounds attend the same school. Scotland belongs to a small group of inclusive countries on this measure along with Finland, Norway and Sweden (OECD, 2015:79).

There is also less variation in student performance across Scotland than in other OECD countries, and relatively little of this difference attributable to schools (OECD, 2007, 2015).

Equalisation and improvement

Research on the early years of comprehensive reorganisation between 1977 and 1985 – before the implementation of the Standard Grade reforms – showed a reduction in social inequalities in attainment (McPherson and Willms, 1987). The end of selection in itself increased the access of pupils to national certification, while the raising of the school leaving age to 16 ensured that all but a minority of pupils were still at school at the stage when national examinations were held (McPherson and Willms, 1987: 529–530). Summarising their findings as ‘equalisation and improvement’, the researchers showed that levels of attainment rose most rapidly among pupils of low socio-economic status (SES) and thus social class differences in attainment were reduced over this period (1977 and 1985).

Detailed quantitative studies of the Standard Grade reform demonstrated its positive impact on the participation and achievement of disadvantaged pupils in national qualifications between 1985 and 1991 (Gamoran, 1996). Gamoran found a faster increase in attainment among

low-SES pupils as a result of their improved access to academic courses resulting in some reduction in the achievement gap between social classes.

Overall, over the 50 years of comprehensive reform and associated developments, the proportion of young people able to achieve national qualifications has grown massively: in 1964–1965, 70% of young people left state schools with no qualifications in SCE examinations, by 2012–13 this had dropped to just 1.5%. In the post-secondary stage, in 1964–1965, 17% of school leavers had one or more Highers³ passes, this proportion increased fairly steadily till 2007–2008 when it reached 44%, it subsequently continued to rise and by 2012–2013 stood at 55% (Croxford, 2015).

Higher Still increased opportunities in that more young people had access to a wider range of learning experiences that were more consistently valued. Nevertheless, a major research study concluded that although Higher Still provided the opportunity to study different types of curricula – academic, general and vocational – it did not materially change the relative standing of these different curriculum areas or their place in the selection process (Raffe et al., 2007). Universities in their admissions criteria, for example, continued to prioritise ‘academic’ subjects, and patterns of student choice changed little.

Persistent inequalities in outcomes

The comprehensive reform in Scotland has been largely successful in providing young people with the opportunity to participate on a more equal basis but it has had less success achieving greater quality of outcomes, especially as measured by success in national examinations and international tests as we now outline.

³ Highers are the level of examination necessary for entry to higher education.

Social class inequalities in attainment

We have already noted the slight narrowing of social class differences in achievement since comprehensive reorganisation. Nevertheless while research found a faster increase in attainment among low-SES pupils, it also demonstrated that those from high-socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds maintained their advantage with respect to the top levels of examination scores (Gameron, 1996). All social classes shared in increasing levels of attainment between 1984 and 2002, but the gap between them narrowed only slightly so that the overall gradient of social class inequalities in attainment at the end of the compulsory stage remained fairly persistent over the period (Croxford, 2009).

Whereas there has been some modest reduction over time in social class differences in attainment at the end of compulsory schooling, inequalities at the post-compulsory stages increased from 1987 to 2005 (Croxford, 2009). Attainment of three or more Higher Grade passes at age 18–19 is the threshold for entry to higher education and there are very strong social class differences in attainment at this level: pupils from a managerial/professional background had a marked advantage, and in comparison all other social classes had substantially lower attainment. Over this period these inequalities increased so that by 2005 the gap between pupils from managerial/professional class and from all other classes was wider than in 1987.⁴ Data for 2011, based on the Scottish Index of Neighbourhood Deprivation (SIMD) shows a clear relationship between levels of attainment and extent of area deprivation: the greater the deprivation, the lower the level of attainment. Qualifications gained decreased in line with higher levels of

⁴ It is not possible to provide an entirely satisfactory update on these figures. They are based on data from the Scottish School Leavers Survey which was discontinued in 2005 and the available official statistics do not provide equivalent information on outcomes by socio-economic status. The alternative measure used by SG –SIMD – does not identify the SES of individuals but refers to the average level of deprivation of the area in they live. As such it is less discriminating (Croxford, 2015)

deprivation. Consequently, in 2011, 66% of pupils living in the most affluent areas achieved three or more Higher Grade passes compared with 15% of pupils in the most deprived areas (SG, 2012).

The OECD reviews of schooling in Scotland provide further evidence of inequalities in attainment (OECD, 2007, 2015). Although they note that Scotland has a relatively low proportion of underachieving children, the reviews stress the strong influence of economic, social and cultural status on children's and young people's development and achievement from pre-school onwards. They highlight how differences in achievement evident in primary school continue to widen in the compulsory years of secondary school and that subsequent participation and attainment in post-compulsory education and training is unequally distributed across social backgrounds (OECD, 2015).

The OECD team in 2007 summed up the position in Scotland thus:

Little of the variation in student achievement in Scotland is associated with the ways in which schools differ. Most of it is connected with how children differ. Who you are in Scotland is far more important than what school you attend ... Socio-economic status is the most important difference between individuals. (OECD, 2007: 15)

If one conceives of education as primarily of intrinsic value, then everyone has benefitted from increased attainment but if it is essentially a positional good it appears that middle class parents have been able to maintain the positional advantage of their children through the comprehensive system. While comprehensive education has had some levelling effect on social inequalities at the end of compulsory schooling because the large majority of young people now achieve national qualification at this stage, the value of these qualifications as credentials has declined. The critical period for social inequality has been pushed up to the post-compulsory stage

where higher attainment confers greater positional advantage, for example, in entry to higher education and to the high status universities (Croxford, 2015).

This persistent inequality in educational outcomes, especially in terms of the so-called ‘attainment gap’ in national qualifications is currently at the forefront of government policy (Sturgeon, 2016). In 2016 the First Minister of Scotland announced a renewed focus on this saying:

Nobody can be comfortable living in a country where different levels of wealth create such a significant gap in the attainment levels – and therefore the life chances – of so many children. It’s bad for the children most directly affected, but, in my view, it also impoverishes us as a society ...

That’s why I see closing the attainment gap as a defining challenge over the next few years for the government I lead, and for our society as a whole. (Sturgeon, 2016)

Enhanced equality of value

Equality of value is difficult to measure but we can gain valuable insights from young people’s views on their school experiences. One source of data on this comes from the Scottish School Leavers Survey (SSLS), a regular survey of a nationally representative sample of young people from 1977–2005. It asked a series of attitudinal questions about school and also gave respondents the opportunity to write freely about their time at school. More recently the surveys carried out as part of the OECD’s PISA programme provide useful data on young people’s attitudes to school and their place in it.

Data from the Scottish School Leavers Survey provided the basis for an influential book ‘Tell Them From Me’ published in 1980 during the early stages of comprehensive reorganisation

(Gow and McPherson, 1980). Using pupils' responses and comments in the survey, the book gave voice to the views of pupils after the initial comprehensive reorganisation but before the implementation of Standard Grade reform, i.e. at a time when pupils were still selected within most comprehensive schools into 'non-certificate' and 'certificate' streams. It powerfully conveyed the sense of rejection and alienation of the non-certificate pupils for whom educational provision was inadequate and who, in the words of one pupil were the '*flung-aside forgotten children*'. Their views on the unfairness of the system were clear in their comments:

At our school we were put into groups- one's who can sit there [their]'O' grades [national examinations] and ones who can't which is unfair. The one's who did not sit there [their] 'O' grades the teachers never Botherd [bothered] to learn them anything.

Such comments mirrored pupils' responses to the specific attitudinal questions asked in the SSLS, for example, only 23% of non-certificate boys said 'yes' to a question asking them if their last year at school was worthwhile compared with 74% of boys in the highest certificate stream (the responses of girls were very similar). The book had a powerful impact on the educational community in Scotland and influenced subsequent reforms.

Over time, school leavers' perceptions of their school experiences have tended to become more positive, with youngsters in the lowest attainment quartile feeling less marginalised.

Recent surveys by OECD show that in 2012 Scottish pupils had more positive attitudes towards school than their peers in other countries (OECD, 2015: 56). Data from the SSLS and subsequent surveys show that, overall, an increasing proportion felt that 'school work was worth doing', that 'teachers helped me to do my best', 'teachers helped to give me confidence to make decisions' and 'my friends took school seriously' (Croxford and Howieson, 2015). Most notable is the improvement in attitudes of pupils in the lowest quartile of attainment. These data suggest

that compared with their counterparts in the 1970s, many of whom felt rejected and alienated from school, in 2014 pupils with lower levels of attainment were much more likely to feel that schoolwork was worthwhile and helping them to develop useful skills. Nevertheless, it was also evident in the 2014 survey that some pupils, as in the 1970s, felt that the school gave most attention to the academic pupils.

Overall, the development of a more inclusive curriculum and qualification systems has helped pupils feel more part of the school community while the growing professionalism of teachers, able to draw on a greater range of teaching and learning strategies and techniques, has played a part in changing pupils' experience of school. A mark of the importance given to equality of value is that an important indicator in the official assessment of a school is the extent to which pupils are listened to and their views valued (MacBeath, 1999).

Nevertheless, despite improvements in the experience and opinions of lower attaining pupils, they are still more likely to have negative perceptions of school and to play truant than those in the higher attainment groups. While schools have made some progress towards the comprehensive principle of equal value, it is still not being fully realised: the academic hierarchy is still strong in Scottish schooling and schools are under constant pressure from government and wider society to deliver success in examinations. Qualifications still differentiate pupils, and some qualifications are given higher value than others by society, especially in competitive systems of entry to higher education and careers. However, pupils' perceptions of their school experience expressed in 2014 appear far less stark than was the case in 1977 when some 'non-certificate' pupils felt 'flung-aside forgotten children' – a contrast with the comment of one young man in 2014 who wrote '*I enjoyed the community atmosphere of my school – this then helped me thrive*'.

From uniformity to diversity

Reflecting back over the 50 year since the introduction of comprehensive education, it is possible to characterise comprehensive schools in Scotland in terms of two models: the first from its inception until around 2000 was centred on the creation of a common, universal system and a second model, post-2000, which has prioritised diversity, flexibility and choice (Howieson, 2015; Raffe, 2015). Evidence on the impact of these changes is very limited, and what is available relates to the later years of secondary schooling, what is now termed the 'Senior Phase' i.e. the years covering 15-18 year olds. Our discussion therefore focuses on developments in the Senior Phase and their possible impact. We suggest that current changes here run the risk of creating a more stratified and socially segregated set of provision with substantial variation in the curriculum (type and number of subjects) available to young people depending on where they live and result in an over concentration of certain groups of young people in vocational provision. The more complex and diverse a system is, the harder it is to negotiate and this may further disadvantage some young people and their families.

The move to greater diversity

Significant changes in approach to the curriculum in the compulsory stage are evident from around 2000 when issues of diversity, flexibility and choice increasingly figured in debates and government policies and documents (SEED, 2001; SE, 2003a, 2003b, 2004c; LTS, 2003). While submissions to the National Debate on Education strongly endorsed the comprehensive school system, they also called for greater flexibility and diversity (Munn, 2002). The 2007 OECD review of Scottish education criticised what it termed the 'excessive uniformity' in its organisational forms, the content of the curriculum, and the approaches to teaching and learning (OECD, 2007).

It is notable that the move to a more diverse curriculum has not been seen or presented as a rejection of the comprehensive education but as a reinterpretation as the First Minister of Scotland explained in 2003:

I am committed to that [comprehensive] idea ... The modern comprehensive is diverse, not uniform or standard ... modern comprehensive schools need variety, ambition, leadership, flexibility and pupil choice. In other words, they must be diverse (McConnell, 2003).

The move to greater diversity has intensified under the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (SE 2004a, 2004b). This is the major reform of the 3–18 curriculum in Scotland introduced on a phased basis since 2004 with the aim of bringing about ‘transformational change’ in Scottish education. CfE has re-structured secondary education into two phases: first to third year as a period of broad general education and the Senior Phase covering fourth to sixth year the point at which (at least in theory) pupils make curricular choices and study for national qualifications. It places greater emphasis on inter-disciplinary learning, skills development and the application of learning to real-life situations. The qualifications previously taken in the compulsory stage, including Standard Grade, have been replaced by new National Qualifications and the qualifications offered in the upper school have been revised.

CfE is committed both to a more diverse curriculum and, critically, to a model of development which promotes innovation at the local level by schools and teachers in response to the particular needs of their pupils. Consequently there is now much greater flexibility in how schools design and structure the six years of secondary education and especially their approach to the Senior Phase (Raffe et al., 2010; TESS, 2012; Scott, 2015).

The diversity and complexity of the Senior Phase has been further increased by the introduction of the 'Developing Scotland's Young Workforce' (DYW) strategy by SG (SG, 2014a, 2014b). While much of it is concerned with post school provision, DYW also involves schools, for example, pupils in the Senior Phase should be able to take vocational qualifications or follow the first year of an apprenticeship while at school. The aspects of DYP involving schools are expected to form a fully integrated part of the CfE programme (SG, 2014a: 10). How this is to be done has not been made clear and the challenges for integration are increased by the separation of responsibility for DYP and CfE between two different government ministers.

Diversity or division?

A more diverse system, although introduced under the banner of personalisation and choice for pupils, has the potential to introduce new selection effects that undermine the comprehensive principle of equality. This is an issue recognised in the OECD review of CfE:

... CfE which leaves considerable discretion in its implementation might mean that the more privileged students, parents, schools and communities make progress first. The challenge for policy is first to ensure that gaps do not actually become exacerbated ... (2015: 78).

Recent studies have raised some warning signs in this respect (Scott, 2015; Reform Scotland, 2016). Scott identified at least five significantly different approaches being adopted across Scotland to the implementation of the S4 curriculum and associated qualifications; he also found evidence of curricular narrowing and significant curricular distortion. Both the Scott and reform Scotland studies concluded that pupils in different schools can experience significant differences in the number and range of subjects offered and in the number of examinations they undertake in their fourth year (first year of the Senior Phase). Scott argues that this is likely to

have differing impacts on their opportunities for attainment and progression in their later school years and also post school. One of the most concerning of Scott's findings is that these differences have impacted differentially across the ability range, that less able and lower middle-ranking learners appear to be differentially disadvantaged, a situation which, he declares '*compounds Scotland's existing problems of social justice and equality of opportunity*' (Scott, 2015: 2).

Current policy rejects the standardisation and uniformity that have hitherto characterised Scottish comprehensive schooling but we suggest that uniformity can have benefits. Indeed, a degree of uniformity is the source of many of the strengths of the Scottish system, such as its comparatively low level of social segregation across schools, and the consistency of standards recognised and endorsed by international reports. A uniform system is more transparent and more easily navigated by learners and their families in a context where individuals and families differ in their ability and resources to negotiate a diverse set of opportunities and make the best choices. Above all, diverse systems can easily turn into hierarchical and unequal systems.

The curriculum in comprehensive schooling

Comprehensive schooling is as much about the curriculum as it is about selection and structures. CfE aims to offer students a wider range of experiences, broader learning outcomes and a 'suitable blend of what has traditionally seen as 'academic' and 'vocational' '(SE, 2004a: 10). But there has been little, if any, substantive discussion of the relationship between academic and vocational learning in CfE. Rather it appears that a 'suitable blend' is perceived as separate courses and qualifications being available *in parallel* to academic provision (SE, 2004b) and as providing a 'valuable alternative to academic learning' (SG, 2007: 5). The DYW strategy also appears to view academic and vocational learning as distinct, referring to Senior Phase pupils being able 'to follow industry relevant vocational pathways alongside academic studies' (SG, 2014a: 10).

In its promotion of vocational provision, the Senior Phase of CfE is departing from the traditional approach of comprehensive schooling in Scotland of enabling all pupils to have access to a knowledge-based liberal curriculum as a way to achieve greater social equality.

There is a danger that the current approach may have a negative effect on equality of opportunity: the recent history of vocational provision in secondary schools in Scotland demonstrates that participation is skewed towards the lower end of the attainment range rather than proportionately across the whole range (HMIE, 2005; Howieson and Raffe, 2007). Schools, for various reasons, gave insufficient encouragement to more able pupils to select vocational education where appropriate; most instead regard vocational provision, especially part-time at college or a training venue, as a suitable alternative curriculum for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties or a history of truancy. Indeed, the perceived ability of vocational options to engage a wider range of pupils has been a central argument for greater diversity. Yet a range of studies has pointed out that the value of much vocational provision in terms of the engagement and motivation of pupils, (especially the least engaged) is explained more by the pedagogy, and relatedly the relationships with staff and the change of location than by the curricular content in itself (e.g. Steedman and Stoney, 2004; McCrone and Morris, 2004; Spielhofer and Walker, 2008). Arguably, most of the positive outcomes are achievable without vocational content since the key aspects are about pedagogy, assessment, relationships and attitudes.

We would concur with critics who maintain that a focus on vocational provision for some young people denies them access to the 'powerful knowledge' enshrined in (academic) disciplines which is damaging to their life chances and runs the risk of increasing social exclusion (see Priestley and Sinnema (2014) for an overview). Less advantaged and lower-attaining pupils should have access to the 'powerful' knowledge of academic disciplines and subjects, just as more advantaged students need access to less 'academic' types of learning.

Conclusions

We started this article by noting the optimism of the 1950s and 1960s that education systems could be designed in such a way as to address social inequalities and improve individuals' life chances. To what extent has this been realised in Scotland?

The Scottish comprehensive system has achieved relatively low levels of social segregation across schools and a consistency of standards: differences in pupils' outcomes are not determined primarily by the school they attend. It has promoted equality but it has had more impact on equality of opportunity removing barriers such as school selection and the more divisive aspects of curriculum and examination systems. A positive effect on equality of value is also evident; this is a frequently overlooked aspect of equality and one that can temper the inequalities of the different pathways and their associated selection effects. The comprehensive system has had less success in achieving equality of outcome. Although some narrowing of social inequalities in the outcomes of education is evident at the end of the compulsory stage of secondary schooling (at 15 or 16 years), the main site of positional advantage has moved up the age range to attainment and participation at 18 or later and here inequality in outcomes increased over the period.

The fundamental challenge for any comprehensive system is how it can flourish within a society where inequalities are deeply embedded. Two aspects of these inequalities impact most directly upon schools. The first is the 'push' of social backgrounds and the extent to which families diverge widely in their resources and power to influence the system and to achieve the best outcomes for their children. The second is the 'pull' of destinations of unequal value and attractiveness, especially in higher education and the labour market, and the expectation that education differentiates, selects and prepares young people for these unequal destinations: in other words, the selective function of education. These two factors make it impossible for any school system to achieve perfect equality. We would argue, however, that they do not mean we should abandon

the comprehensive approach, but that policies and strategies needs to be realistic about what schooling can achieve and recognise these wider inequalities and the pressure on education to fulfil a selective function. It may require going beyond the 'open door' concept of equality to consider methods by which a comprehensive system can achieve greater equality in an unequal society, such as positive discrimination or at least compensatory action.

As the Scottish experience has shown, comprehensive schooling can make some difference but we would argue that more is possible. As we noted earlier, comprehensive education has been defined only in relation to the secondary school sector and does not encompass other sites and types of post-compulsory of education i.e. comprehensive reform in Scotland is incomplete. We need to move towards a further stage in comprehensive reorganisation to create a broader comprehensive *system* especially at the post compulsory stage. Scotland now needs to review and evaluate the post-compulsory stage to age 18, both in and out of school, in terms of one clear overarching framework embodying the principles and values of the comprehensive system. It may be timely to do so in the context of the Senior Phase of CfE and the Developing The Young Workforce strategy.

We conclude by highlighting our concerns that the gains that have been made over the 50 years of comprehensive schooling may be being undermined by the reforms of the past decade or so, in particular, Curriculum for Excellence. This is unintended but stems, on the one hand, from a failure of governance and leadership and, on the other, a lack of a clear curricular vision and coherent curriculum theory (Murphy and Raffe, 2015; Priestley, 2010; Priestley and Minty, 2013; Priestley and Sinnema, 2014; Scott, 2015). If the more diverse comprehensive system that CfE aims to provide is not to increase inequalities of opportunity, outcome and value, it is essential that it is underpinned by explicit principles of diversity. CfE, especially in the Senior Phase, aims to offer diversity within a coherent framework but what this means has not been articulated nor the

consequences examined. How much diversity is desirable? What is the appropriate balance between responsiveness to local needs and the level of coherence and consistency the system as a whole requires, how should different types of learning within and outwith schools be valued? At present, these questions are simply not being addressed within Scotland's policy community. There is an urgent need to develop commonly understood and shared principles to inform decisions about the best balance point between the potentially competing, but equally valuable, forces of diversity and uniformity.

(6973 words)

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