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Past, Present and to Come. Some Reflections on Teacher Education in Scotland

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Jimmy Scotland, was formerly a Principal of Aberdeen College of Education. He died in 1983 – just weeks before he was due to retire. His reflective article on the teacher education system in Scotland was written for the 1983: volume 20 edition of Education in the North. It offers an interesting insight into the concerns of teacher education at the time of change: financial cuts, college mergers (or closures), changes in the BEd and other courses as a result of “new curricular and new technology” and an increased emphasis on distance learning to meet the changing professional development demands – so not too far removed from the current situation in teacher education in Scotland.

Yvonne Bain

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Past, Present and to Come

Some Reflections on Teacher Education in Scotland

J. Scotland

I began teaching when I came home from the Hitler War, and joined the staff of Jordanhill College on the first day of 1949. I have therefore been involved in the Scottish educational affair for almost 37 years, and for more than 34 of these I have been trying to educate teachers. In that time there have been, in my view, four notable developments.

The first, and in many ways the most striking has been a steady, unremitting process of democratisation. When I was at school and university, before the War, everyone talked freely about how democratic Scottish education had always been, but much of that was an empty boast. Poor boys could certainly get on—as the only son of a widow who had to work very hard indeed I can claim to be one—but they had to have brains: the aristocracy of the intellect was very real. The Scottish schools in those days were a hierarchical society. Senior secondary pupils were generally agreed to be more valuable citizens of that society than their less fortunate, duller brothers in the junior secondaries, and hardly in the same world as the wretched group in advanced division. English and mathematics and classics were more important subjects than art and music and of course handwork and domestic science, which were strictly for the hewers of wood and drawers of water. The brightest pupils whatever their bent, went into two or even three language courses: that was a reward, something parents could boast about. School staffs too were hierarchical. Headmasters (there were no headmistresses, except in girls' schools) were university graduates, and in secondary schools they had to have good honours degrees. They had reached their position by hard work and the good fortune to impress education committees, and they expected to have their orders obeyed. Boards of studies and staff councils did not exist. On the other hand, except in some fee-paying schools, the larger items of educational policy were settled elsewhere, by directors, education committees and (most commonly) the Scottish Education Department.

Half a century later that picture remains as a living memory in the minds of only a few people who, like myself, are nearing retirement: in another ten years it will be dead, as much a part of history as the medieval grammar schools and the Candlemas holiday. The brave new world we were promised, and sought to work for, after the War was essentially democratic, and the last four decades have witnessed the erosion of any forms of privilege, earned or not. Pupils have been granted a bigger say in the running of their schools, and so have their parents, if they want to use it: many do not, of course, leaving the floor at parents' meetings to a handful who are sincerely and co-operatively concerned and one or two zealots whose main aim in life is to change the current state of affairs, whatever it is. The academic subjects and the three Rs have lost their starring role, at least in the official reports, though such documents

regularly express concern at the old-fashioned habits of so many Scottish teachers. The teachers themselves are diligently consulted on educational matters, at school, regional and national level. No influential working party is ever established now without its quota of 'practising' teachers: the argument tends to be about what is meant by 'practising'. There is even evidence that the last autocratic barrier is coming down, and women are entering into their kingdom (queendom?) with headships of mixed schools, chief inspectorships and places on the directorate.

The democratising process has also been at work in teacher training. Students are represented on governing bodies, and it is only a matter of time before they arrive on all boards of studies. Technically these boards exist only to advise the Principal, but he would never dream of taking any important decision without their concurrence, and the next change in the Regulations will give them executive power. Lecturers have a role of increasing influence on the governing bodies. As in the other tertiary institutions, however, women have been slow to achieve equal status. A few—a very few—have become heads of academic departments. A mere handful have become Principals, and seldom in competition with men. As for the subjects of the training syllabus, the practical group have found a more important place, especially in the B.Ed. course which is now drawing to the end of its life, and it is likely that the new primary degrees will concentrate as much (or more) on practical classroom skill as on academic performance, though powerful voices, especially in the professional organisations, will go on advocating the virtues of the old university pattern.

This democratising trend is too well established to be halted in the next few years. Student participation is with us: even where individual colleges are not convinced that it is helpful, they will have to accommodate it if they want C.N.A.A. validation. Lecturers will play a bigger part in the running of their colleges: principals will have to operate by 'democratic leadership', taking everybody with them. We shall have at least one female Principal in the big undenominational colleges before the end of the century. Members of the administrative staff will join their governing bodies.

It is all thoroughly reasonable, and therefore to be welcomed. It must be recognised, however, that it slows down the rate of change: anyone who has been involved in the recent sunburst of committees understands that. Where it prevents ill-considered impetuosity it can be valuable. The problem will be to find a generally acceptable compromise between a healthy safeguard and a clog.

A second feature of the educational landscape in my time has been the changing level of teacher qualifications. Here there has been something of a paradox. At the bottom, the

level of entry to the profession, it has been steadily rising, but at the top, in academic terms, it has been falling. When I started training it was in a course shortened from three terms to two and many of the students training with me were receiving concessions of one kind or another. Music entrants, for example, could count their diploma in place of a higher pass, and domestic science girls could get in with a 'near-miss'. One by one all the concessions have been withdrawn and the demand in certificate terms has been steadily raised. Now the Secretary of State has taken what most teachers would regard as the ultimate step and decreed that from the autumn of 1984 all new primary teachers will have to be graduates. It is the climax of a campaign which the professional organisations have been conducting for well over half a century. The opportunity was there in the thirties: when it was missed post-war shortages put it out of reach until the late seventies. This time—perhaps only just in time—the chance has been grasped: with England and Wales already committed it would have been intolerable if it has been let slip.

In the immediate future, of course, this entails an all-graduate profession, with the implications that has for the traditionally non-degree subjects in the secondary field. Music and speech and drama are likely to move that way within the next session, though not all existing courses will survive, even in transformation. The working party at present considering future training for technical teachers meets with the knowledge that no solution it produces will be acceptable unless it includes a degree. The question will be the nature and content of all these degrees. There is of course no possibility, even if anyone wanted it, of carrying on existing diploma courses and giving the successful students a degree. Any course produced will be 'rigorously validated', to use the S.E.D.'s term, by an outside body of national standing, in practice either C.N.A.A. or a Scottish university. With our centuries-old respect for our universities, there will be plenty of influential people who will prefer them, even though they may be expected to give undue weight to academic performance.

Such performance, however, is not the only area of a teacher's education where there ought to be rigour: there are also the twin demands of professional competence and 'character', and pressure will increase for the colleges to examine these more strictly. Unfortunately life-long competence is never easy to forecast. If the effort is to be made by College staff (and it is reasonable to expect it of them) it is equally reasonable to demand greater rigour later in assessing the competence of experienced teachers, and if necessary revoking the licence of the incompetent. Any such proposal will be sternly resisted, of course, but the General Teaching Council will have to look at it very seriously before the century ends. As for character, that is hard to assess at any stage, before and during service: it is only seen to have been weak when it breaks down.

This emphasis on professional skill and social tact is likely to continue and even to grow, and it is right that it should. It has carried with it, however, one danger which ought not to be allowed to flourish. I mean a kind of specific distrust of any kind of philosophising, an anti-intellectual bias which sees no relevance outside the strictly practical and no

practicality in any process of reflection. Educational philosophy has had a poor innings in recent years: where it does appear in the reports, it tends to be smuggled in under the more acceptable title of 'curriculum study', and some of that has been pretty strange philosophy. One reason why the colleges continue to be criticised by practising teachers is that they have gone on including theoretical study in their courses. For the next two decades at least that battle will rumble on: indeed it is never likely to end. But if Scottish education is to be healthy, there must be a proper balance of theory and practice, and everyone in the business has got to believe that.

The third prominent feature of Scottish education in my time has been enormous increase in the range, quality and importance of in-service training. A paradox has developed here too, on both sides of the school gate. Employers insist that staff must keep up to date—it is mentioned at all interviews—but they are unwilling, for financial reasons, to release them to attend courses. At the same time teachers insist that release ought to be a right, but a substantial number find excuses not to exercise it. Nevertheless there has been a rapid expansion since I entered the training field. In those early days in-service courses were held mainly in July, the majority in the first week, with a few dedicated spirits coming to the college during the winter evenings and Saturday mornings. In Aberdeen, with its huge catchment area, all courses ran during the vacation. For a number of reasons, however, including the hardening of attitudes caused by the battles over the contract, these routes became less and less popular. The keys which unlocked the modern expansion were the school-focussed programme and the staffing allowance made by the S.E.D. to the colleges: when the Secretary of State decided to give the Munn-Dunning go-ahead' for instance he increased the in-service complement in the Scottish colleges by 15 lecturers. To this development must be added the strong move currently towards a 'three-tier structure' for registered teachers—certificates, diplomas and degrees. Into this pattern fit the substantial courses now being offered: the guidance certificate, for example, requires a term of full-time study or its equivalent, the new D.L.D. the equivalent of a full year.

The effect of all this has been to alter the whole balance of work for College staff. The quota in Aberdeen for session 1983-84 includes only 51 lecturers allowed for pre-service duties and no fewer than 37 for in-service. Parity of effort is not far off: considering the distances to be travelled on school-based excursions and the comparative amount of preparation, it is probably already here. The main in-service demand is connected with the new curricula, methods and technology: Munn-Dunning and micros are the magic words. The main problem is to distinguish between important initiatives and fashionable fads: we all remember ruefully the amount of effort we expended on teaching machines and primary languages.

I see no reason to expect any fall in the in-service demand over the next few years: competition for promotion alone will push up the value of additional qualifications and a good 'course record'. In the Aberdeen area we will go on having to take the courses to the teachers, and the next major development must be in distance learning. The cost of this

in man-hours is exorbitant—ask our biology department, which has been busy pioneering—but with the number of remote schools we serve and cash limits making it impossible for the authorities to release more than a handful of staff, there is no alternative: it simply must be met.

Such logistic arguments bring me to the last central feature of Scottish education in my time. Throughout the whole period, nearly four decades, the most dominating factor has been finance. At some times more money has been available, but it would be fair to say that the question has never been ‘how much does education need?’ but ‘how much can we spare?’ In short, education has never been a top priority: only when money has been at its most plentiful have we seen any move towards the more generous rather than the more parsimonious of these questions.

I have seen three epochs. In the late forties and early fifties, as we staggered back towards economic recovery, money was very tight. The late fifties and particularly the sixties saw greater prosperity—we ‘never had it so good’—and a consequent slackening of the reins. Experiments were encouraged. The S.E.D. was never notably generous in subsidising increased staff, but they did not object if the authorities improved their ratios. This comparatively happy time lasted until the early seventies, when we were hit by the blackest economic crisis for almost half a century. Since then the cry has been ‘cut everything’. A recent example is the proposal to reduce intake to community work courses on the ground that they ‘must take their share of the cuts’. At a time when steeply rising juvenile unemployment suggests that more rather than fewer trained workers are required, such rough egalitarianism is hard to justify.

Financial constraints have also forced us into a process of ‘rationalisation’ in which the main objectives are to avoid duplication and small classes at all costs. This has led to the closing of some primary and secondary schools, and battles with warlike parents’ groups determined at all costs to keep them open.

In the college world there have been two consequences of the constraints. One is the reduction of freedom suffered by governing bodies and boards of studies. When I began in teacher training the colleges were still inspected, and their curricula technically had to be approved by H.M.Is. As a student I gave my final crit lesson before an H.M.C.I. (who, incidentally, was not spectacularly impressed). Already, however, the writing was on the wall for that arrangement. Inspectors never, as far as I am aware, insisted on scrutinising College schemes of work (if these existed), and none sat in on any lecture I ever gave. The new Regulations of the late fifties, in which the moving spirit was the late John S. Brunton, ushered in an era of freedom, both academic and administrative, which lasted into the mid-seventies and has by no means completely disappeared today. Since 1976 however we have moved back into a world of intake quotas, staffing complements, Stage A and Stage B submissions to the S.E.D. and validation of everything. One recent Ministerial statement is worthy of more attention than it has received: he pointed out that the Colleges, like every other educational institution in the public sector, must be subject to inspection. What this means remains to be seen.

Proportionately the college system has been the area most severely affected by rationalisation, which closed Hamilton and Callendar Park, merged two Roman Catholic institutions, shut down some courses, like Business Studies in Dundee, cancelled the secondary B.Ed. and transferred large areas of teaching and residential accommodation to other sectors. Inevitably, since the final decisions have to be taken by politicians, many saw politicising at work in the process.

Whatever the politicians promise, the financial crisis will be with us for a long time yet, and there is no reason to believe that the citizens will have a change of heart and demand a better deal for education. We can therefore expect rationalisation to go on. A reduction in the number of courses is certain. The music diploma, for instance, will become a degree, but not in three colleges. There may never be a college degree course in speech and drama. Four courses in technical education may well be regarded as too many, unless they are combined with training for other careers. Only in the secondary post-graduate courses is reduction difficult, since schools want teachers able to offer more than one subject. But this situation depends entirely on the Scottish system of specific secondary qualifications: if we were to move to a general certificate the way to rationalisation would be open. Fortunately for the Colleges, the General Teaching Council is likely to fight any such proposal to the bitter end.

If teacher training remains an independent sector the closing of more colleges is clearly a possibility. Each governing body has its list of those at greatest risk, and it seldom includes their own, at least openly. Like everyone else I have my ideas, but I see no reason why I should be quoted in support of any proposals with which I have no sympathy. Let it suffice that I shall be amazed if closures are not in the air again within two or three sessions.

However, tertiary rationalisation is another solution, and to the simplistically minded (which includes many politicians) an attractive one. If there are to be mergers, there are three directions in which the Colleges could go. If the decision is left to C.O.S.L.A. they will probably come under the control of the regions. If it is up to a Labour government, I would guess that the central institutions will become more polytechnic by absorbing the C.Es. And if the universities are allowed to make a bid? One, Aberdeen, already has, but I am by no means sure that all the others are of the same mind. If it is left to the Colleges—but it will not be left to the Colleges. In the end it will be up to the Government, and if that remains Conservative I expect a pragmatic solution, which may vary in different parts of the country, and will be fundamentally economical.

What then is the likely pattern of teacher education in Scotland ten years from now? Either a smaller sector with fewer colleges or reduction to one facet of a polytechnic, or (most likely) a combination of these. All-graduate entry to the profession for all teachers of all subjects, primary and secondary. A three-tier system of additional qualifications for serving teachers, but comparatively few with the time or perseverance to take advantage of it. Continuing, indeed expanding school-based work, and an increasing number of courses run by distance learning. Validation of absolutely

everything. And the colleges, of course, will go on being criticised: *ça va sans dire*.

The whole picture could be transformed by or two changes in the national predicament. If there is more money about,

or if people are willing to devote a higher proportion of what we have to education the skies will lighten. Provided, of course, the money is properly used, and who is to be the judge of that? In our democratic world of today there are any number of candidates.

