Official Response

SUBJECT: Educational attainment gap – Role of the third and private sectors
REQUESTED BY: Education and Culture Committee – Scottish Parliament
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This response has been prepared by the Church of Scotland’s Education Committee. The Committee would like to thank the Parliamentary Education and Culture Committee for undertaking this investigation and to encourage them in their work. We are grateful for the opportunity to share our views on this issue. Representatives of the Church’s Education Committee would be happy to give evidence or speak informally to MSPs or the Committee clerks if further information would be useful. The points made in this response reflect our wishes for best practice; it does not necessarily apply to every parish in Scotland. We begin with some introductory remarks, and the issues raised by the Education and Culture Committee are dealt with below.

Introduction

The aspiration of an excellent education for all is the goal which we must all keep in focus. Closing the attainment gap will undoubtedly unlock a great deal of potential. Some of the pressing questions of the day are relating to societal values and personal values and self-worth of young people and teachers. When we come to measuring ‘achievement’ and ‘attainment’, what is it that we really mean by these words, and are the tools we use to measure the outputs of the education system sufficient? The cross-party consensus that education is part of enabling young people to be the best kind of people they can be (responsible citizens, effective contributors, confident individuals, successful learners); how do we measure this? Who benefits from trying to measure it? And how do we prevent the easy return to the old way of thinking of looking at exam results and judging the quality of a school or the brilliance of a pupil?

Education Scotland’s slogan is now ‘transforming lives through learning’. How does this fit with a focus on raising attainment? At the heart of this is a question about what the purpose of education is all about. It is simpler to measure exam successes than a life which has been inspired and a soul which has a vision. This is a debate which we need wider input, and we hope that the Church would be able to offer a useful contribution.

Equality of access to opportunity in the context of achievement perhaps needs to be recognised as something distinct from attainment. With greater scrutiny of the attainment gap how do we ensure that achievement is equally recognised. There are concerns that achievement is often pursued in local communities as part of the extended curriculum, putting those who find access hard at a disadvantage; this could be through lack of funds, transport (perhaps an issue felt more acutely in rural areas), confidence of individuals, or support of the school and / or wider community. This is an area in which the Church could help by, for example, coordinating community based opportunities.
The Church of Scotland has been concerned with education since its foundation in the 16th century. The Church of Scotland still has a Gospel imperative to enable the voiceless to be heard. Its role in the 21st century is carried out principally by its Education Committee, by its representatives on local authorities and by its chaplains in schools and further education colleges.

In recent years, all reports of the Education Committee to the General Assembly have referred to the attainment/achievement gap and/or encouragement to congregations to support their local schools.\(^1\) Suggestions for how this can be done have been disseminated through conferences, throughout Scotland, for chaplains, teachers and faith representatives on local authorities as well as through publications and presentations to presbyteries. The Church of Scotland has also supported the development of ‘Serve Your Local School’ as a route for individuals and local congregations to be encouraged and supported in constructive and helpful engagement with their schools. In our recent engagement with politicians, both Ministers and opposition party spokespersons, we have been interested to find out ‘how the Church can help’ in partnership and delivery of positive outcomes for education. Serve Your Local School is, we believe, an excellent starting place for local congregations. The Education and Culture Committee should may also be interested to reflect on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report *Closing the attainment gap in Scottish education* (May 2014).\(^2\) There are good examples of church projects which contribute to the cross-sector approach to raise attainment. It has not been possible to gather a list of specific examples in the time provided for this inquiry, but if the Education and Culture Committee is interested in finding out more or visiting a project then the Church of Scotland would be happy to ingather more data or help with practical arrangements.

Our role may be summarised then as one of awareness-raising of the issues from the evidence based reports of the Education Committee and encouragement to provide support to practitioners at all levels of education at a local level. In addition, these are the issues raised by members of the Education Committee in their meetings with the education spokespersons of the political parties in the Scottish Parliament and with representatives of COSLA, Education Scotland, and others.

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The role of chaplains has been one of support for staff at a time when morale is low, and effective intervention and development is dependent on the well-being of practitioners. The same applies to the support of families under stress, and school communities following a major incident.3

The role of Church of Scotland representatives is to keep priorities such as achievement for all at the forefront of their participation in local authority committees. At all times they work in partnership with local authorities.

Education and Culture Committee: Whether their approaches have been particularly successful in improving achievement and attainment for school pupils. If so whether their methods could be more embedded in the curriculum.

We do not have the capacity at the level of the national Committee to collect or collate data when so much of the support work is done at a local level. We would encourage the Parliamentary Committee to consult with local Headteachers, chaplains and local authorities about the situation in particular areas and how good practice can be shared. We recognise the importance of mutual trust between a school and a church for there to be meaningful impact, and so stress the importance of open and positive relationships.

Two areas where the Church of Scotland Education Committee strives to improve achievement is through our two prize competitions. The Stevenson Prize promotes excellence in Religious Observance / Time for Reflection, and the Moderator’s Medal celebrates issues related to Religious and Moral Education and global citizenship. More information is available from the Church’s Education Committee – one suggestion we would make is for greater support in sharing news of the prizes and how schools and young people can take part.

Education and Culture Committee: Given the strong policy focus on the early years, whether the third and private sectors have been able to work equally effectively with pupils of all ages.

The Church of Scotland supports the focus on early years and some local churches engage in projects to encourage the play and learning of pre-school children and to support their parents/carers to create the kind of home environment that helps children thrive. Often these projects concentrate on provision for children from poor backgrounds, or children who are part of families that need support with budgeting, health matters and home management. Many local churches provide accommodation and facilities for pre-school groups such as Mothers & Toddlers. At the other end of the age range chaplains work in Further Education Colleges. However, important though the period is from pre natal to the end of early years there is evidence collected in Scotland that the achievement/attainment gap between those from poorer families and others continues to widen throughout both primary and secondary years of schooling. It is important therefore that any initiative looks at the whole age range and that support is continuous and not part of a one off short-term project. Those who wish to plan and improve provision need to build up evidence of what works in general and what works in specific contexts and allocate resources appropriately, trusting partners that are building up experience, evaluating what is effective and what is not.

3 See, for example, the involvement of David McNeish, a probationer minister who served as Chaplain to Liberton High School following the death of a pupil. http://edinburgh.stv.tv/articles/302111-keane-wallis-bennett-charity-single-in-itunes-top-100-chart/