

# Schools for the 21st century: the national debate on education in Scotland

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In 2002, the Scottish Executive Education Department launched a national debate on schools for the 21st century. The debate elicited over 1500 responses and it is estimated that 20,000 people took part. This paper describes the main themes arising from the debate, highlighting the support for comprehensive education and the high level of trust in the quality and professionalism of teachers. The agenda for change was in terms of greater flexibility and choice in the school curriculum and of the need for well-built and well-resourced schools. The paper discusses this approach to policy formulation in the context of voter disengagement from politics and suggests that the Scottish Executive should attempt to sustain civic participation in education policy-making as a way of developing a new politics in Scotland.

Keywords: *Comprehensive education; Education policy; Scotland*

## Introduction

It is generally accepted that there is a problem of voter engagement in politics in Britain. Turn-out at local and national elections is declining. For example, 59.4% of electors turned out in the UK general election in 2001 compared to 71.4% in 1997 (Electoral Commission, 2003). There is particular concern about young people's level of engagement with the democratic process. In 2001, only 39% of 18–24 year olds voted. Scotland is no exception, despite having voted (in a referendum) in favour of establishing its own Parliament in 1979. Turnout for the first Scottish parliamentary

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elections in 1999 was 58% (Curtice, 2002), and for the second elections in 2003 was 49.43% (Electoral Commission, 2003). This indication of voters' disengagement from parliamentary elections is interesting because evidence suggests that the Scottish people's expectations of the Parliament were high. The Parliament could be seen as a symbolic representation of Scotland's nationhood (Curtice, 1999, 2000). Moreover, it was hoped that the Parliament would usher in a new style of politics, more open, consultative, and participative than the Westminster model (Brown, 2000). Furthermore, some 70% of those taking part in the Referendum Survey expected improvements in education (Hassan & Warhurst, 2000), and indeed education matters have featured prominently in the political agenda since 1999. In higher education, 'up front' tuition fees for students have been abolished, five national priorities in school education have been established and enshrined in legislation and education has been identified as an important vehicle for taking forward the social inclusion agenda, a UK-wide policy initiative (Bryce & Humes, 2003). Consultation has been a feature not only of the legislative process in education, but also of a host of smaller-scale reforms to the school curriculum and to initial teacher education. This commitment to consultation can be interpreted as an attempt to engage voters and special interest groups in a new, more open, style of participative democracy. Such an approach, however, brings with it an obligation to explain the nature of the consultation, making it clear which areas are not open to radical change. It also brings an obligation to report the views presented and the account taken of them by government. Otherwise, government lays itself open to the charge that consultation is no more than window dressing, an attempt to seek legitimacy for policies that have already been decided, thus further alienating voters from participation in decision-making.

This paper provides an overview of a distinctive consultation about the future of school education in Scotland organized by the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), in 2002, popularly known as the National Debate. It is in four main parts. Part one describes the way in which the debate took place and the people who were involved in it. Part two sets out the procedures used to analyse the diverse range of responses to the questions featured in the debate. Part three reports the main themes to emerge with a brief commentary on each. Part four offers a commentary on this process of policy development.

### **The nature of the debate**

The Minister for Education and Young People launched the National Debate on Schools in the 21st century in the Scottish Parliament in March 2002. It lasted for 3 months. It was an unusual consultation in many respects.

1. It was not asking for responses to a specific policy proposal. Rather it was asking in a fairly open way some important questions about what schools in the future should be like. What should pupils learn? How could pupils learn more effectively? What were the best and worst things about the current system? What were the priorities for improvement?

2. The purpose of the consultation was to develop a policy agenda over the medium term going beyond the life of the next Scottish Parliament, i.e. beyond 2003–2007.
3. People outside the normal ‘policy community’ were encouraged to respond. Details of the distribution of responses in terms of groups are given in Table 1. Pupils, teachers, parents, and others were invited to form discussion groups and to send in their conclusions. A number of events, large and small, took place across the country and the results were reported to SEED. There were conferences, seminars, panels, and some specially commissioned events to encourage those who did not normally take part in consultations to do so. Some children’s charities, for example, organized events to enable children and young people who were vulnerable and/or disaffected from schools to make their views known. At least 800 events took place and over 1500 responses were sent in. Events varied in size from small discussion groups of three or four people to major seminars and conferences involving 100 or more. The best estimate from information supplied by organizers of events is that over 20,000 people were involved in the debate. It will be clear that people were involved in different ways and to different extents. Nevertheless, the debate provided an unprecedented opportunity for people in Scotland to make their views known. Further information about categories of respondents is given in part two.
4. SEED prepared support packs to aid discussion. These consisted of a response form which set out 14 open questions which discussion groups were invited to consider, although it was made clear that respondents could present their views in ways which were most appropriate to them. Small numbers of videos, CD-ROMs, posters, and academic papers were submitted indicating that some respondents took advantage of this encouragement. The kinds of questions asked on the responses form were: What are the best things about school education in Scotland and why? What are the main things that need to be improved and why? How can we get children more interested in learning? The form also asked for some information about the nature of the event from which responses were being reported such as the numbers and kinds of people attending. In addition, the SEED support pack contained a number of short briefing papers giving information about various aspects of the current school system in Scotland and providing some international comparisons.
5. People opted into the debate. Thus, the debate did not take the form of a blanket invitation to respond. Some requested the support packs and used the response sheets included, while others responded in the way that seemed most appropriate to them.

The Education, Culture, and Sport Committee of the Scottish Parliament conducted an inquiry into the purposes of Scottish education at the same time as the National Debate was taking place. The Committee wanted to ‘build on that [debate] by provoking debate in more depth about the key issues about the future of education’ (Education, Culture and Sport Committee Discussion Paper, 2002, p. 1). The Committee supported the ‘in depth debate’ by a Discussion Paper organized around

Table 1. Size of group responses

	Total	Individual parent	Individual teacher	Individual others	Individual pupil
Base	1517				
1	650 (43%)	148	49	122	331
2–4	38 (3%)				
5–6	71 (5%)				
7–8	70 (5%)				
9–10	71 (5%)				
11–13	45 (3%)				
14–18	61 (4%)				
19–29	63 (4%)				
30+	74 (5%)				
Don't know/not stated	374 (25%)				

six themes: Coping with Change and Uncertainty; Engaging with Ideas; Keeping Everyone Involved with Learning; Promoting a Sense of Identity; Developing Necessary Skills; and Fitting Structure to Purpose. Each theme was prefaced by a key question and underpinned by summary information and an identification of issues to help focus discussion. The Committee received written submissions to its consultation (from 50 organizations, 24 individuals, and a further 24 individuals contribute to the on-line debate). It took evidence at three oral sessions and commissioned a report from the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) based on focus groups from 'very disaffected [people who would typically not have] regarded the topic as worthy of serious and sustained attention' (Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 2003). This compares to the 1517 responses to the National Debate. In analysing the responses to the inquiry, 38 written submissions to the National Debate were sampled in addition to those above, so that views of groups which had not responded to the Parliamentary inquiry could be included.

The Parliamentary inquiry might be seen as representative of more traditional styles of consultation. It was clear that the majority of responses were from those who were centrally involved in the education system, knowledgeable about it, and accustomed to participating in policy matters. The discussion paper supporting the inquiry assumed a high level of literacy and of understanding of complex issues, such as globalization, the socializing purposes of education, and the role of education in developing a sense of identity. It is interesting that the analysis of the responses mentions that the participants in the SCRE groups did not find the 'framework [of the discussion paper] so helpful. Although they did address the issues which it sought to raise' (Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 2003). The National Debate, on the other hand, might be seen as representative of the 'new politics' in deliberately attempting to engage those unaccustomed to responding to consultations and using a variety of mechanisms to promote their participation. This included a strong encouragement of pupil participation, responses from groups of teachers and parents, as well as from organizations and a determined effort via children's charities to engage disaffected young people and their families. Discussion packs aimed at young people

were produced as well the other materials described above. All of these were written with a non-specialist audience in mind.

Now, of course, one cynical reading of the National Debate is that it was an attempt by Labour and the Liberal Democrats (who govern in coalition) to stifle debate on the Scottish Parliamentary elections in May 2003 as far as education policy is concerned. The parties could claim that their school policy was the result of a national consultation and distract attention from policy failures. Another, less cynical response, is to see the debate as a genuine attempt to develop innovative ways of formulating policy in the context of devolution and to broaden civic participation in that policy-making process. Much depends on the Executive's response to the issues raised in the debate and on its commitment to sustaining civic engagement in policy-making. It is in these contexts that the validity and reliability of the analysis of the responses is especially important.

### **Analysing the responses**

The analysis of the responses went through a number of familiar stages. They are reported here both to provide a context for the key themes reported in part three and to set the scene for some reflections on the part which routine social science methods can play in education policy development discussed in part four.

Perhaps unusually, the lead researcher was invited by SEED to comment on the questions which were intended to support the debate. Comment was invited originally about what kinds of analyses would be possible given the open nature of the questions, particularly if a large number of responses were received. Comment inevitably extended to the nature of the questions themselves so that, from the outset, there was a discussion about the trade offs between open and closed questions, the kinds of analysis which could be undertaken and the kinds of claims that could be made as a result of different kinds of analysis. In short, discussions were taking place which would be familiar to any research team. What was noteworthy was that these discussions were taking place with senior civil servants, who wanted to be fully briefed on methodological issues and options. When it was clear that the national debate was to be constructed around open questions, a strategy for analysis was developed. It was agreed that a detailed analysis of a sample of responses would be undertaken and a coding frame developed which would enable the majority of responses to be analysed using straightforward frequencies. It was agreed that the emphasis would be on the content of what people were saying, rather than on how they were saying it. It is important to note that the social research company commissioned to undertake the numerical analysis was involved in these discussions from the outset. This meant that when the later numerical analysis was undertaken, there was a good understanding both of the substantive and methodological issues involved by SEED, the University researchers, and the research company.

A first step in developing the analysis was to decide whether to distinguish the 1500 responses in terms of categories. It was apparent that the innovative nature of the debate in terms of trying to solicit responses outside the normal policy community

would generate interest amongst both policy-makers and researchers about similarities and differences in responses among different groups. A quick scan of the responses suggested four broad categories of response, pupils, teachers, parents, and organizational responses. It was clear that most of the 127 responses from organizations were from those well used to contributing formally to education policy-making, either through membership of national committees and other mechanisms or through regular lobbying of SEED. Such organizations included the teacher unions, local authorities, Scottish Enterprise, children's charities, OXFAM, the Churches, and so on. It was decided to report separately on these responses for that reason. To begin with, the analysis focused on responses from parents and teachers and in order to develop a coding frame began by selecting at random from the overwhelming majority of responses which had used the response form supplied by SEED. This presented a preliminary structure in terms of 14 questions. It was also decided to concentrate on a straightforward content analysis on responses in terms of key themes in answers to each of the questions. Nothing more subtle could be attempted in the 3 months available for the work, although the research team decided to give their impressions about the overall tone of the responses in the final report.

The following procedures were adopted to establish a coding frame:

- One response which used the response form was analysed in terms of key content in answer to each question by all six researchers involved in the exercise and the result discussed.
- Having established a common understanding of this limited content, a larger sample of responses was then analysed by the six researchers to develop a series of categories which might form the basis for the remaining analysis.
- Two researchers independently reviewed all the categories that had been generated and developed a coding frame which collapsed some categories. The two coding frames were similar in many respects, but there were some differences. The frames were debated and discussed by all six researchers and a final version agreed.
- Coding rules were developed to minimize ambiguity of meaning and coding sheets designed so that the analysis of each response could be traced back to the original.
- Any content that did not fit the coding frame was written out in full and all of these were collected and discussed at a regular meeting and, if there was a pattern emerging, then a new category was added to the coding frame. Those responses which did not suggest a pattern were categorized as 'other'.
- Responses were analysed in batches of 10 per researcher and a descriptive report written to complement the coding sheets. Researchers also wrote their own impressions of the tenor of the response or highlighted aspects that had not been captured elsewhere.
- A report was structured in terms of answers to each of the questions on the form, as batches were completed and then added to by subsequent batches to build up a composite picture.
- Having completed a detailed analysis of over 160 responses in this way, and having established confidence in the coding frame, the remaining responses were coded

by a team of students under the supervision of the research team. A re-check of the first 300 responses to be coded by the students was carried out to identify any serious coding errors. This phase of the work proved the robustness of the coding frame as very few responses were coded as 'other'. The frequency of responses was analysed by the social research company.

- The responses using the response forms were coded first, as they had a ready made structure and it was interesting that the coding frame developed in this way also fitted the more open and free flowing responses.
- A similar approach was taken with the organizational responses, although a more narrative approach was used as well as the previously developed coding sheets as the coding frame was not useful for some responses, such as academic papers, posters, or more lengthy and free flowing responses. The organizational responses were not reported in terms of frequencies given their comparatively small number. Instead, a separate report was provided to SEED.

The main purpose of the analysis was to identify patterns in responses. In policy terms, it was clearly important to take account of issues that were being identified within and across groups, although, as indicated above, care was taken to note responses that did not fit with the generality. It was also important to be as clear as possible about the origins of the response. For example, it transpired that there were different kinds of pupil response, those from individual pupils (331); those from pupil councils (87); and those that came from organizations (21). Thus, each of the main categories of response, pupil, teacher, and parent was further sub-divided so that, if further fine grained analysis of similarities and differences across groups was required, this would be relatively easy to accomplish. Table 2 shows who responded to the national debate.

Similarly, given the nature of debate and the encouragement of group responses, it was interesting to see the balance between group and individual response and the numbers of people attending group events. This is shown in Table 1.

It can be seen that, despite the encouragement to return a response based on group discussion, over 40% of responses were from individuals, with over half of these being from individual pupils. Data on group size was incomplete, with 25% of group responses failing to provide details.

A further characteristic of the response was the high level of non-response to many of the 14 questions on the response sheet. For example, almost 30% of responses did not identify the best things about Scottish schools and over 20% did not identify the main improvements needed. Individual and groups of teachers tended to have the lowest non-response rate across most questions, and this should be borne in mind in reading the main themes which were identified. There were also some interesting features of non-response which require further analysis and are not discussed here. For example, some 47% (70/148) of individual parent responses and 12% (13/107) of parental group responses did not report their views on the question, 'How can parents help their children learn?' Nor was this question of particular interest to individual pupils, with 73% (240/331) not responding.

These percentages of non-responses are unlikely to be due to coding error, since the team coded across groups. Nor are they likely to be a feature of the way the coding frame was constructed since the amount of data coded as ‘other’ was small. We can speculate that non-response was likely to be the result either of a lack of time or a lack of specific ideas which might help inform policy, or a combination of both. Alternatively, since some groups and individuals did not use the pre-defined format, the high non-response to some items could be interpreted as indicating what these respondents saw as key. We return to this issue later.

### **Main themes**

In this section, six main themes arising from the responses to the debate are described and discussed. The themes chosen—the main successes of Scottish schools, the main areas in need of improvement, the role of parents, assessment and accountability, practicalities of schooling, and the nature and function of schools of the future—have been chosen because of their importance to education policy and indeed their intrinsic interest. A detailed analysis of all the themes is available from SEED ([www.scotland.gov.uk/national\\_debate/](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/national_debate/)).

A striking theme across all adult groups and organizational responses was the support for comprehensive schools, educating pupils from 5 to 18 and, related to that, a recognition of the quality and professionalism of the teaching force. Almost 29% of responses which answered this question identified the comprehensive system as a success and 39% of the responses identified quality teaching and the professionalism of the teaching force. As might be expected, these matters featured strongly in responses from individual and groups of teachers, but they were among the three best things about Scottish education identified by parents and pupils too. There was similar praise for the comprehensive system from those organizational responses which mentioned successes of school education in their response. In particular, the socially

Table 2. Respondents to the National debate

	Total
Base	1517
Questionnaire from a group of parents	107 (7%)
Questionnaire from individual parent	148 (10%)
Questionnaire from a group of teachers	133 (9%)
Questionnaire from individual teacher	49 (3%)
Questionnaire from a group/mixture of parents, pupils, and teachers, School Boards, etc.	295 (19%)
Questionnaire from individual others	122 (8%)
Questionnaire from a group of others—not described as parents/teachers	63 (4%)
Individual pupil	331 (22%)
Pupil councils	87 (6%)
Pupils responses through organizations	21 (1%)
Anonymous	65 (4%)
Don't know/not stated	96 (6%)



inclusive nature of comprehensive schools was highlighted. Moray Council's response, 'Education services delivered by public service and not for profit' summed up the view not only of local authorities but those of the Scottish Civic Forum and the Association of University Teachers.

This support for the comprehensive system and for teachers is striking, given the well publicized concern of all political parties in the UK with the need to improve public services in general and educational standards in particular. One approach to improvement in England has been to distinguish among different kinds of providers of services to encourage public awareness of difference and, some would argue, to encourage competition. In the health service we have seen the appearance, not without controversy, of Foundation hospitals. Similarly in education there has been a diversification of school types, with foundation schools the most recent addition. This is a development which might be seen as a move away from the comprehensive ideal. While, as reported below, an improvement agenda was identified in Scotland, there was no demand to change the basic structure of schooling. How can we explain this? One kind of explanation would see this support as no more than public sector organizations and employees protecting their interests and exerting influence over parents and pupils. However, such a view is not supported by other evidence of parents' trust in teachers (Munn, 1997; Humes, 2000) or by analyses of the importance of education in Scotland. As is well known, education is a signifier of national identity in Scotland (McPherson & Raab, 1988; McCrone, 1992; Paterson, 1994; Devine, 2000), and it may be that these views are affirming a popularly held view of Scottish education as traditionally more socially open than in England, 'allowing children of humble backgrounds to rise'. (Paterson, 1994). Alongside this is a belief in education as a public good to be provided for by public means, as well as for individual advancement (MacKenzie, 1989). Thus, any political party in Scotland proposing a radical change in the basic structure of schooling would be implicitly challenging a cherished Scottish tradition or, some would argue, myth about the socially egalitarian and public nature of Scottish schools. Reporting a comparative analysis of the results of the 1999 Scottish Parliamentary Election Survey and of the British Social Attitudes Survey on views of the welfare state, Paterson *et al.*, 2001, pp. 156–157) state:

Scotland is somewhat more favourable than England to public support for education, and to a non-selective system of public community schools. ... they are differences of emphasis rather than fundamental disagreements. ... [However] they are seen through a national or even nationalist prism in Scotland and so their effects may be radically different.

Thus, no political party in Scotland is seriously arguing about changing the basic structure of primary and secondary schooling in Scotland, and this position is reinforced by the responses to the national debate. Indeed, as we shall see below, the emphasis from SEED is upon how comprehensive schools might be reformed from the inside, as it were, by changing the curriculum, rather than with any radical change to the structure of provision. Any attempt at radical structural change would open the Scottish Executive, Labour governing in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, to the

charge of ‘Englishing’ the Scottish education system from the main opposition, the Scottish National Party.

There were many areas, however, identified as being in need of improvement. Unsurprisingly, the need for more resources and for improving pupils’ behaviour featured prominently across all groups, but so too did the need for curriculum reform in secondary education. This was surprising for two reasons. Firstly, the 5–14 curriculum was identified as the major strength of the system, with 54% of responses mentioning strengths identifying this. It featured as one of the top three best things about schools across all categories of respondents. Secondly, Scotland has recently completed a major reform of post-16 education, Higher Still, which aims to cater for the diverse range of pupils now staying on in full time education beyond the statutory leaving age of 16 and to provide a unified system of vocational and more traditional academic qualifications (Raffe, 2000). Higher Still aims to provide parity of esteem between academic and vocational courses by eschewing a twin track. This reform is beginning to have a ‘backwash’ effect on the 14–16 curriculum, with some pupils mixing the traditional Standard Grade examinations, broadly equivalent to the English GCSE, with Intermediate courses originally designed for 16+. There is, therefore, at least potentially, considerable scope for flexibility and choice in current arrangements for post-14 schooling. It may be that respondents were unaware of the scope for flexibility on offer, but the need for curriculum reform was highlighted by 45% of teachers’ groups as well as 31% of mixed groups teachers and parents—groups one might assume who were fairly well informed about curriculum matters.

The main issues raised in responses about the need for curriculum reform concerned the need for flexibility, choice, relevance, and meeting individual needs. These were often inter-related in responses and linked to concerns about pupil behaviour, motivation, and attitude to learning and the restrictive effect of the culture of assessment and examinations. The general view was that, while all children needed a broad and balanced curriculum until aged 14, thereafter current arrangements of requiring pupils to study for seven or eight Standard Grades representative of different ways of knowing, was too restrictive. The following comment sums up the generality of responses in this vein.

Up to the age of 14 all children should be taught the same things to experience a wide curriculum. Thereafter, better partnerships between schools and other educational establishments would offer a wide choice of education—vocational and academic.

Another respondent commented: ‘You can’t fit life into five columns’.

Some responses called for earlier specialization, with course choices being made at the end of first year in secondary rather than the end of second year as at present. The case for greater flexibility and relevance was that the needs of individual pupils were not being met, those of more able pupils, as well as those having special educational needs. Furthermore, age and stage rules, stipulating when pupils could take national examinations, were seen as too restrictive. Greater choice of the number and range of subjects or courses to be taken were seen as helping motivation as choice would be linked to relevance to pupils’ interests and future careers. This was a strong theme in

pupils' responses, although there was a lack of precision, perhaps understandably, in their responses. For example:

I [want to learn] about the world and more about what is happening and how everything works.

A long list of knowledge and skills seen as relevant to modern living emerged from the analysis of pupils' responses, including literacy, numeracy, ICT, foreign languages, craft and design, money management, sport, young people's statutory rights, parenting skills, sexual health, and drugs. Many of these were echoed in responses from organizations, although it should be no surprise that they took the opportunity to highlight the need for more of the particular area they represented. Thus, sportsotland argued for more sport, and the World Wildlife Fund and other environmental groups wanted more emphasis on sustainable development. Perhaps more surprisingly, there was a congruence between business organizations, church, and local authorities about the importance of developing 'soft skills' and, related to this, the role of schools in developing a sense of community and promoting social cohesion. The following give a flavour of these kinds of responses:

Schools focus too much on academic subjects and ignore the softer/interpersonal skills which equally contribute to succeeding in life (Standard Life).

Economic competitiveness and relevance are crucial but ... due attention to personal growth and social cohesion is required (Stirling Council Children's Services).

Learning for earning is important. Learning for living with others in a community is at least of equal (and probably of greater) importance (Church of Scotland Committee on Education).

Universities Scotland highlighted the transition from the structured school environment to a self-managed learning environment as problematic for some students. It suggested that the sixth year should be used to bridge this and other gaps in pupil skills, such as time management, knowledge about the workings of civil society, literacy, numeracy, and skills of developing and sustaining an argument. The following extract sums up its view:

Everyone who fed into this submission put forward the same view—that pupils do not have sufficient ability to undertake abstract thought, to take individual responsibility for learning and its management, or to motivate themselves in their study.

It was evident in some responses, however, that a narrow concern for relevance could promote an increasingly instrumental view of learning. Current assessment practices in schools were seen by some as encouraging a very superficial approach to learning. In the view of Universities Scotland:

Some lecturers are coming under pressure from new students to 'make everything count'—'I read a book—how much does that count towards a degree?'

The pressure for the curriculum to be more relevant is nothing new and relates to longstanding and inevitable debates about the purposes of schooling (e.g. Goodlad & McMannon, 1997; Hartley & Roger, 2000). The question is, therefore, relevant to

what? Schooling has always had contested purposes. These can be summed up as involving debates about the relative importance of (i) meeting the needs of the economy by supplying an appropriately skilled and knowledgeable workforce; (ii) promoting critical autonomy as in classic liberal thought; and (iii) meeting individual needs of the whole child. Even if there were consensus about the key purposes of schooling, it is by no means self-evident how these purposes might best be fulfilled. There are bound to be debates about the relative importance of knowledge, skills, and values, and within each of these areas further debates both about the structure of what is on offer and the most effective ways of teaching and learning. The inquiry by the Committee for Education, Culture, and Sport of the Scottish Parliament, previously described ... reported that:

There was widespread support for a broad view of educational purposes including the promotion of positive values and active citizenship. There was wide agreement that a merely utilitarian education is insufficient. ...

Education should seek a balance between cohesion and diversity, but the general view was that promoting social cohesion should be seen as the more important priority.

It also reported that there was no demand for a move away from comprehensive schooling.

It was agreed that Scotland's non-selective system of schooling ... comprehensive education, has been successful in raising aspirations and levels of achievement. However, the exact nature of how such education is delivered needs to be kept under review (Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 2003, p. 4).

Thus, in some ways, the responses to the national debate, like those to the Parliamentary Committee, revealed the mixture of purposes which schools might be seen as fulfilling. In another way, however, the call for greater flexibility, choice, and relevance sits at odds with the pride in the comprehensive system and the 5–14 curriculum previously identified. Current arrangements can be seen as an entitlement curriculum with the vast majority of pupils, 5–16, following the same courses, albeit at different levels. This provides, at least in theory, the opportunity for all pupils to gain a broad range of qualifications to equip them for entry to further or higher education or direct entry to the labour market. The more flexible the curriculum becomes and the more opportunities for choice which it offers, the greater the likelihood there is of constraining equality of opportunity. Much depends on the principles underpinning flexibility and choice and on the procedures through which choice operates. For example, a core plus options model of the curriculum is rather different from one of unconstrained choice among a certain number and level of courses. Choice involving pupils and their parents and teachers in a full discussion of the implications of the choices being made is rather different from the pupil and/or parent ticking boxes. The potential social and economic consequences of greater flexibility and choice in the curriculum were identified in very few responses and those which did consider the issue believed it would result in greater social stratification. For example, one response said:

There is a strong case ... for training potential plumbers to be plumbers and mathematicians to be mathematicians.

So, in terms of providing guidance for future policy, the responses provided somewhat contradictory advice. It seems as if flexibility, choice, and relevance arguments were seen as helping with behaviour, attendance, and motivation. The potential consequences of greater flexibility choice and relevance for equality of opportunity were not debated and perhaps it would be unrealistic to expect them to be. This is considered further in part four.

A third theme which emerged in the debate was that of the role of parents in helping their children learn. There were two questions on this in the response form, one which asked the direct question, 'How can parents help their children learn?' and a more general question, 'Who can help children learn?'

Interestingly, parents were the main category to emerge in answer to the more general question. Of the 66% of responses to this question, 31% identified parents, closely followed by more teachers, 30%. The importance of properly qualified staff was highlighted in 20% of the responses, among some concern that classroom assistants and auxiliaries helping the most difficult pupils were not properly trained and were being used as a way of saving money.

Looking specifically at how parents might help their children learn, a number of ways were identified. These ranged from the general 'taking an interest in what children are learning' to the more specific, such as, making sure children attend school, do their homework, arrive with the right kind of social skills such as 'teaching children good values and respect from the earliest possible age'. Parents could also help by attending meetings in school and not undermining what the school was trying to do. Thus, the picture which emerges is one of parents as compliant partners of the school rather than as actively engaged in developing school policy and practices. As mentioned above, there is consistent evidence of parental trust in teachers in Scotland and the view of parents as compliant partners is congruent with the identification of teachers' professional expertise as a key strength of the Scottish system. A further point of note is that the responses tended to emphasize the individual aspect of parental help for their children's learning rather than parents collectively playing a role as school managers and influencing learning through a policy role. This may have been a consequence of the phrasing of the question, but where such matters were mentioned in responses it was in a critical way. Indeed, one group of parents and grandparents would like to see School Boards and Parent-Teacher Associations abandoned because they were just 'ego trips for power freaks'. A similar vein seems to have run through the responses to the Parliamentary inquiry, where there was no support for parents as school managers (Education, Culture and Sport Committee, 2003).

In terms of the support parents required to help their children learn, the most frequently mentioned item was more contact with the school and teachers. Other supports included parenting workshops; a national helpline where they could go for information and advice, and a kind of advocacy system to offer independent help and advice when there were problems with the school. Interestingly, parents' groups, mixed groups, and teachers' groups all highlighted more contact with the school and parenting classes as the ways in parents could support their children's learning as their

top two means of support. Over 40% of responses from parents' and mixed groups mentioned more contact with the school compared to 27% of the responses from teachers' groups. Parenting classes saw the order reversed with 17% of parents and mixed groups mentioning this compared to 38% of teachers' groups.

Some responses, particularly those from organizations, highlighted the need for a more developed sense of partnership between home and school and suggested that schools could value parents more. There was also an indication in these responses that policy rhetoric, which tended to portray parents as either supportive or feckless, was too simplistic. For example, the Educational Institute of Scotland, the main teachers' union, commented: '[We] oppose the view which is quick to blame parents for their children's alleged failures. Parents who bear the burdens of inequality require support not blame'. A similar theme emerged from responses from vulnerable young people. The response from Edinburgh Young Carers, and groups containing children with disabilities and their parents, for instance, stressed that parents were not always in a position to help children with school work or even to support the school. The work and effort needed in day-to-day living meant that educational concerns sometimes assumed low priority.

To sum up in policy terms, there seemed, on the basis of responses both from the national Debate and the Parliamentary Inquiry, little support for developing the role of parents as managers and contributors to school policy. This is noteworthy, given the current emphasis on devolved decision-making, local democracy, and empowering communities in both UK and Scottish political rhetoric. Rather, the emphasis was on improving relations between individual parents and teachers, with the parent's role seen as helping to achieve goals established by a trusted professional workforce. This further suggests that any policy which sought to undermine teacher professionalism or standing would be resisted by parents as well as teachers, and that teacher organizations continue to have a very important ally in parents' organizations on a whole range of education policy matters. The belief in teachers' professional expertise and commitment remains strong and the evidence suggests a wish to improve communication rather than to challenge fundamentally the role of the teacher. Such support cannot be taken for granted, however, as previous policy debates on pupil testing show (Munn, 1997).

A fourth theme concerns pupil assessment and links with school accountability. The themes will be familiar to those who have followed debates about performance management systems which value pupil attainment in national tests or public examinations as the key performance indicator of school performance (Winter, 2003). The comments in the National Debate responses included criticisms of there being too much assessment, especially of 'high stakes' assessment, and of teachers teaching to the test. This was seen as promoting a highly instrumental view of learning, namely that the only worthwhile learning was that which would be formally assessed and of narrowing the purposes of schooling to that of exam factories. These kinds of comments were supplemented by suggestions that pupils ought to have much more to show for their time at school than certificates of their examination performance. Only 3% of responses suggested that the present certification system was acceptable.

The most frequently mentioned change was the need to introduce a record of achievement which recorded a range of pupil's achievements including, but going beyond, attainment. Suggestions for inclusion were participation in extra curricular activities and voluntary work, as well as the achievements in team working, the arts, and sport.

There are indications of a change in orientation in policy towards performance management in schooling in the UK. Both Scotland and Wales have ceased to publish information on school performance in a way that makes it easy to construct the much criticised school performance tables. The Scottish Education Minister, Peter Peacock, was reported as wanting 'a better balanced overall approach to the evaluation of schools' (*The Guardian*, 2003). In a statement launching the web-site ([www.parentzonestotland.gov.uk](http://www.parentzonestotland.gov.uk)) designed to provide more extensive information to parents and others on this 'better balanced approach', he said:

Today we are opening up access to more and more relevant information—a new era of openness and transparency. Parents will be offered a well-rounded picture of what is happening in their schools, rather than a one-dimensional focus on attainment alone (*The Guardian*, 2003).

SEED stressed that the web-site brought together existing information on schools, such as examination results, inspection reports, and truancy numbers, in a way that was more accessible and interesting to parents. For example, parents would be able to compare 3 years worth of examination figures for individual schools, as well as comparing these with local and national averages. Inspection reports included information on school ethos, leadership, and home-school relations. The web-site has been generally well received by parents' organizations and others (*The Herald*, 2003).

In a similar vein, recent documents from the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED, 2003) and the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA, 2003) indicate a move towards assessment to help learning rather than seeing assessment only as a measurement of learning. As yet, however, there is no intention to scrap league tables in England. It may be that the national debate provided legitimacy for a potentially risky change in policy that was already being contemplated in Scotland and elsewhere. Nevertheless, it was a 'quick win' for SEED in being able to demonstrate responsiveness to issues raised in the debate.

Fifthly, a number of questions concerned the practicalities of schooling, such as the structure of the school day and year, holiday patterns, and starting and leaving ages. There was a lack of consensus on these matters except for starting and leaving ages remaining 5 and 16 years of age, respectively. Even so, almost a fifth of those responding wanted pupils to start school at 6 and to have extended, high quality nursery provision. A general reading of the response suggests that no change in current arrangements is the safest political response, as there is no clear preference for a change.

In contrast to the lack of consensus on the practicalities of schooling, there was a clear view of the nature of schools in the 21st century. Of the 811 responses which contained information on this topic, 572 (70%) mentioned physical characteristics.

Schools were envisaged as well resourced, well maintained, with wide corridors, and vandal proof, set in pleasing surroundings with landscaped gardens. They would each have a swimming pool, excellent sport and recreation facilities, a computer suite for each department, and a well stocked library. Around 45% of responses tended to emphasize stronger involvement with the local community, particularly but not only in sharing school facilities, although this response was predominantly from adults. Pupils added suggestions about atmosphere and relationships, as in the following extracts:

Having a warm, friendly atmosphere. Having Internet links with home, to allow for web conferencing and other web-based teaching. Be more flexible in when you can attend, possibly with core times. ... Having tougher rules for those who misbehave.

Flexibility in pupils' timetable. Dealing efficiently with bullies. Teachers move around the school rather than pupils.

It is interesting that the responses tended to see schools of the future as not radically different from the schools of today. Children would still go to school, be taught by professionally qualified adults and sit examinations. Although the existence of web-based teaching is mentioned, there was strong support for children's attendance at school every day from all groups, with explicit reference to the social and socializing functions of schooling. There was a similar conservatism about the length of the school day and about starting and finishing times as mentioned above. Perhaps the nature of the question and its position towards the end of the response sheet can explain the focus on the physical characteristics of schools in the 21st century and the lack of radical alternatives to present arrangements. Alternatively, a concern with adequate levels of resourcing ran through responses to many questions and it may have been that this question provided the opportunity to contrast the current dire state of many school buildings with an ideal. Another possibility is that it is difficult to think radically about the future and that more opportunities would be needed to develop radical options.

### **The process of policy development**

The national debate was an innovative approach to developing policy. There was a largely successful attempt to extend the range of voices normally heard in policy formulation and there was an openness about the process of collecting, analysing, and reporting views. All reports were made available on SEED's web-site, and the research team was heavily involved in disseminating its report of the analysis of responses. A summary report in a glossy and easy to read style was sent to all who responded to the debate and a number of oral presentations made by members of the research team, including presentations to Scottish Ministers, senior civil servants, and the Inspectorate. There was also a recognition that the analysis had been completed under severe time constraints and that there would be interest in further analyses. This is currently taking place, and concerns a more fine grained analysis of the views of vulnerable young people, and of responses on the need for curriculum reform.



The Executive's response to the issues raised in the national debate has now been published (SEED, 2003), which sets out a policy agenda until 2013 under four main headings, Learning and Teaching, Pupils, Parents and the Community, Working Together, and Modern Schools. Each section has action points and a date by which they will be delivered. Clearly, those steps which are immediate are more precisely formulated than those due to be implemented in the more distant future. Nevertheless, Scotland now has an agenda for action in schools which goes well beyond the short-termism which has so often been a feature of policy and which has its roots in the views of a diverse range of responses. How to sustain public involvement in the working through of this agenda seems to us to be the next challenge. The debate is, or rather could be, part of a process that attempts to go beyond traditional corporatist and pluralist approaches to policy-making to engage much wider civic participation in education. How that might happen is still far from clear.

As far as the relationship between research and policy-making is concerned, the national debate provided some interesting features. First, researchers were involved at an early stage of the decision to have a national debate and were actively involved in discussions about the relationship between the kinds of questions that were asked and the kinds of analysis that could be provided. Researchers were working with policy-makers from the outset, not on the substance of policy, but on thinking through the processes which collecting and analysing responses to the debate would involve. This extends the relationship between research and policy which has traditionally been one where researchers focus on the effectiveness of particular policy initiatives. Secondly, the decision to commission university researchers to undertake the analysis meant that SEED stood back from the analysis and awaited the report. It could, thus, legitimately claim that the analysis was independent of political influence when a journalist presented an 'alternative' highly critical report which drew on a small sample of focus groups rather than on the 1500 written responses to the debate. Thirdly, the lead researcher was invited to comment on the congruence of the Executive's response to the issues originally reported. While this can be interpreted as an attempt to draw the researcher into the tent, so to speak, and head off any criticism, it can also be seen as a genuine attempt to ensure that nothing significant had been missed. The response to the response has been generally favourable, and it will be interesting to see how this important document is used when some difficult and potentially contentious policies are worked out, or if the Executive fails to deliver or postpones delivery of the promises it contains. Fourthly, the Executive's response to issues raised has left it quite a lot of room for manoeuvre on the issue of curriculum change, for example, and on other matters too. This is because the non-traditional voices taking part in the debate did not put forward well worked out policy solutions to the issues about the need for greater flexibility, choice, and relevance. They have little experience of doing so and, in noting our impressions of the tone of responses, we became conscious of the very few which translated their views into specific policy proposals. One might argue that it is the job of politicians and civil servants to do the policy development. Unless this is done in such a way that traces its roots to the national debate, provides policy options and a mechanism for debating their merits,

showing sensitivity to the different voices encouraged to respond, then there is a risk that the debate will be seen as no more than an elaborate public relations exercise. As one teacher respondent put it:

I am getting a bit fed up with initiatives such as this that cause people like me extra work. I understand that it is important for everyone to have their say in education, but I also believe that this is just a token, i.e. 'we have consulted everyone and we are going to do whatever we planned to do before we wrote this feedback form'. I also believe this type of initiative is keeping a lot of well-paid people in a nice wee job in the Scottish Office. What the Scottish Office [SEED] should be doing instead of coming up with initiatives such as this should be finding ways of recruiting young, well qualified people into my profession. I also believe that no one pays any heed to what I write in these consultation documents. So when you read this get in touch with me.

The Education Minister did indeed get in touch with that respondent, but more than this needs to be done if the hopes of a new kind of politics (Hassan & Warhurst, 2000) in Scotland is to be realized as a result of devolution. The Executive has shown courage in attempting to open up the process of policy formulation and its task of responding to the issues raised has been relatively straightforward because there was no support for radical change. Indeed, it is striking how much correspondence there is between the views reported in the National Debate and the inquiry of the Parliamentary Committee on key aspects of the system. This includes support for the comprehensive school, the importance of the socialization function of schooling, concern about too much assessment, and the need for greater curriculum flexibility. The 'new politics' would have been tested if there had been a real divergence of views between the Parliament and Executive or indeed if the National Debate response had led to a serious challenge to the basic tenets of education policy. A structure needs to be put in place to sustain public engagement with education policy and to work through the implications of taking one course of action rather than another as a result of the debate. National committees now deliberating on curriculum flexibility and on initial teacher education need to press for such a structure. This would not only be good for education, it would be good for democracy.

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