Frank Lennon

Reflections on the current state of reform in Scottish school education

In spite of its many strengths, concern over Scottish school education has recently focused on its historic failure to narrow the attainment gap between the most and the least economically disadvantaged young people in our schools. The cack-handling of the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) from 2010-16 (including the introduction of the new National Examinations) and, more recently, the publication of comparative international data which has revealed (amongst other things) that the association between socio-economic disadvantage and attainment is stronger in Scotland than the OECD, English or Welsh averages, has served only to fuel that concern. Indeed, a report published by the Sutton Trust, found that Scotland's attainment gap in reading for boys was the highest in the developed world¹. The search for solutions is well and truly under way, but a number of disparate factors are currently conspiring to impede it. These include:

- the breakdown of political consensus;
- systemic leadership weaknesses;
- the culture of compliance; and
- the lack of diversity and innovation.

These are factors which are worth considering if Scottish school education is to be effective in the future.

The breakdown of political consensus

Consensus has been a long established characteristic of Scottish school education even during periods of review and reform. It could even be argued that one of the great achievements of the National Debate that led to the most significant educational reforms in the history of Scottish school education CfE, was the near unanimity across not only Scotland’s professional educational community, but across its parent, pupil, business and other stakeholder groups, on the purposes of the school curriculum in Scotland. These were expressed as “four capacities” and continue to enjoy widespread support. Crucially, this consensus extended to the political sphere such that throughout the lengthy development phase of CfE, education in Scotland was free of party-political point-scoring. However, the implementation phase of CfE, coinciding as it did with a period of drastically shrinking local authority budgets (after the 2007-08 financial crash), put unprecedented strain on the deep-rooted consensus. This was exacerbated throughout the CfE implementation period, by the growing disparity between the perceptions, overstated claims and assertions about the so-called “transformational” nature of CfE which emanated from Education Scotland on the one hand, and the deeply sceptical discourse at school level about bureaucracy, lack of clarity, incoherence and mismanagement. This damaged, some would argue irreparably, the historic consensus and has since led to the current increasingly party-political discourse in Scottish school education. The First Minister’s declaration that

she wishes to be judged on the extent to which the attainment gap is narrowed, however well-intentioned, has served only to politicise the debate about school reform even further by indicating that she intends to take personal credit for any progress made by schools. Given the low regard in which politicians continue to be held by the public, few teachers or headteachers will believe that she will publicly shoulder the blame for any failure. That the timescale for is to include measuring progress within the lifetime of this parliament, further suggests politicisation since few if any headteachers would dream of making parliamentary terms part of the timeframe for any improvement at school level never mind something as important as tackling poverty-related attainment gaps. In any event some (and not only cynics), have already pointed out that evidence of sustained improvement in an area that has proved so impervious to the best efforts of generations of dedicated Scottish teachers, is likely to be so far into the future as to be beyond the political lifetime of any currently serving politician. The belated, though welcome, consultation on “measuring the attainment gap and milestones towards closing it” (SG October 2017) has not stopped others pointing to the plethora of statistical measures already published and updated twice annually since 2014 in Insight (the Scottish Government’s benchmarking tool), that make it possible for any politician (or anyone else for that matter) to identify a statistic which will confirm whatever they want it to confirm. However, the “Key measures” contained in the consultation (see Table 1 below) do seem designed to address such concerns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>All children %</th>
<th>Most disadvantaged (bottom 20% SIMD) %</th>
<th>Least disadvantaged (top 20% SIMD) %</th>
<th>Gap (percentage points)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27-30 month review (Children showing no concerns across all domains)</td>
<td>63.7</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>71.7</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary – Literacy* (P1, P4, P7 combined)</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Literacy* (S3, 3rd level or better)</td>
<td>82.0</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary – Numeracy* (P1, P4, P7 combined)</td>
<td>75.1</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Numeracy* (S3, 3rd level or better)</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>93.7</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCQF 5 or above (1 or more on leaving school)</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>94.7</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCQF 6 or above (1 or more on leaving school)</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>81.2</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation measure</td>
<td>91.1</td>
<td>84.8</td>
<td>96.3</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yet the absence from these “key” statistics of a school-leaver measure of literacy and numeracy at the end of S4, S5 and S6, is startling. It looks like a glaring error or an attempt to fudge the two central planks of the government’s reform. A genuinely ambitious attempt to improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged would surely have included such measures along with the % of Scottish pupils who leave school with English and Maths at SCQF level 5. Furthermore, the value (statistical or
otherwise) of “P1, P4 and P7 combined” measures of literacy and numeracy is highly questionable. Thus the error in deciding to avoid any external, independent evaluation of CfE at the start of its implementation in 2010, is currently being mirrored by the absence of clarity in the proposals for measuring any narrowing of the attainment gaps.

**Systemic leadership weaknesses**

Leaving aside concerns over the leadership qualities of specific individuals, there are some weaknesses in the how the implementation of change in the system is being led that are not being addressed. The Deputy First Minister’s recent decision that Education Scotland (ES), whose leadership of CfE has been universally condemned (including by the OECD in their 2015 report), is to have an enhanced role following the recent Governance Review, is not only irrational and ill-advised but baffling. It is the educational equivalent of appointing the leadership of RBS responsible for its catastrophic financial collapse (from a share price of £6 in March 2007 to 11p twenty two months later) not only to lead financially recovery, but to take on enhanced powers across a wider range of responsibilities. Just as financial recovery required not just a change of strategy, but a change of culture, culture change is urgently required in Scottish school education and this will not come about by strengthening the role of an organisation whose leadership of the CfE changes so conspicuously lost the confidence not only of the profession as a whole, but of its own staff: in its ‘People (Employee) Survey’ for 2016, the final year of CfE implementation, only 11% of ES staff felt that change was managed well in ES and in all of the 6 years of CfE implementation from 2011-16, that figure never rose above 28%. The challenges we face in Scottish school education cannot be solved by continuing with the institutional leadership framework within which the problems were created.

**The culture of conformity, the lockstep approach to change and the lack of diversity**

One of the legacies of more than four decades of school improvement in Scottish school education has been a propensity for conformist thinking and a reluctance to innovate. This has led to a culture of compliance when now, more than ever, we need diversity and innovation. This compliance is evident across the system. For example, although we have 32 local authorities and 358 local authority run secondary schools, we have very little diversity in school governance - all 358 schools are not only line-managed in a virtually identical way, but in spite of their extraordinarily diverse intakes and local circumstances, they have strikingly similar leadership and management structures. The consequences of this lack of diversity in school governance are that secondary schools in Scotland are largely indistinguishable in their leadership and management practice. Thus the decades old strategy of ‘sharing good practice’ has failed to make any measurable impact on the attainment gap (however that is defined). In fact the resultant professional culture has tended to encourage replication and compliance rather than creativity and innovation. With CfE implementation, this legacy of compliance was aggrandised by the employment of another of Scottish school education’s traditions, namely the lockstep approach to change. This holds that if we are to introduce change in school education it must be introduced by every school at the same time. So, it is with the government’s latest proposals for school reform: change is to be top down, led by Education Scotland, mandated from Holyrood and implemented in a lockstep fashion across the entire system at an arbitrary point in time determined by the government.
As a consequence – whether intended or not – the compliance culture of Scottish school education which has served the least advantaged young people in our schools so poorly for decades, seems destined to continue.

It need not be so. The proposals to significantly increase school autonomy are genuinely innovative and greatly to be welcomed. They represent a historic opportunity to change the culture of Scottish school education and, moreover, could be implemented without sacrificing the consensus. However the top-down, mandatory, lockstep approach - also evident in the proposal for Regional Improvement Collaborations - undermines the government's claim that the case for change is about moving towards “a school and teacher-led system”. The obvious conflict between the intention to move towards “a school and teacher-led system” by employing a change model based on centrally determined mandatory lockstep mechanisms seems to have escaped the government.

The alternative to the above approach would be to introduce the changes incrementally by encouraging schools or groups of schools to develop the capacity and professional confidence to adopt the new changes. There are, of course, dangers in each approach: the lockstep approach runs the risk of grudging compliance with unwilling schools or those who judge themselves to be unready, being compelled to introduce change at a time not of their choosing. For risk-averse schools and local authorities, the comfort of conformity – in knowing that every school was in the same boat even if it was destined to sail round and round in circles - might be comforting but history suggests it will do little to improve the lot of the disadvantaged. The fact that not one of the 32 local authorities has so far supported the government proposals for greater autonomy for schools might not be surprising given that they might see it as “turkeys voting for Christmas”, but it is nevertheless, deeply disappointing. It indicates an aversion to diversity and innovation which might threaten the status quo – a status quo that cannot point to any closing of any poverty-related gaps over the past 4 decades. This aversion appears to extend not just to lockstep change but even to incremental piloted change. An incremental approach, they might argue, would divide schools into ‘early’ and ‘late’ adopters with possible implications for ‘equality’ if early adopters were seen to be gaining an advantage or experiencing a disadvantage as compared with others; but it would also be likely to create stronger local communities with the school at the centre, a more dynamic culture of innovation across the education system from which progress might arise. Given the historic level of uniformity in Scotland’s schools, such a development seems much more likely to generate new ideas and approaches.

Given this context, the Scottish Government’s recently published consultation on the provisions of the Education Bill, is the latest, and perhaps the most important, of a series of government publications since the OECD Report of December 2015 *Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective (December 2015)* that have included:

- the launch of the *National Improvement Framework (January 2016)*;
- the establishment of the *Innovation Fund (January 2016)* to fund innovative projects to close the attainment gap;
• the publication of *Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education A Delivery Plan for Scotland* (2016);
• the publication of *Curriculum for Excellence: A Statement for Practitioners from HM Chief Inspector of Education* (August 2016);
• the consultation on *Draft Head Teacher and Training Standards (Scotland) Regulations* (December 2016);
• the publication of Education Scotland’s *Quality and Improvement in Scottish education 2012-2016* (March 2017); and
• the allocation of *Pupil Equity Funding* (April 2017);
• *Next Steps* (June 2017)

The OECD (2015) Report’s cautionary note comes to mind here: it pointed out that the impressive array of “intense activity” (sic) they found in Scottish education did not in itself constitute coherence. In this context it is worth focusing on the fact that although the *Next Steps* document endorsed (on p13) the 2017 ADES Report’s sensible call for:

“…an uncomplicated model but one that has sufficient sophistication to be able to flex to meet differing needs.”

There is, in spite of two subsequent government publications (on Key Measures and Provisions of the Education Bill), still no indication of what this model might look like.

Thus two fundamental problems continue to be a lack of evidence that lessons have been learned about how to introduce change and a lack of understanding of the importance of introducing more diversity into school education. Crucially, the document containing the provisions for the new Bill has nothing whatever to say about the serious practical implications of its proposals on the two distinct sectors of Scottish school education (primary and secondary) and nothing to offer on the importance of changing the culture. Making greater autonomy mandatory for every school in Scotland flatly contradicts the SG’s repeatedly stated intention to give more decision making powers to headteachers. In spite of emerging evidence suggesting that primary heads, unlike their secondary counterparts, do not wish any more autonomy, the lockstep approach appears set to ensure that they get will it whenever Education Scotland or the DFM decides. The wisdom of employing a lockstep approach by making such changes mandatory for all schools irrespective of the varying degrees of willingness and readiness within and across the primary and secondary sectors is highly questionable.

---