The Paul Hamlyn Foundation

The Four Countries Conference

3 -5th March 2017

FINAL REPORT

CONTENTS

Background

The conference was organised by four educationalists working in different parts of the United Kingdom. Brief biographies are included in Appendix 2. The event was planned to address several questions

1. Is there a case for developing a stronger British education system?

   This question seemed to be of increasing importance because of the commitment of the UK government to emphasise "British values", even though this has particularly difficult resonances in Northern Ireland. This is a complex issue which will be discussed elsewhere in this report, but the priority given to this issue in public statements by leading Westminster politicians implies an ambition for consistency across the four Home countries.

   In the debate surrounding the referendum on Scottish Independence, advocates of unionism argued for the value of a British identity and encouraged a sense of shared heritage and values.

   During the referendum on European Union membership, many Leave supporters based their decision on a strong identification of the United Kingdom as a nation state. The resultant tensions, arising from different voting patterns across the United Kingdom, created a risk of further fragmentation and raised questions about what holds the constituent parts of the UK together.

2. Does the diversity in education policy, practice and provision offer opportunities for learning and improvement across the four countries?

   There is a clear willingness in all four countries to look beyond their own systems to seek paths to improvement. The Scottish Government has commissioned two recent reviews by the OECD and has established an international panel of experts to support its efforts to raise attainment. The OECD has also published reports on leadership, and on assessment and accountability, for Northern Ireland. All four countries have looked at the results of the PISA tests and drawn on the experience of those countries who are most successful in these tests. The recent experimentation with "Chinese Maths" in England is a good example of this.

   There is a concern that we are too ready to ask the question "What works?" and adopt approaches. The thinking behind the conference was that we needed to ask the question "What works here?" and then adapt approaches. Our concern is that there is too much educational tourism and a tendency to attempt to implement changes without taking adequate account of context. The risk of this would be sufficiently reduced if lessons were being drawn from countries where contexts were likely to be more similar.

3. What are the strengths of each area of the United Kingdom from which the others might draw?

Format

The event ran from the evening of 3rd March 2017 until the afternoon of the 5th March 2017. As well as the instigators, 5 active educationalists were invited from each of the four countries (see Appendix 3). The intention was to keep the number of colleagues attending small enough to allow for meaningful discussion and to make the process of recording manageable. Within that number, we sought to ensure diversity in terms of sectors, roles and backgrounds. In the case of Northern Ireland, we placed greatest priority on reflecting the diverse nature of schools.

The correspondence and the papers which were circulated to participants are collated as Appendix 4.

We were committed to flexibility in format and activity and to ensuring that participants were not constrained and were able to shape the event. This resulted in significant divergence from the proposed programme.

The Friday evening was used, as planned, to allow participants to meet each other, to be briefed on the plans for the weekend and to make any comments that they might wish to make before the more formal launch of the conference on the Saturday morning.

After an initial briefing on the Saturday, participants were given time in their "country groups" to identify what they thought were the key elements of their system and identify strengths and issues which might hinder efforts at improvement. They then reported back on these discussions before moving into mixed groups. Their tasks,, within these groups were to identify what they had in common as practitioners and what they might learn from each other's policy, practice and provision.

There were regular opportunities throughout the day to share discussions between groups and to identify emerging consensus.

The Sunday morning was given over to continued group discussions with participants able to reflect in their "country" groups on what the main lessons were for them. The event finished with a collective session where the outcomes of discussions were shared, points of consensus were identified and general agreement established about the shape and content of this report.

Report

This report has been compiled based on summaries which were developed and shared with participants during the event and on notes submitted by a significant number of participants. An executive summary of the report outlining the conclusions reached has been attached as Appendix 1.

Outcomes, issues and recommendations

A stronger British education system?

1. The general view was that the traditions of the four countries in terms of education were well-established and strong. Added to this was an equally firmly held view that devolution had progressed too far for there to be any formal moves toward a "British" system in education. The phrase that was used was "that ship has sailed". There was significant variety across the four countries and strong political commitment to particular approaches to educational reform. The challenge is to draw on this diversity to inform policy and practices in the four countries.

2. While there were significant differences on other issues, the combination of a tradition of educational autonomy, the very real differences in the four systems and the political commitments in education made it an area where drawing together a UK wide system was likely to prove impossible even if a case were to be made for its desirability.

3. That said, there was a sense of bewilderment that no efforts had been made in this direction. Given the strong Unionist commitment among major political parties and the evident desire to build a sense of Britishness, it seemed remarkable that education, often seen as a powerful tool for nation-building, had not, in recent times been seen as a unifying force.

   It is very likely that young people in Scotland will have studied the Scottish Wars of Independence, but they are unlikely to study Magna Carta or the Glorious Revolution unless they specialise in History. These latter events would be seen as fundamental in the shaping of British democracy. There is little evidence that there is a common effort to develop a sense of national culture. While "English literature" might be shared, the inclusion of a Celtic contribution to that in English schools is often non-existent or minimal. There is a very strong commitment in Wales to the development of the Welsh language. Clearly there is a massive commitment to the traditions of communities in Northern Ireland, alongside innovative approaches to the teaching of history and citizenship to help young people engage with the divided nature of its society. In short, there are numerous examples of policy, practice and provision which tend to encourage a sense of specific nationalism rather than a sense of Britishness.

4. While there has been discussion of "British values" as part of the curriculum, the concept was seen as being poorly developed. While some of the values cited were universal, specific reference to "respect for English Law" suggested a very Anglo-

centric viewpoint. There was no evidence of any consideration of values embedded in the curriculum of individual countries. Scotland, for example, has made great play of the values inscribed on the Scottish Parliament's Mace and these values were formative in the design of the Curriculum for Excellence. This appeared to have been completely ignored in the Westminster Government's pronouncements on "British values"

5. We could find little evidence of any joint discussions between politicians from all four countries with responsibilities for education, although there were examples of meetings involving Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Arguably, it was more likely that they would focus on Finland, Singapore, China, Canada or any other apparently successful education system that on any of their UK neighbours. Leading educational figures, such as Sir Michael Wilshaw, former head of Ofsted, have been openly critical of performance in Scotland and Wales in the light of recent PISA results, while the current Prime Minister has rebuked the Scottish Government for its perceived failings in education. None of this gives any sense of common responsibility for the education of British children nor any commitment to sharing learning for the collective benefit of these young people. Together, the nations of the United Kingdom might be "an unstoppable force", but education would appear to be an area where that "force" does not require activation. Arguably, the systems have grown further apart rather than closer together with the recent review of education in Wales moving it further away from the English model and seeking a Welsh model for improvement, which is informed by the experience of other nations, within the UK and beyond, but which responds very specifically to the challenges, circumstances, traditions and strengths of Wales.

The Individual Nations

While we had discussed, and written about, issues of Britishness and talked about the variety within the United Kingdom in the lead-up to the conference, we had not identified what the differences were. We addressed this by asking participants from each country to identify what they perceived as the key identifying characteristics of their education system.
The responses are summarised below

England

1. The first identified characteristic of the English system was diversity. The extent of this in terms of types and structures of schools and in governance gives rise to a sense of fragmentation which goes beyond creating a healthy dynamic for variety and the possibility of learning from within the system. Participants from England, who were neither uniformly radical, nor consistently politically aligned, used the phrase "dog's breakfast" to sum up the level of variation in England's schools. This needed to be set alongside the commitment of English Ministers to a system with multiple drivers for improvement.

2. Part of the response to the apparent autonomy and diversity within English education was a highly-centralised system of accountability which was perceived as being "high stakes accountability". Schools were classified relative to each other, hence the description of "outstanding", as well as against

established standards. The consequences of a critical assessment, "requires improvement' or being placed in "special measures" could be significant. Schools could be forced to become academies and the reputational damage could have a severe impact. There was a concern that, while there were claims about increased autonomy and the decentralisation of power and decision-making, there was a strong sense of the "decentralisation of blame'

3. There was also a recognition that there were issues that required to be addressed through external accountability. Grade inflation was an example that was discussed, but the overall view was that there was a lack of balance in the English system that required to be addressed

4. The approaches taken to accountability were identified as one of the most significant drivers of practice and provision in schools. Combined with the assessment system and other aspects of Government policy, notably the introduction of the EBAC, participants felt that the curriculum was narrowed, practice was inhibited and conformity and compliance were encouraged.

5. This tendency to centralisation as a reality, regardless of the rhetoric, was exacerbated by the specificity of the National Curriculum, despite the flexibility that was available to schools, notably academies. It was also reinforced by the assessment system. This meant that, while schools were offered flexibility in their journeys, the clear expectation was that they would all arrive at the same points

6. The tendency to fragmentation affected several aspects of school life. There was great diversity in roles within the system which led to diversity in career pathways and remuneration. This also meant that ongoing training, especially leadership training, tended to be fragmentary. While it can be argued that there are advantages to be gained from this level of diversity, there was a feeling that it created uncertainty, distracted from the core business of learning and teaching and absorbed time unproductively. There was also a concern that there was undue inconsistency because of the different approaches to initial teacher training

7. Diversity in funding was another characteristic of the system. It led to a sense of inconsistency and unfairness and there was a feeling that funding might be devoted to the pursuit of ideological goals rather than the needs of existing schools and pupils. While recent efforts to reform funding were intended to reduce this variability, they were unfortunately caught up in a debate about the adequacy of funding.

8. The issue of diversity impinged on other areas notably provision for young people with additional support needs. This was an area where there had been a plethora of change in identification, language and provision. Catering for young people who require provision, which is often expensive, in a market driven system can be very challenging.

9. Participants from England felt that there was so much change in their system that they became absorbed in the process and were frustrated in their efforts to make a difference for the young people in their care

10. The approach to governance in schools in England was perceived as a strength, although there were reservations about some of the current pressures on Governors. They were valued as voices for the community and an additional perspective in reviewing schools. The model of governance offered the possibility of real partnerships in schools, but there was some unease about the "professionalisation" of the role of Governors and a distancing from school community.

11. While many of the comments made about the system in England may appear negative, there was appreciation for the commitment to tackle quickly any concerns about provision or practice in schools. The idea that any shortcomings should be tackled within young people's time in schools was admirable. There always tends to be a tension between making improvements at the pace that children need and the pace that teachers feel that they can accommodate. Education in England has a clear sense of urgency and a determination that improvement will be made at pace

Northern Ireland

1. There were also huge issues of fragmentation and diversity in education in Northern Ireland although the reasons for it were often historical. One participant described it as "much of the English diversity overlaid with "tribal politics""

2. Academic selection remains a defining characteristic of the Northern Irish system and continues to provoke controversy and debate. As with many other issues affecting education in Northern Ireland, it is highly politicised and difficult to resolve. It is worth noting that the current Westminster government's advocacy for an expansion of grammar school provision in England does not cite Northern Ireland as a strong example.

3. Funding is complex by sector and stage and is a serious issue for schools. Head teachers reported pressures on budgets and resultant reductions in staffing and other critical areas of provision. This alone would be sufficient to create problems in the system, but it is creating further difficulties because it is demanding time from leaders to make the system function, which leaves less time for making the system better.

4. Accountability is also a challenging issue in Northern Ireland too. There is an absence of any value-added basis for evaluating performance and a narrow focus on key performance indicators. One participant used the wonderful phrase – "accountability is bedevilled by self-fulfilling prophecy". This has had a damaging impact on curricular reform so that the full value of curriculum

innovation has yet to be properly realised. The need to justify your school in terms of formal attainment has restricted the capacity of the system to develop a truly rounded and holistic approach to education and constrained, in particular, the development of well-regarded vocational routes.

5. The absence of any value-added measures, or a wider conception of educational value, means that selective schools always dominate league tables. This reinforces selection and elitism and can be demoralising for other schools

6. The admissions process makes it difficult for schools to plan effectively. Indeed, the peculiar circumstances of the political settlement in Northern Ireland has produced a system of mandatory coalition government. This has come at the cost of collective responsibility and a lack of coherence and consistency in educational policy.

7. The multiple school sectors in Northern Ireland, reflecting its particular history and politics, mean that there is a plethora of sectoral interest groups, all with a distinctive perspective on educational policy and practice. Ironically, however, despite the many "representatives" this produces, many head teachers feel that their voice is missing from the circles where decisions are considered or made and would be keen for their views to be given more formal recognition.

8. Unlike other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland has a more than adequate supply of qualified teachers, indeed the challenge that it faces is more to do with the cost and consequences of over-supply.

9. The state of the economy was having a significant impact in Northern Ireland, and in other parts of the UK. One participant used the expression "you can't be what you can't see" to sum up the impact that the economic climate was having on aspirations for learners with a concomitant impact on their commitment to education.

10. There was concern about the consistency of integrated services which were seen as being diverse and ad hoc, not least because they have barely survived a period of intense political dispute over the direction of educational policy more generally.

Scotland

1. Scotland is overwhelmingly committed to comprehensive education, which participants described as "being in the DNA of the Scottish System".

2. The commitment to comprehensive education and inclusion was reflected in wider policy areas. The "Getting it right for every child" framework which included indicators of well-being and health, the commitment to staged intervention and the presumption of mainstreaming were all part of an evident commitment to address the needs of all children.

3. Because of the size of the country and, perhaps, because of attitudes, there are very high levels of interaction between stakeholders in the system including politicians and practitioners, inspectors and senior local authority staff. Despite this, there was also a sense that the system was very hierarchical and that change tended to be top down. There was a view that Scottish teachers had not seized the opportunities offered by Curriculum for Excellence because of a fear that they did not really have the "permissions" that appeared to be offered and that they were at risk of being made accountable if they did not deliver what Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the SQA wanted.

4. The teachers' professional associations/trade unions seem to enjoy much greater power and influence in Scotland than in other parts of the United Kingdom. They are consistently involved in national committees, notably the Curriculum for Excellence Management Board and Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers. This is seen as bringing both advantages and disadvantages. It minimises conflict in the system, but it can lead to compromise and slow the pace of development and improvement.

5. National agencies like Education Scotland, which has responsibilities for inspection and for driving development, and the Scottish Qualifications Agency, as the only national examining body, also exercised considerable influence. The General Teaching Council of Scotland, now independent, is another powerful and influential agency that reinforces the central role of the teaching profession in Scottish education.

6. The GTCS was highly valued as a gatekeeper for professional standards and the move towards the need for ongoing "Professional Update" was a positive step in maintaining standards. Increasingly, GTCS has been taking a leadership role in professional growth through, for example, its new set of standards on career-long professional learning This commitment to professionalism in teaching was further reflected in the recent establishment of the Scottish College for Educational Leadership. The commitment that SCEL had made to leadership at all levels was welcomed

7. Arguably, the most powerful bodies are the Local Authorities. They retain considerable control over finance and responsibility for staffing, despite moves towards devolved school management. There are no school governors and, although there is considerable parental involvement and the National Parents' Forum Scotland is another influential body, parents and communities have little statutory power in schools

8. The control by local authorities means that admissions to schools in Scotland are catchment-based or faith-based. Parental choice does play a part, but far less so than in England.

9. There were limited routes into teaching in Scotland. This limitation enhances consistency across the profession and helps to explain the closeness of the

system. It also gives an even more important role to the universities. It may also contribute to inflexibility in access to teaching careers and the perceived lack of diversity within the system

10. Curriculum for Excellence, as the basis for planning curriculum nationally, is massively significant. There is consistent support for its founding values and its stated commitments to equity, creativity, the rights of students and teachers and its relatively extensive and inclusive approach to assessment. This needs to be set against the view that CfE has not been implemented as intended and many of the initial ambitions have not been achieved. As stated earlier, the flexibility in implementation has not been translated into a reality in many instances. There has been frustration in the efforts to reform assessment, although there was a strong view that the assessment system in Scotland was inclusive and extensive. There was an equally strong view that the extent of change had been far more limited than many would have hoped, while the level of disruption and the impact on workload had been more considerable.

11. The experience of Curriculum for Excellence requires greater analysis than it has been afforded in this report, but participants were of the view that a constructive review of its design and implementation would be of value to all four countries.

12. The approach to accountability was perceived to be positive. The inspection system is strongly based on self-evaluation and has been influential internationally. Although there is still anxiety about inspection and some challenges to it, the widespread view is that it is fair and supportive rather than punitive. The use of the "How good is our school?" documents which share the standards used by inspectors and ensure that the same criteria were likely to be applied in self-evaluation as in external inspection, were valued.

13. This sharing of evaluative standards was a strength of the Scottish system and participants praised the efforts to establish sophisticated measures across schools through "Insight", the benchmarking tool which has been developed to support schools in reviewing their performance. The emphasis on student destinations was particularly important

14. While participants were very positive about the overall policy framework in Scotland there were concerns about the extent to which they were reflected in reality and how far the level of resourcing matched the level of ambition.

Wales

1. Welsh participants also identified a tension between a system committed to equity and consistency and concerns about a levelling down and a lack of challenge. The overwhelming sense was of a system in the early stages of significant change. Among the important factors underpinning the Welsh system were: a commitment to comprehensive education; the importance of

the Welsh language for all young people; and the recent reforms to qualifications including the creation of Qualifications Wales

2. There was considerable optimism about the Donaldson Review and the moves towards its implementation and its potential to address longstanding concerns about education in Wales building on existing strengths.

3. Elements of the current efforts at reform which gave grounds for optimism were numerous. There was a strong view that the inter-dependencies inherent in educational reform were being addressed, resulting in changes being more aligned and creating coherence in current reforms. There was an effort to establish relevant and meaningful approaches to accountability that would support the ambitions of curricular change. This included the need to establish a support-based system for categorising schools that minimised labelling. There were also proposals to build a strong system of professional growth and development including the implementation of a review teacher training and development undertaken by John Furlong. Overall, there was a sense of commitment to cultural and ideological change among politicians and educationalists. This has meant a strong sense that the Donaldson Review has genuinely responded to the context of Wales and created a strong sense of ownership during the current phase of implementation. The phasing of implementation has been welcomed although, particularly given the scope of the reforms, timescales would remain challenging.

4. Wales has, perhaps uniquely, adopted a co-construction approach to its reforms. Pioneer schools from across Wales are directly involved in developing the new curriculum and in exploring implications for professional development and accountability

5. This growing culture of partnership has been evident in developments in ICT. The early development of a Digital Competence Framework alongside literacy and numeracy frameworks illustrates the importance attached to digital shills in the overall reform programme.

6. The governance implications of the reform have been further addressed by the central role given to 4 regional consortia in helping to lead the developments

7. Implications for pedagogy were central to the original Successful Futures Report (Donaldson) recognising the importance of how students are taught as well as what they are taught

8. One of the concerns was about low aspirations in Wales and the need for the system to be more ambitious. This is one of the issues which may help to explain a perceived history of reviews and false starts in Wales. There have been previous efforts at reform which have appeared to be well-founded and have shared elements with other successful education systems, but these have not brought any significant shifts in outcomes for pupils, at least, as measured by the PISA test.

9. Funding for schools in Wales is relatively low and there was strong view that the system had been under-resourced. While this may have helped to explain the failure of previous efforts at improvement, there was no conviction that it had been adequately addressed in support of current development

10. Whether related to the funding issues or not, Wales has very significant staffing shortages

11. Other important factors in defining the Welsh system were –

   • having as single awarding body
   • a strong commitment to bilingualism
   • the emergence of all-through schools

12. Factors which posed a potential threat to progress were

   • Confusion around roles in a complex system
   • Issues about indicators used for accountability which were seen as creating perverse incentives and undermining progress
   • A limited research base underpinning previous efforts at reform

Common Factors

It was clear from the contributions that there was considerable diversity between the education systems of the four countries in terms of policy, practice and provision and in terms of values. Despite that, there appeared to be a great deal in common among the participants as professionals. When asked to discuss this in mixed groups, consensus quickly emerged about values, beliefs and the sense of purpose for education

The following statement on the underpinning beliefs and the purposes for education emerged from discussions among the participants and was widely accepted by them: -
"We believe in the worth, dignity and value of each young person and in their ability to make a valuable contribution to society.
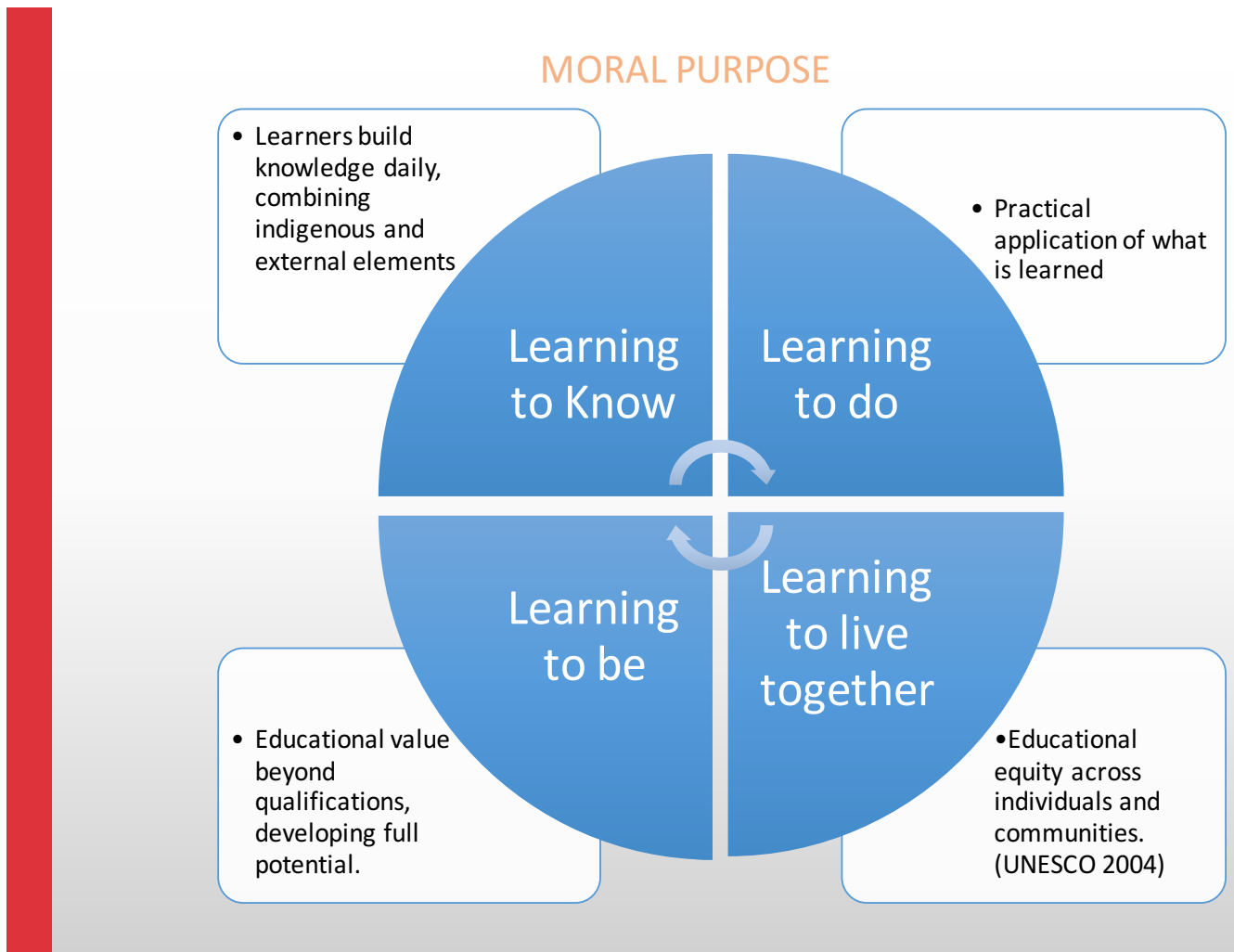
Therefore, the purpose of the educational system is to provide young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable them to be: -
   - Ethically informed,
   - Enterprising, creative contributors to society,
   - Healthy and confident individuals,
And
   - Ambitious, capable learners who will reach their full potential."

There was also considerable commitment to the UNESCO model as set out in the illustration below

MORAL PURPOSE

- Learners build knowledge daily, combining indigenous and external elements

Learning to Know

Learning to do

- Practical application of what is learned

Learning to be

Learning to live together

- Educational value beyond qualifications, developing full potential.

- Educational equity across individuals and communities. (UNESCO 2004)

All the participants, regardless of where they worked were committed to the idea of education having a wider social purpose informed by a sense of moral value. A key issue for them, which will be addressed later in this report as well, was how this belief could be reinforced through all the key elements of the education system.

There was a strong view that while there might be bold and ambitious statements about values, such statements would not be fully reflected in policy, practice and provision unless they were discernible in –

- Admissions policies
- Assessment practices, especially those associated with qualifications
- Accountability measures and indicators
- Closely associated with accountability, the standards used for comparisons between schools and for international comparisons
- Behaviours expected from teachers and others working with young people.
- Curriculum design

There was virtually no dissent from this view and, while there was debate about the detail of curriculum design, there was no sense that the issues raised within that debate could not be resolved.

The major issue was about the content that should be delivered through the curriculum. There was a strong argument made for the importance of knowledge in the curriculum and a general sense that a curriculum needed to balance that with the need to offer experiences and to develop skills, attitudes and dispositions. The challenge for all of the systems was how to accommodate that and participants did not have the time to address this fully.

It was recognised that it was a discussion that needed to take place. While it was relatively easy to agree the importance of knowledge, the issue was agreeing the detail of that in terms of content. In specialist subject areas there was often a reluctance to leave out areas of interest and emerging curricula were often unteachable. In such instances the "taught curriculum" was often based on what was regularly assessed. In simple terms the tests became the main means through which the curriculum was defined with all the problems that involved, when what was required was a vigorous, ongoing and open conversation on the appropriate content to be included.

There had also been concerns that the lack of specification of knowledge/content had contributed to difficulties within Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland.In short, while there was consensus about a need for balance between different element in curriculum design, participants never reached a consensus on what that balance should be. However, retaining a clear focus on the overarching purposes of education should provide a means of identifying priorities in design.

There was also consensus on the factors that made the greatest positive difference to outcomes for students. The overwhelming view was that the quality of interaction between educators and learners was the most important factor and that it was the practice of teachers and others working directly with learners that would bring better outcomes. This meant that the quality of initial training was vital, as was ongoing professional development for educators.

There was strong support for engagement with research and evidence. There was a general welcome for, what was seen as a growing movement towards, evidence-informed practice and recognising the need to involve teachers more, not just as consumers of research, but as active participants in enquiry and research. This was tempered by the need to recognise the importance of context and the need for systems to adapt, informed by evidence from elsewhere, rather than to adopt.

In every area, participants felt that, regardless of the strengths or weaknesses of the systems in which educators worked, most staff took a professional approach and sought to do what they saw as being in the best interests of the young people and the communities to whom they were responsible.

The discussions between participants supported the views of those who worked across the UK, that effective and successful schools and teachers demonstrated commonalities in practice. There was a belief that the understanding of pedagogy was

better and more widespread than it had ever been and that there were many shared approaches across all four countries. There is considerable cross-border activity. Some is online, with Twitter being used extensively, blogs being shared and video resources, such as TED talks, and groups like Pedagoo or ReasearchEd being drawn on across the UK. There is also other shared activity. Teachmeets, begun in Scotland, are very much part of the educational landscape. There have been successful Research-Ed and Pedagoo events across the UK, while events like Northern Rocks, organised by teachers have attendees from beyond their national setting. In Northern Ireland, the decision by the Education Authority to cancel an annual summer school, due to budget cuts, was challenged by the #NIEdChat group who have organised their own event for the last two years.

There are significant numbers of educationalists who are influential in all parts of the UK. All four countries tend to draw on the same cadre of international experts. There are many UK based academics, consultants and trainers who work in all four countries and the debates, which educationalists have, tend to focus on the same areas
It was notable how often participants used the same references and how quickly they indicated their awareness of the references used by others.

The significant differences between the systems were not reflected in the professional attitudes, beliefs and values of the participants

Strengths

The view of all participants was that there were strengths in all areas of the United Kingdom and that there were lessons to be learned from all of them. It was also their view that there was more than enough diversity within the United Kingdom to inform progress in each of its parts.

Participants accepted the view that, while there was a great deal to be learned from other countries, the greater similarities and shared experiences across the United Kingdom meant that lessons learned within were more likely to be applicable.

In terms of strengths, England was seen as being particularly strong in driving change and the determination to make changes in a timescale which would have an impact on students within the system was respected. There were strong efforts at establishing practice which was evidence based and considerable discussion of research

Northern Ireland was admired for the outcomes attained for students in a very diverse and challenging context, albeit that the headline figures mask a high level of inequality of outcomes arising, in significant part, through the system of academic selection. Teachers were seen as being of high quality with a willingness to explore avenues and seize possibilities within politically divided system. Participants used the lovely phrase "resilient independence" to describe a culture of getting on and doing what staff felt was best, regardless of the political context. This can be seen in several areas, including the development of innovative curriculum approaches to the teaching of history and citizenship, both areas with significant potential to exacerbate divisions. It

is evident also in the 'entitlement framework' which was originally designed to ensure all young people had access to a wide and balanced curriculum, including vocational programmes. Here, too, the full value of the entitlement framework has not been realised.

Ironically given the focus on divisions between communities, there was a strong sense of commitment from communities to schools. As one participant described it, there was a sense of "growing where we are". This was supported by the relatively small scale of the system which tended to mean that there were good relationships across the system, notably between schools and inspectors. Furthermore, schools have been at the forefront of work to develop Shared Education, a system of collaboration and cooperation between Protestant, Catholic and Integrated schools in local areas to promote social cohesion, school improvement and more effective use of resources.

Scotland appeared to have a strong sense of pride in the system and a general feeling that the building blocks existed to create an improved, and improving, system. There were lessons to be learned from the experience of implementing Curriculum for Excellence for Scotland itself and for other countries. There was a strong sense of common values captured in the commitment to comprehensiveness and a feeling that this was expressed in a clear and commonly understood language. Scottish participants felt that developments in education had benefitted from a long period of political consensus and regretted that had now passed. They also spoke positively about the development of clusters of schools and the strengthened possibilities of schools working together across stages.

The Welsh participants reported, and demonstrated, a remarkable sense of optimism. They talked about being in a phase of "turmoil and triumph". They recognised that change was messy and that there were elements of uncertainty, but they were fiercely proud of the progress that they had made. There was also a very strong sense of ownership and unity about the review and implementation. The pronoun "we" was consistently used including Graham Donaldson, the lead on the review and the government adviser, and the other participants.

The grounds for optimism stemmed from the view –

- that changes being made were purpose driven and focussed on the best interests of young people
- that there was a commitment to make cultural change
- and that there was a genuine effort to address all the inter-connected drivers and to seek to align changes

In each of the countries the perceived strengths were set against hindrances or sources of anxiety, most of which are set out in the earlier sections of the report on individual countries. There was unanimity that lessons could be learned.

Looking forward

The participants identified the following as the main lessons to emerge from the discussions

1. **Any changes, reforms or improvements in education policy, provision and practice need to be systematic and aligned.** The image that was used was that if one only pulled one string on a marionette, the puppet would simply jerk. Coherent movement only comes from pulling all the strings. Efforts at change in curriculum, for example, would not take root unless there were changes in training and staff development to support that change.

2. **Accountability systems and approaches are a critical part of the alignment.** Every country reported on issues arising from their accountability system. Regardless of public statements, policy positions or whatever, practice tended to reflect the demands of narrow forms of public accountability more than anything else. This was particularly true in England where the judgements of Ofsted had a huge impact on schools. Being placed in a category by Ofsted has immediate consequences for schools. These ranged from forced academisation to the dismissal of staff. Schools had a very clear view that an Ofsted report made a huge difference to the school's reputation. In the competitive, market-driven system which exists in England this can be especially damaging to schools. To a lesser extent, accountability had the same impact in the other three countries. Crude accountability encouraged compliance, discouraged innovation and narrowed both the curriculum and the range of experiences offered to students.

3. **Accountability systems need to be intelligent. They should not be a means of classifying schools, but be much more focussed on supporting improvement.** The efforts that had been made in Scotland to achieve this were welcomed and had created a model that could be drawn on elsewhere. Measures used for the purposes of accountability need to reflect all the ambitions which any nation has for its schools. If aspects like citizenship are deemed to be important outcomes from schooling, they need to be as evident and important as attainment in the measures used to inform judgements about schools. When specific attainment measures are being used for accountability purposes, they should meet appropriate standards of validity and reliability, and when they are used for multiple purposes then separate validity and reliability checks are needed. More perniciously, it is self-defeating to oblige attainment measures to be standardised to bell-curves while still demanding improvement – it is simply not possible for everyone to be 'above average'.

4. **Successful and sustained destinations for school leavers should be a key indicator in all education systems.** Attainment measures were limited in value and there is clear evidence that success in examinations does not guarantee success in the workplace or in Further or Higher Education or training. The narrow focus on the former as the output of schools, has meant

more limited focus on the latter, which might more properly be considered one of the core purposes of education

5. **Participants recognised that the attainment of school pupils can be significantly affected by factors beyond the contribution of schools.** This has some divisive possibilities, such as the widespread use of tutors employed by parents. There was no doubt that some students had more supportive environments with, for example, access to technology, resources and study space. This can also have more positive consequences, if we consider, for example, ways in which schools can engage more constructively and innovatively with their local communities to enhance the importance of education more generally and seek synergies which will enhance opportunity. There was also a concern that schools could still influence the attainment of students by means of approaches and techniques which were unlikely to assist their performance after their transition from school.

6. **An analogy that was used was that there was a danger that schools became too focussed on getting their students over the hurdle, which immediately confronted them, rather on helping them to complete the race.** There was a view that, in too many instances, schools supported young people to get the qualifications to get into employment or another stage in education, but did not ensure that they had the capacity to thrive after that transition.

7. **Participants were not arguing that attainment should be disregarded.** They were aware that qualifications are a vital currency for young people and were totally committed to ensuring that, wherever possible, these were achieved. The argument was that there needed to be far greater balance across the indicators used to judge schools

8. **The same principles should be applied to comparative data and indicators used for benchmarking**

9. **Because of the commitment to measuring progress and the established rhetoric of "raising standards", comparisons are consistently made against previously established standards.** While this is understandable and areas like literacy and numeracy are obviously of continuing importance, **we need to establish standards for other skills that we deem to be important.** None of the four countries have benchmarks in higher order skills or well-being. International comparisons do not tend to focus on these areas either. As a result, education systems and schools are more likely to focus on a narrower range of outcomes.

10. **Accountability should be ongoing, democratic and integrated.** All participants agreed that self-evaluation was the essential driver for improvement. A focus on the "event" of external evaluation tended to be a distraction. The roles of external inspection should be as –

A "health check" to ensure that self-evaluation was thorough, ambitious and effective;

A means of ensuring that national priorities were reflected in the work of schools;

A way of evaluating progress across schools to ensure that the interests of all young people and communities were well-served.

11. **Schools should be a focus *for* evaluation rather than the focus *of* evaluation.** Participants noted the increasing tendency for inspection to consider other aspects of provision in an area as well as the school. Participants felt that this approach should be extended. They accepted that, while schools can make a difference for young people, they could not be entirely responsible for overcoming all the challenges that children and families faced. The emphasis on raising attainment, which was a priority for all four countries, ran the risk of placing too much focus on schools and too little on the contexts in which they operated.

12. **There should be more analysis of the results of national benchmarking such as PISA.** Participants were concerned that politicians and the media reacted to the headlines of data, rather than the reality. PISA was a very good example. There were examples of schools in parts of the UK which performed very well in the PISA tests, but, rather than look at the factors that promoted that success and drawing lessons from it, there tended to be a knee-jerk reaction to the overall figures

13. **This was an illustration of a wider concern.** There were examples of excellent performance in all four countries, but there was often too little effort to look at how success had been achieved within the UK and too much readiness to look at how success had been achieved by other systems. Politicians were too ready to look for national and legislative solutions to perceived problems, rather than to allow schools to focus on basic issues of teaching and learning, of care and the other factors that were more likely to improve outcomes for young people

14. **All countries need to be clear as to how they take account of disadvantage when reviewing progress.** This is a really difficult issue. Disadvantage should not be an excuse for low attainment and participants were aware of the "soft bigotry of low expectations". On the other hand, it is unrealistic to expect schools serving communities blighted by disadvantage to have the same patterns of attainment as schools in more favourable circumstances. A possible compromise was to have less emphasis on pace when judging the progress of young people from challenging circumstances and to emphasise progress made over the full period that a child spent in a school. This would allow schools to nurture young people and to broaden their experience and plan their progress over a longer period. The obsession with linear, age based progress puts undue pressure on some schools.

15. **The views of pupils should play a larger part in school self-review and planning, as well as being more influential in inspection and external evaluation.** There was increasing evidence of pupils being given more of a role to play in schools and the increasing numbers of "rights respecting schools" was welcomed. There were good examples of "pupil voice' being used in each of the four countries and this was seen as having a positive impact on school improvement.

16. **The emphasis on pupil voice echoed the commitment of the group to the principle that young people should have a sense of dignity, value and worth.** Participants also felt strongly that this sense could not be developed unless staff working with young people were treated in the same way. Teachers and other colleagues in schools were unlikely to improve their performance when morale was low

17. **Linked to this were reservations about the constant use of the term "challenge" linked to school improvement** – The London Challenge, The Attainment Challenge, the Black Country Challenge etc. – as if there was some sort of inbuilt resistance to change and reluctance to improve. A language of "promise", "entitlement" and "guarantee" would be much more positive and more likely to motivate staff.

18. **There were similar issues about the choice of language between "subsidiarity" and "autonomy".** There was unanimity about the principle of "subsidiarity" – that decisions should be taken at the most local and appropriate level possible. This principle can be enacted in various systems of governance. It is based on clarity about the responsibilities that exist at all levels in any system. The emphasis on "autonomy" has led to an obsession with structures and with governance and has distracted from making the changes or improvements in those areas that are most likely to make a difference to the outcomes for young people (See para. 19 below)

19. **The issue of autonomy is complex as well as distracting.** If curriculum is centrally prescribed and assessment is centrally controlled, if there is demanding, centrally controlled accountability, school autonomy is very significantly reduced. In these circumstances, the status of the school is much less relevant. There was also unanimity that individual schools faced overwhelming difficulties in generating improvement.

20. **The need to establish a culture of professional growth throughout a career together with the supporting structures to allow this to become embedded in every teacher's beliefs and practices.** Such a culture will require a fresh approach to educational leadership. The importance of all teachers contributing to leadership in a school, taking responsibility for ensuring consistent high quality education for all its young people.

21. **Participants were very clear about the factors that were most likely to make a difference.** In this, they were in broad agreement with much of the

current educational research including the Educational Endowment Fund Toolkit, the Sutton Trust, John Hattie, Michael Fullan, Michael Barber and others. Key factors were:

- agreement on the fundamental purposes;
- a focus on practice and pedagogy;
- a culture of reflection;
- drawing on research and successful practice, but tailoring the lessons to the context of the school or class;
- offering a breadth of experience to students and capturing all the learning that comes from that;
- ensuring that pupils felt cared for.

There were other factors associated with vision, values and leadership which are touched on elsewhere in this report. This list has been selected to reflect the belief that the fulcrum for improvement is at the point of interaction between educators and learners

Appendix 1

Executive Summary

Conclusions

1. The diversity between the education systems of the four countries that make up the United Kingdom is such that there is no such thing as a British education system

2. The extent of devolution, the powerful identities developed in the individual parts of Britain and the sheer extent of differences between the education systems would make it impossible to develop a common system across the United Kingdom. Even political parties absolutely committed to unionism have made no serious efforts to change this.

3. Despite the systemic differences in values, policy, provision and practice, there was overwhelming consensus among practitioners about the purpose of education and general agreement about approaches and practices likely to lead to better outcomes for young people.

4. There is much to be learned from the diversity across the UK and this should be reflected by establishing mechanisms for joint discussion and sharing at both political and professional levels. The establishment of such mechanisms is more likely to generate effective learning because of the similarities of the contexts than the tendency to seek lessons from other countries which were apparently successful in international comparisons. We need to continue to draw on the experience of such countries, but we are neglecting the potential of drawing from immediate neighbours

5. There are factors, emerging from the discussions at this event, and reflected in much current educational research, which need to be the focus for improving outcomes for learners. These are listed below

   - Any changes, reforms or improvements in education policy, provision and practice need to be aligned

   - While the best interests of children must be safeguarded, accountability systems need to be intelligent. They should not be a means of classifying schools, but be more focussed on supporting improvement.

   - Measures used for the purposes of accountability need to reflect all the ambitions which any nation has for its schools. If aspects like citizenship are deemed to be important outcomes from schooling, they need to be as evident and important in the measures used to inform judgements about schools as attainment.

- We need to set expectations of student performance in all the areas where we seek to improve the performance of young people so that we do not narrow the focus of education unduly

- Successful and sustained destinations for school leavers should be a key indicator in all education systems.

- Schools should be the focus for evaluation, rather than to focus of evaluation. All the factors likely to contribute to the success of young people should be considered in inspection. While attainment in literacy, numeracy and formal assessment should remain an important indicator of school performance, the range of indicators should be broadened

- The same principles should be applied to comparative data and indicators used for benchmarking

- Accountability should be broadly based and should be consistently based on self-evaluation systems validated by inspection.

- There should be more analysis of the results of national benchmarking such as PISA to ensure more targeted improvement priorities.

- There should be greater clarity about how we take account of disadvantage in reviewing progress. This could involve the use of value-added measures and/or placing less emphasis on pace as opposed to progress made by the end of learners' experience of schools

- The views of pupils should play a larger part in school self-review and planning as well as being more influential in inspection and external evaluation

- A language of "promise", "entitlement" and "guarantee" would be much more positive and more likely to motivate staff than the constant emphasis on "challenge" in the discussion of school improvement

- The concept of "entitlement" should be used to ensure a breadth of experience for all young people

- The concept of "subsidiarity", i.e. decision-making at the most local and appropriate level would be more constructive than the concept of "autonomy", which tends to lead to an over-emphasis on structures and organisation

- The key elements in improving outcomes for young people are related to practice and pedagogy and require:

  o A clear focus on improving practice and pedagogy;;
  o A culture of reflection;

- o Drawing on research and successful practice, but tailoring the lessons to the context of the school or class;
- o Offering a breadth of experience to students and capturing all the learning that comes from that;
- o Ensuring that pupils felt cared for.

Appendix 2

The Organisers

To follow ….

Appendix 3

Participants

Northern Ireland
Marie Lindsay
Barbara Ward
Kevin Lambe
Michael Allen
Barry Corrigan

England
Amanda Martin
Debra Kidd
Saima Rana
Ben Davis
Tom Sherrington

Wales
Dylan Jones
Gareth Rein
Kevin Palmer
Natalie Gould
Sonny Singh
Eithne Hughes

Scotland
Amanda Corrigan
Kenneth Pieper
Lena Carter
Natalie White

Conference Organisers
Tim Brighouse
Graham Donaldson
Tony Gallagher
David Cameron

Appendix 4

Questions for Edinburgh

The Briefing paper outlines two issues:

- 'Post Brexit should there be a nationally agreed set of schooling purposes, policies and practices across this (dis)United Kingdom?'
- 'Irrespective of our answer to this question what do we think are some of the strong and weak points in the differing practices in the four countries so far as they affect -
    - Structures Governance and Finance
    - Curriculum Assessment and Examinations
    - Accountability and school improvement
    - Admission Arrangements to schools
    - Teachers; their initial education and training, professional development and retention
    - Services for pupils with special needs and services for the individual beyond the school.

What we have tried to do below is to highlight some of the areas of difference. The list is not intended to be comprehensive nor does it set priorities and parameters for your conversations. It is intended more as an initial stimulus and aide memoir

First Issue

So far as purposes are concerned we want to encourage only the most general agreement across the four countries, although there will need to be agreement about what are the shared UK values.

We may feel as a group, that there is more to say than the summary of general aims purposes and values which were published by Cambridge Primary Review Trust and summarised in their briefing paper as twelve aims divided into three groups, which, while set out for primary, encompass all the school years:

The first group relates to the individual and incorporates descriptions of *wellbeing; engagement; empowerment; and autonomy*: the second group connects the individual with others and the wider world and explains *encouraging respect and reciprocity; promoting interdependence and sustainability; empowering local, national and global citizenship; and celebrating culture and the community:* while the third group focuses on knowing, learning and doing and elaborates that into *exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense; fostering skill; exciting the imagination; and enacting dialogue*

If we feel there is more to say or a better alternative way of expressing these general aims, then each group will suggest their ideas after discussion.

Second Issue

Structures Governance and Finance
There are very different approaches in:
- Role of local government
- Academies
- Free Schools
- Studio Schools
- UTCs
- PRUs
- Faith schools
- Selective schools
- Governing bodies
- Parent committees
- School Budgets and the extent of delegation
- Age of transfer to secondary school

Curriculum Assessment and Examinations
Again, there are differences
- All have nationally determined curricula but details are very different with similarities between Scotland and Wales on the one hand and Northern Ireland and especially England on the other. (Academies and Free Schools determine their own curriculum)
- Assessment embraces many different approaches – diagnostic, formative, summative, and informative as well as to keep track of the individual pupil and the school as a whole. In every country there is a confusion about these.
- Assessment statutorily takes place at different ages in the four different countries
- There are terminal external exams which originate when the school leaving age was 16 and is now retained although the leaving age from education has gone up to 18 where there are also external exams
- The IBAC is present in all countries as is the Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and ASDAN and BTEC and GCSE in three and Ordinaries and Highers in Scotland.

Accountability and school improvement
- Four Inspection services (Estyn, Ofsted, HMI/Education Scotland, HMINI) dance to slightly different tunes with differing impacts.
- School Improvement services are centralised in Northern Ireland, the responsibility of local authorities in Scotland, mainly privatised in England and

arranged along different lines in Wales. Universities play some role (research findings) in all four.

- Beyond the school Local Authorities, the NI single board, Multi Academy Trusts/chains, the churches and Faith groups are accountable to four governments in different ways and to varying degrees of detail

Admission Arrangements to schools

- Probably the key to equity and 'social mobility' in schooling are admission arrangements. In England, Local Authorities are still responsible for organising and running applications, although Academies can run their own admissions governed by an Admission Code of Practice. The introduction of parental preference in the early 1980s has influenced admissions heavily. In consequence, there is a wide range of school type - community, academy, free, foundation, aided – to facilitate what politicians describe as 'parental choice'. So great was the concern with the possibility of schools playing fast and loose with admissions that a 'Schools Adjudicator' was established during the 1990s.
- In Wales admission arrangements were also similarly affected but the wide variety of types of school to choose from did not develop after the establishment of the Welsh Assembly. Local Authorities have more control over the admission arrangements.
- In Scotland, Local Authorities have a strong role in running the system and securing equity. Catchments areas for schools still dominate criteria for admissions.
- In Northern Ireland although the new single board has the duty to secure fair admissions the churches have a major role.
- One of the questions we might address is 'Should parents have both rights and preferences as far as admissions are concerned?'

Teachers: their initial education and training, professional development and retention

- Once again England is the outlier. Diversity of providers and a lack of strategic planning have gathered pace and there is now a complex picture of various providers of initial training education and qualification. There is much more planning in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In all but Northern Ireland we are experiencing a shortage of available NQTs for teaching posts needed in schools,
- Maybe the key question is should there be a UK wide group to advise on securing a sufficient supply of suitably qualified teachers in the years ahead?
- Teachers' subsequent professional learning, which is vital, presents an even less coherent picture. Participants will have their ideas of the best features of arrangements in the four countries.

Services for pupils with special needs and services for the individual beyond the school

- The countries vary in their approach to 'inclusion' For example in Scotland the 'permanent exclusion of a pupil' is not an option. Approaches to the education of children with special educational and other needs have also varied over the years.
- Other extra -school provision worthy of discussion would be opportunities for music making and tuition.

Appendix 5

BRIEFING PAPER

This is a briefing for participants in the PHF funded weekend conference involving practising (mainly school) educators from Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and England. Among our purposes will be an attempt to answer two main questions:-

- **'Post Brexit should there be a nationally agreed set of schooling purposes, policies and practices across this (dis)United Kingdom?'**

- **'Irrespective of our answer to this question what do we think are some of the strong and weak points in the differing practices in the four countries so far as they affect   -**
  - **Structures Governance and Finance**
  - **Curriculum Assessment and Examinations**
  - **Accountability and school improvement**
  - **Admission Arrangements to schools**
  - **Teachers; their initial education and training,   professional development and retention**
  - **Services for pupils with special needs and services for the individual beyond the school.**

This paper is an attempt to rehearse some of the issues raised by these two questions

SECTION ONE:

The implications of Brexit and the need for some general UK-wide agreement about educational purposes

It is tempting to see the referendum decision to leave the European Union –so-called Brexit – as marking the end of one age and the beginning of another; similar in a way to the French Revolution in 1789 or the Fall of the Berlin Wall 200 years later. Both led to huge social changes affecting all parts of their societies including education. But there are hazards in any historical comparisons. Among them in the case of Brexit is that, whereas the other two historical watersheds had a unifying effect on hitherto socially very divided societies, Brexit arguably has laid bare a society starkly divided on attitudes, values and opinions on many issues within the ironically misnamed United Kingdom. After all, 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' appeared to have polar-opposite views on the importance of independence and interdependence, on nationalism and internationalism, on our obligations towards others, on diversity, on immigration and on a whole range of other issues including the health of the economy. There have even been some concerns at the escalation of 'hate' crimes and racist behaviours in the wake of Brexit. It represents a picture of a society not at peace with itself and fearful for the future.

So, what does Brexit mean for our education systems?

It could be seen as an opportunity for the schooling and college system and services for young people to overcome some weaknesses long neglected. Among them is our present focus on just a narrow range of skills and knowledge at the expense of valuing and promoting others which will be required for a society to prosper in the future; in other words an economic imperative .

There is however another important aspect of schools' and colleges' work which the Brexit divisive debate has thrown into sharp relief. Schools and Colleges are places where society expects the next generation to learn, embrace and to demonstrate in their everyday living the 'values' which unite societies. It is not merely that any economically successful modern society needs its citizens to have high level skills and education to prosper, but that as many commentators have remarked, education is an essential ingredient in any society's claim to be civilised – to be reasonably harmonious and at peace with itself.

Post-Brexit, for this to happen in the UK as a whole, there is surely a need for the four countries to agree, in the most general terms, what unifying and overarching values, aims, purposes, skills and knowledge are needed in future UK citizens. While jealously and properly guarding each of the four countries right to protect and exercise their devolved powers in education, such a four countries (UK) agreement might extend to the principles underpinning the schooling system. It might for example underline a shared commitment to providing equal opportunities and valuing equity so that every citizen wherever they live knows that there is a common agreement to realise the talents of each and every child whether they live in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland or England, even if the means of doing that are differently organised.

We are probably at a key moment when it is essential to address these issues affecting our different systems within the four countries. Brexit has thrown into sharp relief the urgency of addressing them – at least if we are anxious to preserve a *United* Kingdom. Our systems have been growing apart. Consider.

Gradually the consensus which welcomed the creation of the Welfare State including the schooling systems after the end of the Second World War has evaporated.

The 'Trust, Optimism and Hope' which characterised the twenty years after 1945 gave way to a period at least in England of 'Doubt and Disillusion', which began to affect the direction of education policies and practice ad is perhaps epitomised in Callaghan's Ruskin speech.

What emerged from this mainly English debate was an age, starting in the 1980s which might be dubbed one of 'Markets and Managerialism'. It was punctuated by White Papers – followed by Acts of Parliament- with mantra words such as 'choice'(for parents) 'diversity'(of provision and types of school) 'autonomy' (for schools)and 'accountability'. It stemmed from a belief in market forces and competition as a means of finding a solution to most problems even in education. But the same white papers always also contained the words 'Equity' and 'Equality' which demanded regulation by the state since market forces, though never publicly acknowledged, couldn't be relied upon to deliver those ideals. On the contrary markets and competition tend to produce losers as well as winners – sometimes more of the former than the latter. So, it was necessary to allow the state to be managerial as it attempted to reduce failure and promote equity. From 1980 there have been more than 40 Acts of Parliament which have given the Secretary of State over 2000 powers but with the holder of that office not obviously accountable, even to Parliament in a regular way[i], for their exercise. The

writer Alan Bennett has called it a 'totalitarian tendency'[ii]. It extends to the Secretary of State defining in detail what shall be taught, how it should be taught and when it should be taught – something never attempted by Napoleon, Hitler and other continental dictators, and interestingly by no other western developed country – at least to the same extent as that enacted in England.

The three other countries within the UK, found it increasingly difficult to live within the constraints imposed by Westminster's departure from the post-war settlement. It is fair to say that such an approach was increasingly unpopular in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. Although in the post-war years the detailed flowering of the blueprint had influenced Northern Ireland and Scotland less directly than England and Wales, it had still powerfully affected their educational climates and there had been a UK wide consensus about the 'direction of travel' in the educational systems. (The Scottish Office and Stormont, until it collapsed during the troubles[iii], had always contrived to take the best from Westminster initiatives but had adapted them to legitimately different local circumstances.) That changed however with the creation of the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1998. Westminster's writ in education no longer applied beyond England to the great relief of the other three countries: and in the twenty years since the four countries' systems have diverged more widely.

For example, a large audience of Scottish teachers in 2015[iv] had never heard of the requirement, imposed and policed by OFSTED to promote what are called 'British Values'.[v] Nor were they aware of the 'Prevent'[vi] strategy.

With Brexit that divergence becomes much more serious not least because if there is no agreement among the four countries on aims, values, purposes skills and knowledge, there is more likelihood of the UK earning the soubriquet 'the sick man of Europe'. Such a sickness exacerbated by internal strife and self-reproach would mean that it has less chance of emerging from its post-Brexit confusion as an exemplar of a creative, compassionate, prosperous, harmonious and collaborative set of societies respecting and celebrating each other's differences while united by an explicitly agreed shared educational purposes and values.

Do we therefore agree that what is needed is a UK summit of the first ministers from the four countries to agree, necessarily in the most general terms, some UK-wide Educational Aims and Principles?

It could be argued that even if there is a logical case for that to happen, the likelihood of it taking place is remote. There might be little appetite for it in each of Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland for the very reasons outlined above. For this reluctance to be set aside, it might be necessary to illustrate what might be an agreeable set of aims.

Many philosophers., psychologist and (more recently) economists have attempted such an exercise in the past. The latest iteration, which has commanded wide respect is that contained in the Cambridge Primary Review Trust and summarise briefly twelve aims divided into three groups, which while for primary encompass all the school years:

The first group relates to the individual and incorporates descriptions of *wellbeing; engagement; empowerment; and autonomy*: the second group connects the individual with others and the wider world and explains *encouraging respect and reciprocity; promoting interdependence and sustainability; empowering local, national and global citizenship; and celebrating culture and the community:* while the third group focuses

on knowing, learning and doing and elaborates that into *exploring, knowing, understanding and making sense; fostering skill; exciting the imagination; and enacting dialogue*

(http:/cprtrust.org.uk/about cprt/aims/)

The outcomes of any four countries' discussion could include a set of statements in general terms about aims and purposes similar to those set out in the Cambridge Review with an acknowledgement that it was, is and will remain for each country separately to determine in detail and to implement its own policies and practices.

It should be clear that one of the purposes of schooling in particular is to make sure with parental support that children grow up honest and with the usual virtues outlined in the major religions, all of which are differently represented in the four countries. Whatever a school's approach to religion it should be expected to promote pluralism, which requires an emphasis on the need for any citizen to respect other people's legitimate views, even though she/he has argued fiercely to the contrary and consider them to be wrong.

Doubtless it will be necessary for the four first ministers to agree what values unite the four countries: these will presumably be called 'UK Values' and would replace those promoted as British Values by the Westminster government when addressing the running of English schools.

If it was felt reasonable to go beyond that it might be helpful to set out the hope that each country in elaborating the skills and knowledge required for all future UK citizens might encourage each of the four countries to ask themselves the following questions:

- 'If curricular and exam arrangements which reflect some of the needs of a pre-informational technological age continue to be essential, are they sufficient for our future needs?'
- 'If they are not sufficient how will they need to change?'
- 'How will we value and develop skills other than those dependent on language and numeracy skills?'
- 'How will we assess and report on a young solving interdisciplinary problems?'[vii]
- 'Will we continue to be dominated by a view of intelligence which while valid in 1944 is increasingly questioned by research? In short do we still ask 'how intelligent someone is' when we might better be asking 'how are they intelligent'?
- 'And if that is the right question what implications are there for curriculum, exams and accountability?'

As they set out to go their separate ways of implementing these aims – and some agreement about the need to address the above questions, it might be helpful to encourage First Ministers from the four countries to compare notes on their existing different approaches to running their schooling systems.

The second section to this paper contains some starter comments and questions about the different approaches to the ways the schooling system is organised.

SECTION TWO:

Irrespective of our answer to the first question what do we think are some of the strong and weak points in the differing practices in the four countries so far as they affect

- **Structures Governance and Finance**
- **Curriculum Assessment and Examinations**
- **Accountability and school improvement**
- **Admission Arrangements to schools**
- **Teachers; their initial education and training, professional development and retention**
- **Services for pupils with special needs and services for the individual beyond the school.**
-

- *Structures, governance, and finance*

It is arguable that England has the most centralised system with, consequently, the least involvement of local government. Wales and Scotland still have local authorities with a strong role. Northern Ireland has recently replaced the five Education and Library Boards with one organised on an area basis. {The population of Northern Ireland (c.1.5million) means that communication and accessibility to those making decisions is less an issue than it is in England (population c.47 million).} Of course governance doesn't stop there. Schools themselves in England and Wales have always had and still have governing bodies drawn with representation from various interest groups (e.g. staff, parents, churches, business and the community). So does Northern Ireland, but Scotland has no such school governing bodies, although it does have more direct parental influence. It is fair to say that the Scottish local authority is more powerful vis-à-vis the school head and staff, than is the case elsewhere.

All four countries have 'Faith' state schools: indeed Northern Ireland because of its history has the most, although some of the cities in England and Scotland have a similar profile.

The recent move towards all schools in England becoming Academies or Free Schools and the encouragement of Multi-academy Trusts[viii] is not replicated in any of the three other countries.

Northern Ireland has a selective secondary school system and there is much selection (some overt as in Kent, Buckinghamshire and Lincolnshire and some covert through admission practices) in England and may be more. Scotland and Wales can lay claim to having secondary schools organised along comprehensive lines.

So far as finance is concerned England has gone furthest in delegating budgets to schools. Schools have control now of all their revenue budgets and can move money freely from one heading to another – including staffing. English schools also control monies for repairs and capital. England is committed to introducing a

national funding formula having abandoned in 2006 a system still maintained in Scotland and Wales of being content with allowing local authorities to determine how much is spent on schools education. (Northern Ireland had left it to the five Education and Library Boards but is rationalising through the one board for the whole country)

- *Curriculum, Assessment and Examinations*

There is great variation in curriculum arrangements. England uniquely allows the Secretary of State to determine within a legislative framework what should be taught and recently how it should be taught and assessed. Over the years teacher and other professional influence over the curriculum has all but disappeared.

Each of the other three counties also have a national curriculum but, in the case of Scotland and Wales, with much more involvement of teachers in the design. The English National Curriculum is more narrowly defined in terms of knowledge and skills.

In all four countries, most teachers feel that whatever the national curriculum declares – and the Welsh and Scottish versions are internationally admired for being exemplars of what might be described as a 'Whole Education' – they are in effect constrained in what they teach by the testing and examination system. In England this is particularly so: national tests and exams are norm-referenced, externally set and mainly externally marked with the results published as part of the accountability system. Tests are required at 7, 11, 16 and 18. In the three other countries there is less frequent testing although more frequent testing is being discussed.

It is fair to state that the same tests or exams have been used for multiple individual and collective purposes – diagnostic, formative, summative and comparative (both among and between schools and pupils and to trace standards over time) This has detracted from reliability so exams , which have been reasonably reliable for one purpose have been much less so for another.

There is a strong argument for random sample testing to establish not only comparisons of standards over time but comparisons of performance in the four countries. PIRLS, TIMMS and PISA and other new international tests could be used for such purposes. Should we add that as an item for UK agreement?

There might be a case for arguing that post 16 there is the need for a British BAC to replace existing Highers and Advanced Level. Such a development might pave the way for a more appropriate way of assessing all the skills and qualities schools and colleges are trying to develop in their students.

In all four countries, a running sore, in danger of becoming a fatal wound for so many youngsters' prospects, is the absence of IAG (Independent Advice and Guidance) for youngsters at 14 and again at 16, 17, 18 and 19.

- *Accountability and school improvement*

Since the late 1980s, led by practice in England, schools have become more and more accountable. It has reached the point in England where one set of poor test/exam results can cause school headteachers to lose their jobs[ix] and where to

teach in Year 6 in primary schools, or to be head of English or Maths in secondary schools is regarded as to be in a particularly vulnerable post.

The combination of published results and Inspection has made UK school accountability the fiercest, as well as the most narrowly focused in the developed world, with England leading the way. Because the process is so narrow, schools are not held accountable for the contribution they make to the physical and mental health and well-being of their students. It would be easy with existing instruments to repair that gap at least on a locality basis.[x]

Each country has national inspectorates, the development of which has reflected the move away from an age of 'Trust, Hope and Optimism' to one of 'Markets and Managerialism'. So great is professional distrust that schools have been given less and less notice of inspection. Of the four inspectorates, OFSTED has gone furthest in this direction and commands the least respect in schools.

Inspectorates variously claim that they have a part in improving schools. Clearly school improvement is a complex matter with many agencies having a role in supporting the main agents in the process namely school leaders and their staff. How that is achieved varies according to the country and more local arrangements within the four countries. In England there is now what is called a 'school-led' system. **One of the key questions arising from our discussions will be to suggest key ingredients in what schools need to help them keep improving what they do.**

- **Admissions arrangements to schools**

There are stark variations for parents in the question of admissions. In Wales and Scotland the local authority lays down the criteria for admissions of pupils. In Northern Ireland although the five Library Boards have given way to one board with five offices, government's role in admission arrangements is necessarily less. This is because 95% of schools are either 'Controlled' or 'Maintained' and secondary education despite the abolition of the eleven plus remains selective with grammar schools setting their own tests. Contrary to practice in the other three countries neither Catholic nor Protestant schools can stipulate religious affiliation within their admission requirements.

In England with the growth of the number of Free Schools and Academies, the plethora of different and, in urban areas, mutually incoherent admission criteria baffles most parents.

It begs the question of the four first ministers 'Should parents, wherever they live in the UK, have the right, if they want to exercise it, to attend the school closest to them?'

- **Teachers: their initial training, development and retention**

The supply, development and retention of teachers is arguably the greatest challenge for Wales, Scotland and England. All are suffering from shortages with Northern Ireland, on the other hand, having a strong record for initial training development retention and development. Without teachers, improving schools is a pipe-dream. England is stumbling into a serious shortfall with individual schools resorting to unqualified staff and, in urban areas especially London, seeking

recruitment abroad, despite the restrictions on immigration which makes that increasingly difficult.

The Continuous Professional Development of teachers once they are trained is even more important because if done well, it helps retain teachers in the profession as well as encouraging teachers to become ever better at what they do. This too is tackled differently in the four countries.

Indeed the differences among the four countries in this – arguably the most important matter – are many. There are GTCs (General Teaching Councils) in Wales and Scotland but not in England or Northern Ireland. Pay scales are different and, while there remains huge respect for the profession in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the incessant denigration of schools and teachers is a serious issue in England.

Is there a case for some UK-wide agreement about teachers?

- ***Services for pupils with special needs and services for the individual beyond the school.***

One of the great success stories of the last 45 years has been the progress made in identifying barriers to children's learning and then making provision either through separate special schools or units or through the mainstream to overcome some of those barriers and to develop such youngsters' potential. This has been true of all four countries. Of course we continue to discover how Special provision might improve further and there will remain a constant debate about how far it is possible to proceed along the inclusion spectrum from locational to social to educational. Again a comparative study of practice across the UK would benefit policy and practice in each territory.

When it comes to the Youth and Careers Services there has developed wide divergence, with the English System having neglected the Youth Service in recent years and having abandoned attempts to have any coherent planned or reliable provision for Independent Careers Advice and Guidance. This has hit hardest those youngsters in mainstream schools achieving least from the system though it has also led to other youngsters making poor choices. It is arguably the most important 'unmet need issue' facing the education services in the four countries. A recent Welsh report[xi]on Youth Provision and a report from Gatsby[xii] on IAG point out better directions for both. To some extent this area for too long has been the Cinderella of the system.

One of the main purposes of our conference will be to agree, if we can, about some of the strengths and weaknesses within the different ways in which each of the four countries approaches all these issues summarised within this second section.

The conference, however, will also be a chance to discuss common unmet needs of the system.

SECTION THREE:

Some other considerations

Neither this paper nor the conference addresses some issues affecting all four countries and their educational system. Among those issues are *'Early Years in the pre-school years, Further Education and Adult Education, Youth Services and Universities and Higher Education'* That is not to signify that these are any less important than the schooling system but simply that we did not believe that the size of our gathering and the numbers of people involved together with their experience and expertise would allow us do so usefully.

If we are successful in persuading the leaders and/or the education ministers of the four countries to talk about the issues we have raised here and will have reflected upon at the weekend they will need a briefing and background paper.

It would need to summarise among other things:

Data illustrating demographics and outcomes in terms of both national tests and international tests (PISA PIRLS and TIMMS show no significant advantages of one set of UK national practices over another);

Research evidence of what works in terms of policy and practice;

Changing views of intelligence[xiii];

Any changes over time in priorities for educational outcomes.

It would include emigration and immigration statistics both within the UK and beyond and would make the reasonable assumption that, even if the respective figures were to balance, it is increasingly important to educate a future set of citizens ready to take their place either within the UK or in other parts of an increasingly mobile world, where different cultures, faiths and languages sit side by side.

It would cover the transformative effects, irrespective of Brexit, of recent developments in technologies and their impact in particular on how young people grow up and on career opportunities and the world of work.

CONCLUSION

Our weekend conference may have little effect on what happens at a time of great uncertainty and confusion not just within the UK but internationally.

One of the ways out of that uncertainty and confusion has to relate to education. One of the outcomes of our time together therefore could be an agreed statement to our four countries' education ministers about measures they could take together to optimise the chances of our schools doing a better job. And that a pre-requisite for that to happen is for them to talk together and learn from each other both now and to take stock on progress in say five years' time.

---

[i] Most of the English legislation since 1988 has given powers to the Secretary of State who has to answer from time to time to the enquiries of House of Commons Select Committees. More recently 'arms-length' Quangos advising on the Curriculum have been discontinued.

[ii] *'The Guardian'* October 31st 2015

[iii] Stormont was suspended in 1971 favour of direct rule from London, two years after the 'Battle of the Bogside'

[iv] 'Tapestry' Master-class conference: Glasgow November 25th 2015

[v] 'British Values' were set out in a press release from the DFE for English schools (November 27th 2014) and followed up by OFSTED in school inspections. Among them was instilling among pupils a 'respect for *English* (sic) law'

[vi] 'Prevent' is a strategy designed to pre=empt terrorism by identifying those teachers think might be at risk. They and school governors are required to take training in Prevent awareness and this is checked at Ofsted inspections.

[vii] CBI/Pearson annual report' The Right Combination' July 2016

[viii] The growth of Multi-Academy Trusts has had the perverse effect of diminishing the autonomy of individual schools and the role of governing bodies who have become subservient to the Trust Board.

[ix] *'The Guardian'* August 24th 2016.

[x] There is a survey devised by Strathclyde and Warwick Universities which assesses physical and mental health at age 9 and 14 which could be used to highlight the need to promote the health of young people.

[xi] Wylie report to Welsh Minister for Education March 2016

[xii] A report from the Gatsby Foundation by Sir John Holman *'Good Career Guidance'* (2015)

[xiii] The work of Howard Gardner, in particular, among many others has suggested different sorts of intelligence and talent. .