



University
of Glasgow

Where next for Scottish Education:

Leading from the classroom

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**WORLD
CHANGING
GLASGOW**

Introduction

In March 2023 we set out what we believe is required to successfully transform Scotland’s education system¹ and reflected that Scottish education is at a crossroads.



On the one hand the system could continue on the same path, cherry picking seemingly attractive elements from the plethora of reviews, reports and commentaries from insiders and outsiders alike. Alternatively, we suggested that the system might engage in the long-term thinking required to harness emerging opportunities and challenges. Every child and young person should be entitled to grow and develop in a caring and stimulating educational environment and to experience the highest quality learning and teaching, irrespective of the source.

As we write this second piece almost a year after we published our first paper on this issue, the jury is still out. Financial pressures have become even more apparent, complicating the possibilities of achieving ambitious reform. There have also been a series of further developments and reviews. For example, the series of national reviews with their associated insights and recommendations. The proposed establishment of a *Centre for Teaching Excellence*, announced in October 2023, suggests a stronger policy focus on developing professional practice. Evidence from the 2023 PISA results, although affected by the pandemic, highlights the need for significant improvement in its measures of language, mathematics and science. While we should not be driven by positions on a rather dubious league table, there is much to be learned

from the detailed evidence and analysis that lies behind the PISA survey results. The third report of the International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA)² published in November 2023 has also provided a pragmatic set of insights and recommendations for a possible way ahead for Scottish school education. And the second review of Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs) published by Scottish Government³ in January 2024 acknowledged RICs contribution to professional learning and capacity building across the system.

In this paper we set out further thinking to inform policy and practice. We also hope that the paper stimulates the discussion, thinking and the calculated risk taking required to catalyse the development of a Scottish education system that can lead, rather than respond to, the local and global challenges of the future.

First, we reflect on how to improve young people’s school experience and improve achievement by giving more responsibility for key decisions to schools and teachers. Second, we make the case for the investment in, and reinvigorated focus on learning and teaching. Third, we set out some initial ideas about how we might reform the current educational landscape to achieve real and sustained impact in classrooms across Scotland.

What might subsidiarity look like?

The history of educational innovation and change cautions against top down, delivery orientated models of change. Such mechanistic attempts to improve outcomes fail to catalyse significant, sustained success. We argued in our previous paper that professional leadership and strategic vision must be underpinned by the principle of subsidiarity: the more that those directly involved in schools can take key decisions about what and how our young people learn, the greater the likelihood that those decisions will meet specific needs and varying backgrounds more effectively. Ownership of learning and teaching by those directly involved in the process rather than delivery of remote, externally determined requirements tends to reap greater rewards. The challenge is to balance that ownership against the risks of undue variation and the need to ensure that what is taught and learned is of high quality, meets individual needs and reflects the cultures, goals, and values of the nation. The choice is not a false dichotomy of central direction or total freedom. The challenge is to find an appropriate balance between those two positions. Achieving the appropriate blend is key to sustaining a healthy society underpinned by economic wellbeing across Scotland.

Subsidiarity is not an easy option. To be successful it requires thoughtful leadership, clarity of purpose, appropriate mechanisms for support and accountability and a highly competent and committed teaching profession. In turn, this necessitates:

- an expert and motivated teaching profession committed to and supported in its own continuous career-long professional growth;
 - a culture of innovation, creativity, responsiveness, and flexibility;
 - mechanisms to support the stimulation, identification and sharing of effective and innovative practice;
 - the generation of a secure evidence-base about performance and progress
- and
- political and professional leadership of the highest quality, underpinned by a climate of high expectations, trust and shared responsibility for continuous improvement.

We concluded our last paper by posing a rhetorical question about whether government and the profession are up for the challenge. While there are some positive signs, this question remains unanswered, and the necessary conditions still remain to be realised.

¹Chapman, C and Donaldson, G (2023) *Where next for Scottish Education: Learning is Scotland's future?* Unpublished working paper. University of Glasgow: Glasgow
²ICEA (2023) *International Council of Education Advisers: third report 2021-2023*. Scottish Government: Edinburgh
³Scottish Government/COSLA (2023). *Schools – Regional Improvement Collaboratives: review*. Scottish Government: Edinburgh



What makes a difference?

Research evidence suggests that schools account for 5-18% of achievement differences between students after control for initial factors. Pam Sammons concludes:

“Knowing a particular student’s family SES [socio economic status], income or gender is not a very good predictor of his or her attainment and should not lower teachers’ expectations” (p.14).

Disaggregating views about children’s ability from children’s background characteristics is key to developing an equitable and high achieving system and as in many systems around the world remains a challenge in Scotland. The starting point for all young people, irrespective of their background, must be for teachers to focus on supporting all children to improve on their previous best. If we can create a culture where this is uniformly valued and believed we will be in a stronger position to ensure that all children and young people achieve their full potential.

In her review of school effectiveness and equity, Sammons⁴ argues classroom or teacher effects have been identified as being substantially larger than school effects, accounting for up to 45-50% difference after prior attainment and background differences have been considered. Furthermore, what happens in the classroom accounts for around four times more variation than what happens at the school level and even less variation is accounted for at local authority level. Put simply, an education system cannot outperform the quality of its teachers. Teachers and classrooms do make a significant difference. It is clear that, not only do teachers and classrooms matter, they matter more than schools, local authorities and central government in terms of ensuring that children progress well in their learning and in reducing variations within the system. The decisions and practices of teachers and other practitioners are the key determinants of the quality of a young person’s educational experience.

This of course is not to say that school leaders, local authority staff and central government do not matter. Rather, appropriate decisions must be made in the most appropriate place in the system. For example, *Every Dundee Learner Matters* is a system change strategy designed to place teachers and schools as the key decision-makers in leading improvements. A key mantra is: **“that it is the job of schools to improve themselves and it is the job of the local authority to make sure it happens.”** Put simply, it is the teachers and school leaders who are best placed to lead improvement efforts; whilst the local authority has oversight as a broker and facilitator

to make connections and provide support and challenge as the conscience of the system to make sure it happens. Subsidiarity, therefore, is about maximising the ability of those directly engaged with young people to take good decisions and to adopt effective and sensitive approaches to learning and teaching.

Given the centrality of teachers in ensuring successful learning, it is imperative that teachers are supported to be at the top of their game in terms of their professional practice – their values, knowledge, expertise, and pedagogical understandings. To get to the top of their game and to stay there, teachers require to work in collaborative and supportive contexts, to have access to and engagement with relevant research and professional learning and to engage positively in self-evaluation. These conditions should be seen as an **obligation** not an opportunity and should be protected, particularly when resources are scarce.

Lawrence Stenhouse reminded us in 1975 that it is the duty of other educators to support teachers in classrooms to create excellent learning experience⁵. This has significant implications for school and system leaders and policy makers whose responsibilities must include the identification of high quality and relevant research and professional learning and the creation and protection of time for teachers, individually and collectively, to improve their practice.

How far might giving greater responsibility to schools and teachers make a difference to the performance of our young people in, for example, PISA assessments? Clearly, an ‘over to you’ approach will not in itself lead to improvement. This is not our argument. Rather we argue that putting in place the conditions accompanying subsidiarity described in this paper will be central to strengthening the education system at all levels by making the right decisions in the right places. This will have the biggest impact on building capacity across the system and ultimately the outcomes for children and young people.

⁴Sammons, P. (2007) *School effectiveness and equity: Making connections*. CfBT Education Trust: Reading

⁵Stenhouse, L. (1975) *An introduction to Curriculum Research and Development*, London: Heineman.

What might high quality learning and teaching look like?

What constitutes 'high quality' learning and teaching? (excellence, as a term is possibly even more problematic). There are competing views, 'quality' and 'excellence' are contested spaces with positions taken based on differing types of evidence, experience, and philosophical positions. Should a definition be developed, to what extent would it be possible or desirable to create a shared understanding of the definition? For an education system to thrive in the emerging complex environment, involving existential challenges such as climate change, significant geo-political uncertainty, mass population displacement, exponential technological growth etc., every child will require, more than ever, to have access to the highest quality learning experiences. These experiences will need to promote highly developed analytical, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities as well as acquiring access to and command of disciplinary knowledge. At the same time, there will remain a need to acquire what is called epistemic knowledge. That is the particular way in which different disciplines are structured, their forms of thinking and their 'tests of truth'. The challenge for curriculum design and delivery will be to develop both disciplinary and inter-disciplinary learning while avoiding undue emphasis on the accumulation of information.

High quality learning and teaching occurs within a framework of goals and expectations embodied in the curriculum. In Scotland, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is intended to provide such a framework. It seeks to blend the development of competences with, contrary to much of the criticism, the acquisition of necessary disciplinary knowledge and leaves considerable scope to schools and teachers to determine much of what is actually taught. CfE was a radical departure from accepted forms of curriculum design, but it is now nearly twenty years since its development began and the world is very different. Despite continuing strong support across the teaching profession, questions must be asked about how far its current shape is still relevant and working in practice. Issues such as the continuing validity of the current capacities require urgent re-examination as the nature and pace of change impacts on all our lives. Is there a need for greater specificity of content and outcomes? Is there too big a gap between the experiences and outcomes and decisions about what is to be taught and learned? Is progression in learning clear enough? Are pupils being accurately assessed in relation to outcomes? And, as identified in the Hayward Review⁶, how can we achieve real congruence between curriculum purposes and qualifications?

The outcomes in the CfE build from previous experience of, for example, 5-14 and were benchmarked against PISA expectations. Young people who had a consistent command of its Level 3 and 4 outcomes should perform to a high level in PISA tests. We need to understand why there appears to be an incongruence between CfE outcomes and performance in PISA. We need to promote an honest conversation about what counts as success and to reflect on whether we have the best possible measures and indicators in place to support a system underpinned by high expectations. For example, we need to ask ourselves to what extent do current measures of '*positive destinations*' serve children well and create a widespread culture

of high expectations and aspirations? We need much better evidence about what is happening in Scottish schools than has been available for at least the last decade. Investment in high quality independent research to create a Scottish empirical evidence-base and the reinstatement of a strengthened inspectorate will provide part of the answer but sample national surveys of performance should also be re-introduced.

It is also likely that the dramatic developments in digital technology, particularly generative artificial intelligence and large language models, will place any amount of content at our fingertips. Perhaps more importantly, it will mean that the opportunities for how and where learning occurs will become increasingly varied. For example, in its simplest form a child may learn a mathematics technique more effectively through a video clip at home on the internet or a personalised AI package rather than solely from their regular class teacher in school. Education systems will need to be designed to engage with multiple sources of learning

opportunities that extend far beyond a teacher and a class. The scope for greater personalisation of learning is already in sight, particularly as the range of additional learning needs expands.

All of this will require a rethinking of teachers' roles, responsibilities and ways of working. While schools will remain at the heart of ensuring that young people's learning and social needs are being met, sources of instruction are likely to become much more varied. Digital technologies create possibilities for more personalised learning but should not replace the vital interpersonal role of a teacher, lead to isolation or replace the school as a community devoted to the learning and wellbeing of all children and young people. The ways in which schools and teachers can harness the new technologies while avoiding the associated risks will require fresh thinking that is likely to challenge hitherto unquestioned assumptions about the nature and quality of learning and teaching. Put simply, the structures and processes of schooling, teaching and learning will need to take on new imaginative forms.



⁶Hayward L. (2023) It's Our Future - Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment, Scottish Government: Edinburgh

How might teachers get to and be supported to stay ‘at the top of their game’?



Leading from the classroom

Scotland is potentially well placed to make subsidiarity work. It has a well-regarded, relatively well paid, all graduate teaching profession the nature and quality of whose membership is buttressed by a General Teaching Council (GTCS) that oversees standards of entry and promotes career-long professional learning. Local authorities have supported the professional learning of practitioners, augmented in the last few years by the work of Regional Improvement Collaboratives (RICs). Education Scotland, professional associations and others have also provided national support for schools both through guidance and resources. Furthermore, the Scottish curriculum, focuses on competences and gives considerable scope for teacher agency. However, we have argued consistently that this established structure must be recast through fresh thinking and agile ways of working that relate more directly to local collective agency. How can it move to both stimulate and support the kind of local ownership of decisions that can realise the benefits of subsidiarity?

The policy-making process in Scotland needs to engender a greater sense of ownership amongst the profession, parents/carers, young people and communities. Equally it must establish a better balance between responding to immediate pressures and creating a longer-term sense of purpose and direction. We need deliberative mechanisms that use evidence, research and professional experience and insights to inform and shape policy. While the overall direction must ultimately be set by the democratically elected government and parliament, both the shaping and the realisation of that policy in practice requires much stronger participation across the key stakeholders.

The proposed *Centre for Teaching Excellence* has the potential to identify exciting, effective and hopefully inspirational practice. In particular, and as recommended in the latest ICEA report⁷:

“The Scottish Government should urgently explore the implications of AI for education to identify related curriculum and professional learning policy developments, and work with universities, teachers’ organisations, business,

parents, students and community, to support measured implementation.” (p.20)

The challenge will be to create the conditions for such a centre to reach into every classroom in Scotland. Cascade approaches to innovation and professional learning have, at best, a chequered history. At worst they lead to successive distortions and misunderstandings as important insights about practice trickle down from the centre to a school. They can also lead to over-simplification of often sophisticated thinking. How then can we ensure that these dangers are avoided as we move forward?

The aim must be to establish mechanisms locally that allow ideas to be generated, tested, and adapted. Much has been written about the importance of collaboration in creating and sustaining innovative local cultures. The RICs were an attempt to promote regional collaboration and a sharing of expertise. A recent review⁸ of the RICs found that there had been ‘real progress’ since their creation and that RICs are having a diverse range of impacts including on the development of school staff, the delivery of lessons, planning for improvement, assessment and moderation, online learning, building leadership capacity and supporting collaboration across local authorities.

We need to learn from these successes and build on the experiences and the relationships they developed. The case for sharing within and across schools and local authorities is strong. We need direct involvement of heads and teachers in the governance of any new local infrastructure. We suggest that the possibility of identifying Local Learning Hubs (LLH) should be explored covering a small number of local authority areas. LLHs could act both as a broker and a facilitator of local collaboration and as a conduit for introducing fresh thinking and new evidence and understandings. The Education Scotland initiative to engage small teams of school leaders in identifying and investigating significant issues provides an interesting example of this kind of involvement⁹. For example, they have powerfully identified changes in the nature and extent of behaviour issues in schools as significantly reducing the ability of school leaders to engage in aspects of their vital leadership

⁷ICEA (2023) International Council of Education Advisers: third report 2021-2023. Scottish Government

⁸Scottish Government (2023). *Schools – Regional Improvement Collaboratives: review*. Scottish Government: Edinburgh

⁹Education Scotland (2024). *Excellence in Headship Stretch 2: headteacher agency for system change*. Education Scotland: Livingston

Leading from the classroom



Commentary

An increasingly febrile national and international environment together with supercharged technologies will inevitably require an agile education system, of the like we have never seen before.

roles. The hubs could also contribute directly, drawing on the proposed *Centre for Teaching Excellence* resources, by testing and validating emerging promising practice from the field. These LLHs could also link with a university as a further source of broader expertise and inspiration.

At the national level, there is also a case for a mechanism to facilitate and support the sharing and dissemination of ideas. The Muir Report¹⁰ envisaged a radical restructuring of Education Scotland but there will remain a need for something at the national level that can be a focal point for curating and disseminating professional advice and support. A relatively small, agile unit could curate ideas and stimulate and support collaboration across the LLHs. It would be important, however, for any national body not to be seen as directing local activity, creating a new top-down culture that could stifle local ownership and creativity. The purpose of this unit would be to accelerate progress by supporting LLHs to innovate and move validated practice across localities/hubs/the system and thus tackle unacceptable variations in educational experiences across the system.

The scope for much more timely and economic sharing of ideas has been greatly increased by the

experience of distance communication developed during the pandemic, now further energised by developments in AI. The participative approaches employed by the Muir and Hayward Reviews and in the National Conversation have also produced important insights into fresh approaches to collaboration. If Scotland is to move to a more cohesive, collaborative and innovative educational culture, we need to establish such participative approaches as the norm rather than the exception.

*Teaching Scotland's Future*¹¹ (TSF) outlined developments in the teaching profession that would help to make the potential benefits of CfE a reality. While a number of important initial changes were introduced, many then faded or were partially implemented and, as identified in the recent third report of the International Council of Education Advisers¹², the main thrust of TSF remains to be realised. In essence, we need to strengthen a culture of professional learning that continually learns and refreshes expertise as the context changes and our understanding of good teaching and learning develops. Changes in the scope and pace of change since 2011 make investment in professional learning even more important today, especially in times of austerity when professional learning budgets often become vulnerable.

We have argued that, in order to create the optimal learning experiences for the children and young people of Scotland, we need a more participative policy-making process together with more local scope for decision making and that this will improve both system agility and impact on outcomes. However, subsidiarity will only lead to improvement if there is a consistent approach to sustaining its various elements. Arguably, and in a similar vein to other systems and settings¹³, the somewhat disappointing impact of reform in Scotland over the last twenty years reflects insufficient attention to staying true to policy intentions while generating high-quality evidence to continuously monitor what is happening in practice and the impact on outcomes. In particular, the greater involvement in decision-making of a continually upskilling teaching profession should be integral to such a process.

Of course, agency does not mean complete freedom and the absence of accountability or the abdication of responsibility, and any emerging educational infrastructure must embody a strong commitment to evaluation and improvement at all levels. We have not explored the vital subject of accountability and collective responsibility here but will return to it in our next paper.

¹⁰Muir, K. (2022) Putting Learners at the centre. Scottish Government: Edinburgh
¹¹Donaldson, G. (2011) *Teaching is Scotland's Future*, Scottish Government: Edinburgh
¹²ICEA (2023) *International Council of Education Advisers: third report 2021-2023*. Scottish Government: Edinburgh

¹³E.g Payne, C. M. (2008) *So much reform, so little change: The persistence of failure in urban schools*. Harvard Education Press: Boston, MA



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