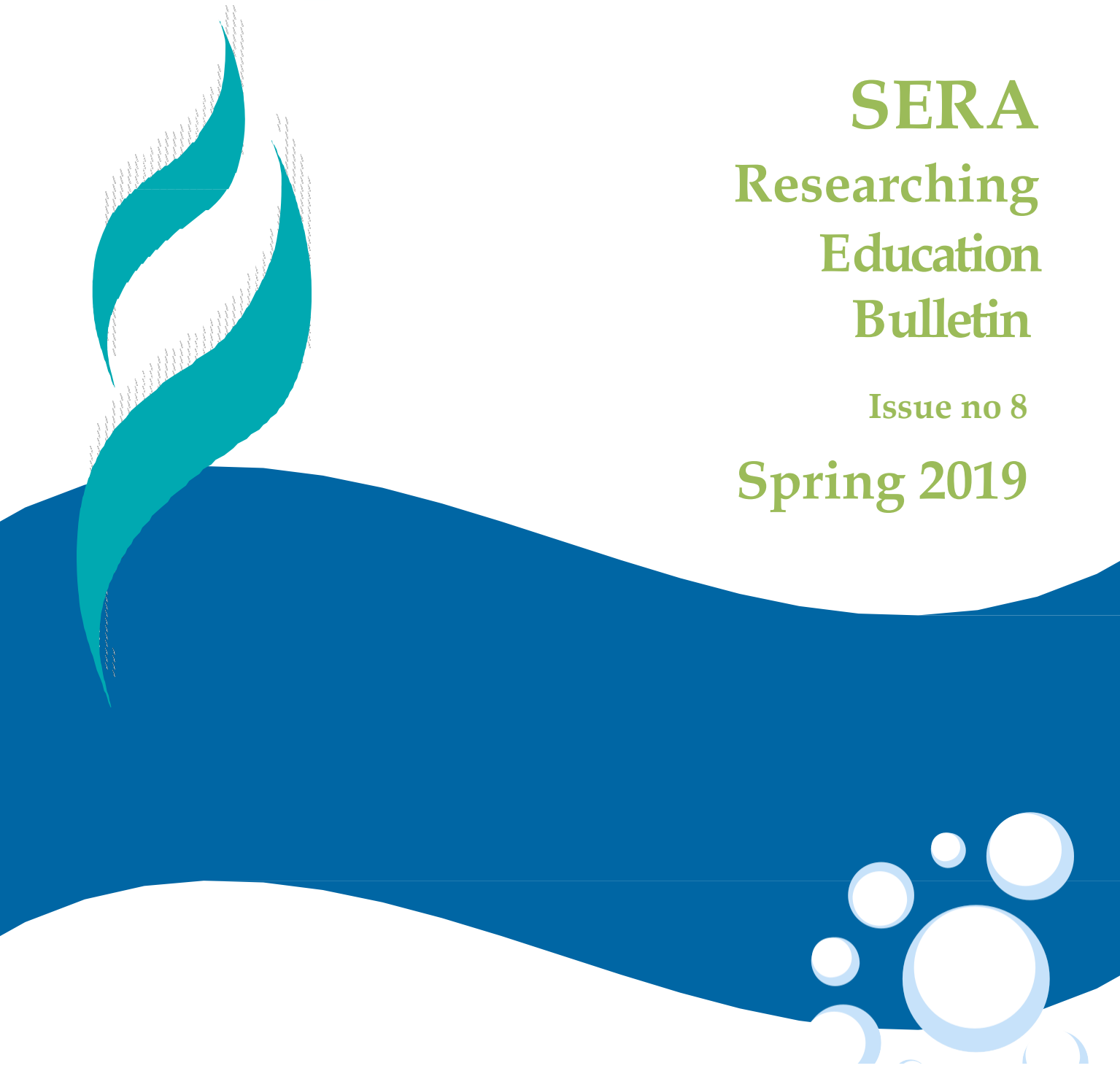




*Improving education
through research*

SERA is a charity registered in
Scotland SC003928



SERA Researching Education Bulletin

Issue no 8

Spring 2019



Editorial

Welcome to the latest issue of [SERA's Researching Education Bulletin \(SERA REB\)](#). We always welcome summaries of research from all education stakeholders. If you have something you wish to share or if you feel strongly about an issue in education then we would be delighted to hear from you. Just contact Lorna.Hamilton@ed.ac.uk.

We start this issue with a critical historical account of a particular kind of faith school in Scotland, over a 100 year period, by Stephen McKinney from the University of Glasgow. This provides readers with a thoughtful reflection on this significant anniversary. This is then followed by work from Luby and Beckley who ask, how do you measure the success of research ? They draw on work done with schools achieving positive outcomes when tackling issues around poverty. Next we have a large project from Pauline Duncan and Deirdre Grogan sharing insights from the Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 (EPP1) project as part of the Scottish attainment challenge. This is followed by an opinion piece from Lorna Hamilton and Fiona Ellison. This article engages with what is an urgent concern nowadays – the ways in which academic research can be employed to further a particular government policy and the debate that ensues. Finally, there is a short introduction to a more substantial paper from NEPC in the USA on whether class size makes a difference – link provided.

I am sure that this rich range of papers will stimulate discussion and debate. On behalf of the Editorial team I hope that you enjoy reading this latest issue of SERA REB.

[Lorna Hamilton](#)
[University of Edinburgh, Spring 2019.](#)

SERA REB Spring 2019

Table of Contents

<i>Catholic Schools 1918-2018</i> Stephen McKinney	P4
<i>A Modern Tale from the Forest of Sherwood</i> From A. Luby and P. Beckley	P8
<i>Changing Pedagogy in Scottish Primary Schools: Insights from the Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 (EPP1) project</i> Pauline Duncan and Deirdre Grogan	P12
<i>National Improvement Framework - 'research evidence' in current educational reforms</i> Lorna Hamilton and Fiona Ellison	P15
<i>Does class size make a difference?</i> NEPC briefing	P21



Catholic Schools 1918-2018

Stephen McKinney, University of Glasgow

This article was originally published in a shortened form in the Times Educational Supplement Scotland on 19th of October 2018. It is reproduced here with kind permission of the editors.

This year is the centenary of the Education (Scotland) Act 1918. This is rightly perceived to be a definitive moment in the process of Catholic schools becoming part of the state funded school system. The 1918 Act addressed the issue of the transfer of voluntary or denominational schools in section 18. Section 18 did not specifically refer to Catholic schools but to a wider range of schools, which included Episcopalian schools and a small number of Church of Scotland and Free Church of Scotland schools that had not transferred in the aftermath of the Education (Scotland) Act 1872. Nevertheless, section 18 offered conditions for the transfer of Catholic schools that were highly advantageous for the Catholic schools – schools that were often struggling with the challenges of financial viability and relying on fund raising endeavours. The Catholic schools were often characterised by large class sizes, inadequate resources and unsatisfactory physical working conditions. There were serious issues with a fair remuneration for the teaching staff in Catholic schools in line with the state system. The Act made provision for the sale or lease of the Catholic schools, the retention of the denominational status, the continuation of the practice of religious instruction and observance, the right to approve the religious belief and character of the teachers and a very welcome parity in the pay scales for the teachers in Catholic schools. Perhaps surprisingly the initial choice for many Catholic dioceses was to lease the schools rather than sell, though by the late 1920s most Catholic schools had been sold to the local authorities.

There are different ways in which to interpret the introduction of this Education Act. It can be perceived to be an altruistic act that aimed to include Catholic schools in the state-funded school sector to ensure equity of opportunity in education for all children. The focus was on the inclusion of children from a largely impoverished community that constituted a sizeable minority, especially in the West of Scotland. It can be understood to be a government response to pressure from a vocal and persistent Christian minority to accede to their specific demands

for funding for their own schools; schools that would help them to retain their religious identity in a country that did not appear to be very tolerant of Christian diversity and, at times, could be openly hostile. It can even be considered to be driven by an agenda of increasing centralisation - the need to consolidate government interests and influence in all of the major forms of school education to enable some form of social control. To these can be added more contemporary interpretations of the justification for Catholic schools. The continuation of Catholic schools can be understood to represent an example of the neoliberal principle of greater choice in state schooling in accordance with wishes of different groups in society. It could be argued that these schools continue to exist in recognition of the human rights thinking on choice in school education. From the perspective of the Catholic Church, Catholic schools offer a faith education that is based on explicit Christian values and these schools are part of the mission of the Catholic Church to engage in the work of education and faith education to serve the children of the Catholic community and the wider Scottish community.

Despite the varied justifications for Catholic schools, there remain a number of serious issues around the continued existence of state funded Catholic schools. The challenges to Catholic schools include some of the classic arguments that question the existence of any form of faith schooling in a state funded school system. Interlocutors argue that it is not the role of the state to be involved in, or contribute to, any form of faith formational or confessional schooling. Catholic schools in Scotland do represent the public manifestation of a formal relationship between organised religion and the state. There are recurring accusations that Catholic schools create or generate divisions and divisiveness and that they signify a form of government endorsement of 'sectarian' schools or schools that can, or have the potential to, maintain or foster sectarianism or sectarian attitudes. These particular accusations are seldom substantiated and not supported by the extant research evidence. Most recently the Final Morrow Report (2015) categorically rejected these claims by adopting the following statement from the Interim Report (2013): *We do not believe that sectarianism stems from, or is the responsibility of, denominational schooling, or, specifically, Catholic schools, nor that sectarianism would be eradicated by closing such institutions* (paragraph 6.38). The Catholic schools are sometimes considered to be schools that privilege the educational interests of a particular religious group, though this arguably holds less currency in the current climate of a

more diverse pupil population within these schools. Contemporary Catholic schools are, in fact, more inclusive than their predecessors and are sensitive to the need to educate all of the children in their care, while retaining a Catholic identity.

There are other challenges for Catholic schools that include negotiating the changing and evolving social mores and attitudes in society such as changes in the public and legal recognition of gender and the changes in the understanding of religious identity. There are difficulties in recruiting a sufficient number of Catholic teachers for Catholic schools, though this needs to be understood within the context of the serious challenges of recruitment and retention of a teaching workforce in Scotland. There are recurring questions about the justice of the exclusive staffing of Catholic schools: teachers being approved in terms of their religious belief and character.

The debates around the continued existence of state funded Catholic schools continue to be periodically articulated (and often misrepresented) in the press and media. It is perhaps helpful to explore one of the ways in which Catholic schools have contributed to the education of children in Scotland. In 1817 the Catholic Schools Society was set up in Glasgow to establish schools to educate the children of the growing Catholic work force. One of the main aims of these schools was a mission to educate the children from backgrounds of poverty and deprivation. This idea of the mission for the education of the poor would continue through the 19th century and was intensified with the arrival of large numbers of Irish Catholics during the years of the series of famines in the middle of the century. This continued through the 20th century in the years of depression and into the present day. In the latter part of the 20th century the idea of mission for the poor was sometimes reconfigured, using contemporary Catholic theological discourses, as a preferential option for the poor. Regardless of terminology, there remains a strong consciousness of an historical and contemporary dedication to the education of the poor that has a deep-rooted Christian motivation. Further this dedication is inclusive of all children in Catholic schools, irrespective of their faith or values background. There is also ample evidence that the quality of the education provided in state funded Catholic schools is equal to any comparable non-denominational school in terms of attainment and achievement. Catholic schools, as state schools, have fully participated in

the initiatives to close the attainment gap. The continued existence of state-funded Catholic schools in 2018 is both celebrated and contested. There are ideological and philosophical objections to their continued existence that are rehearsed in the debates about their suitability for a 21st century Scotland. Perhaps these debates could include a greater awareness of the important contribution of Catholic schools to the education of the Catholic community and to the wider Scottish population.

Professor Stephen J. McKinney is the leader of the Research and Teaching Group: Pedagogy, Praxis and Faith in the School of Education, University of Glasgow. He is the past President of the Scottish Educational Research Association.

Scottish Educational Review

<http://www.scotedreview.org.uk/>

Aims and Scope *Scottish Educational Review* (SER) publishes academic articles and research notes relating to the field of educational policy and practice. The journal is written for academics and researchers in the field of education, teachers and managers in schools and local authorities and those concerned with the development and implementation of education policy. While some of the focus is Scottish, we aim to publish work that is of wider interest to the readership. We also publish work relating to education out with Scotland that may be of interest to a Scottish audience.

Availability of papers SER is available in paper form by subscription. The website contains an archive of back issues (papers as downloadable pdfs). The most recent edition is available as **abstracts only**, but all older articles are available in full back to 1997.

A Modern Tale from the Forest of Sherwood
From Luby, A. and Beckley, P. 2017

As a researcher, how do you measure success in education? What about this?

Location: former mining village in darkest, deepest Nottinghamshire

Conversation -

Grant: How many is that then?

Lee: I make it four.

Grant: So, that's four syringes on the football field. What about the dog poo?

Lee: Let's not go there...!

This extract summarises the conversation between head teacher, Grant Worthington, and CEO of The Forge Trust, Lee Hessey. As autumn leaves fall, they survey the football field of a primary school that no-one wants - except them. Others see failure and waste; they see opportunity and challenge.

For Grant, it is an opportunity to revive the fortunes of the children in the mining village in which he grew up. An opportunity not to be missed. For Lee, it is a challenge to build further the four schools' multi-academy trust that is The Forge Trust. A challenge not to be resisted.

How do you measure hope? ambition? dreams?

It is the ambition of people like Lee and Grant that first drew me to The Forge Trust. Their hopes and dreams are for the young folk whom they serve: children who are but modern reflections of themselves from a time past. Grant and Lee have forged successful careers and happy lives; and they wish the same for the offspring of the proud mining towns of Ollerton and Newark. They are not alone.

Three years ago, under the tutelage of Wendy Morton, an experienced educationist, the AdAstra Primary Partnership came into being. I was gifted an opportunity to work with teachers from this partnership sited in schools that '...are located in or near to areas of deprivation. The six schools are rigorously addressing the issue of poverty and asked for an outside research consultancy project to help take them forward with their plans' (Luby 2016b:

2).

The AdAstra research projects are both varied and compelling. In the playground and in the streets, award winning head teacher, Helen Chambers, has engaged with and won over recalcitrant parents, who now cooperate gladly with staff and even study at her primary school. But within the early years' classroom a confusing problem presents itself; that of children unable to grasp properly any implement for writing.

Along with her staff, Helen has the vision and the humility to seek outside help: this was provided by specialist Paul Young. According to the teachers, the impact of his in-service has been both "informative" and "amazing". Indeed, some staff have become enthused and spontaneously talk about some of the techniques displayed. Such a positive impact is very important as the type of professional development for teachers regarding handwriting development '...can have significant impacts on children's writing that can endure for at least two years' (Jones & Christensen 2012: 223). Members of staff cite evidence of this impact through becoming more aware of the links between physical development and handwriting skills; and, in particular, they identify:

- Visual clues for lack of gross motor and fine motor skills;
- Tripod grip as an example of fine motor skills but whole hand grip is gross motor and use of the latter indicates a lack of the former;
- Importance of crawling for proper development of balance; and
- Physical skill as a requirement for literacy.

Such professional development of understanding amongst teaching staff and teaching assistants is commendable; and of particular significance given that 'Most studies of children's handwriting acquisition focused on the elementary school years, and there is scarce information about the development of writing skills before that time' (Vilageliu et al 2012: 7).

This combination of vision and humility, seeking fresh understanding and, ultimately, transformation – is evident across all of the AdAstra partnership schools (Luby 2016a, 2017) e.g.

- Jacksdale Primary and Nursery School secures outside expertise but, using primarily the staff's own expertise, addresses poverty of language;
- The Sir Donald Bailey Academy has a whole-staff approach to the development of speaking & listening skills; and
- Forest View Junior School imaginatively develops critical thinking.

Unsurprisingly, the AdAstra partnership is no longer six schools – but has doubled in size. Primaries from as far afield as the cathedral city of Peterborough, the East Midlands 'capital' of Nottingham, and the disused coalfields of South Yorkshire are now in the fold.

This excitement at the positive outcomes being achieved by teachers tackling poverty spreads also to higher education. Several colleagues, intrigued by the talk about AdAstra, ventured into classrooms to conduct ethnographic research. The two extracts below from the jottings of Pat Beckley give a flavour of their experiences.

[A]. The entrance hall welcomes children, staff, parents and visitors into the school. A teacher explains she has introduced 'Visualisation Learning' as previous assessments of children's progress show a lack of understanding of spelling, particularly impacting on boys writing abilities; and it was a 'fun way to learn'. Staff discussions lead to initiatives including whole school collaboration for improvement in spelling, the promotion of children's language, parental involvement, a safe and secure school environment with stimulating, engaging and motivating activities.

[B]. The home/school aspect is carefully considered regarding liaison with parents/carers and collaboration with supporting children's learning. The 'Visualisation Learning' activities become a bridge between the two cultures of home and school. Parents/carers give feedback about progress. Home/school activities are completed with parents, grandparents, after school and in the morning. Children in one group believe they have 'got much better at spelling now', or 'I love spellings' and 'knew about them more 'cos I work with mum and dad'.

In the Forest of Sherwood the tale of Robin Hood feeding the poor by robbing the rich may be a myth; today's reality is that the poor are fed – educationally – by inspired and dedicated teachers. Now, that is a tale worth telling.

References

Jones, D. and Christensen, C. A. 2012. Impact of Teacher Professional Development in Handwriting on Improved Student Learning Outcomes in Writing Quality. In M. Fayol et al (Eds) 2012. *Translation of Thought to Written Text While Composing: Advancing Theory, Knowledge, Research Methods, Tools, and Applications*. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Luby, A. 2016a. *Closing the Gap: Adastra Research Consultancy Projects*. Lincoln: Bishop Grosseteste University ISBN 9781871346213

Luby, A. 2016b. Stars and Saints: Professional Conversations for Enhancing Classroom Practices. *Education Today* 66(3) 2-6, Autumn 2016.

Luby, A. 2017. To the Stars: Ad Astra Addressing Poverty. In P. Beckley (Ed.) *Supporting Vulnerable Children in Early Years: Practical Guidance and Strategies for Working with Children at Risk*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Vilageliu O. S., Kandel, S. and Aznar, M. A. 2012. Early Development of Handwriting Motor Skills. In M. Torrance et al (Eds) 2012. *Learning to Write Effectively: Current Trends in European Research*. Bingley, Yorks: Emerald.

Changing Pedagogy in Scottish Primary Schools: Insights from the Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 (EPP1) project

Dr Pauline Duncan Pauline.duncan@strath.ac.uk* Ms Deirdre Grogan d.grogan@strath.ac.uk
School of Education, University of Strathclyde

Abstract

This paper reports on the Exploring Pedagogy in Primary 1 (EPP1) project conducted by the School of Education, University of Strathclyde (2017-2018). EPP1 was commissioned by Renfrewshire Council as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge to support the improvement of children's educational outcomes through a targeted professional development programme exploring pedagogy and theory to inform practice in primary one. 90 teachers from 30 primary schools in Renfrewshire participated in the 8-week programme and evaluation activities. The evaluation research strand aimed to assess the programme's impact on teachers, schools and children's learning experiences. Data was collected using interviews, semi-structured classroom observations and questionnaires. Research findings showed improvements in teachers' reflexive practice, confidence and knowledge and understanding of young children's learning. The training led to teachers designing more enabling environments with a wide range of play-based learning opportunities resulting in an increase in independent and child-led learning.

Summary of research

The Scottish Government's focus of closing the attainment gap in our schools is a laudable but complex aim. Firstly, it calls for Scottish primary teachers to examine the changing philosophy and methodology of their teaching. The changing philosophy is based on the principles of active learning, increasing children's choices, creating more personalised learning pathways and ensuring teachers provide an appropriate level of educational challenge for children. At its core, the new model aims to support teachers to tailor the pedagogy used in primary one more explicitly to the way young children learn.

In order to take this new pedagogy forward, a training model was developed in Glasgow, Renfrewshire and East Renfrewshire Local Authorities in partnership with Strathclyde

University. The training was structured as a series of expert-led workshops delivered over an 8-week period, and included practice-based tasks and course reading for teachers to explore pedagogical approaches and theories to inform practice, increase reflexivity and develop skills for effective planning, documenting and classroom design. The programme content was informed by research and policy on learning and education in early childhood including the influential work of Fisher (2013), Moylett (2013) and Stephen (2010), and Education Scotland's (2016) 'How good is our early learning and childcare' (HGIOELC) framework.

The EPP1 project documented and evaluated the implementation and impact of this 8-week programme in Renfrewshire Council. EPP1 was one of a series of interventions adopted by Renfrewshire Council as part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge initiative to improve children's educational outcomes in Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) deciles one and two. The project ran for the duration of 18-months and involved 90 primary one teachers and 30 head teachers from 30 primary schools in Renfrewshire.

Informed by Guskey's (2002) programme evaluation model, the research strand gathered data on the programme's impact on schools, teachers' thinking and practice, and children's learning experiences. The project employed qualitative and quantitative methods including interviews with teachers and management, pre- and post-training questionnaires, and semi-structured classroom observations using an observation schedule designed around the HGIOELC quality indicators. Statistical and iterative thematic analysis was carried out on the data.

Initial findings showed an increase in teachers' knowledge and understanding of play-based and child-led approaches following the training. Teachers gained a better understanding of the ways in which the learning environment can facilitate or potentially restrict aspects of young children learning. With this improved knowledge and understanding of the theories underpinning early childhood pedagogy, the teachers engaged in more thoughtful design of classrooms and the opportunities they afforded. By creating enabling environments, children were better able to lead their own learning and take ownership of the classroom. Children were described as more confident and engaged, and demonstrated improved transitions and collaborative learning. Learning became more personalised on account of children's increased

involvement in planning and decision-making. Teachers became more responsive and were better able to extend the learning in children's play experiences. They devoted more time to classroom observation and employed strategies learned through the programme to use this data more effectively in planning.

The training increased reflexive practice and strengthened professional dialogue among teachers within individual schools and across the local authority. Teachers were supported to look at their practice and environment through a more critical lens and by drawing on colleagues' expertise as critical peers, teachers can continue to develop knowledge and practice. These outcomes have important implications for sustaining the new pedagogical model. This programme has given teachers the tools to ensure the long term capacity for change beyond the duration of the programme.

References

Education Scotland 2016. 'How good is our early learning and childcare?' (HGIOELC).

Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yctu37cu>

Fisher, J. 2013 Starting from the child, (4th ed), McGraw Hill Education, Open University Press.

Guskey, T. 2002. Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development. Educational Leadership, 59(6) pp. 45-51.

Moylett, H. 2013. Active Learning (Learning and Teaching in the Early Years), Practical Pre-School Books.

Stephen, C. 2010. Pedagogy: the silent partner in early years learning, Early Years, 30:1, pp.15-28.

*Corresponding author: Dr Pauline Duncan pauline.duncan@strath.ac.uk, School of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Lord Hope Building level 5, University of Strathclyde, 141 St James Road, Glasgow, G4 0LT UK

Evidence based Policy?

An opinion piece by Lorna Hamilton and Fiona Ellison

Research informed teaching

Increasingly, teachers in Scotland in the 21st century have engaged with research as part of their initial programmes of Teacher Education and as part of any close to practice research, whether teacher generated or in collaboration with other groups such as academic researchers. This burgeoning research literacy has encouraged the sharing of research and co-construction of outputs from research in more diverse forms and contexts. This greater research visibility in education is very welcome as we strive for interconnectedness between the diverse stakeholders in the education research field. However, it does also raise questions about the ways in which research is understood and the ways in which research is used to support teaching, learning and policy.

Teachers in Scotland have to engage with research as a fundamental part of their professional development and in relation to particular strategies or initiatives of relevance to their own immediate contexts or wider communities. Since research has formed a key part of teacher professional development, their engagement with research and their construction of research has been encouraged to be critical and reflective but what of the ways in which politicians understand and use research? Recent stories have emerged in the press concerning the Scottish Government's possible mis-application of research to support Primary 1 testing (a key strategy/ component of the National Improvement Framework) (Herald Newspaper 9th January 2019). Research authors Dylan Wiliam and James Popham have both stated that they did not support P1 testing and believed that their research had been misunderstood or shaped to support such policy. So how had this come about?

The attainment gap

As a result of International assessments and a review by the OECD (2015), The Scottish Government felt compelled to tackle the attainment gap that had been identified in the review of the Scottish state system. Yet the inequity highlighted by the OECD (2015) led to the government bringing in a new and potentially divisive strategy involving national standardised testing through its National improvement Framework (NIF). It was stated that

the only way to reduce the attainment gap was to ensure that children, at set chronological points, were formally tested in literacy and numeracy (at P1, 4, 7 and S3). Although summative in nature, we would argue, and very limited in scope in what it might tell about individual children's attainment, these tests were also supposed to have a diagnostic component that would feed into teacher decision-making around learning. It could be argued that a single test, even if genuinely diagnostic, would still be very limited in capturing what children were capable of, in comparison with the daily and weekly evaluations carried out by teachers as they plan and assess the strengths and weaknesses of young people. However, because of the supposed diagnostic component of these tests, the government appeared to be keen to stop criticism by characterising these formal chronological tests as formative assessments and used research by Dylan Wiliam and James Popham to support the legitimacy of 'testing' as some kind of formative rather than summative measure. This was needed particularly in regard to P1 testing because a movement in Scotland by various stakeholders and opposition politicians towards challenging the use of testing, had resulted in a debate in the Scottish parliament around the possible removal of such assessment. Although a majority voted to abolish the tests at P1, the parliamentary vote was not binding and so the debate has persisted and testing is being applied across the country.

Poverty, the attainment gap and testing

It has been argued by some, in political debate and during wide consultation on Scotland's response to the attainment gap, that only national standardized testing could offer robust information for the development of policy and practice leading to the closing of such a gap. However, previous reform on Assessment in Scotland's schools (Assessment is for Learning- AiFL) over several years had prioritised a strong formative component in schools while encouraging evaluation conversations with young people that were to provide a foundation for meaningful learning and attainment. This strongly formative assessment process also seemed to gel conceptually with the values and aims of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). In contrast, national testing at set chronological age levels, it was argued, would be needed to provide teachers with important 'information to inform future teaching and learning. This ignores developmental differences in children while also appearing to dismiss the formative assessment processes encouraged by AiFL and CfE.

Hamilton (2017) also argues that it deprofessionalises teachers by suggesting that the only way they can teach effectively is if test results tell them what is problematic. The rather naïve notion that testing children helps them to achieve and teachers to teach appeared to be taken by policymakers to be an obvious ‘truth’ supported by their interpretation of work by Wiliam and Popham. However, Wiliam is quoted as saying that using his work to support these standardised tests, at least at P1 level, was a ‘substantial and perverse misrepresentation’ of his work (Herald Newspaper,). The Scottish government’s response was that they saw the tests as formative and as Professor Wiliam and others supported formative assessment, their decision to go ahead with testing was founded on established evidence. Wiliam carefully notes that while, ‘some might argue these assessments may, under certain conditions be regarded as formative [P1 assessments at least] are almost completely useless as guides to the achievement and needs of five-year-olds.’ One of the Education secretary’s international advisers and also a member of the OECD panel which carried out Scotland’s original Review, Professor Andy Hargreaves (reported in Holyrood Affairs Magazine)has spoken out against the use of testing because of its probable negative impact on children’s well being and the ways in which it devalues teacher judgements. Indeed he suggests that standardised testing is ‘an attack on decisional capital,’ within schools. We may draw the conclusion that Scottish policy belief in Standardised tests appears to be built on sand rather than on a critical and reflexive understanding of research. Wiliam’s qualifying statements when discussing a limited possibility that such testing could be defined correctly as formative assessment and Hargreave’s concern about the negative impact of such testing on children and teachers, should concern us all.

Close to practice research

Ellison’s recent small- scale research into primary schools and their responses to these changes does raise some important questions about the very nature of the attainment gap the government is trying to reduce and highlights the need for a more substantial engagement with the underlying influences on underachievement.

the term closing the attainment gap is wrong. I think we need to
talk about interrupting the cycle of poverty because one term of

any Scottish Government isn't going to close the attainment gap.

But I mean this whole NIF testing thing...this analogy is used a lot

'you don't fatten a pig by weighing it. So you know testing a child isn't going to make them learn any better. It's about quality teaching and learning and that comes through quality professional learning for teachers and quality leadership at all levels

(Head teacher: S1H1, p.110, Ellison, 2018)

And from Sahlberg, representing Finland, the country for so long at the top of international league tables, we see a similar concern:

Data from standardised tests cannot inform a teacher about these important hidden cognitive forces therefore it is small data that can help teachers understand why some students don't learn as well as they could in school (Sahlberg, 2017, p.3 cited in Ellison, 2018).

We can clearly identify areas of poverty and social deprivation through the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation database. Government and Local Authority strategies to tackle issues around poverty through funding and resourcing schools,(e.g. PEF) or introducing collaborative initiatives and research(e.g. EPP1) can lead to innovative ways of enhancing teaching and learning. Such positive steps forward in dealing with the attainment gap should perhaps make us more critical of a flawed emphasis on standardized testing and the unreliability of the data being collected. It might be argued that national standardised testing is a short-term 'solution' to long-term cycles of poverty and social deprivation which will simply gloss over the real issues. On the other hand, genuine attempts to enhance professional development and teaching and learning through school and LA based initiatives and collaborative research may bring about more significant transformations.

Research has highlighted that where this kind of standardised testing is imposed, it usually leads to teaching to the test, leading to a temporary perceived increase in performance but that it is unlikely to lead to a reduction in the attainment gap since any increase in

performance is usually because of the narrow focus on test specific knowledge. It is important to debate the selected use and misinterpretation of research as a means of upholding damaging policy decisions. Misunderstanding or misinterpretation of research as justification for decisions that are not educationally sound can further undermine teachers, schools, children and parents while superficially appearing to show supposed 'increased performance.' It is perhaps much more likely that other approaches to supporting children's learning (such as PEF etc.) may empower stakeholders to bring about a more substantial and longer lasting impact on pupil learning and that much quoted attainment gap. But we would argue that it is such contextualised resourcing and support along with the informed and professional judgements of teachers – the small data mentioned by the head teacher in Ellison's work- that is most likely to bring about long term changes in school attainment not standardised testing.

Research literacy and criticality

Research literacy and criticality are essential if policy is to make meaningful use of research to engage genuine debate and considered decision-making. The worrying evidence to date is that politicians continue to simply look for superficial agreement in research texts based on limited understanding of education and educational terms. However, there is always likely to be a tension between the short termism of political needs and the time needed for good quality research to be generated. How can we manage the intersection of research and policy in such a way that use of research is robust and meaningful?

As we look more and more towards evidence based decision making, it is clear that there needs to be support for a critical research literacy within each part of the research-policy journey: **research driven policy, research informed policy and research on policy implementation**. The first of these, **research driven policy**, encourages a coherent national education research set of strategies and priorities with regard to research development informed by a critical engagement with research publications. The next, **research informed policy**, requires careful collation of academic and close to practice educational research on key areas of interest to Scotland's education system. Accessibility, scrutiny and debate are important aspects of any use of such databases to encourage criticality and to avoid any misrepresentation criticisms. Finally, any policy initiative needs to be obliged to build into any

policy development, **academic and close to practice research** as part of a structured **evaluation process** with regard to **policy implementation** in order to build evidence and a better understanding of strengths and weaknesses in any school reforms. This presupposes that the Scottish Government is keen to support and develop research, in Scotland in particular, but more than this, that the government wishes to build more robust and fruitful engagement with educational research at all stages of the policy process.

Some helpful references

Ellison, F. (2018) The Enactment of National Assessment Policy Changes in Scotland. *Unpublished MPhil thesis*. University of Oslo.

Hamilton, L. (2017) Invited opinion piece By GTCs - The wrong diagnosis: National Improvement Framework undermining professionalism. *Teaching Scotland Digital Magazine*.
<http://www.gtcs.org.uk/News/teaching-scotland/67-the-wrong-diagnosis.as>

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (OECD) (2008), Reviews of National Policies for Education: Scotland 2007: Quality and Equity of Schooling in Scotland, Reviews of National Policies for Education, OECD Publishing, Paris

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2015) Improving schools in Scotland: An OECD perspective. Report, OECD, Paris, France.

Reporting on Wiliam, Popham(2019) and Hargreaves (2017)

Herald Newspaper 9th January 2019

Holyrood Current Affairs Magazine 2017

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors alone.

Does class size make a difference?

Many teachers will agree that common sense would support a reduction in class size as one of the ways in which more individualized learning can be tailored to each child and as a means of increasing attainment. Yet research contributes mixed results to this debate and often confusion about the benefits of smaller class sizes. If this topic interests you, consider looking at work from NEPC in the USA on class size (free to access).

From NEPC Newsletter Thursday 14th March 2019

*It has been a factor in recent teacher strikes sweeping the nation, including in **Oakland**, **Chicago**, and **Los Angeles**. Uniformly popular among **teachers** and **parents** alike, class size reduction initiatives are the perpetual people pleaser of the political world, repeatedly appearing in forums such as **State of the Union speeches** and **campaign platforms**. But what does research tell us about the connection between smaller class sizes and key outcomes such as student achievement or high school graduation?*

*In recent years, skeptics ranging from the popular author Malcolm Gladwell and Hoover Institution scholar **Eric Hanushek** have cited research to cast doubt on the efficacy and value of class size reduction reforms, launching a cottage industry of news articles boasting such headlines as **Small Classes: Popular, But Still Unproven** and **Despite Popularity with Parents and Teachers, Review of Research Finds Small Benefits to Small Classes**.*

*Of course, the implementation of any common reform will show varying outcomes in different instances. Responsible scholars and policymakers, therefore, insist on looking at the entire body of research. In one of the National Education Policy Center's most often-cited policy briefs, **Does Class Size Matter?**, **Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach**, a professor at Northwestern University, reviews the research comprehensively and reaches a clear set of conclusions.*

A full version of this work can be found at:

<https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/does-class-size-matter>

SERA's annual conference will take place in Edinburgh in 2019 from the 20th to 22nd November. Check out details and call for papers at sera.ac.uk



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

Supports



IMPROVING EDUCATION
THROUGH RESEARCH

Scottish Educational Research Association - 44th Annual Conference

Moray House School of Education and Sport

www.sera.ac.uk

 @sera_conference

 @scottisheducationalresearchassociation

20 - 22 November 2019



*Improving education
through research*

Charity no SC003928

If you are interested in joining SERA or in attending our annual conference, please go to www.sera.ac.uk

Membership details

Researching in Schools

SERA Ethics in Research

SERA conference 2019 in

SERA Researching Education Bulletin Committee 2019

Lorna Hamilton, University of Edinburgh

lorna.hamilton@ed.ac.uk

Ross Deuchar, University of West Scotland

ross.deuchar@uws.ac.uk

Ian Matheson, Previously General Teaching Council for Scotland

Anna Beck, University of Glasgow

a.beck.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Are you a practitioner? Would you be interested in joining the board and helping to shape how the Bulletin develops in the future? Then please get in touch with Lorna.Hamilton@ed.ac.uk

We would also be interested in hearing from other stakeholders who might want to participate, so do consider this opportunity.

