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Of Myths and Monitoring: learner-centred education as a political project in Scotland

Alan Britton, Michele Schweisfurth and Bonnie Slade

University of Glasgow

Prevalent constructions of best practice at the global level include learner-centred education as an emancipatory and holistic approach across the life course. However, competing discourses of standardisation and preparation for the workforce are also at play. As a small state constructing an image and role for itself on a global stage, Scotland draws aspirationally on learner-centredness in its current *Curriculum for Excellence* governing education in schools, and in the *Statement of Ambition* for Adult Education, aligning it with apparently indigenous ideas of good practice in education while distancing it from prevalent patterns in neighbouring England. However, in operationalising these, competing agendas and versions of best practice interrupt these policy narratives and prove difficult to resist. Using a combination of document analysis, observations of consultation processes, and interviews with policy actors, this article explores these tensions in policy content and process.

Introduction

Under the Scotland Act of 1998, Education and Training are devolved matters under the control of Scottish rather than UK government. Under devolution, education in Scotland has diverged from England in a range of ways, driven in part by indigenous histories and aspirations. The direction of travel in curriculum documents has been towards more learner-centred and holistic approaches, in both school and adult education. A policy process based on wide consultation and consensus has underpinned this. Both the contents and processes of these policies have resonance with Scottish indigenous traditions, or, perhaps, 'myths'. However, neither the local and global good practice foundations of the documents, nor the consensus-building processes that have underpinned them, have prevented other versions of what it means to have a good and improving system from impacting on the operationalising of the learner-centred agenda.

We argue in this article that the policy discourses surrounding education in Scotland are as much an indication of how the country sees itself and wants to be seen as they are about evidenced 'best practice'. These national 'myths' resonate with wider global narratives surrounding learner-centred education. Due to its scale and political positioning, Scotland also makes an interesting case study of how global norms of educational good practice embed themselves in a small state with a consultative approach to policymaking. Scotland's aspirational national identity is reflected in the educational and social goals it sets for itself and the values and narratives that underpin these, and need to be seen in the context of ongoing aspirations to full statehood by a significant minority of the population and by its governing political party (the Scottish National Party). The case of Scotland also foregrounds the competing discourses of good practice and the outcomes promised by it, including the potential tensions between learner emancipation and the standards agenda, and the demands of monitoring regimes in a world of 'policy by numbers' (Grek 2009). The role of transnational actors such as the OECD and UNESCO within the policy context is also significant. All of these have implications for other contexts where national versions of good practice come up against

global discourses, in all their contradictions, especially where the idealised vision of education reinforces aspects of national identity. Significantly, in relation to learner-centredness, the way these global-local tensions play out is in stark contrast to the usual story of external imposition and local implementation ‘failure’.

The article is based on analysis of two key documents – the *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive Education Department 2004) and *Adult Learning in Scotland: Statement of Ambition* (Scottish Government 2014) - interviews (80) with policy and ground-level stakeholders from previous (unpublished) studies, and observations of consultation processes. It draws on existing and ongoing research by the authors on relevant Scottish policies (eg, Britton 2013, 2016) and international research on learner-centred education (Schweisfurth 2011, 2013) as well as analyses of how adult education programmes elsewhere struggle to achieve stated emancipatory aims (Slade 2011). In linking global and national levels, exploring histories as well as the contemporary context, and using both school-level and adult education, it includes horizontal, vertical and transversal axes to build the case (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017). While exploring the content of these documents and the understandings of best practice behind them, we are also concerned with the processes of their development and approval. We did not gather evidence on actual practice in school and adult learning contexts—our concern is with an analysis of the rhetoric and the policy process.

The article begins with a review of key concepts that frame the analysis: learner-centred education (LCE); policy borrowing in globalised contexts; and policy building in small states. The article then turns to the Scottish context and its educational and policy-making traditions, as well as specifics of the two key documents. The subsequent analysis examines the competing imperatives that have conflicted their operationalisation and troubled the preferred, consensual and ostensibly national notions of best practice.

Learner-centred education as best practice

Learner-centred education (LCE) has a long tradition among international agencies, national governments, schools and classrooms, and adult learning environments. While often thought of as a modern construct, learner-centred ideals date back (at least) to Socrates (Brandes and Ginnis 1996), working in various strands through child-centred ideals and movements (eg Plowden 1967), progressivism (eg Dewey 1916), and emancipatory conscientisation (Freire 1972). LCE’s influence at the discursive level has been exceptional. It is unlikely that an education system exists which has not been touched by its influence (Schweisfurth 2013).

Three broad narratives prevail that frame LCE as best practice, and help to drive the LCE agenda globally (Schweisfurth 2013). Firstly, based on constructivist principles and the notion of scaffolding (Vygotsky 1978), and supported by selected evidence from neuro-psychology (Ginnis 2012), learner-centred approaches are believed to be more effective in generating sustainable learning than teacher-centred pedagogy, which is perceived to discourage learner engagement in all senses of the word. Secondly, the ‘emancipatory narrative’ is based on a set of arguments about the liberating potential of LCE (Freire 1972) and its role in inculcating skills and attitudes associated with democratic citizenship (Dewey 1916). Finally, learner-centredness is associated with the policy imperative for learners to acquire ‘21st Century Skills’ of research capability, independent and lifelong learning, and flexibility, in the context of new learning technologies and new modes of economic production. These narratives have been invoked in a wide range of national government

policy documents and expressed as basic principles by international organisations such as UNESCO, and in the Global South, they have been promoted through the vectors of international aid programmes.

However, despite all of these compelling narratives and global travel, LCE is not without its critics. There is wide evidence of implementation 'failure' in schools, especially in middle- and lower-income countries, blamed on a range of factors (Schweisfurth 2011): poor fit with local cultures which may, for example, construct adult-child relationships in an authoritarian mode; poor resourcing; lack of teacher preparation; unrealistic policy expectations; and high-stakes exam regimes which promote rote learning of prescribed knowledge. The term is slippery and in contexts where it is advocated, it has many manifestations and associated terms – active learning, project- or activity-based learning, child-friendly learning, for example - open a range of interpretations and allow teachers to call many things learner-centred that may or may not reap its supposed benefits. The fact that pedagogy is monitored rarely and with less accountability compared to testing of learning outcomes allows such misunderstandings to prevail.

Within this widely-evidenced story of implementation 'failure', LCE is perceived to be a borrowed policy which is then unable to be sustained when imported into contexts not suitable, not ready, or not supportive. Equally, it is important to acknowledge some criticisms of the foundations of LCE, regardless of the challenges of its implementation. Critics have noted that despite its emancipatory aspirations, it can work against equity by disadvantaging learners who do not enter the learning space with the same resources and are denied the 'powerful knowledge' that they need for social mobility. The focus on skills over a prescribed knowledge canon also troubles those who argue that subject knowledge is necessary in order to use skills in a meaningful way (Young 2008 ; Rotherham and Willingham 2010). Recent scholarship calls into further question the effectiveness arguments by noting the particular pedagogical attributes of some high-performing countries, which go beyond the learner-centred – teacher-centred dichotomy (Komatsu and Rappelaye 2017). For the purposes of this analysis, what is significant is that in a very wide variety of contexts in both the Global North and the Global South, LCE has been more powerful as a discourse (or, as Harber and Davies (1997) describe it, a 'hooray term') than it has as a teaching and learning reality.

This generalisation about LCE's problematic implementation and foundations in schools is apparently less true in adult education, where internationally there has been considerable success with community development and adult learning programmes using Freireian principles (see for example ActionAid's REFLECT circles at <http://actionaid.org/australia/REFLECT-circles>, and Kirkwood et al 2011). This may be due to the fact that the power distance between teachers and adult learners is not determined by cultural attitudes to elders and children. The non-formal sector is also rarely governed by tight policy frameworks regarding curricula and pedagogy, thereby bypassing the challenges of the policy implementation process and relying more on facilitators at ground level who are ideologically committed to LCE's principles (Schweisfurth 2013). However, while there are many good examples of this type of adult pedagogy, and while international organisations such as UNESCO (2015) explicitly recommend learner-centred approaches for adults within their frameworks, these are difficult to enforce or measure. The recent introduction by the OECD of PIAAC as a standardised international test of achievement focuses on literacy and numeracy outcomes – outcomes which tell us little of how they were achieved. Within the literature on adult education a prevalent debate focuses on the increasingly labour market-oriented and competency-based approaches in the

contemporary context of neo-liberalism (eg Allman, 2001; Carpenter and Mojab 2011; Field 2015; Giroux 2012; Grace 2013). The success of programmes such as REFLECT and the prevalence of LCE rhetoric does not mirror the whole of the complex world of adult education policy and practice.

Policy borrowing and transnational influences in small states

In contemporary comparative education, the transnational flow of educational ideas and the borrowing of policy from one state to another have been the subjects of much conceptual and empirical study. Drivers for such policy movement include analyses by insiders and outsiders of what a state needs to improve its education system: what problems exist and why, and how to fix them, framed within wider global or local understandings of what an education system is trying to achieve (Phillips and Ochs 2004). States are more likely to borrow from countries they consider to be comparators and/countries whose image they aspire to be more like. In the current global policy context, a range of aspirations might shape this decision-making process. A comparator country's 'hegemonic image' (Schriewer 2012) may be favourable because of its economic achievements, or because its ideology is presented in a desirable way. Educationally, the influence of the OECD through its PISA programme is a major driver. A country's high and equitable PISA results are read as evidence of a strong education system, and the OECD's own widely-used advisory service reinforces this and is rooted in analysis of the combination of factors that generate laudable attainment distributed relatively evenly among the population. When enviable PISA results are accompanied by strong economic performance and an admired ideology, this constitutes a powerful constellation of attraction. Finland is an example. Not only does it have consistently high PISA scores that are relatively de-linked from students' socio-economic status; it has a successful economic record and its social democratic underpinnings have appeal for some nations (Takayama 2013).

In adult education, while the OECD's PIAAC has brought adult learning into the world of international assessments, this is less of a driver than the sometimes contradictory mixture of economic imperatives and ideological stances. UNESCO plays a key role, and sets the following standards on quality for member states in adult education:

Member states should foster an environment where quality adult learning and education is provided through measures such as ...developing appropriate content and modes of delivery, preferably using mother-tongue as the language of instruction, and adopting learner-centred pedagogy, supported by information, communication technology (ICT) and open educational resources...aligning the provision of adult learning and education, through contextualized and learner-centred culturally and linguistically appropriate programmes, with the needs of all stakeholders, including those of the labour market. (UNESCO 2015: 12)

This repeated use of the term 'learner centred' and emphasis on the differentiated needs of individual learners is noteworthy, as is its juxtaposition with the needs of the labour market, which may of course be contradictory to the needs and aspirations of the individual. Efforts to monitor and to make the impact of adult learning visible include the Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE), now in its third iteration (UNESCO 2016). The data for GRALE III is obtained through self-reporting by national organisations. Questions about quality address 'systematic information on ALE outcomes; providing pre-service education and training for educators, requiring educators to have initial qualifications, providing in-service education and training programmes for educators and conducting research an analysis on ALE' (p.11). There are no questions about

pedagogy, leaving perceptions about practice out of the comparative analysis. For the 2016 GRALE III report 139 out of 195 member states submitted reports; the UK was not one of them.

Arguably, small states have a particular relationship to policy borrowing and a particular position in relation to bilateral and international policy advice (Crossley et al 2017). With a population of 5.4 million (National Records of Scotland 2017), Scotland is not technically a small state by the most common definition, which specifies a sovereign state of less than 1.5 million (Commonwealth Secretariat). It is neither fully sovereign nor of that scale. However, it is *relatively* small compared to its only land bordering neighbour – England, population 54.8 million – and over questions of education, in the context of devolution it is sovereign. It also shares a number of characteristics with small states (Bray, Crossley and Packer 2011): individuals can have augmented importance; many key policy and practice actors know each other; practitioners are closer to policy than in a larger state; and people hold more than one professional role, demanding considerable polyvalence, further extending influence. Smaller states are also potentially more vulnerable to economic and other forces that act upon them from outside, given that they have fewer resources to be self-sustaining and protectionist. They may therefore find it particularly difficult to resist global movements, and their cultural identities may need to be reinforced more explicitly than in larger nations whose identities are more apparent and confident internally and on the global stage.

As such, smaller states may be inclined to define themselves by how they are different from their larger neighbours in order to set themselves apart and to help protect a sovereign identity. Canada's Prime Minister 1968-1979 and 1980-1984, the late Pierre Elliott Trudeau, likened living next to the United States of America as 'a mouse sleeping with an elephant' (CBC 1969, <http://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1797537698>). In the context of this constant pressure of influence, Canadians tend to be quick to define themselves by the ways in which they are different from their neighbours. Likewise, New Zealanders set themselves apart from Australians, as Scottish people often do in relation to their English neighbours.

As well as improving policy and practice, policy borrowing provides an opportunity to define a national identity by choosing comparator countries with care, a particular imperative for small states. Policy borrowing may be explicit if the country from which the policy is borrowed is one that the nation wishes to signal its admiration for. It may also be 'discursive' (Steiner-Khamsi 2014) if it is governed by an indigenous desire but the government wishes to signal something by referencing an admirable comparator. Equally, borrowing may be 'silent' (Waldow 2009) if policy actors wish to emphasise the independence of their decisions, or distance themselves from a powerful neighbour or the prevailing ideology there, or a colonial or neo-colonial history. Each of these may serve particular purposes for small states as they construct policy and at the same time, reinforce an identity.

The Scottish policy and educational context

To talk of a 'British' educational system would be to misunderstand the autonomy of Scottish education, which can be traced to its origins during the Reformation (for this historical perspective on Scottish education see for example Anderson 2008; Bell and Grant 1977; Humes 1986; Mackintosh 1962). Education is one of the key cultural pillars (alongside Church, Banking, and Sport) that have shaped and sustained Scottish identity despite periods of constitutional flux and subordination to the wider United Kingdom (Anderson, 2008). For some it represents the intellectual

heritage of the Scottish Enlightenment (Herman, 2001; Peters, 2003) and embodies the ideal of the “democratic intellect” (Davie 1961), supposedly promoting a pedagogical breadth and depth that is reflective of, and a driver of, egalitarian and meritocratic national instincts (Devine 1999). The ‘lad o’pairts’ is an historical image with contemporary resonance. He personifies this vision of meritocracy and the value of education: the poor boy from a rural area who through study and his own hard work and determination achieves upward mobility to a respectable profession.

The somewhat idealistic formulation of these intellectual traditions reinforces the quasi-mythological view of Scottish education that has come under more recent scrutiny (for example Chitty 2004; Ozga and Lingard 2007). Humes (1986) suggested there was a widespread ‘reluctance to face the truth about Scottish education’, and he also pointed to the notion of a shaping ‘myth’ (2008) as a key factor in cultivating ongoing collective attitudes towards Scottish education. In her study of a related policy (Teaching Scotland’s Future) using Actor Network Theory, Beck points to different functions of Scottish myths about its education system:

The ‘myth’ performs two very different functions in the policy process: it exists as a ‘mask’ that works to cover up the infelicities of the system by creating ‘simulacra of order’, but it should also be recognised as a form of ‘sustenance’ from which actors feed (Beck 2016: 23).

In other words, regardless of their empirical truth, these shared myths help to cover up unpalatable realities – elitism for example – while also strengthening the sense of community, shared purpose, and confidence in policy.

It is noteworthy that the fight to maintain a separate system has at times been intertwined with the wider political and constitutional backdrop, so that its initial survival was guaranteed through concessions secured within the Act of Union of 1707 which merged the Parliaments of Scotland with England and Wales, creating the United Kingdom. Some also argue that Davie’s ‘Democratic Intellect’ influenced a ‘revival of educational nationalism....this reinforced the view that there should be no attempt in Scotland to follow English patterns [of Education policy] where this was avoidable’ (Bell and Grant, 1977: 99). From this perspective education was at the same time a symbol of distinctiveness and a driver in itself of the impulses towards further autonomy. The separateness of the Scottish system was maintained throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Education in this period seems to fit into the wider pattern of semi- autonomous governance that led Kellas (1975) to identify the existence of a de facto Scottish ‘political system’ that existed apart from, yet connected to, the constitutional reality of Westminster-based governance.

Consensus policymaking has been described as being ‘in Scotland’s DNA’ (OECD 2015). While this reflects the values to which Scotland aspires, there is some debate over the nature of this consensus and how deeply it informs the education policymaking process. Humes presented what he himself described as the first ‘full frontal attack’ (1986: 6) on the ‘received wisdom’ that Scottish education was not only *different* but *superior* to English education (Humes, 1986: 5). He also presented a critique of Scottish educational institutions and policymaking that asserted that, contrary to popular beliefs around pluralism, the system was in fact highly centralised, and control was exercised through often hidden processes of patronage that tended to reward compliance. A small number of key institutions and actors (including civil servants, inspectors, curriculum developers and professional associations) tended to set the parameters of educational discourse, and controlled the review, development and conduct of policy in Scotland. More recent studies of the process (eg

Britton 2013, and Beck 2016) also raise questions about balances of power in decision-making, and how particular views come to prevail, despite many stakeholders sitting at the policymaking table.

Scale matters here, and has for a long time. Bell and Grant (1977, 92) suggested that:

...the smaller size of the country means that the leading figures at the centre have a far greater personal knowledge of individual Scottish authorities and schools and thus the consequence of even petty defiance can be all the greater.

McPherson and Raab used the term 'policy community' to describe the people and groups within government and other outside interests that are 'directly involved in the making and implementation of policy (1988 472). They recognised that the policy community could be viewed in a negative light as an indicator of a corporatist approach to policy, or more favourably as evidence of a diverse and pluralist approach to policymaking. Their concern was that the policy community in Scotland had tended to act in a self-reproducing cycle by incorporating only those whose values and attitudes were in accordance with the more powerful elements within the governing structures.

Policy discourses and policy processes in Curriculum for Excellence and the Statement of Ambition

The development of *A Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE), which began in the immediate post-devolutionary period, and was presented as the most significant educational reform in a generation, represents an ideal case study to explore the genealogy, the authenticity and the implementation prospects, of Scotland's stated commitment to learner centred education.

As noted above, CfE was a product of its times; it emerged during a period marked by the confluence of radical constitutional change in the UK (notably devolution) with new political and ideological directions (New Labour/Third Way; new public management), as well as emerging global drivers in education, including the growing influence of the OECD and PISA. The other significant backdrop was a discourse within Scotland around a 'new politics'; a new, more participative approach to policymaking (Paterson, 2000), that was in many respects a backlash against the Westminster model (Crick and Miller 1995). At its heart, CfE sought to refocus Scottish education towards an emphasis on the learner. The initial vision of CfE presented in the Review Group Report of 2004 (Scottish Executive Education Department 2004) explicitly placed the learner at the heart of education.

In the new curriculum, alongside four core values for Scottish education, Wisdom, Justice, Compassion and Integrity, borrowed wholesale from an inscription on the Mace of the new Scottish Parliament (Gillies 2006), the fundamental purpose of Scottish education was to enable all young people to become Successful Learners; Confident Individuals; Effective Contributors; and Responsible Citizens – the four 'Capacities' of young people (Scottish Executive 2004). These ambitions were to be supported by a number of curriculum design principles, including choice and enjoyment, which were very much aligned with the interests of the learner. The initial documentation stressed the need for teachers to be semi-autonomous professionals who would plan and implement learning and teaching in ways that supported the needs and the specific context of their students. They should be empowered to create learning opportunities that transcended traditional disciplinary boundaries, with a strong emphasis on the development of skills and values. This was accompanied by explicit references to learner-centred teaching methods, with the term 'active learning', for example, appearing 40 times in 'A Curriculum for Excellence: building the curriculum 2'. This bold learner centred vision was generally greeted with cautious support from

political and professional voices alike. However, the early lack of detail around how vision could be transformed into effective practice led to an extended period of stasis, delay and confusion. This policy vacuum was gradually occupied by other perspectives that sought to rein in the original, more open ended and transformative view of teacher agency. In its place there was a gradual re-assertion of elements of the *status quo* around the primacy of disciplines, and the need to retain a strong content-based framework for learning. One of the first of these such interventions was the creation of 8 'Subject areas' that emerged in the aftermath of the Curriculum Review. These subject areas were modelled very closely on what had come before, thus minimising the scope for more creative or radical approaches from the outset (Britton 2013). One respondent involved at the highest levels in the development of CfE suggested that these were developed in order not to "frighten the profession too much" (quoted in Britton 2013 p96), suggesting that teachers in the system were not professionally prepared for a less prescriptive model of curriculum development and enactment. Another respondent supported the principle of establishing the subject areas, but bemoaned the lack of coherence and consistency once Subject Groups were created to take forward the process of elaborating the detailed curriculum outcomes and experiences under the different headings:

Where is our guidance? What is our reference point? Where are the instructions? And what you then had was each of the subject groups came up with a different language (quoted in Britton 2013 97)

While practitioners were involved from the beginning and so its origins were grounded in practice, there was very limited early scoping of the documents, appraisal of global and national antecedents, formal piloting, or benchmarking or longitudinal study of the process or outcomes. A recent and highly influential OECD Report commissioned by the Scottish Government itself (OECD 2015) noted the paucity of any major evaluative research on such a critical policy initiative.

Priestley and Humes (2010) suggested that the original CfE vision, and subsequent developments, were notably *ahistorical*, in that they failed to acknowledge or learn from the canon of systematic curriculum thinking. With regard to the notions of policy learning (from the past) and policy transfer (from other systems), there is only very little evidence that this informed CfE developments (Britton 2013). Others have suggested that in relation to CfE:

Scottish policy-makers have been more concerned with establishing systems which respond to the traditions and expectations of the nation as with learning from the other jurisdictions (Hart and Tuck 2007 105).

A number of factors therefore appear to have converged that led to the process of confusion and policy dilution. While the initial template for CfE emerged from a relatively consensual process involving mainly like-minded individuals and from indigenous ideological foundations, this approach merely deferred the more controversial implications. Only when the process of professional engagement and consultation commenced in earnest did some dissent and resistance emerge. In particular, the practical and pedagogical implications around assessment and certification in the secondary school sector that lay dormant from the Review in 2004 were only very belatedly addressed, and were resolved in the main through a minimal change approach. One respondent noted familiar issues with LCE's implementation on the ground (quoted in Britton 2013: 87):

...there weren't enough educationalists around the table and everybody was allied to [a] more liberal vision of education away from the restrictions of qualifications, courses and

exams but nobody...said how do we make this a reality in an infrastructure that is subject based...

Another factor that emerged in the period after the publication of the Review Group Report was the intervention of a number of powerful actors in the policy community (including the Inspectorate, and the Teaching Professional Associations [*de facto* trade unions]). These interventions diverted the implementation strategy away from a learner-focussed approach with its emphasis on pedagogical process, towards the reassertion of the primacy of disciplines and content development, in the form of thousands of discipline-related Experiences and Outcomes. This was by requirement overseen by new governance and project management entities that were seen by some key stakeholders as deviating from the original mission:

...we kept on trying to impress upon initially the Executive and then the Government [from 2007] that you need to make sure this joins up, this is a holistic reform process, it is not something that could be narrowly project managed in the way that you set objectives and you focus narrowly on those objectives. It is very much part of a wider, cultural change it's going to embrace lots of other things, make sure things join up (quoted in Britton 2013: 94)

As CfE evolved, and to a degree, mutated, some of the internal contradictions and paradoxes became more apparent. The original vision favoured a flexible process-oriented curriculum over a content curriculum (Priestley and Humes 2010), and it sought to place the learner at the heart of education. However, the subsequent developments were primarily designed to provide teachers with detailed guidance to frame their teaching, and in the case of the secondary sector, to support teaching towards the national qualifications regime. Latterly, the original vision has come under further pressure, in the face of downward trends in Scotland's PISA scores in Literacy, Maths and Science. In the 2015 round of PISA testing, Scotland's performance in science and reading was significantly lower than in the previous test in 2012, although it remained stable in Maths (NFER 2016). One of the most sensitive political dimensions to the 2015 results was the fact that England was outperforming Scotland in Science, for the first time. The Scottish Government's response to these results was to suggest that the reforms they were in the course of embarking on would mitigate against any further decline. The apparent decline in performance has recently been attributed by Paterson (2018) at least in part to the 'child-centred philosophy' and 'constructivist' underpinning of CfE.

The political dimension to education, and the need to be seen to take action in the face of apparently declining performance, may yet represent the greatest challenge to the learner centred vision in the original CfE documentation. The Scottish Government's present overriding priority is to close the attainment gap between more affluent and less affluent school students, which they see as being addressed by, *inter alia*, a greater emphasis on data, as recommended by the 2015 OECD report, and the introduction of standardised testing. Both of these arguably – and very controversially – bring the Scottish system significantly closer into line with that of England. The government will also be at great pains to promote teaching activities that might directly improve future PISA performance. This appears to be an example of the 'epistemic nature of the OECD's policy influence (Lewis 2017: 527), wherein PISA acts at the supranational level to shape what is valued and prioritised at national or sub-national levels. A pressing and unanswered question is whether they see this agenda as incompatible with the learner centred vision upon which CfE was originally founded.

Such tensions are not new in the Scottish system; Humes noted (1986) for example that the *Primary Education Memorandum* of 1965 was widely regarded as an early indigenous endorsement of progressive and child-centred education. However, some others saw it as much less radical, and as envisaging 'education as an instrument for promoting the value system of a reified society' (McEnroe, cited in Humes 1986: 78). Perhaps the difference now is that these tensions no longer play out only *within* the system – they emerge from the transnational pressures exerted beyond the system as well, in the form of 'PISA Shock' (see e.g. Wiseman 2013). These new tensions and pressures, emerging from the globalisation of education (and the corresponding policy impulses towards homogenisation) can bear down heavily on indigenous traditions, myths and practices, leading to 'silent borrowing' and a more utilitarian view of the role of education. The pressures of external comparability can also lead to pressure on politicians to enact 'policy as spectacle' (Humes 2013), based around high profile interventions and policy announcements that may not be supported by sustained investment in the subsequent phase of enactment. This critique has been applied both to the CfE process, and to the Statement of Ambition for Adult Education.

In contrast to schooling, with respect to adult education 'much of [Scotland's] national educational narrative rests on beliefs about the quality of schools and universities. It is rare for vocational or adult learning to attract anything like the same attention' (Fields 2015: 15). While the implementation of CfE has been more structured and has a longer history than the *Statement of Ambition*, allowing for a more developed analysis of the relationship between discourse and implementation, Scotland is at a critical juncture with respect to making the case for moving the SFA into policy. Adult learning and education has been a contested issue in Scotland for decades. In Scotland, a major turning point in awareness of the importance of adult learning was the *Report of the Committee on Adult Education in Scotland* (the 'Alexander Report') in 1975, which outlined four purposes of adult education: 'the reaffirmation of individuality the effective use of the resources of society ...to foster the pluralist society ... education for change itself' (Scottish Education Department, 2002:48-49). While the report did not use the phrase 'learner-centred' it did outline a description of learner centred practice as fundamental to adult education. For example:

...the success of all education depend(s) on the response of individual minds, but...individual minds could benefit from collaboration with others and from developing a problem-solving approach to shared situations (p. VI).

There is now sufficient evidence to show that adults will be more highly motivated to learn if emphasis is placed on the applied rather than on the theoretical, if content is related to the performance of everyday tasks and obligations and if the methods used take into account their accumulated experience of life. Any statement of the aims of adult education such as we have just completed will be of little avail unless adults can be encouraged to pursue them. (p56)

The Alexander Report had an impact on the conceptualisation of the relationship between community development, youth work and adult education. Field (2015) argues that it 'opened up new spaces for adult educators to debate the nature and purpose of their role (p. 18). It is the Carnegie Report, written two years later in 1977, however, that can be seen as a direct ancestor of the 2014 Statement of Ambition:

We consider the concept of community education to be consistent with current international thinking about education as a whole, as represented for example by the

phrases “education permanente”, “recurrent education”, and continuing education”. It reflects a view of education as a process (a) which is life-long (b) in which the participants should be actively and influentially involved and the traditional stress on teaching outweighed by the emphasis put on learning; and (c) in which the needs of participants rather than academic subject divisions or administrative and institutional arrangements should determine the nature and timing of provision.’ (cited in Community Learning Scotland 2002: 60)

The Carnegie Report acknowledges that these key elements of adult education – lifelong, learner-centred and lifewide education - were consistent with international thinking at the time.

Despite decades of discussion and numerous key reports on the issues there is currently no formal policy on adult learning in Scotland. There are formal policies on Community Learning and Development, ESOL, Digital Learning and Teaching, Adult Literacies, Youth Work, but not on adult learning and education in the round. Energy and effort have been given to fill this policy gap. In March 2013 community consultations were started by Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning Mike Russell on the development of a formalised treatise on adult learning. In this small state setting, it is noteworthy that Mike Russell at this time in his role as Cabinet Secretary presided over both school and adult education: an example of the polyvalence of actors and of the influence of individuals. The emerging themes and emphases of the Adult Learning document echo the learner-centred basis of CfE. This is no accident. According to Russell in the Ministerial foreword in the Statement of Ambition:

... at the heart of our ambition is the principle that everyone in Scotland has the right to access high quality learning to meet their needs and aspirations – throughout their lives. For children and young people this is enshrined in Curriculum for Excellence. High quality learning opportunities also underpin our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people, as set out in the recently published National Youth Work Strategy. Adult Learning can help develop the person, the family their community and society generally. (Scottish Government 2014: 2)

Just as the content of the document plays to Scotland’s preferred vision of itself, so too did the process of its building. As part of an extensive consultation process, over 115 participants working in adult learning and education from Local Councils, Colleges, Community Groups, Government and Universities were brought together to give their views on the issues. Following on from the conference was the formation of a National Strategic Forum on Adult Learning chaired by the Cabinet Secretary. Over the next year the Strategic Forum produced a draft Statement of Ambition; feedback was gathered from learners and practitioners at two events in early 2014. Revisions were made and the Statement of Ambition was officially launched on 21 May 2014. The SoA references 31 policies that are interwoven in the context of adult learning; despite the strong resonance with global discourses, 26 of these are Scottish, reflecting a desire to emphasise its indigenous roots.

This participatory approach to decision-making certainly aligns with the generalisations noted above regarding the Scottish context. Key organisations were all represented; working groups extended this participation, and wide public consultation accompanied the process. From accounts of members of the National Strategic Forum on Adult Learning who were involved in the development of the Statement of Ambition the focus on ‘lifelong, lifewide and learner-centered’ emerged from the ground up, yet this articulation bears much resemblance to the Scottish Carnegie Report (1977) quoted above. The Statement was developed through intensive community consultation at events

in Scotland, with two major consultations that took place at Newbattle Abbey College. Since this time the National Strategic Adult Learning Forum, and four associated working groups (learner voice, family learning, access and participation, and professional learning) have been active in developing specific strategies to implement effective adult learning across Scotland consistent with the values and aspirations of the Statement of Ambition. Notably, they have been doing this work without government funding.

Beyond these stated aspirations and discourses, a rather different vision of adult education is at play, which is much more consistently resourced, framed more tightly in policy, and more subject to monitoring. Skills and employment-oriented policies such as *Developing the Young Workforce - Scotland's Youth Employment Strategy* (2014) and *Skills for Scotland: Accelerating the Recovery and Increasing Sustainable Economic Growth* (2010) are in operation in the same context. Funding is more widely available to learners interested in this part of the post-compulsory sector, but under certain conditions:

...courses are selected and monitored according to the positive outcomes they can offer to the learner and their career prospects. Individual Training Accounts aim to improve work-related skills and qualifications. They align to the training definitions set out by the Scottish Government....All ITA courses must be in one of the curriculum areas aligned to the Scottish Government's Labour Market Strategy which includes: Adult Literacy and Numeracy Tuition, Agriculture, Business, Construction, Early Years and Childcare, Fitness, Health and Beauty, Health and Safety, Hospitality, IT, Language, Security, Social Care and Transport.
(<https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/our-products/sds-individual-training-accounts/>)

As well as attracting and offering relatively generous funding, the outcomes of such programmes use indicators such as 'positive destinations' – meaning sustainable employment or further education and training – to gauge the success of the education (Lowden, Valiente and Capsada-Munsech 2016). Process indicators of learner-centredness are decidedly absent, and the prescribed list of positive destinations may bear little relation to the particular needs and desires of individual learners. It is also noteworthy that the 'Education and Lifelong Learning' Secretariat is now known as 'Education and Skills'.

Conclusions

Nations may reference particular visions of good pedagogy and curriculum in their policy documents for a range of reasons. One may be evidence-based policy. However, thinking of policy as discourse or even 'policy as spectacle' opens up a set of political possibilities. Learner-centredness, given its links with modernity and with emancipation, can be a useful national signal. A developing country might use it to highlight its modern aspirations. A fledgling democracy might use it to proclaim its democratic ambitions. A small state might use it to reference particular images of itself to itself and on the world stage, and to differentiate it from its larger near neighbour.

It is evident from the discussion above that learner-centredness is, at least discursively, a driving notion of good practice in the Scottish context, with main school and adult learning documents referencing it both implicitly and explicitly. This reflects one set of global patterns, although the precise vectors of influence are not clear, if they exist: If there is borrowing it is silent. The prevailing myths of Scottish education place LCE as an approach reflective of indigenous preferences, and the wide consultations generated documents which embrace this vision of Scottish education at both levels while also reflecting its democratic ideals in the process.

The collaborative elements in the process of CfE around the National Debate and the Review Group helped to shape a broad, learner-centred vision of education that appeared to be a fair representation of the views of the educational policy community and the teaching profession alike. However, again without direct reference to external forces, the relatively narrower application of participative development evident in the mediation around subject areas and the creation of the Experiences and Outcomes then somewhat undermined the initial vision. The process seemed to be ill-equipped to deal with the inevitable tensions and conflict that emerged as CfE moved from the abstract to the concrete. Moreover, the desire to retain consensus only led in the end to the postponement of conflict, and the dilution of the original vision.

These processes of development are particularly Scottish in some ways but also reflect patterns evident in other small states. Particular individuals in this small state have very large voices. The then Cabinet Secretary of State for Education and Lifelong Learning (in Scotland unusually covered both compulsory and post-compulsory education; Mike Russell's commitment to coherence between these was a major factor in the direction of the development of the SoA. The emphasis on the indigenous is itself a reflection of the Scottish desire to be independent in its decision making – particularly independent from influences of a larger and more powerful neighbour. The capacity to involve such a large number of stakeholders not only reflects the Scotland's 'consensus' DNA; it is also made possible by the relative ease with which key players can be brought together with most relevant organisations given representation and a physical space at the policy table. However, not unlike many other small states, while the appearance of consensus is important for peaceful co-existence in relative proximity, it may mask differences of opinion which may later surface.

Beyond the development phase, as we see with both the Curriculum for Excellence and the Statement of Ambition for Adult Education, it is harder to sustain the purity of the learner-centred line as competing discourses emerge from outside the cosy world of consensus policy making. Some of these are driven by external actors (such as the OECD) and some by neoliberal hegemonies in a context of global competitiveness and resource constraint: a rather different set of global narratives from those positing LCE as 'best practice'. As in other settings, LCE may be presented in terms of processes and emancipatory outcomes, but globally, and increasingly in Scotland, nationally, the outcomes that matter are those more readily quantified and compared, and economic competitiveness and the associated skills are of primary concern. In a small, aspirational state like Scotland these influences are not happily acknowledged and any borrowing is likely to be silent – especially if it brings Scotland into closer alignment with England.

While there are noteworthy broad similarities between the ways that the CfE and the SoA were formulated, and the way that LCE is embedded in them, there are of course differences which reflect their very different target groups and statuses. The compulsory school sector is more centralised, uniform, and focused in purpose than adult education, which is more fragmented and where widely different motivations by learners for voluntary participation are at stake. Compulsory schooling also attracts far more public investment in Scotland, as elsewhere. Global comparison of adult learning is in its infancy and is based on a combination of self-reporting general national overviews, and tests of adult basic skills such as found in PIAAC. At least so far, these have considerably less 'bite' than PISA, for example, while employability outcomes are monitored more closely. While the SoA aspires to policy status it is still aspirational; whether what emerges as policy bears the same hallmarks of LCE remains to be seen.

The political nature of LCE's place in education policy in Scotland and its resonance with Scottish 'myths' does not mean that individuals and groups are not committed ideologically to its precepts. Many are. However, these are under considerable pressure. The learner centred approach to education tends to require a longer timescale for impact to be evident, and indeed some of the benefits may remain intangible – such as the four capacities in CfE. If these remain the fundamental purpose of education at all phases in Scotland, they require some patience and no small degree of political courage. Politicians and professionals alike would need to 'hold their nerve'. The question is whether the commitment to learner-centredness, in its alignment with Scotland's aspirational self, can compete with the wider standards and economic competitiveness agendas.

The case of Scotland is an excellent example of a range of phenomena of international interest: how interpretations of 'best practice' are aligned for political purposes with prevailing national myths; how national scale affects the policy process, policy borrowing and international influence; and how, despite their differences, both school and adult learning reflect these over time. This analysis also provides another kind of evidence in the debates around the specific example of learner-centred education: even where it is presented as indigenous and in harmony with the aspirations of most key stakeholders, it remains subject to powerful competing discourses, modes of monitoring, and visions of 'best practice'.

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