

The STeP Journal
Student Teacher Perspectives

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I am delighted to welcome Professor Carey Philpott from Leeds Beckett University (and from the University of Strathclyde until July 2015) as guest editor of this special issue of the STeP journal. Thanks are due to Carey for his initiative and inspiration to present an issue of STeP focussed on Scotland, and for all the hard work to bring it to completion. The result is this most interesting and varied collection of papers for us all to share.

If you have an idea for a special issue, please get in touch with TEAN to discuss.

Now over to Carey to present the editorial for his issue of the journal ...

Alison Jackson
Director of TEAN

Editorial

Welcome to this special edition of the STeP journal devoted to research and scholarship carried out by Education students from universities in Scotland. The intention behind this special edition is twofold. Firstly, it is intended to showcase some of the excellent scholarship conducted by Scottish Education students. Secondly, it is intended to be something of a window onto the Scottish education system and some of its particular concerns, as experienced and researched by Education students, at this point in history.

In the context of the UK (and of course, by extension, the rest of the world) the concerns of students, teachers and other educationalists in Scotland might seem entirely familiar. For example, this special edition includes research on, among other things, promoting positive behaviour, inclusion, the link between educational under achievement and socio-economic status and improving the quality of classroom talk. None of these seems like a particularly Scottish topic. Nor do they appear to be indicative of a particular moment in history except in the broadest sense that these might be topics that have become more important in recent decades than they possibly were in the distant past of education. However, the scholarship in each of the papers in this special edition highlights how these apparently perennial and universal topics have a particular relationship to the current context and recent history of Scottish educational policy and, therefore, take on a particularly Scottish character. One possible value of this special edition might be in allowing educationalist in other parts of the UK (and beyond) to see how these topics of shared concern play out differently in the Scottish policy context. This can give a vantage point to readers to consider how the policy context of their own education systems influences the particular conceptions and experiences of these topics that they have.

Mark Finlay from the University of Strathclyde discusses how teachers might make pupil to pupil talk more educationally productive. In doing so he highlights how the current Scottish curriculum (Curriculum for Excellence) is purposely designed to give more autonomy to teachers to make decisions about the details of pedagogy. Finlay considers some of the possible challenges, uncertainty and limitations in this approach to curriculum reform. Arguably, this greater autonomy necessitates increased teacher engagement with practitioner research of the kind that Finlay and other contributors to this special edition exemplify. Finlay also links the need for more highly valued

pupil talk to the declared overarching ambitions of the Scottish curriculum to support the development of the “capacity” to be ‘confident individuals’ and ‘effective contributors’.

Caitlin Murray, also from the University of Strathclyde, similarly considers the role of education in supporting the development of social participation in her research on the use of philosophy in the primary classroom to promote political citizenship. ‘Responsible citizens’ is another of the “four capacities” of the Curriculum for Excellence. Political citizenship has a particular resonance in current Scotland. The independence referendum saw record levels of political engagement. The decision to include 16 and 17 year olds in the franchise for the referendum and for future Scottish parliamentary elections has prompted renewed debate on the role of schools in developing political awareness. However, Murray argues that the idea of citizenship is not adequately defined in Scottish educational policy. In particular she questions whether Scottish policy constructions of citizenship pay sufficient attention to political engagement or whether they emphasise less controversial social and charitable engagement. Like Finlay, she argues that Scottish educational policy requires teachers to pursue certain outcomes without sufficient definition of what these outcomes mean. Once again, this highlights the need for teachers to actively and critically enquire into policy and also to actively enquire into how it can be implemented in practice.

Another University of Strathclyde student, Hollie Kynaston, also researches citizenship in the primary classroom. Kynaston is interested in global citizenship. She cites Learning and Teaching Scotland’s expectation that pupils should have “an understanding of the world and Scotland’s place in it”. Scotland’s place in the world is currently a much debated issue and one that continues to develop and this brings a particular inflection to the educational topic that Kynaston discusses. Like Murray, she explores the similarities and differences between different sources of policy in Scottish education and how these might result in tensions and uncertainties for teachers. As before this emphasises why teachers need to actively engage in interrogating these ideas and their implementation rather than just accepting them as self evident.

Robert Galbraith from the University of Aberdeen also discusses how terms or practices that we might take for granted need to be rigorously analysed and investigated if each successive new generation of teachers is not just to follow uncritically the practices of previous generations. Galbraith researches the concept and practice of inclusion. Like some of the other contributors he identifies a landscape in which teachers have to interpret and implement policy ideas that might be perceived as not fully defined and, at times, apparently contradictory.

Kirsty Allan, also from the University of Aberdeen explores inclusion too. Allan’s contribution draws attention to the way in which teachers’ professional development (or Career Long Professional Learning as it has become called in Scotland) depends on active enquiry into practice rather than expecting ‘off the peg’ solutions either from policy or from instruction by experts. The current Scottish policy context recognises this. The intentional reduction of prescription in Curriculum for Excellence has been matched by a renewed expectation that teachers will engage in enquiry into their practice as a source of professional learning.

Galbraith’s consideration of inclusion touches on an oft-repeated view of Scottish education as committed to a form of egalitarian and meritocratic social justice and inclusion which has a distinctly Scottish history and character. **Leah Henry from the University of Strathclyde** calls this into question with her research into the effects of ability setting and streaming on educational underachievement among pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Henry’s research is a systematic literature review; a form of research not often adopted by students. Henry’s review is powerful as it suggests an absence of evidence for the benefits of a widespread practice in education; one which can easily be slipped into uncritically by new teachers. Henry’s review was prompted by, and continues, a sequence of recent research into Scottish education that raises

uncomfortable questions about significant underachievement in Scotland based on socio-economic background in a country that has historically prided itself on a belief in its own meritocracy.

Another literature review is carried out by **Allegra Davidson, also from the University of Strathclyde**. Davidson explores the evidence for some popular approaches to providing for pupils with Autism in the mainstream classroom. One of the significant things that Davidson discovers is an apparent shortage of research studies into the effects of these approaches. Once again, this highlights the importance of new teachers not uncritically accepting existing practices but actively enquiring into them. It also suggests the need for teachers (and others) to generate more research studies as part of this enquiry.

In one way or another all of the contributors to this special edition discussed so far consider the role of education in supporting young people's ability to be full and equal participants in society. **Ailie Grant from the University of Strathclyde** continues this theme in her research on promoting positive behaviour using restorative approaches. Grant locates her research in the overarching aim of Curriculum for Excellence to support young people's "capacity" to be 'confident individuals', 'responsible citizens' and 'effective contributors'. She argues that we cannot separate the techniques we use to promote positive behaviour from our overall view of the purposes of education. Put another way, we can't develop confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors if we use behaviour management techniques that are at odds with, or take no account of, these goals.

Tommy Clanachan and Yonah Matemba from the University of the West of Scotland echo Kynaston's paper on global citizenship by identifying that teachers might lack confidence about how exactly they are to teach certain areas of the curriculum. Clanachan and Matemba's concern is with Scotland's curriculum for Religious and Moral Education (RME). They bring a different perspective to this debate by suggesting that a lack of specialist subject knowledge can be a problem. Arguably, in a curriculum that focuses on the development of capacities and skills, specialist content knowledge can end up being down played. Clanachan and Matemba also demonstrate an interesting and different approach to the other contributors in this special edition in that this paper is a collaboration between a student (Clanachan) and a tutor (Matemba). The growing profile of practitioner research in education (see also the recent Carter review of teacher education in England) and the long standing challenge of research capacity in teacher education departments, suggests this could be an interesting way forward.

Finally, **Denise McNulty from the University of Dundee** takes us into a different educational sector. McNulty works in Further Education (FE) and she explores the development of creativity in students learning to be make-up artists. Her references to humanist learning theory share a similar concern to some other papers in this special edition in seeking to connect education to a holistic view of learners. Her concern with creativity also shows an interest in education's role in supporting the development of broad capacities rather than narrowly conceived knowledge and technical skills. FE in Scotland has recently undergone a major re-organisation and a tightening of funding. Some commentators have argued that Scotland's high profile policy of no tuition fees for university students has squeezed funding in FE with a consequent negative effect on educational inclusion. In this context McNulty's consideration of how we can maximise the effectiveness of FE is an important one. McNulty also particularly draws attention to some differences between FE in Scotland and other parts of the UK.

Taken collectively, the papers in this special edition share some concerns that are indicative of some current concerns within Scottish education. The first of these is the role of education in helping young people to become full and equal participants in society rather than education being narrowly focused on disciplinary knowledge and technical skills. Several of the papers outline how the pedagogies we use need to be linked to this overarching goal. Closely allied to this is a concern for

educational inclusion in its broadest sense; ensuring that all participants irrespective of personal and cultural differences feel equally included.

A second concern is the ways in which reduced prescription in policy necessitates more active enquiry from teachers. The uncertainty that results from this lack of prescription should not be seen as a failing on the part of policy. Total prescription is not possible nor is it desirable. To seek total prescription is to remove the scope for practitioners to develop an understanding of what works and what is needed in their particular context. However, this scope needs to be filled with the confidence and capacity to actively engage with research (of the kind that STeP promotes) if it is not to be filled with the uncritical adoption of ready made practices, whether these be in the form of custom and practice or 'off the peg' solutions from commercial providers.

Carey Philpott
July 2015