

SSTA Congress 2021

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Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to speak at today's Congress. I've been retired for a number of years so it's always encouraging to think that I might still have something useful to contribute to professional discussions. My pleasure was somewhat diminished, however, when I mentioned to a friend that I was coming here today. He said, 'I wouldn't get too excited if I were you. It might just be an example of care in the community. It could simply be that the organisers felt that the poor old soul could do with an outing.' That friend's inclusion on my Christmas card list is currently under review.

The same friend said that he hoped I didn't intend to enhance my reputation for being able to Bore for Britain by wittering on for too long. I was able to reassure him that my contribution would be limited to 15 minutes. So I'd better press on.

Context

It's an interesting and critical time for Scottish education. Some of the reasons for this will be very familiar to delegates so I don't need to elaborate on them:

- The disruption to learning and teaching caused by the coronavirus epidemic.
- The continuing reverberations of the 2020 examination crisis.
- The publication of the OECD report on Curriculum for Excellence
- The Stobart report, also published by the OECD, on assessment and qualifications
- The Scottish Government's decision to replace the Scottish Qualifications Authority, reform Education Scotland and re-establish the Inspectorate as a separate agency.

- Towards this end, the Scottish Government asked Ken Muir, formerly Chief Executive of the GTCS, to produce a report to take forward the recommendations of the OECD. I am a member of the Expert Panel set up to advise Professor Muir and I shall a little bit about that shortly. As you will know, the membership of the Expert Panel has attracted some criticism.

All of these developments have taken place at what might be called official levels of the Scottish educational system. But it is worth pointing out that, running alongside these, have been a number of critical contributions from a range of sources, not all from the same ideological perspective. The most recent is James McEnaney's book, *Class Rules: The Truth About Scottish Schools*, in which he has some trenchant things to say about the quality of leadership in Scottish education. The book was written in some haste and it is a bit uneven in quality. However, there is an excellent chapter on 'Making Sense of the Statistics' which offers a forensic analysis of various sources of data, including Scottish Government figures, PISA results, the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, and SQA attainment statistics. A review of McEnaney's book can be found at: <https://www.scotedreview.org.uk/media/microsites/scottish-educational-review/documents/2021/53-2/humes-review.pdf>

Coming from a different perspective has been Professor Lindsay Paterson's paper attacking what he sees as the inadequacies of the OECD report on CfE. The paper has the provocative title, *Partial, Sycophantic and Superficial*, and takes issue with the limited data used by the OECD, the acceptance of restricted parameters on the enquiry process imposed by the Scottish Government, and what he sees as the inadequate weight attached to formal knowledge. The paper can be accessed at: <https://reformscotland.com/2021/08/partial-sycophantic-and-superficial-the-oecd-review-scotlands-curriculum-for-excellence-2021/>

Yet another critique, this one originating outside Scotland, but written by someone who attended a Scottish secondary school, was the Social Market Foundation (SMF) publication entitled *Encouraging Innovation and Experimentation in Scottish Schools*. This was informed by interviews with a number of people in Scotland who have written about the educational system, including myself. The SMF paper can be accessed at:

<https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/innovation-and-experimentation-in-scottish-schools/>

Moving Forward

All this serves as background to the various efforts to address perceived problems and bring forward constructive suggestions about how to improve the learning experience of pupils and enhance teachers' sense of being valued. In the remaining time available to me, I would like to do two things. First, I want to revisit an article of my own, published in 2018, which attracted some attention at the time. And secondly, as promised, I want to say a little about the work of the Expert Panel advising Ken Muir in his review.

The title of my 2018 article was *Seven Reasons why Scottish Education is Underperforming*, available at: <https://sceptical.scot/2018/01/seven-reasons-scottish-education-performing/>

I want to ask the question, 'Is there any evidence that we are making progress?'

I shall deal with the reasons in the order in which they first appeared in the article. I do so with some trepidation because the fifth reason could turn you into a lynch mob (note my use of narrative anticipation). But sometimes you've just got to live on the edge.

- **Failure to learn from the past.** I said that CfE had been introduced without taking sufficient account of earlier thinking on curriculum development, most notably the work of Lawrence Stenhouse, a former Head of Education at Jordanhill College. One of Stenhouse's key principles was that there can be no effective curriculum development without teacher development. There is now greater recognition of this. Mark Priestley's work on teacher involvement in curriculum making and the importance of teacher agency has been very important in this regard. It also ties in with the theme of your Congress – 'Teachers Leading Learning'.

- **Poor political leadership.** We have had no fewer than ten Cabinet Secretaries for Education since devolution. That raises problems of policy continuity as each newcomer tries to establish their presence by launching new initiatives. The present Cabinet Secretary has only been in post for a few months so it would be premature to pass judgement on her contribution.
- **A complacent and self-regarding policy community.** I have been writing about the leadership class in Scottish education for decades and suggesting that it has encouraged a conformist and risk-averse culture. As a result of all the factors that I outlined at the start, the policy community is perhaps a little less complacent than it used to be, but the informal networks of the major players continue to operate and will be used to defend their positions.
- **Lack of up-to-date independent data.** This has been a recurring theme in Lindsay Paterson's work. The charge is sometimes made that government fears systematic data collection because it may make it harder to defend its record if some of the evidence is negative. The OECD report, to be fair, emphasises the important of longitudinal data in order to carry out proper evaluations and reviews of the system.
- **Defensive and protectionist professional attitudes.** (This is where red mist may appear before your eyes.) You may be slightly mollified by the fact that, in the original article, I illustrated this point with reference to the EIS and did not mention the SSTA. But I have long held the view that professionalism is an ambivalent concept, containing elements of both public service and self-interest, perhaps illustrated most vividly in the legal profession. The playwright George Bernard Shaw once said that 'All professions are conspiracies against the laity'. The GTCS tends to treat professionalism as unproblematic. I think it's a concept that needs to be interrogated, not assumed to be a self-evident good.
- **Boastful and sentimental language.** Boasting is now the default position of most public bodies, not just in education. Just look at their websites and their absurdly grandiose mission and vision statements. This one will be hard to shift as it is a reflection of how far the world of public relations has taken over management thinking. I was pleased to note, however, that your General

Secretary, Seamus Searson, recently commented on the over-use of jargon and vague language that characterises many policy documents.

- **A deep vein of anti-intellectualism.** This was an ironic comment on the academic community. I suggested that, instead of asking hard questions about meaning and purpose, they had ‘too often colluded in the shallow discourse and intellectual evasions of government’. I felt that comment showed my commitment to inclusion – no group was exempt from my critique, including the community to which I myself belonged. I feel that this is still a work in progress.

So, my overall conclusion is that some modest progress has been made but there is still plenty of scope for further improvement. What can we expect from Ken Muir’s review? I said that there was criticism of the membership of the Expert Panel, partly on the grounds that classroom teachers were not included. There is one current headteacher, Billy Burke of Renfrew High School, and he is making effective contributions on behalf of both teachers and pupils. It is also worth pointing out that, in addition to the Expert Panel, there is a much larger Practitioner and Stakeholders Advisory Group, on which more than 50 organisations, including SSTA, have a voice. An online consultation document has just been launched, in which everyone who wishes to make a comment will have the opportunity to do so. I would urge all teachers who have points they wish to make to take advantage of that opportunity, especially if they have had experience of working with the SQA and/or Education Scotland.

The remit of the review focuses particularly on structural and functional issues – what will replace SQA, how will Education Scotland be reformed, how independent will the Inspectorate be once it ceases to be part of ES (under the sinister title of Directorate of Scrutiny). I think there is certainly an appetite for change in these respects and we have been urged at an official level to be bold in our recommendations.

But will this be enough to address the underlying cultural issues that have contributed to a degree of disillusionment within the teaching profession? Restoring public and professional trust and confidence is not easy and will not be achieved simply by

rebadging existing agencies. There are difficult questions to do with the overall distribution of power in Scottish education, the challenge of winning the hearts and minds of the teaching force for reform proposals, and the role of other agencies which are critical to the quality of what goes on in schools, most notably the local authorities. My own view is that, as well as responding to the remit we have been set, we need to outline a longer-term agenda for action.

Conclusion

Let me end by saying this. Although this is a testing time for Scottish education, pupils and parents continue to pay tribute to the dedication of the vast majority of Scottish teachers. One good thing to emerge from the current difficulties is that there is now much greater critical attention directed at those who run the system, whether as politicians, government officials, or chief executives of national organisations. There is also greater awareness of how bureaucratic institutions can be used to defend existing power bases rather than to encourage innovation and experiment. The 'iron cage' of educational bureaucracy is unlikely to be completely dismantled, but the locks and chains which protect it are less secure than in the past. Classroom teachers have a vital part to play in this process. I wish you well in your efforts.