Consultation on Education (Scotland) Bill: Inequalities of Outcome

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My expertise is in the field of school improvement, with a particular interest in questions of social justice. Living in Edinburgh, I am acutely aware of the economic divisions in the city and our country, and of the strong correlation with academic outcomes. My most recent book is *Living on the edge: rethinking poverty, class and schooling* (2013, co-authored with Australia’s leading expert).

1) Legislation is only able to steer action and it would be inappropriate for Scottish Parliament to attempt to write a blueprint for action at education authority and school levels. Nevertheless, I will attempt to share with Committee members my understanding of what is involved.

2) It is salutory to recall that a previous Scottish education minister declared this to be a major and urgent priority back in 2005 (BBC, 21 Sept). Some indicators have improved, but the SPICe Briefing to this bill (page 5, charts 1 and 2) shows slow progress and an attainment gap which remains extremely wide. This suggests that something stronger is needed than ‘having regard to the desirability’ of reducing inequalities of outcome (Question 2). I would however advise against imposed targets and sanctions, since that it likely to result in various kinds of gaming and concealment rather than a shared commitment to change.

3) In the intervening period, some important projects have been started then cut short, for example New Community Schools. On anecdotal evidence, the Literacy Hubs initiative appears to have suffered from minimal funding (a part-time coordinator for each group of authorities); insufficient expertise (the co-ordinator seconded for too short a time to develop strong knowledge, either in terms of literacy practices or as change managers, and without the project drawing on university-based expertise); insufficient time to build capacity (eg active working groups in each area). It is not surprising that the emphasis has not extended beyond the initial stages and into reading for information and critical literacy in P5-S2, including specific subject literacies such as science or history - essential foundations for higher levels of achievement.

4) It is ironic that the poverty-related attainment gap remains as high in Scotland as England, despite many differences between the education systems. In part this is because
of scandalous levels of family poverty in both countries. However members of the Education and Culture Committee need to consider whether there may also be some school-based factors. For example, it is normal in both systems for children to be separated into what are (questionably) terms ‘ability groups’ from early in P1 / Y1, a practice which is inconceivable in the Nordic countries, where hierarchical segregation is rare up to age 16. There is still insufficient research regarding this practice in Scotland (how widespread, how much linked to socio-economic differences, how likely pupils are to remain in the lower groups, and so on). We do not know, for instance, how frequently the lower groups are delegated to the classroom assistant, a practice which Blatchford’s research has identified as damaging in England.

5) This forms part of a larger problem. US colleagues have identified the phenomenon of ‘pedagogies of poverty’, namely a tendency for children in lower streams and in schools in poorer neighbourhoods to receive a debased curriculum with too many routine exercises, a prevalence of low-level closed questions, and a lack of intellectual challenge (problem-solving, critical reading, genuine discussion). This urgently needs to be researched in the Scottish context, and approaches identified which reconcile skills development and remediation with human interest and intellectual challenge.

Regarding Question 1: What improvements in attainment, in achievement and in reducing inequalities of outcome do you consider the Bill in itself could deliver? What would be a desirable level of improvement?

6) It is highly improbable that differences in achievement or attainment can be eliminated in a society with high levels of child poverty. Economic poverty impacts directly on health, for example through poor housing, but also on child development including friendships, leisure activities and self-esteem. Scotland is not immune from the strident derision directed at benefit claimants by the Westminster government and sections of the mass media. Schools and the education system can make a difference but cannot compensate for the wider society, economy and politics.

7) Furthermore economic poverty has a cultural impact which, in various ways, endures across generations, leading to an intergenerational opportunity gap. This points to the need for many-sided support:

- high quality nursery staff who enrich children’s communications and experience
- children’s centres which actively involve parents in sharing forms of play and communication, lend toys and books, provide advice respectfully
• homework centres in schools and libraries to provide the support and learning resources which parents are unable to give, but also identification of sources of support within the child’s extended family or neighbourhood
• a literacy programme which places as much emphasis on the enjoyment of books and stories as on phonic decoding
• early and ongoing intervention where it is needed to close gaps in key skills
• summer holiday activities.

8) Schools can attempt to raise aspirations, but this cannot be achieved or sustained without genuine opportunities. However, schools and other agencies can help families navigate a route to desired careers and qualifications.

9) If you live in the wrong postcode, you need formal qualifications more than anybody, so attainment is crucial, but wider development is equally vital. Without a wider view of achievement, attainment is unlikely to rise: for example, the creative arts bring personal satisfaction and self-confidence as well as broadening horizons.

Regarding Question 4) What specific actions will education authorities be able to take to reduce inequalities of outcome that they are currently unable to take?

10) An Education Act of itself has limited effect, but sets a framework, expectation and forum for evaluation. Much will depend on how the Attainment Scotland fund is used, including the ways in which knowledge and understanding is shared, and capacity (eg habits and structures of collaboration and learning from best practice) is built. As in the London Challenge, education authorities will need to work with wider sources of expertise, and agents of chance will need to identify particularly successful heads and teachers and facilitate ways of learning such as peer observation and visits to other schools.

11) It should be noted that the London Challenge holds important lessons but cannot simply be copied as a blueprint. Much of Professor Tim Brighouse’s work consisted of countering a prevalent culture of inter-school competition, naming-and-shaming, and punitive evaluation and inspection – problems which Scotland fortunately does not have.

12) A part of the change process consists of finding the right approach to teachers’ consciousness, including open but supportive discussion and questioning of some teachers’ deficit stereotypes of parents or neighbourhoods, pessimistic attitudes to raising attainment and achievement, or the assumption that achievement depends entirely on external factors and that the particular practices and cultures of schools are irrelevant.
Further issues

13) Developing professional knowledge is vital, including correcting misreadings of data: for example, to recognise that correlations between socio-economics and attainment are tendencies and not deterministic of individual futures; that a lower vocabulary score at age 5 is an average and does not mean that all children from the bottom quintile have poor language skills, or indeed that children have insufficient language for school learning.

14) More flexible approaches to curriculum provision from S3 or S4 should include some work-related learning, but this is a question for all students; the issue is motivation by connection to the real world (as citizens as well as future workers), opening up possibilities and horizons rather than early training for routine low-paid jobs, and the principle of a broad and balanced curriculum for all.

15) Those involved with bringing about this change at national, local and school level will need an empathetic and complex understanding of the impacts of poverty on children’s lives, both economically and psychologically. Ethnographic studies of modern poverty point to prevalent senses of shame (low self-esteem, etc.) and futility (i.e. that study or training or saving is useful because problems will get in the way of successful outcomes). My own case studies of successful schools point to ways in which they counter both these emotions in the various aspects of school life (curriculum, pedagogy, ethos, relations with the community etc.) and thus empower their students to learn and pursue aspirations.

16) In summary, the challenge is complex, and success will depend on a combination of diverse school and community factors including:

- the quality of early years experience (language, experience, agency etc)
- the need to investigate / question teachers’ view of families
- finding ways of expanding pupils’ experiences
- a broader view of literacy for upper primary / secondary
- finding ways to connect curriculum to experience (but also expand horizons)
- countering ‘pedagogies of poverty’ with engaged learning
- supporting pupils through adolescence / opening possibilities / building confidence
- our existing strengths (HGIOS, ethical leadership concepts, sense of social justice)
- broadening experiences of a range of occupations, rather than early training.

Recognizing limitations of time, I hope that Committee members will be able to sustain commitment to this issue, including convening gatherings for sharing knowledge between the various agencies, independent experts, and teachers and headteachers. The mobilisation and sharing of knowledge may be key to bringing about significant change.