

Study Visit to Scotland

5th – 8th March 2001

Programme for the Study Visit

1. The itinerary consisted of visits to five schools - John Ogilvie High School, Earnock High School, Trinity Academy, St George's School for Girls and Castlebrae High School, and separate meetings with academics, Local Authority officials, the Education Institute of Scotland, the Schools Inspectorate, and other interests.

Background

2. Scotland's education system reflects both its history and geography. Scotland made its first move towards a national and comprehensive system of education in 1696. The 1872 Education Act acknowledged the State's direct responsibility for education and set out to provide secondary education but a secondary school system was not achieved until 1945.

3. In 1947, when the school leaving age was raised to fifteen, there were over nine hundred public secondary schools. Some thirty of these were grant-aided by central government; were selective and most charged fees. A smaller number of LEA schools were selective and charged fees, or had primary departments that did so. The remainder were maintained by the LEA and charged no fees.

4. Some two hundred of the nine hundred public schools offered six-year certificate courses for pupils from age twelve. Outside the city areas, many six-year schools accepted pupils for non-certificate courses, and, in this sense,

were not fully selective. Senior secondary provision both for certificate and other courses was centralised in one school known as “omnibus” or “comprehensive”.

5. After 1945, the seven hundred or so other schools became known as junior secondary schools. They were three-year schools for pupils aged twelve to fifteen which had comprehensive intakes and were required to provide an education that was shorter and different in kind. In more scattered areas, they were the only secondary schools and were often of long standing.

6. The two hundred senior secondary schools included sixty or so highly esteemed first generation of schools. They were selective between 1945 and 1965 but the majority became eleven to eighteen comprehensive schools and have had a continuing influence on educational policy, community schooling and recruitment to it. A second generation of schools was formed in the early 1900s. Initially, they were designated as Higher Grade schools offering five-year courses but in 1923 they were allowed to offer a full Leaving Certificate curriculum; after 1945, there were about one hundred and twenty such schools.

7. None of these first or second generation schools was Catholic. Before 1918, Catholic schools received central government grants. After 1918, the responsibility for virtually all Catholic schools transferred to the new local authorities. There were also a small number of private secondary schools which in the 1960s served less than 2% of the school population.

8. When comprehensive reform was announced in 1965, the position of these prestigious senior high schools was well established. Twenty years later nearly all had become comprehensive but their pupil intakes remained socially privileged, they had higher average levels of examination attainment, and they remained highly popular with parents.

9. In 1964 the Labour government recommended the all-through comprehensive school as the only acceptable form of secondary provision for Scotland (six models were recommended to English LEAs). Such schools were to provide courses for all six of the secondary school years, including courses that led to presentation at the SCE O-grade and H-grade. Where distance and accommodation allowed, all pupils from the local area were to attend.

10. In 1965, Scotland had proportionately more comprehensive schools and more state pupils attending them than England and Wales. Scotland moved more decisively towards a predominantly comprehensive secondary system. This owed something to the higher levels of comprehensive provision that existed and to other distinctive features of Scottish political and educational life.

Summary of Findings

11. All comprehensive schools in Scotland now cater for pupils aged twelve to eighteen. Pupils take external exams at Standard Grade in S4 and a range of options, including Intermediates, Highers and Advanced Higher Grades at S5 and S6. Pupils may not study for Higher Grades unless they achieve credit levels at Standard Grade.

12. There was a clear consensus from those we met in the school visits and the representative meetings that the comprehensive system is right for Scotland, based on its culture in rural areas of local community (omnibus) schools, the political backdrop and the socio-economic climate.

13. The schools system in Scotland has many of the same features as in Northern Ireland. Schools with strong, positive leadership and good teachers have an ethos of achievement and excellence. Small schools are unable (not resourced) to provide an appropriate, broad curriculum. The common curriculum at S1/S2 (our KS3) is not entirely satisfactory for different abilities and aptitudes. The curriculum generally is academically orientated; more focus on individual choices/pathways begins at S3/S4 (our KS4) and this progressive approach continues into S5/S6 for those who stay on. There are popular and less popular schools, based on perceived status, past performance and in many cases the management style and ethos of achievement.

14. All secondary schools have designated primary school catchments and those pupils who apply must be enrolled. Parents may choose to make "Placing Requests" to another school and if accepted are responsible for travel costs. There is a social mix in enrolments but they are skewed in particular areas and according to the school's status.

15. The present system has evolved over a period of some thirty years and there remains a legacy of different school types. The more “popular” schools tend to be those which were formerly selective senior high schools while the former junior high schools are under-subscribed. There are restrictions on the comprehensive model in urban situations, especially where there are private schools in the area.

16. There is mixed ability teaching, particularly at S1/S2, and a developing debate about the effectiveness of this. Some setting/banding by ability is happening, but teachers acknowledge educational benefits for lower ability pupils. The Inspectorate has asked for more setting to take place.

17. There are questions about the extent to which the present curriculum in schools provides significant opportunities for non-academic courses. The implementation of the new “Higher Still” curriculum is designed to address this. All schools are making a four-year transition from the old Higher Grade system to the new Higher Still structure, which is designed to provide all pupils in S5/S6 with courses suited to their skills and abilities. However, it is unclear whether there is a proper understanding of the respective roles of schools and FE sector in its delivery.

Edinburgh University and Strathclyde University

18. Academics provided statistical and qualitative evidence to support the view that the Scottish comprehensive system is educationally and socially effective and in the best interests of pupils and society. The views below are those presented to the Review Body.

19. The transition to a comprehensive system in the 1960s was relatively non-controversial because of the Scottish tradition that all children in the community should be educated together. The change impacted most on the former (selective) senior secondary schools and the former comprehensives which “lost” their intakes from the former four-year junior schools at age 16.

20. The independent sector has not increased significantly since 1965, compared to the former grant-aided and independent schools pre-1965, ie

enrolments increased from 4.9% to 5.3% of the pupil population in 1999, but are 25% in Edinburgh and 15% in Glasgow.

21. Under Open Enrolment about one-third of parents have a meaningful choice. More middle class parents exercise choice. Parental choices are based on historical status, past performance, ethos and social class. There is no empirical data on the relative performance of children of the same ability in the private and comprehensive sectors.

22. Social class inequalities in terms of attainment have narrowed over the past thirty years, particularly for working-class girls. However, this narrowing is much less marked in the Higher Standard Grades. There was no available evidence about whether the gap was closing because the top was getting lower or the bottom higher or both.

23. The support in Scotland for a non-selective system has been running at 70% over past twenty years. Current debates are about the development of the Higher Still curriculum and mixed ability teaching as opposed to setting, not about the principle of comprehensive education. There is no statistical evidence that mixed ability teaching is more or less effective than setting by aptitude/ability; streaming is not an option in Scotland.

24. The improvement over time in levels of attainment may be difficult to ascribe solely to the comprehensive system. However, there is no sense of any lowering of standards and the improvement in attainment of lower social class has not been at expense of high achievers.

South Lanarkshire Local Education Authority

25. The LEA representatives were very positive about the role of comprehensive schools, describing the main benefits as inclusion, differentiated teaching styles (setting, banding), equality of opportunity, appropriate curriculum for each pupil. They mentioned ongoing challenges, such as the need to involve teaching staff in changing culture/attitudes, particularly when dealing with a mixed ability enrolment. While there are no comprehensives categorised as "failing", there are a number of lower achieving schools which attract extra resources and apply a differentiated curriculum.

26. Other issues were that at least six comprehensives which were formerly selective remain very popular and are over-subscribed; criteria for admission to such schools include sibling relationships, proximity, first come/served and ballot. Some 20% of the school population are described as “disaffected”, ie, not interested in continuing education beyond age sixteen. This excludes 5-6% with learning difficulties and disabilities. Also, schools in rural areas (in particular) are being encouraged to develop community school arrangements - adult education, etc - to reinforce inclusion.

Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)

27. The EIS is the main teacher union in Scotland, with over fifty one thousand members (about 80%) in nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, further and higher education. Our meeting was with senior officials. Their views were that outside of Edinburgh and Glasgow there is 95% support for comprehensive schools; that the system ensures social integration, effective education for all, smooth transfer from primary to secondary and a holistic approach to the curriculum. Standards were generally rising, but there were problems in small schools. The optimum school size for comprehensives should be an enrolment of one thousand to one thousand three hundred. There were objections to clustering or partnerships between schools by teachers and parents at S5 and S6.

Schools Inspectorate

28. The Inspectorate, while fully committed to the principles of comprehensive education, provided a frank assessment of the present position in Scotland.

29. There are shortcomings in the curriculum and teaching practices at S1/S2, arising from the provision of the same curriculum to mixed ability pupils. There is a need for differentiation in some subjects for lower ability pupils to assist their development and for higher ability pupils to stretch their potential. This points to “setting” in more subjects, but not streaming.

30. There are too many subjects in the S1/S2 curriculum. More focussed choices may be appropriate based on a four-year continuum from S1 to S4.

Curriculum content in many schools is too academic-orientated; Higher Still should help to provide broader choices and in developing key skills.

31. School attainment standards have not declined in Scotland but other countries may have progressed more quickly. Outputs from comprehensive schools are robust and improving. The added value of a school's input compared to family and social influence is difficult to measure. The Inspectorate seeks to provide this in its audit reports.

32. The existence of independent schools undermines the effectiveness of comprehensive schools in the area, ie, reduced social integration and mix of ability. HMI experience is that independent schools deliver high academic standards.