



McKinney, S. J., Hall, S. T. and Lowden, K. (2017) Catholic Schools and attainment in Scotland. *Open House*, 269, pp. 14-15.

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Deposited on: 25 September 2017

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Catholic Schools and Attainment in Scotland

By

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In April 2017, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) Scotland, with the support of the Humanist Society Scotland, published a report entitled *Autonomy in the Right Place. School Governance Reform in Scotland*. This report is essentially a review of literature and a small-scale empirical study, which is reported in chapter five: Attainment and Governance Structures in Schools in Scotland. This study consists of a statistical analysis between school attainment and the effects of deprivation in secondary schools. The research reveals that ‘low income has a negative effect on overall attainment’ in Scotland and that there is no difference between denominational schools and non-denominational schools in promoting attainment for children and young people from backgrounds of poverty and deprivation. These findings received a short burst of media attention and elicited critical responses from academics and from representatives of the Catholic Church. This article aims to provide an examination of this research and poses some deeper questions about the aims and purpose of Catholic school education.

In all fairness, the authors of this report rightly point out that there are limitations in their empirical research. The research employs limited data on measures of attainment, uses one particular measure of deprivation and lacks longitudinal scope. The measurement of attainment is restricted to achieving literacy and numeracy at SCQF level 5 and the attainment of three or more Highers for the years 2014-2016. A more nuanced approach would be to expand the measurement at level 5 to incorporate the qualifications required for some Further Education courses and differentiate the Highers required for different types of University courses, including the more prestigious courses. The use of free meal registration is a frequently used measure of poverty and deprivation for pupils in research. This measurement allows the researchers to identify individual children who are from backgrounds of poverty and deprivation. Another measurement that is used by local authorities is the Government produced Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. This is slightly more problematic because it identifies deprived areas, not individuals. A child or young person may be from a deprived data zone but not be deprived. Conversely, a child or young person may be from a non-deprived zone but be deprived. A combination of these two measurements would provide a more accurate picture of the poverty experienced by young people. Further it is unclear if the researchers have used free school meal registration from across the years 2014-2016 or have simply used the figures for 2016. One of the major limitations is that the research in the report, or at least the figures for attainment, is restricted to results in 2014-2016. A more longitudinal survey would be more conclusive as this would provide greater accuracy over a longer period of time.

Even within the limitations of the research, the findings of the research are not surprising. At best, it can be stated that this report simply confirms the findings of recent research. The finding that low income has an impact on attainment in school has been attested in a number of research projects in Scotland in recent years. The second finding that there is no real difference between attainment in denominational

and non-denominational schools, once levels of deprivation have been factored in, is also not surprising. Again, recent research has demonstrated that this is the case in certain parts of the country where there is a high concentration of Catholic secondary schools. Most tellingly, this research fails to acknowledge that a more sophisticated approach would have investigated both attainment and achievement. This would then examine the impact of low income on all initial positive school leaver destinations: Higher Education; Further Education; Employment and Training. Recent research has demonstrated that there is no necessary connection between low income and an initial positive school leaver destination in both denominational and non-denominational schools.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these unsurprising and far from novel findings is that they received so much media coverage. There have been claims that the support of the Humanist Society Scotland may have influenced the research, claims that have been refuted strenuously by the IPPR. This does raise interesting questions about the position and 'effectiveness' of Catholic schools in Scotland. Catholic schools have full access to all government and local authority educational support in the contemporary Scottish educational system. While retaining a religious distinctiveness, they share in all major curricular initiatives and engage with the range of appropriate Scottish qualifications. They have also fully engaged with some of the very recent Scottish Government initiatives that have aimed to promote attainment in schools: the Scottish Improvement Partnership Programme, the Attainment Challenge and the recent Pupil Equity Fund (PEF). The Attainment Challenge is subject to increased scrutiny in the wake of the disappointing PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores in 2015 that indicated declining levels of literacy and numeracy in Scottish schools. Catholic schools also participate in initiatives to improve and enhance initial school leaver destinations. While the focus on attainment and achievement in all Scottish schools is encouraging and very supportive of the children and young people, the effectiveness of all schools, including Catholic schools cannot be reduced to measurements of attainment and achievement. There are other purposes to schooling that cannot be so easily measured for example, schooling aims to support young people in fulfilling their potential and promotes cultural capital, health and well-being (including mental health), and spirituality. Catholic schools are rooted within a Christ centred approach to schooling and to formation of the person within a Christian vision of life. This means that Christian values are at the heart of the Catholic school.

The IPPR research is limited and, even when the findings are tentatively accepted, they are neither new nor surprising. It is unhelpful to reduce the discussion about the effectiveness of school education to attainment (and even achievement) and to draw simplistic comparisons between Catholic schools and non-denominational schools. The aims and purposes of schools are complex and multi-faceted and Catholic schools have additional dimensions in their aims and operation. The aims of school education for all children and young people in Scotland are that they have equal opportunities to a nurturing school environment and equal access to high quality learning and teaching. It is not an issue of Catholic schools being 'better' or having higher levels of attainment or achievement, or even enhanced cultural capital or health and well-being. It is an issue of Catholic schools being distinctive in being Christ-centred faith communities that share a Christian vision of what it is to be human and also being

committed to higher attainment, more sustained school leaver destinations and a better quality of life for all young people in the future.

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A full list of references is available on request.

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