



A balancing act between freedom and equality

After 50 years of comprehensive education, Henry Hepburn investigates how far the system has fulfilled its lofty ideals and asks where next for Scotland's schools

SCHOOLS MAY be the most idealistic of institutions but in their long history they have let down countless young people. Those in Scotland are no exception. For much of the 20th century, schools had two distinct tiers: academically minded pupils were nurtured and hotheaded; others learned to accept being ignored or disparaged.

A 1977 survey of Scottish pupils (see panel, page 18) contains a poignant quote from a teenage girl who truanted for weeks at a time throughout S4. "The reason I never went to school the past year was because I was in a non-certificate class and the teachers had no time for dunces," she said. "We did not get any work of any kind – every day at our different classes we just sat all day doing nothing."

This was 12 years after the launch of comprehensive education: one of the great strides towards social justice in the 20th century, up there with universal suffrage and the NHS. But just over a decade in, Scottish schools still pivoted on high-stakes exams. The girl's rueful sign-off about her experience of fourth year is particularly poignant: "I liked school up to then." Even in a comprehensive system, by the time exams came around many pupils were effectively tossed to one side.

Nearly four decades later, comprehensive education is marking its 50th birthday. A conference was held at the University of Edinburgh last week to assess its impact and to tie in with a new book, *Everyone's Future: lessons from fifty years of Scottish comprehensive schooling*.

"By and large people are pretty happy with our comprehensive system," says co-editor Danny Murphy, a University of Edinburgh research fellow and former secondary head-teacher. But this is far from the full story.

The French national motto "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" also provided the three foundation stones of comprehensive education: giving pupils the freedom to make choices over how their lives would pan out; increasing equality; and ensuring that children learned to get on

despite their differences.

Comprehensive education was about rejecting selection based on ability – schools were to be melting pots where everyone reached their potential. Murphy lived this change when he started teaching in the East End of Glasgow in 1974.

"It's been a kind of up-and-down, rocky road sometimes, but I think by and large the teaching profession has done a great job of responding to that challenge. We're much further down that road now than we were in 1965, but there's still a way to go," says Murphy, who discussed comprehensive schools at length in a recent Radio Edutalk interview (bit.ly/Edutalk).

Narrow academic focus

One landmark change in the decades that followed was the advent of Standard grades in the 1980s, based on the principle that every pupil should achieve qualifications on a national level. Even so, says Murphy, to this day such qualifications do not adequately reflect everything that young people can do – that is left to schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the John Muir Award.

"We have a system at the moment that certainly grades children in terms of their academic merit, but we don't provide any kind of pat on the back when children are leaving [school] about the other good things that they do or have done on a national basis," he explains.

Only one of Curriculum for Excellence's four capacities, "successful learners", is certificated nationally, Murphy says. This means that the other three – "responsible citizens", "confident individuals" and "effective contributors" – are implicitly relegated. "The



academic still dominates in the way that we think about our schooling and what it's for," he adds.

Murphy would like to see the development of a "graduate certificate" where achievements such as caring for a relative or prowess in sport are given equal prominence to traditional qualifications.

Yet the focus on exams has ramped up in the past two years as new qualifications have worked their way into the system, which Murphy says "imposes a tremendous degree of uniformity" at the same time as CfE is supposed to be liberating schools to experiment locally with ideas.

Meanwhile in England, where comprehensive education also dates back to 1965, the founding ideals are harder to see in a system that now prizes choice and individuality, with the "inevitable consequence...that more inequality will result", he argues.

Choice also exists in Scotland, however, with about one in five parents exercising their right to request a school place outside their catchment area. Families should have some right to choose, says Murphy, although this leads to increasing "social segregation" – a sifting apart of children according to class and wealth that jars with the spirit of the comprehensive ideal.

This is exacerbated by comprehensive education ending at the age of 16, whereas England recently raised the school leaving age to 18. In Scotland, Murphy argues, the post-16 educational landscape is a confusing morass navigated most efficiently by well-educated, affluent families.

Murphy's idea of utopia lies in the ground between the Scottish and English systems. "You've got to find some sort of balance between these two values, between freedom and equality," he insists.

'Educational apartheid'

As well as struggling with this tension, comprehensive education has also been undermined by social factors beyond schools' control, according to Walter Humes, a visiting professor at the University of Stirling and a panellist at last week's conference.

"Class remains a potent element in

this, though it is a term that most politicians prefer to avoid," says Humes, who gained a panoramic view of how the comprehensive ideal has progressed as co-editor of the reference book *Scottish Education*. "The links between educational achievement and the wider economic and structural context require much more attention when educational policies are being developed."

Humes points to an elephant in the room: schools that exist outside the state-funded sector. "In Scotland, of course, we have the educational apartheid of Edinburgh in which nearly 25 per cent of pupils attend independent schools compared with 4 per cent in the country as a whole," he says. "Again, politicians and policy advisers are reluctant to engage with this question."

Professor Humes says there is "complacent self-congratulation within the educational establishment". But he is hopeful that the imminent review of CfE by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development will serve up "a tough-minded appraisal of its strengths and limitations".

Another panellist, Larry Flanagan, believes that for all the remaining problems the big picture is overwhelmingly positive. The general secretary of the EIS teaching union says: "While an education system alone is incapable of completely eradicating the impact of structural inequalities in our society – and in many ways these have deepened over the past 50 years – comprehensive education is at least predicated on the will to make the attempt.

"It has enhanced the lives and life chances of countless numbers of our citizens. And, while always a work in progress, it is a better starting point for the future than any of the alternatives." ●

Everyone's Future: lessons from fifty years of Scottish comprehensive schooling is published by IOE Press. It is dedicated to co-editor Professor David Raffé, who died unexpectedly in February