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Stephen J. McKinney, Angela Jaap,  
Stephen Day and Steph Thomson

**Celebrating 50 Years of SERA**  
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## Introduction

Stephen J McKinney [Stephen.mckinney@glasgow.ac](mailto:Stephen.mckinney@glasgow.ac).

Angela Jaap [Angela.jaap@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Angela.jaap@glasgow.ac.uk)

Stephen Day [stephen.day@uws.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.day@uws.ac.uk)

Steph Thomson [stephanie.thomson@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:stephanie.thomson@abdn.ac.uk)

The Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) reaches a significant milestone in 2024, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of SERA. This is a cause for celebration and a chance to review the past, present and future of SERA. There are plans to mark this anniversary with a series of events throughout the year. Our annual conference, to be held in November in Dundee University, will be the site for reflection, discussion and ideas about future trajectories. The Executive of SERA also decided to prepare two special editions of the in-house and open access journal, *Researching Education Bulletin*. We invited all the SERA networks to contribute a short article on the work of their network. There are now ten networks that provide opportunities for more focussed discussion on special areas of interest in research in education. In keeping with the outward looking aspect of SERA, the networks chosen area of interest must have a strong international dimension and not be limited to local interests. The networks offer face-to-face or online events throughout the year and have developed a strong presence at the annual conference. There have been some recent initiatives where networks have started to collaborate in joint events. Changes in leadership of some of the networks has brought some new ideas and new directions. We take this opportunity to thank the leaders of the networks for their time and commitment. Their leadership is essential for the continued progress of SERA and its engagement with the interface between educational research and the wider educational community.

We also invited our key stakeholders and working partners to deliver a short article on their work in Scottish education. It is with enormous gratitude that we acknowledge the generous response from our external colleagues. In this special Spring edition of *Researching Education Bulletin*, we present the first set of articles; the remaining articles will be presented in an Autumn special edition. This first set of articles is composed of contributions from four of the ten SERA networks: ***Digital Literacy; Inclusion; Leadership and Poverty and Education***. The remaining articles are from Education Scotland, Scottish Higher Education Developers (SHED), Scottish Universities Inclusion Group (SUIG), College Development Network (CDN) and the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS). We hope you enjoy these fascinating and insightful articles.

Anne Keenan of the Educational Institute of Scotland has contributed a thought-provoking article on the ways forward to support teachers in Scottish classrooms. She adopts a sentence from the United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Panel on the Teaching Profession: 'Teachers require time, tools and trust to innovate'. This sentence is used to frame her discussion. Drawing from teacher voices, she cites their frustration with the prevalence of managerialism and top-down accountability. These are stifling the ambitions to generate an

Empowered school system. Greater trust of teachers would allow them scope to exercise teacher agency. This means listening to the teacher voice at all levels of Scottish education, including ‘at the heart of governance arrangements of national bodies’. Adopting this way forward would facilitate effective support for teachers – support that is ‘relevant, timely and responsive to teachers’ needs’. Excessive workloads often mean that teachers do not have enough time to further their own professional learning. Keenan argues that a top-down dissemination of research can run counter to the increasing desire among teachers for practitioner enquiry and action research. There are anxieties about the ‘tools’, the resources available to teachers and the long-term strategies that can help to address issues such as class sizes, contact time and specialist ASN support.

Callum MacFarlane and Jacqui Ward are two attainment advisors in Education Scotland. They argue that the emphasis on collaboration and working in partnership lies at the heart of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) and this is evident across the operational guidance for all SAC funding streams. They probe the meaning of partnership and the ways in which partnerships have developed and identify some features of effective partnership working. These are: having a shared sense of purpose, aims and objectives; resources provided for partnership working; clarify roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability at operational and strategic levels and different professional approaches and expertise are valued. While there is evidence of successful partnerships with schools and authorities, the partnership links between the Scottish Attainment Challenge and research could be stronger and would be of mutual benefit. This is a very helpful insight and one that can be pursued with individual researchers and the SERA Poverty and Education Network.

Di Cantali of the Scottish Universities Inclusion Group (SUIG) has contributed an article on the importance of inclusion in teacher education practice. She tracks the contemporary history of the legislation and the understanding of inclusion evolving from a medical model to a more expansive understanding of inclusion. She explains this as a move from a medical model to a social model. Further, inclusion must be considered within the context of the tripartite model of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. Inclusion is embedded in Scottish education, and it is also embedded in teacher education in the Professional Standards for Teachers. She argues that it would be, ‘impossible to be working within the required standard for a teacher’s career stage without being an inclusive learner’. SUIG has undertaken a mapping process to identify where inclusive pedagogy and practice underpin initial teacher education programmes, and this article provides a very helpful example of how inclusion can be mapped onto a sample year of a four-year undergraduate teaching degree course.

Tom Cunningham and Catriona Cunningham contribute an article on the Scottish Higher Education Developers (SHED). They explain that SHED is concerned with educational development and that educational developers in HE, aim to support staff in a number of ways including enhancing teaching practice, guiding, ‘colleagues in achieving professional recognition for their teaching and/or support for student learning,’ and leading enhancement projects. SHED provides support by sharing best practice from educational developers in Scotland and beyond. There is an online reading group where research papers are discussed.

SHED also provides a forum for educational developers to share their research and organises an annual writing retreat. Two recent examples of the work of educational developers highlight the responsiveness to new challenges. First, educational developers provided guidance and assistance to staff as they moved to online and blended teaching during the period of the pandemic. Second, educational developers have been invited to support institutions as they respond to the challenges posed by generative artificial intelligence.

Paula Christie provides an overview of the *Step Forward* programme introduced by the College Development Network (CDN). This is a programme designed to support action research and build capacity and confidence in research activities. The researchers are developed in the processes of research in the *Step Forward* programme. This promotion of research in the College sector is designed to empower college practitioners to engage in local small-scale action research in their own context, and this is within a challenging time of constrained resources. This action research can influence thinking and practice in the sector. There are opportunities to publish the findings of research in the CAIRN journal. This is a practitioner-orientated publication that is hosted by CDN that targets those who teach and research in the sector. The *Step Forward* programme and CAIRN journal demonstrate the opportunities for college sector staff to undertake research and disseminate their findings.

Stavros A. Nikou, Gabriella Rodolico, Lavinia Hirsu and Celia Antoniou represent the SERA Digital Education Network, one of the more recently established networks. In their article, they discuss immersive technologies and Generative AI in education. They examine Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), Extended Reality (ER) and Artificial Intelligence (AI). While these all offer exciting opportunities for the future of education, they do caution that they will also require digital competency and technical infrastructure. For example, teachers who are competent in AR (creating and managing AR resources) are more likely to create meaningful immersive learning experiences. Similarly, research points to the educational benefits of using VR in the classroom, but this requires the acquisition of some level of expertise. They propose that the use of AI could significantly change how we approach teaching, learning, evaluating and engaging with knowledge. ChatGPT has the potential to provide significant support to academic writing, though it does raise issues about the authorship and integrity of academic writing. The SERA Digital Education Network aims to raise awareness of the benefits of immersive technologies, AI and other digital technologies, and the need to develop knowledge and expertise.

Julie Harvie, Zoè Robertson and Kevin Brack have written an article on behalf of the Leadership in Scottish Education Network (LiSEN). They report on a research project that sought to understand the impact of the *Into Headship Programme* in preparing teachers for the ‘multi-faceted’ role of Headteacher. In particular, the aim was to identify the influence and impact of *Into Headship* on the agency of the participants to lead strategic change in their schools. They used the, ‘choral triad of agency,’ composed of the three dimensions of iterative, practical-evaluative and projective, to guide the interview questions and as an analytical tool. Drawing from participants from three Scottish universities they collated quantitative and qualitative data. While the participants felt that they had become more

critically informed through the programme, they faced structural and bureaucratic barriers in their working contexts. However, an enhanced sense of agency meant that the Headteachers were empowered to be less accommodating of, 'what comes from above,' and more confident in engaging with policy and applying a more critical stance to policy developments.

The paper by Stephen McKinney et. al., explores *The Effects of Poverty on School Education*, providing an overview of various projects from colleagues across the SERA Poverty and Education Network. Since its inception in 2014, the Poverty and Education Network has made a substantial contribution to the educational research landscape in Scotland. Many Network members are sector-leading experts, providing support and advice to the Scottish Government, its Learning Directorate and Education Scotland. Similarly, the Network has attracted the media's attention with several articles in the Times Educational Supplement for Scotland over the last decade. The Network's contribution to this anniversary edition is structured into three sections: pre-, during and post the Covid 19 pandemic. Across the three sections are overviews of work on food banks, digital poverty, and school uniforms, all of which seriously impact how children access school education. Perhaps the most powerful and concerning message arising from this paper is the increase in hidden poverty. This poverty is less well-known and not in plain sight but can have a powerful impact on the educational experiences of children, young people, and families.

The next contribution is from Lisa McAuliffe, Donna Dey and Stella Mouroutsou from the SERA Inclusive Education Network. Established just before the pandemic, the Inclusive Education Network has managed to attract a large and broad membership from across all areas in Scottish education. Their focus on research-informed and research-led practice ensures that the Network remains current and cutting edge. This paper reviews a variety of activities and does so by framing another significant milestone: the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Salamanca Statement. Deemed a, 'watershed moment,' for inclusive education worldwide, the authors share the critical developments in inclusive education and practice in Scotland since this time by providing a robust overview of the various actors and agencies within and across the educational sectors in the country. Acknowledgement is made of the shifts in the policy landscape from the *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act* (2000), through to commitments in policies and initiatives such as GIRFEC in the late 00s. Likewise, the paper acknowledges the wider practice changes at school-level and within Initial Teacher Education. but resounding calls for investment and the need for partnerships to ensure these developments will continue for years to come.

**‘Teachers require time, tools and trust to innovate’.**  
**Anne Keenan, Educational Institute of Scotland**

Eight simple words. And yet for teachers across Scotland, they offer a beacon of hope; a recognition of their professionalism; of the barriers they face; and of the action which is so urgently needed to support them in delivering quality education for children and young people. This quote, taken from the recent United Nations Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on the Teaching Profession (UN, 2024), succinctly captures the importance of teachers being given time to engage in, and reflect on professional learning and research; of having the resources to turn new ideas and innovation into practice; and crucially, of being valued as trusted professionals to deliver positive results for learners. But what would this look like in Scotland?

***Trust***

The last four years have seen Scottish Education not only respond to the pandemic but also cope with the uncertainty and time demands associated with a programme of reform. Teachers have engaged in endless consultations, taking the time, despite their excessive workloads, to make their voices heard. They have done so because they care about the outcomes, for themselves, for the young children and people they teach, and for society as a whole. And they have been clear. If change is to be effective, they need to be trusted as professionals.

They have cited managerialism and top-down accountability approaches as stifling professional autonomy, generating needless bureaucracy and adding to stress and anxiety (Scottish Education Journal, 2022; EIS, 2023a). They have called for changes to collegiate meetings and collaborative events which, instead of focusing on pedagogical discussion, have concentrated on quality assurance and scrutiny initiatives, in which teachers see little value and which actively undermine professional judgement. The take-away from this is that if we want to have an Empowered School system, then we need to truly trust our teachers.

Empowerment has been a key feature of our education system since 2019, but the planned joint work between the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and the profession to embed this in practice and deliver the resultant cultural change was halted by the pandemic and has never been resumed with the same sense of purpose. Yet, the importance of teachers having greater prominence in governance arrangements across national education bodies has been a consistent feature of the recommendations which have emerged from the range of Education Reform reports published in the last four years, and most recently in the International Council of Education Advisers (ICEA) Third Report (2023). In reviewing the infrastructure and governance of Scottish education, ICEA recommends that greater prominence is given to education professionals in decision-making processes, with a clear focus on teachers taking the lead locally to work within and across schools in developing innovative teaching and learning. Pointing to the importance of addressing the global crisis of recruitment, retention and motivation of the teaching profession also referenced in the UN report, ICEA highlights the need to increase:



‘the intrinsic satisfactions of teaching through greater opportunities to be involved in school-level innovation; more experience of being autonomous professionals working collaboratively together on improvement and innovation; and moving away from top-down leadership to greater teacher leadership within and across schools; and providing appropriate pathways for career progression’. (ICEA, 2023: online)

They recognise that teacher agency goes hand in hand with quality education and is underpinned by the need to grow professionally, both individually and as part of a community of learning professionals, as rooted in the suite of GTCS Professional Standards (GTCS, 2021). The ICEA (2023) recommendation that Scottish Government, national agencies and Local Authorities strengthen approaches, ‘to professional learning as an integral part of the move towards greater collective agency,’ will, therefore, resonate with teachers across Scotland. If translated into practice through Education Reform, the EIS would expect to see teachers at the heart of governance arrangements of national bodies, with teacher voice influencing their role and functions and determining priorities. Only by truly listening to the profession will support - whether that is in the form of professional learning or research – be relevant, timely and responsive to teachers’ needs (Scottish Education Journal, 2022; EIS 2023b).

### *Time*

Whilst research and international best practice will support Scotland to continue to innovate within education, it will only empower the profession if sufficient time is devoted to the dissemination of this research and practice through quality professional learning; and through facilitating teachers to share practice and engage in research themselves, whether as individuals or as part of collaborative inquiry. Professional learning and research play a central role in shaping teacher professionalism, in building capacity, confidence and expertise, and in encouraging a sense of agency which allows teachers to lead learning in their classrooms.

Yet, we know that time to devote to learning, in whatever form, is problematic. Teachers report the challenges they face in being released to participate in events and the dearth of time devoted to facilitate reflection and collegiate dialogue to embed learning effectively. Teachers are struggling with excessive workload and striving to undertake vital professional learning in their own time, to support the young people in their classes. If we want to improve educational outcomes and close the poverty related achievement and attainment gap, then we need to invest in all teachers and ensure that those engaging directly with children and young people in the classroom are given the time and resources to engage in quality professional learning.

Recent proposals to create a, ‘Centre for Teaching Excellence,’ (Scottish Government, 2023) have suggested that staff working at the Centre could distil research and evidence into practical digestible support for teachers. Whilst this support may be welcome by some in some situations, it is unlikely to impact practice more widely in the current context of excessive teacher workload. With the majority of EIS members reporting that they work in excess of one day a week extra unpaid, how will they have time to engage with this material and to consider with colleagues how it can impact on their local context, as part of the collaborative endeavour envisaged above? This notion also perpetuates the top-down approach to research



dissemination and fails to recognise the inherent drive or ‘itch’ which many teachers have – but don’t have the time or space to exercise – in wanting to engage with a problem locally and through practitioner inquiry or action research, find a solution.

The ICEA Third Report (2023) stresses the importance of strengthening collective agency, reducing the amount of external assessment so that teachers have more time and space for innovative pedagogies, and to enable deeper learning, knowledge application and skills development. To be effective, this must be supported by networked learning and local practice sharing, which requires time and resources. Change of this nature cannot be driven through top-down or hierarchical approaches, but rather, must be grown from local practice sharing and collegiality. In recommending the expansion of this approach, ICEA concludes that the most promising collaborative professional learning programmes are those, ‘led by teachers for teachers,’ (2023: online).

If this approach is adopted as part of reform proposals, the EIS would expect teachers to be given the time, resources and support to engage in meaningful professional learning, collegiate dialogue, individual and collective action research and inquiry opportunities, and with dedicated opportunities to share learning in practice.

### ***Tools***

Whilst having the time to engage in learning which will support innovation and having the agency to implement change in practice are important, they will be ineffectual unless accompanied by sufficient resources. Teachers need the tools to make a difference.

Teachers across Scotland are delivering high-quality learning and teaching, striving on a daily basis to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and young people in their classes, in very challenging circumstances, with limited resources, and often to the detriment of their own health and wellbeing. The impact of the pandemic on young people, coupled with the continuing scourge of poverty and the huge increase in the number of young people requiring specialist additional support, including mental health support, have combined to create an environment where anxiety, frustration and disaffection can potentially fester. Teachers want to deliver the best outcomes for all young people, but they require the resources to allow them to meet these diverse needs effectively. Time to participate in professional learning and research, while necessary for the profession, on their own will not address the challenges teachers face.

We need a long-term resourcing strategy for education – including action to reduce class sizes, reduce class contact time and to significantly enhance the availability of specialist ASN support and expertise in schools – if we are to meaningfully effect change and deliver positive outcomes for all learners.

As we look towards implementation of Education Reform proposals, we need to learn lessons from the failure of the current Senior Phase to realise the vision of Curriculum for Excellence and approach change on a rational, planned and sustainable basis. Scotland’s teachers must

have their say in how the recommendations are taken forward, in a way that recognises their professional expertise, that does not add to workload, that provides dedicated time for planning, preparation and crucially for professional learning. This will bring additional resource requirements which will require significant additional investment from government. But we believe that Scotland's young people – and their teachers - are worth it.

### **Conclusion**

As we stand at this pivotal juncture, awaiting the Scottish Government's response to Education Reform proposals, teachers are clear – they want action that will take Scottish Education in a more positive, progressive direction, giving them the *time, tools and trust* to bring the joy back to teaching!

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## Scottish Attainment Challenge – the power of partnership working

Callum MacFarlane and Jacqui Ward (Attainment Advisors)  
Education Scotland

### *Context*

Education remains one of the most effective means to improve the life chances of all of children and young people. Moreover, the right to education and wider flourishing are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Yet in Scotland, almost one in four children are officially recognised as living in poverty (Scottish Government, 2023a). A significant proportion of these children, (69% -170,000), are living in working households (Scottish Government, 2023a). There are specific households with children who are known to be at a higher risk of poverty. These include households with single parents, 3+ children, disabled household members, a minority ethnic background, and children under one or a mother under 25 (Scottish Government, 2023a).

Addressing the educational impacts, as well as the contribution that education can make to alleviating poverty, requires joined up policy and collaboration throughout the system. In this article we consider the place and power of partnership working in relation to the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

### *Introduction*

The Scottish Attainment Challenge aims to bring a greater sense of urgency and priority to the issue of achieving equity in educational outcomes, with a particular focus on closing the poverty-related attainment gap. It was launched in 2015 with funding of £750 million over the parliamentary term. In 2021 the programme was refreshed with the support of a further £1 billion over the next parliamentary term until 2026. Collectively these funding allocation(s) are intended to support the Scottish Government (2022c) revised mission:

*to use education to improve outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty, with a focus on tackling the poverty-related attainment gap. (page 2)*

## *The Scottish Attainment Challenge*

From the outset, a key principle and component of the Scottish Attainment Challenge has been an emphasis on collaboration and working in partnership with others, including with children, young people and families. Partnership working is emphasised across the operational guidance for all SAC funding streams:

<b>Pupil Equity Fund (PEF)</b>	<i>The contributions of wider services supporting children and young people and their families are vital to supporting pupils' readiness to learn. Collaboration across services is crucial in tackling the poverty related attainment gap.</i> Page 3, PEF operational guidance (2023b)
<b>Strategic Equity Fund (SEF)</b>	<i>Consideration should be given to how the local authority can work with wider local services, such as Community Learning and Development, Social Work or Family Services, and with community or third sector partners to support the health and wellbeing, attainment and outcomes of children and young people impacted by poverty.</i> Page 6, SEF operational guidance (2023c)
<b>Care Experienced Children and Young People's Fund (CECYP)</b>	<i>The funding is allocated to local authorities, with the Chief Social Work Officer and the Chief Education Officer, assisted by Attainment Advisors, working in collaboration with planning partners, and other professionals, carers and children and young people, to assess where the funds could have the most impact on attainment.</i> Page 7, CECYP operational guidance (2022a)

This highlights the understanding that everyone, at all levels of the system, has a part to play in improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty and financial instability.

### *Why partnership working and what exactly is it?*

Within education, the OECD (2015) highlight the impact partnership/collaboration can have on enhancing the education profession. It can result in the increased confidence and skills of practitioners to make a change and improve school performance. Meader (2018) states that collaborative decision making can transform schools because it builds engagement, leads to improved understanding, more inclusive decisions, and shared responsibility.

Partnership working recognises the cultural, social and political complexities of closing the poverty-related attainment gap. The practice of colleagues at Education Scotland acknowledges the collaborative advantage, meaning there is clear recognition that the SAC mission described above, cannot be accomplished by a single organisation. Wider stakeholders have a role to play in improving outcomes for children and young people in education (Audit Scotland, 2021).

Partnership is an effective and efficient means to address complex social issues (What Works Scotland, 2019). However, agreeing its definition can be difficult since many concepts are

used interchangeably, such as collaboration, or joint working (Cook, 2015). For this paper, Lester et. al.,’s (2008) definition is used. They view partnership as, ‘any situation in which people work across organisational boundaries towards some positive end.’ Within SAC, partnerships can be across schools, authority wide, cross authority, or across sectors and organisations including the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector and the research community. They can also be national partnerships between authorities, Education Scotland and Scottish Government, with all working towards improving outcomes for children and young people impacted by poverty.

Cook (2015), Boares and Menzies (2015) and Walsh and de Sarandy (2023) identify features of effective partnership working. Some of these are detailed below, alongside examples of how these have been implemented in the SAC:

1. ***Having a shared sense of purpose, aims and objectives.***

The, ‘Closing the poverty-related attainment gap: a report on progress 2016-2021’ (Scottish Government, 2021) indicated that those authorities making the most progress in improving outcomes for children impacted by poverty had a clear and embedded vision. The report also acknowledged variation in progress across authorities. [A SAC Logic Model](#) was developed alongside partners from across the Scottish system to provide a more coherent and detailed narrative on the theory of change around SAC. Subsequent evaluation highlighted this logic model has supported more strategic, longer-term planning for Strategic Equity Funding (SEF) (Scottish Government, 2023d).

2. ***Resources provided for partnership working***

Nearly 2 in 3 headteachers reported seeing an increase in collaborative working in their school as a result of Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF) support in 2020, including one quarter who have seen a large increase (Scottish Government, 2023d). ‘[PEF: inwards, outwards and forwards](#)’ (Education Scotland, 2022) provides numerous case studies of this partnership working through networks, joint projects, inter-authority opportunities, inter-school groupings and partnerships that go beyond education.

3. ***Clarify roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability at operational and strategic levels.***

The ‘[Framework for Recovery and Accelerating Progress](#)’ (Scottish Government, 2022c) was developed with the purpose of supporting, ‘a shared understanding and collective accountability for expected progress,’ and to, ‘drive a whole system focus on improvement with clear roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders in the system working together to reduce variation.’ Following its initial implementation, there was recognition that a wider involvement of partners in the setting of the [Scottish](#)

[Attainment Challenge - Local stretch Aims](#) would be beneficial moving forward (Scottish Government, 2023d).

#### **4. *Different professional approaches and expertise are valued.***

The latest survey from local authority SAC leads, highlights that the [Attainment Advisor](#) role is highly valued as being able to support and challenge authorities and schools (Scottish Government, 2023d). They advised the role is particularly beneficial when there is consistency of support as the Attainment Advisor has an awareness of the local context and circumstances.

The national SAC programmes involve 3<sup>rd</sup> sector partners including YouthLink. They effectively articulate the power of youth work and partnership working in schools with [their infographic and case studies](#).

The latest [Education Scotland SAC national summary report](#) (August – November 2023) illustrates partnership working with families and communities.

### ***Conclusion***

Effective partnership working is crucial in achieving positive outcomes for children and young people. There are other aspects of effective partnership working which have not been discussed here due to the complexity of this concept. Nevertheless, there is a clear understanding that strong collaboration and partnership working continues to be required to achieve the SAC mission. The Scottish Attainment Challenge would further benefit from stronger partnership links with the research community.

Just as there is no single cause of poverty, there is no one solution to tackling poverty-related attainment gaps (Poverty Alliance, 2021). There needs to be multiple and various supports to address and mitigate these gaps and partnership working is a key and necessary component of this.

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## The importance of inclusion in teacher education practice

Di Cantali [d.l.cantali@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:d.l.cantali@dundee.ac.uk)

Senior Lecturer in Teacher Education, University of Dundee & Chair, Scottish Universities Inclusion Group

### *Inclusion in Scottish education*

Inclusion in Scottish schools is defined by the Scottish Government (2019) as comprising four essential elements, namely that pupils are present, that they participate in teaching and learning activities, and achieve success in their learning. Where appropriate, pupils receive support to do so. In essence, inclusion in Scotland requires all educators to have high expectations of learners, aligning with one of the underpinning principles of the National Framework for Inclusion (SUIG, 2022). That is, educators must have an open-ended view of a child's capacity to learn and achieve (SUIG, 2022, p.7). Inclusion developed in Scotland following the new conceptualisation of what is regarded as an Additional Support Needs (ASN) (Scottish Executive, 2004a), alongside Curriculum for Excellence which placed learners at the 'heart' of education with the aim that every learner should achieve the four CfE capacities (Scottish Executive, 2004b). Along with this, came a presumption of mainstreaming, the landscape of school provision and their populations changed accordingly over time.

When considering inclusion in its broadest sense, being part of the tripartite that is Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion, Scotland was well ahead of its time 20 years ago when the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Act (2004) was enacted into Scots law. At the time, inclusion often focused on children with medical needs and/or disabilities being included into mainstream schools under Presumption of Mainstreaming guidance (Scottish Government, 2019). The advent of the ASL Act transformed the underpinning conceptualisation of inclusive education to align closely with a social model of inclusion. This was through the unique definition of inclusion as any barrier to a learner making progress in their learning. This barrier, or barriers, could be short or long-term, and occur at any point during a learner's education (Cantali, 2019; Scottish Executive, 2004a). Ainscow, reflecting on global responses to inclusion since the Salamanca Statement of 1994, suggests that, 'every learner matters and matters equally,' (2023, np). This vision aligns with the Scottish conceptualisation of supporting learners to identify and address barriers to their learning, including highly able learners who require to be supported and challenged to extend their learning.

Societal changes in the past 20 years have mirrored the changes in education, moving from a medical to a social model of inclusion. The most fundamental aspect of this has been in the way in which disabled persons are viewed. Under the medical model, disabilities were viewed as a deficit and as a person having an, 'abnormality' (Qu, 2022, p.1012). The social model, however, sees society as being disabling and Qu goes on to assert that it is society's responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to ensure equitable access for all. More recent societal changes, notably increased population mobility, and conflicts e.g. in Ukraine and Syria, leading to refugee families being welcomed into Scottish communities (Mainwaring et al.,

2020) and similarly across the globe, has led to teachers being required to support further migrant integration to their schools (Florian & Pantić, 2017). These have meant that it is crucial for teacher educators to prepare student teachers to work in increasingly multi-lingual, multicultural, and diverse classrooms. Accordingly, teacher education has needed to adapt to ensure that not only inclusion, but equality and diversity considerations underpin professional learning holistically. This aligns with Florian's (2009) earlier note of caution regarding the need to ensure that teachers have confidence in their ability to teach all children under their care. She cautioned that providing specialist programmes may result in teachers feeling underqualified to teach some learners, and that Scotland's initial teacher education programmes should ensure that, in line with the principles of the Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches in Action framework (Florian & Rouse, 2009; Rouse and Florian, 2012), teachers should have a holistic understanding of how to include, and support the needs of all learners.

### ***Inclusion: a cornerstone of Scottish Initial Teacher Education practice***

In much the same way as inclusion is described as a 'cornerstone' of Scottish education (Scottish Government, 2017, p.12; SUIG, 2022, p.6), it is also a cornerstone of inclusive Initial Teacher Education. In Scotland, teacher education is university-based, with 11 higher education institutions (HEIs) providing initial, and continuing, teacher education. A mixture of courses, including three- and four-year undergraduate degrees, and graduate level qualifying courses of one or two years, are provided, all of which are accredited by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). Successful completion of a course of study leads to students attaining the Standard for Provisional Registration (GTCS, 2021) and being eligible to enter the teaching profession as a probationer. Successful completion of the probationer year leads to full registration with the GTCS. Additionally, Master's and doctoral degrees are also available, some of which offer specialisms in inclusive pedagogy and practice, supporting the career-long professional learning that all Scottish teachers are expected to engage in as part of the conditions of being registrants with the GTCS.

The fundamental place of inclusion within Scottish education, providing support for its teachers to develop as inclusive educators following the ASL Act (2004), was prioritised by the Scottish Government through the Inclusive Practice Project, two key outputs of which were the Inclusive Pedagogical Approaches in Action (IPAA) framework (Florian & Rouse, 2009; Rouse & Florian, 2012) and the National Framework for Inclusion, now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Scottish Universities Inclusion Group (SUIG), 2022). The underpinning principles of the IPAA framework can be summarised as difference being ordinary, problems being challenges for teachers, and the need to work collaboratively to address these (Cantali, Florian & Graham, 2022; Florian & Spratt, 2013). These principles align with the Professional Standards for Teachers (GTCS, 2021), in which reference to inclusion, inclusive pedagogies and practice can be found throughout each of the Standards. Inclusion is interwoven throughout and underpins all aspects of the Professional Standards for Teachers in Scotland (GTCS, 2021), to the extent that I would argue it is impossible to be working within the required Standard for a teacher's career stage without being an inclusive educator. A requirement to confidently make use of inclusive pedagogies and practice is at the heart of being a teacher in Scotland. This includes

having a working knowledge and understanding of inclusive pedagogies (SPR 2.1) and demonstrating professional commitment in ensuring all learners' individual differences are respected and they are included (SPR 1.1 & 1.2). Supporting this, teachers must ensure that their planning is cognisant of barriers to learning that pupils may face, and that this effectively meets all learners' needs (SPR 3.1) and encourages their full participation (SPR 3.2). The National Framework for Inclusion (SUIG, 2022), being a reflective tool closely aligned with the Professional Standards for Teachers, supports teachers, and the wider body of educators in Scotland and beyond, to consider how their practice is inclusive and supports all learners' needs to be met.

### ***Inclusive practice in Initial Teacher Education research***

Recent research into initial teacher education and the ways in which inclusive practice and pedagogy underpin this include work carried out by the Scottish Universities Inclusion Group (SUIG). SUIG is a working group of the Scottish Council of Deans of Education, first established in 2006 and including representation from all HEIs offering teacher education. This project, undertaken by the eight universities providing initial teacher education in 2018-2019, mapped where inclusive pedagogy and practice underpinned the various aspects of initial teacher education courses. Mapping was undertaken at modular and programme level (see Figure 1 for an example map) and this demonstrated that inclusion was an integral element of all courses both explicitly and implicitly (Cantali, Florian & Graham, 2022).

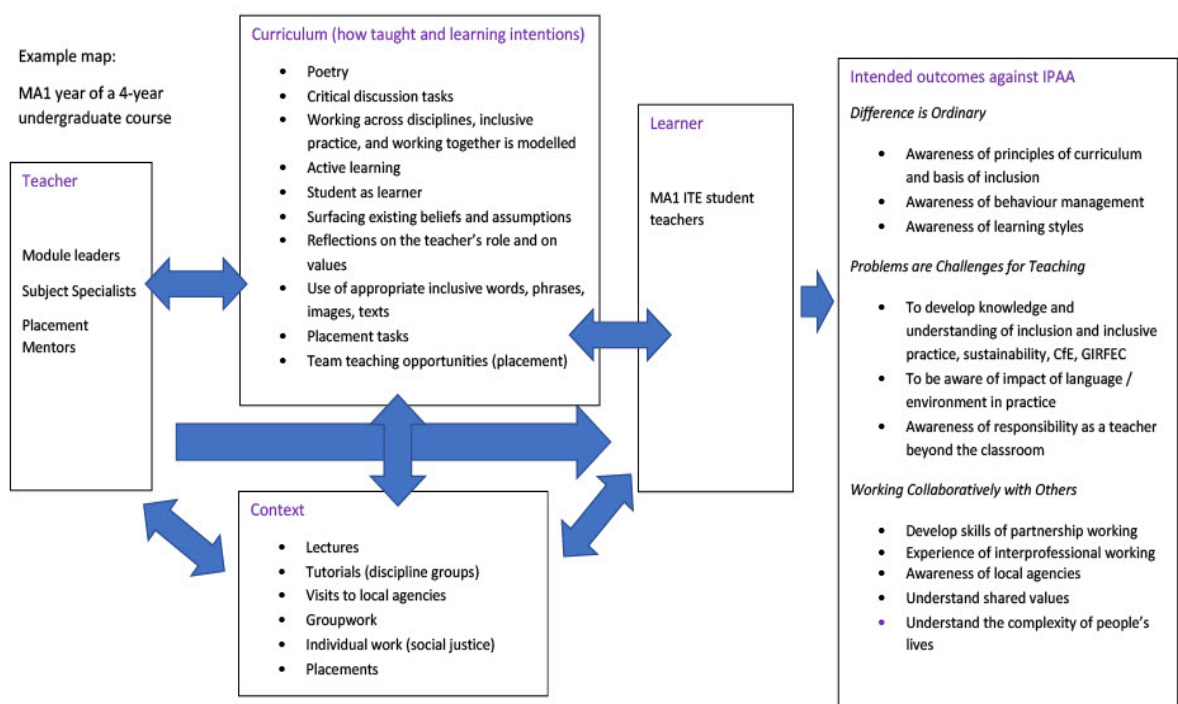


Figure 1: Example map of the first year of a four-year undergraduate teaching degree course.

Follow-up research, undertaken by some universities, where lecturers and students' views were gathered, also reported that there was recognition of where inclusive practice was being modelled, and where inclusion was being taught (Cantali & Knight, 2019). This was sometimes explicitly present, for example in specific inputs which focused on topics such as behaviour management, autism, trauma-informed practice; and sometimes implicitly present, for example in lecturers' behaviour where they used inclusive practices in their teaching. They also promoted good practice in ensuring accessibility of course materials.

In conclusion, inclusion in teacher education practice in Scotland is an integral part of Scottish initial teacher education courses and the GTC Scotland Suite of Professional Standards. It is, in mirroring an inclusive society more generally, intrinsically linked with wider aspects of teacher education practice and underpins the Scottish teaching values of social justice, trust, respect, and integrity. Being a teacher educator in Scotland requires us to not only embody the professional values above, but, perhaps more importantly, to model support and value all learners with whom our student teachers may work both during practicum pre-qualifying and once they are practising teachers. We can do this through modelling, both implicitly and explicitly, inclusive pedagogies and practice throughout our work.

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**The Importance of Research for Educational Developers: A view from the SHED  
(Scottish Higher Education Developers)**

**Dr Tom Cunningham, Senior Lecturer in Academic Development, Glasgow Caledonian University, SHED Vice-Convenor**

**Professor Catriona Cunningham, Head of the Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement, Edinburgh Napier University, SHED Convenor**

***Introduction***

**Wha's like us?**

Peering over the notes of the past,  
Teasing out the threads of what used to matter  
Only to find  
The same threads now interwoven  
In different shades and patterns.

No avatars.  
But lots of women (no register required).  
No more money  
But a shared history and an unshaken sense of what matters:  
Equality,  
Diversity,  
Support,  
Scholarship.

Many a storm has been cooked up in the SHED kitchen -  
The sound of the CETL singing helping us along the way  
But what it boils down to - the very essence  
Of what makes SHED endure  
Though the landscape shifts and changes -  
Is a distinct Scottish flavour.  
Call it what you will -  
SHED is a place for us all.

(Poetic Transcription written for SHED 25 Yearbook in 2018)

This poem, written by SHED colleagues to celebrate the 25-year anniversary of its existence, summarises the diversity of approach, highlighting the role of scholarship throughout. There are several words we could emphasise in relation to how research has been used by SHED to develop HE professionals. But the main thing that strikes us is *context*. In Scotland, the QAA commitment to enhancement (not merely assurance) means that the focus shifts from the deficit ‘where is the problem that needs to be fixed?’ to a more appreciative ‘what is working and how we can all learn from this?’ approach that underpins the Scottish approach to learning and teaching. It is this enhancement culture, the ‘Scottish flavour’ identified in our poem, which influences and shapes research in HE in our context. Each university is supported by QAA Scotland, with funding through their Enhancement Theme (QAA, 2024) activity as well as



additional funding for inter-institutional Collaborative Cluster work that fosters a shared purpose and drive for enhancement through theme-led research. The diversity of educational developers in terms of their disciplines, shapes the transcultural nature of academic development. We are at once linguists, geographers, biologists, chemists, even philosophers (Cunningham, 2022). As this short piece argues, there is no singular field or approach that underpins our scholarship. What unites us, as the poem makes clear, are the ‘threads’ woven into our academic practices. Our exploration below explores these individual ‘threads’, teasing out the importance of research to educational developers is used for professional development in HE in Scotland.

The first question of course is who, or what, are educational developers? Somewhat confusingly, the terms ‘academic development’ and ‘educational development’ are often used interchangeably in the literature. At the core of our work is what Leibowitz (2014, p.359) describes as, ‘the creation of conditions supportive of teaching and learning, in the broadest sense. This would include the provision of the support, as well as the generation of conditions that are supportive.’ Educational developers in HE support staff to enhance their teaching practice, guide colleagues in achieving professional recognition for their teaching and/or support for student learning, and (increasingly) lead enhancement projects related to learning and teaching at institutional and sector level.

### ***Research Led***

Given our role is to support staff to develop their practice in teaching, learning and assessment in HE, it is vital for our credibility and currency that we are research-led in the work we do. The Professional Standards Framework for teaching and learning in higher education (Advance HE, 2023), on which much of our work supporting staff is based, explicitly mentions research as a basis for effective practice. Developing this credibility and trust (a topic of a recent call for papers in the International Journal for Academic Development) is central to building relationships with staff.

Our SHED meetings include sessions of sharing of best practice from educational developers in Scotland and further afield. We also have a SHED reading group, hosted online, which meets to discuss current and influential papers in learning and teaching. Our last reading group, for example, focused on assessment and the argument of Ajjawi et al. (2023) that we need to shift our focus from authentic assessment to authenticity in assessment. These discussions are stimulating and informative in themselves. But they have also led to enhancements to our shared practice. For example, a reading group discussion of a Felton et al. (2019) paper on students-as-partners in the work of educational developers explicitly informed student partnership activity in learning and teaching during the pandemic response at both the University of Stirling and Edinburgh Napier University.

## ***Research Active***

Educational developers are also, increasingly, becoming involved in the research process itself, and conducting their own research projects. This helps develop credibility in our work and in the validity in what we say and do for staff colleagues. At SHED we have instigated a ‘scholarly series’ for educational developers to share some of their research ideas, or work in progress, to a sympathetic but critical audience. We see our role here as to help foster research practices, as educational developers often come from different disciplinary backgrounds with differing research practice. Once a year SHED organises a ‘writing retreat’ which gives participants the opportunity to craft, develop and edit their written work for publication.

An example of such active research, from our own work (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2022), is a project we led exploring staff perceptions of student engagement. Using a creative and playful fairy-tale storyboard approach we explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the move to online and blended learning, and the role of educational developers in this process. We gained ethical approval to interview staff before, during and after the Autumn 2020 semester. This was particularly relevant for us, given we had designed and led sessions for staff over the summer of 2020.

There are many other, diverse, examples of ongoing research SHED colleagues have shared with the community. Colleagues have used the ‘writing retreat’ in different ways, including writing up research, which they have then shared at subsequent SHED sessions.

## ***Opportunities and Challenges***

Recent developments have placed the work of educational developers in the limelight like never before. The response to the pandemic in terms of moving teaching to an online and blended model (arguably) made educational developers ‘institutional heroes’ (Cunningham et al. 2021, p.102) for the support and guidance they provided to staff. Recently, educational developers have been called upon to support institutions develop their response to generative artificial intelligence and the impact this will have on teaching, learning and assessment.

Despite this limelight, there is ongoing debate about whether educational development can be called a ‘field’ at all. Clegg (2012), for example, has written on what ways Higher Education could be considered a field, and so educational development a sub-field of it. More recently, Evans (2023) has argued that the scholarship of educational development is at a crossroads, between what she calls the ‘critical’ and the ‘mainstream’ understandings of the field. There are growing voices for a more ‘academic’ and ‘holistic’ approach to our work (Sturm, 2022; Sutherland, 2018) – calls which place research in a more central role. Roni Bamber, in her 2020 SEDA report, highlights the opportunities and challenges that metrics offer to educational development as both a rich source of ‘data’ as well as a potentially dangerous weapon.

## Conclusion

As our short piece shows, the roles and even identities of educational developers are multidisciplinary, contextual and complex with ongoing debates about the validity and even relevance of our research to develop and/or support HE professionals. Often, we are required to balance the demands of the ‘day job’ with our desire to be active scholars in learning and teaching. Some of us are on academic contracts, some not, some of us are expected to contribute to the scholarship of learning and teaching, some less so. Despite this, and although there is not yet explicit REF recognition for our ‘field’, there are multiple ways in which the appreciative approach of educational development within Scotland makes, we believe, a tangible and meaningful difference. Arguably, it is the ‘common thread’ of our values-base as well as the increasingly diverse and critical voices in our midst that help us navigate the tensions around metrics research so thoroughly by Roni Bamber. All of which helps us focus on what matters in higher education in Scotland.

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## **Building Capacity and Confidence – CDN’s ‘Step Forward’ for colleges** **Dr Paula Christie**

### ***Introduction***

The College Development Network, (CDN) is the national improvement agency for Scotland’s Colleges. In 2022, CDN introduced the *Step Forward* programme across the college sector. This action research focused programme was specifically designed to provide the framework to turn research and insight into enhancement on the ground in colleges, as well as building capacity and confidence in research activities. The *Step Forward* programme provides a bespoke package of support and guidance for colleges that alongside support in conducting primary research can also include mentoring, evaluation, and other relevant training to assist in the implementation and delivery of interventions and projects that aim to improve practice. The cyclical action research model of enhancement, further research, further enhancement has also been adopted in the development and delivery of sector wide initiatives including CDN’s recently launched *Trauma Informed Colleges* programme.

### ***School College Partnerships***

Action research enables researchers to develop a systematic model of inquiry toward their own practices and is often employed as a means of improving social issues affecting the lives of everyday people through positive change (Hine, 2013). One such area where this approach was deemed beneficial has been in the delivery of School College Partnership programmes. SCPs are defined as:

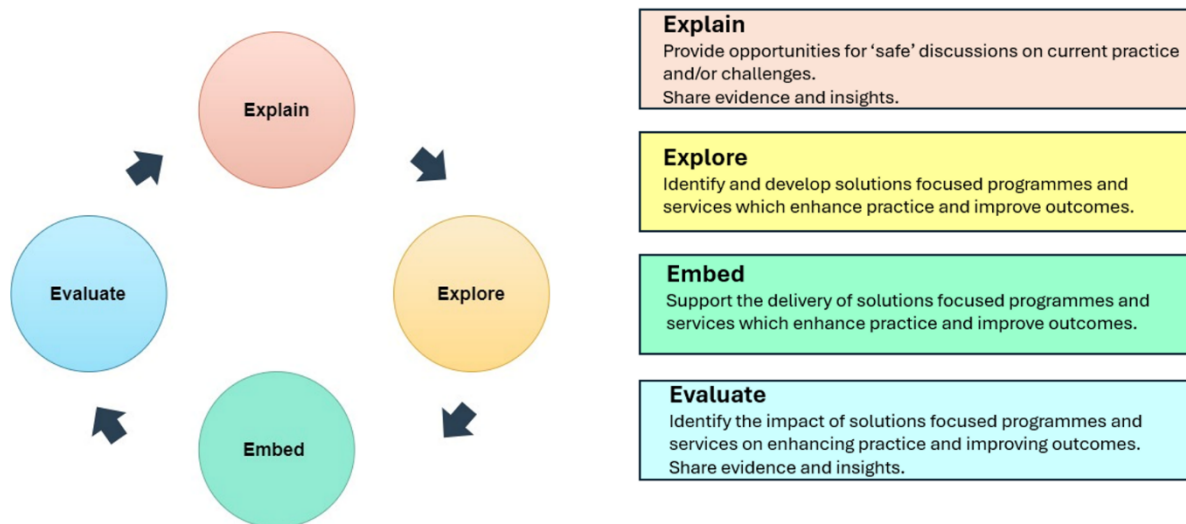
*Any learning activity that involves young people aged 3-18 that is delivered by a college in collaboration with a school, either in school or in college, with a broad focus on skills for life and work and often with the involvement of employers. Co-creating the Learner Journey: School-College Partnerships and Effective Skills Pathways (2021)*

These partnerships are inclusive of all ages and stages of the learner journey and provide qualifications across a range of subject areas and SCQF levels. These longstanding collaborations also support the success of those pupils with additional support needs and those with multiple disadvantage (CDN 2021). Colleges, through CDN’s professional networks, have expressed that delivery and management of these programmes has become increasingly challenging, particularly post-pandemic, due to increased levels of anxiety amongst learners, increased support needs, an increase in adverse behaviour, and an increase in levels of disengagement and non-attendance. Also highlighted are related concerns around retention and withdrawals.

### ***The Step Forward Model***

The collaborative *Step Forward* model allows for a repeated cycle of investigation, intervention, and impact assessment to take place within a safe and supported process. Interventions and enhancement activities are based on evidence which is gathered and shared

by project stakeholders. Project staff are trained and supported by CDN in initial project scoping activity and research design and are offered practical support and training in data collection which helps to build an evidence base for purposeful intervention and enhancement activity. Evidence is then shared and, in line with the project scope, followed up with an agreed and manageable enhancement activity or intervention. As noted by McNiff (2013) sustainable change from action research comes from the premise that ‘I change me’ not ‘I change you’. Throughout the Step Forward project, college-based teams are encouraged to experiment with new ideas and practice as well as think reflexively about their existing practice or processes. A Diagnostic Tool has been devised which assists teams to identify and rate existing practice within a safe and collaborative space, with the output of this self-audit forming the basis of a bespoke project action plan. On conclusion of the project, the impact of any enhancement activity or intervention is evaluated, and again shared, thus creating the opportunity for the cycle of further enhancement activities and evaluations to continue.



The consultancy styled support role of CDN within the *Step Forward* programme is supplemented with a series of ‘Researcher Development’ sessions which cover aspects of research design, data collection, data analysis and dissemination.

### ***Enhancing practice and improving outcomes***

Action research initiatives, such as CDN’s *Step Forward* programme, offer an opportunity for college staff to co-construct solutions to challenges and to think critically about real and sustained change at both institutional and individual levels. In response to the challenges faced within SCP programmes, Forth Valley College undertook a *Step Forward* programme with the aim of better understanding their learners and enhancing practice to meet the needs of all stakeholders involved within the partnership. Project staff have benefitted from guidance on project scope and design and staff have reported increased levels of confidence in designing a manageable project, which can be extended or revisited as part of the action research cyclical approach. Data collection and data analysis skills were supported, and the project is now at the

stage of embedding interventions around improved communication between all stakeholders. A Short Life Working Group will enhance the transition of senior phase learners and continue to support pathways, progressions, and enhancement for evaluation at the end of this calendar year.

Within the field of scholarly research, the process of research is intrinsically valued, however, as noted by Henriksen and Mishra (2019, p.295). ‘practitioners, in contrast to scholars, are deeply enmeshed in this ‘turbulent world’ seeking immediate answers to the issues that they face at the moment.’ The challenge for college practitioners engaged in local small scale action research projects can often be to demonstrate the value of research activities, particularly as demands on resources leads to greater constraint.

Engaging with action research leads colleges to engage with, inform and where appropriate, challenge, contemporary thinking, and practice within the sector. The dissemination of action research is therefore vital to allow lessons to be learned by both the local stakeholders and by a broader audience for the benefit of practitioners more widely. Project teams and others with research interests in the college sector have the opportunity to publish the findings of research in the CAIRN Journal, a practitioner-orientated publication, hosted by CDN, that is committed to advancing scholarship and knowledge exchange. The intended audience includes those who teach and research within the sector; and those who lead, develop, manage, and evaluate delivery provision.

### ***Conclusion***

College based action research is an effective vehicle for generating innovative and relevant new practice, driven by practitioners as experts in their own field. CDN’s *Step Forward* programme, increases capacity and develops skills for a cycle of ‘research- enhancement-further research-further enhancement’ which encourages activities which have a clear focus on delivering systemic change, supporting the enhancement of practice, and improving outcomes for learners and staff. The potential for college-based action research findings to be disseminated via a practitioner-orientated journal hosted by CDN adds to the knowledge base and further develops skills in publishing for impact.

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## **Integrating Immersive Technologies and Generative AI in Education: Critical Issues and Future Pathways**

Stavros A. Nikou, University of Strathclyde, [stavros.nikou@strath.ac.uk](mailto:stavros.nikou@strath.ac.uk)

Gabriella Rodolico, University of Glasgow, [gabriella.rodolico@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:gabriella.rodolico@glasgow.ac.uk)

Lavinia Hirsu, University of Glasgow, [lavinia.hirsu@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:lavinia.hirsu@glasgow.ac.uk)

Celia Antoniou, University of Strathclyde, [celia.antoniou@strath.ac.uk](mailto:celia.antoniou@strath.ac.uk)

The field of education has seen a flurry of debates around the future and impact of immersive technologies i.e., Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), Extended Reality (XR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI). Empirical studies are emerging, and researchers are coming to terms with how we should make the most of these latest technological innovations. In this article, we highlight a few critical aspects regarding the integration of immersive technologies and AI in education by considering possible entry points. Immersive technologies allow users to experience virtual objects superimposed to physical spaces (AR) or fully computer-generated virtual environments (VR). These digital technologies enable new forms of interactions since users can explore, manipulate, and redeploy both real and virtual objects in real time. Moreover, to support these interactions, AI could be used to power immersive experiences, or it could come in between users and the virtual objects to mediate their relationships in the guise of avatars or integrated bots. This is a very exciting future to look towards, but to get there, we need to consider teachers' digital competences, develop the appropriate theoretical and practical frameworks to use these integrated technologies, understand the potential risks and to take on reflective and critical stances towards the implementation of XR in any educational context.

Literature reviews have shown that AR increases students' content understanding, motivation, interaction, and collaboration (Garzon et al, 2019). However, for the successful implementation of AR in education, several issues need to be considered. Technical infrastructure and support should be available, and educators need to make sure that all students have access to immersive learning opportunities (Perifanou et al., 2023). Moreover, educators should have the appropriate digital competences to integrate AR in education. To address this, Nikou et al. (2023) developed and validated the Teachers' Augmented Reality Competences (TARC) framework. According to the framework, educators should be able to create (design, develop, and modify AR resources), use (apply AR pedagogies, teaching, and assessment practices) and manage (search, evaluate, organise AR resources and address ethics, safety and security related issues). Educators confident to create and manage AR resources are better equipped and willing to use AR in their classes (Nikou, et al. 2024). Moreover, educators who are competent in AR and appreciate its educational value are more likely to create meaningful immersive learning experiences that support curriculum objectives to improve learning outcomes (Nikou, 2024).

VR-supported lessons are another example of how we may create immersive learning experiences that may enhance positive emotions and engagement when compared to more traditional tools, such as readings from textbooks. Research has shown that VR-supported lessons in Higher Education can enhance self-rated positive emotions, remembering and understanding skills and also increasing levels of engagement when compared with those

taught using established teaching approaches (Allcoat & von Mühlennen, 2018). In addition, VR has a greater positive impact on learning information integrated into visual modalities when compared to AR (Huang et al., 2019). However, to experience and facilitate these benefits in a learning environment, educators should consider their self-efficacy while teaching with VR technologies, their safety in the classroom, as well as their Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) (Jang et al., 2021) in the context of VR supported lessons. Pre-Service Teachers (PSTs) in particular, although willing to use VR in their classrooms, also express concern about their self-efficacy on the pedagogical potential of the technology, its safety in the classroom, management of devices and technical support (Cooper, et al., 2019). In a recent pilot study, Rodolico and Hirsu (2023) explored the PSTs' learning experience with a specific interest in the impact of VR-supported lessons on their self-confidence, that could be improved by research evidence-based, well-designed hands-on lessons in ITE courses. The findings indicated that involvement in VR lessons, such as those within ITE science courses, motivated PSTs to consider the integration of this technology in their classrooms.

The emergence of Generative AI (trained with large datasets and using Natural Language Processing techniques to generate new digital content in response to user prompts), can significantly change how we approach education and how we teach, learn, evaluate, and engage with knowledge. AI-empowered conversational agents, such as Chat GPT, appear to be utilized more often in a variety of contexts, including education. Research in the educational use of conversation agents is emerging (e.g., Mariani et al.). Teachers find that chatbots, if used appropriately, can be a valuable educational tool because they can automate administrative and teaching tasks and can be supportive and engaging for students (Nikou & Chang, 2023). Educational Institutions are creating resources to support the understanding and critical evaluation of Gen AI in Education. For example, the School of Education, University of Glasgow 4-hours MOOC (Rodolico et al., 2024) explores the world of Generative AI and its possible applications in education through discussions and reflections. This short course aims to provide an initial understanding of the fundamentals of generative AI in Education and create a space for engaging in critical evaluation of AI, exploring its potential benefits and drawbacks in educational experiences through practical exemplars. Learners are introduced to the ethical considerations associated with its use and analyse the impact that AI could have on the positive learning experience of learners. Moreover, since the release of ChatGPT, education professionals have ventured to explore the relationship between AI bots and the academic writing process. Until very recently, the incorporation of similar tools in academic writing in general remained largely unacknowledged. Researchers and practitioners in the TESOL team at the University of Strathclyde (Antoniou, forthcoming, 2024) have therefore identified the need to experiment with the implementation of AI applications like ChatGPT when authoring work but also from a pedagogic perspective. The potential of ChatGPT in education has been explored in a very small number of studies with some of them focusing on enhancing creativity and critical thinking in writing academic essays (Zhai, 2022). At this present stage, ChatGPT has not only been demonstrating clear potential in supporting academic writing, but it has also raised concerns about academic authorship and integrity and about eluding plagiarism detection (Yeadon et al., 2022). In higher education in particular, researchers have voiced views on whether the AI-supported text generation constitutes an example of plagiarism when modified

with human input (Yeadon et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a need to further explore the higher education learners', practitioners', and policy makers' perceptions of issues of academic integrity and develop training guidelines.

It is also not difficult to further imagine some of the potential developments that we could see within the space of immersive learning with AI: having a real time feedback agent integrated as an avatar within a VR and AR experience, or an assistant for real time content creation could support users to engage in a particular VR or AR task. The multidimensionality of immersive environments including the possibility of learning through space, depth, and multiple media (e.g., audio, video, tactile objects) will create new opportunities for AI to affect the process of learning with and within these virtual spaces. Yet, the challenges we outlined above regarding teaching and learning with XR technologies remind us that any new developments and integration of AI, need to consider many key aspects. AI may represent a new threshold for teacher adoption in educational settings and will require a re-evaluation of the frameworks we have started deploying with XR. To ensure that AI is embedded effectively into immersive experiences, the research community needs to engage with the development of these technologies as early as possible, so that we are able to inform not only the application and deployment of these technologies, but also their design and development.

Given the growing momentum around immersive technologies, artificial intelligence and other digital technologies, the SERA Digital Education Network aims to further develop knowledge and expertise from multiple perspectives. We recognise the need to conduct this type of digital education research before technologies have become mainstream. Early and sustained engagements with immersive experiences but also with advancements in the field of AI will ensure that we are prepared to use them critically and effectively, while we also develop the tools to strengthen capacity with educators and learners, so that they can make informed choices about their future learning pathways.

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## Enhancing political awareness and agency in school leaders – A case study of the Into Headship programme.

Julie Harvie, University of Glasgow  
[Julie.harvie@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Julie.harvie@glasgow.ac.uk)

Zoë Robertson, University of Edinburgh  
[Zoe.robertson@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Zoe.robertson@ed.ac.uk)

Kevin Brack, University of Edinburgh  
[Kevin.brack@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Kevin.brack@ed.ac.uk)

### ***Introduction***

In Scotland, leadership preparation is now seen as an essential element in readying teachers for the complex role of headteacher (school principal). This is reflected in the fact that since August 2020, there has been a statutory requirement for aspiring headteachers to gain the Standard for Headship (General Teaching Council for Scotland, 2021), done primarily through a master's level programme called *Into Headship*. However, there have been renewed discussions around leadership development programmes and how well they equip practitioners for the highly multi-faceted role of a headteacher. Questions have been raised over the past few years at an international level around the relevance and focus of existing practices (Harris & Jones, 2020; McLaughlin, 2022).

This article considers a key finding around enhancing the political awareness of participants from a research case study carried out by the Scottish Educational Research Association Leadership in Education Network (SERA LiSEN) which explored the lived experiences of a cohort of aspirant school leaders undertaking the *Into Headship* programme. The research used an ecological model of agency (Priestley et al., 2015) to shape the design process and analyse the data. Ways in which this sustained learning programme impacted the agency of the participants in leading school improvements were considered but this short article will focus on the aspect of enhancing political awareness and the development of criticality.

### ***Methodology***

This research was conducted with a national cohort of students from across three Scottish universities as a case study of the national cohort. The aim was to identify the influences and impact that *Into Headship* had in relation to the agency of participants to lead strategic change in their schools. Details of the theoretical framework underpinning this study are below.

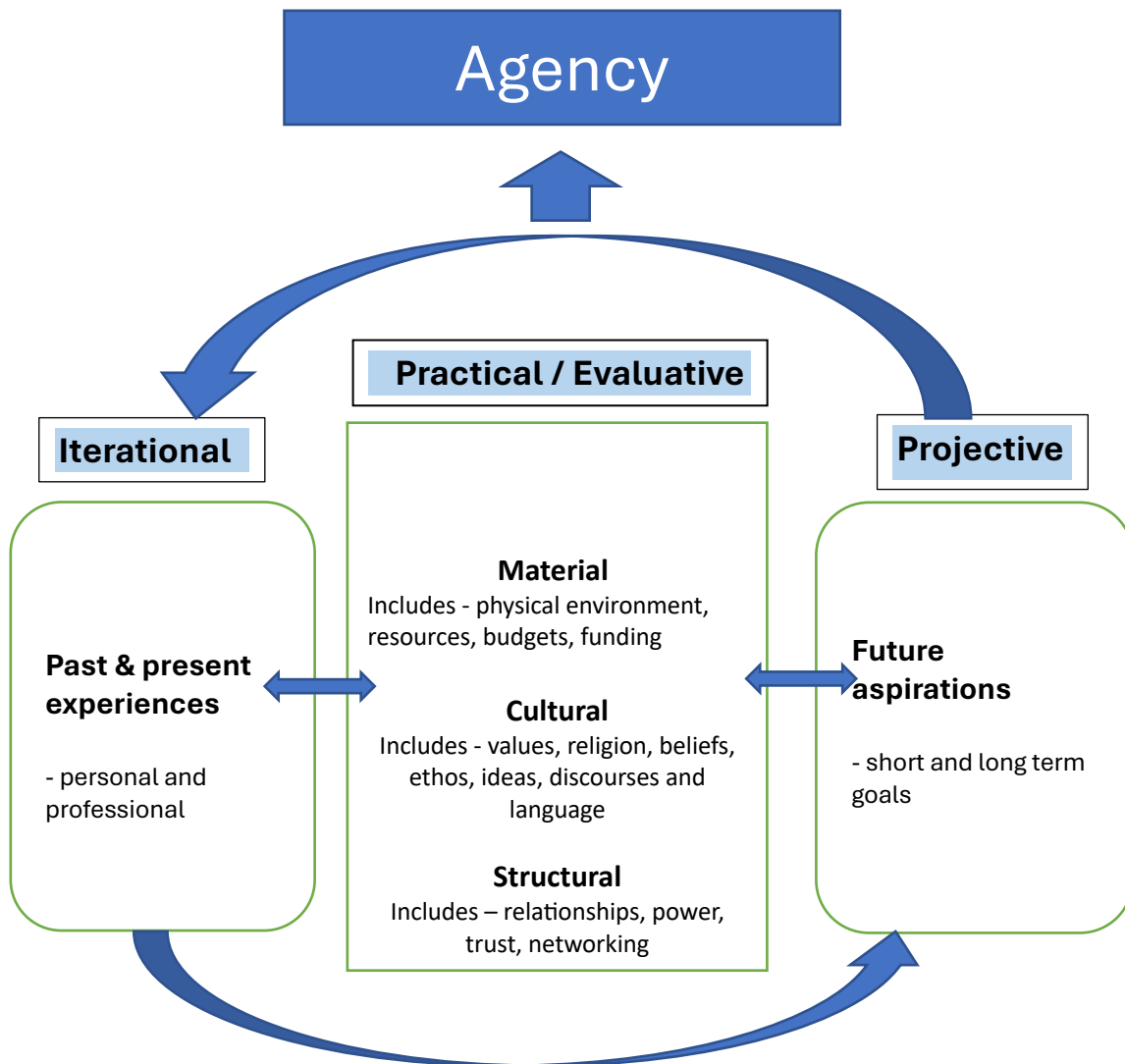
### ***Theoretical Framework***

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) theorise the interplay between three different dimensions which they call the 'chordal triad of agency' and they categorise these factors as iterative, practical-evaluative and projective (1998:972). In this theory it is proposed that these three dimensions



interact continuously and simultaneously as people live out their lives from day to day. Agency is conceptualised here, not as a quality or ability a person has, but rather as something a person can achieve which is affected by the ‘chordal triad’. This ecological approach is useful in helping to examine and analyse aspects which may enhance or impinge on a person’s agency in a variety of settings.

Figure 1 – Ecological model of agency – (Adapted from Priestley et al.,2015).



The arrows in Fig. 1 above indicate the interconnectedness of all the elements. In day-to-day interactions, the various factors are continually at play and work together to affect a person’s agency in any given situation. Some elements can have more of a significant impact than others at different times and there is an ebb and flow effect between them as time progresses. This ‘chordal triad’ has been used in recent years as a conceptual framework with which to examine the agency of pupils, (Brotherhood, 2020), teachers (Priestley et al., 2015) and Early Career Academics (Breslin et al., 2021). In this research it was used in two ways, firstly to guide the interview questions and secondly as an analytical tool to examine the data gathered.

## ***Methods***

An online survey (questionnaire) was initially sent out to every student in the three participating universities after ethical approval had been obtained. The final section of the questionnaire gave participants the opportunity to opt in to take part in a further interview. Twenty-seven people (approximately one third of the participant cohort), completed this and, of these, eight consented to being interviewed. To capture a broadly typical representation of the cohort, six participants were selected for interview. The raw data was then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis framework. Survey data was first analysed to provide broad areas of focus for the interviews. Interview data was coded using the same thematic analysis process and themes were then mapped against the different dimensions of the agency model.

## ***Enhancing Political Awareness***

One of the key findings from this research was that participants reported feeling an enhanced sense of agency as a result of developing their political awareness through the *Into Headship* programme. A dominant trope in the current educational policy landscape in Scotland refers to the need for school leaders to be empowered, critically informed professionals who are able to make sound professional judgments. The language of 'empowerment', 'criticality' and 'judging wisely' are littered through key policy documents such as the *Standard for Headship*, (GTCS, 2021), the *National Improvement Framework and Implementation Plan* (Scottish Government, 2022), and the *Head Teacher Charter* (Education Scotland, 2019). However, there are tensions because although the empowerment agenda claims criticality is key for school leaders, it does not necessarily afford this (Forde et al., 2022). Whilst the rhetoric of some policy may seek to develop criticality in the system, the realities of this within cultures of performativity and entrenched bureaucracy are often problematic and result in higher levels of accountability for headteachers (Humes, 2022).

Developing an identity as a new leader and specifically an '*empowered leader*' who is critically engaged with policy can present very real practical challenges and tensions. Participants in this study reflected on the difficulties faced when starting to challenge some dominant practices or policies or more simply where the constraints of current approaches sat at odds with the ideals and strategic critical insights. Leading school improvement is a political act. Participants talked about being 'politically savvy' but also having a fear of being seen as 'disruptive' particularly where they might be seen to speak against policy mantras. There are many studies which highlight the importance of developing a critically informed profession (Donaldson, 2011; Drew et al., 2016). Headteachers are continually having to navigate complex, ethical terrain and deal with 'wicked problems' (Bottery, 2016), critically appraising issues and contexts in order to make sound decisions for young people and driving school improvement. Criticality could be seen then as a vital factor to facilitate school leaders to develop their agency in the making of right judgments. Every participant in this study made some reference to criticality so the ways in which criticality was perceived and how this contributed to their sense of agency will now be considered.

## *Developing Criticality*

All participants in this study reflected on the intellectual challenge and growth they experienced through engaging with masters level study while working full time as a school leader. They spoke about specific knowledge and key concepts which related to models of leadership, leadership strategies and the specific focus of their strategic change and how their knowledge and understanding of these had developed through their professional reading, professional dialogue and practical application. The importance of integrating theory with practice also came through strongly from the data. This was often linked to perceptions of now having 'greater confidence' or simply having 'reaffirmed what I was already doing'. However, it was interesting to note that this enhancement of knowledge went deeper than merely acquiring facts, technical skills or strategies and participants expressed more profound and transformational impacts.

Decisional capital has been described as the process of decision making within complex situations (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012) and for school leaders, this relates to the ability to make wise professional judgements based on critical insights and the development of phronesis or practical wisdom. In this study, the enhanced criticality participants experienced was clearly linked to an increase in their decisional capital and agency to take action. Individuals reflected that though the complex interplay of the process of engaging with theory, policy and research and considering this through the lens of their practice and professional context, they had developed a much fuller understanding of the issues at hand. Practice was used to critique and consider theory and policy and simultaneously, research, theory and policy perspectives were used to critique practice. Alongside this was a supporting narrative around the value and importance of school leaders developing a much richer knowledge about policy at international, national and local levels. One participant reflected on the changing role of the headteacher and highlighted how crucial it was now for headteachers to be:

*... really good at policy and have a strategic understanding of what's happened at OECD level, PISA level, economic level and globally and how this impacts on your education budget and all that you've been asked to do.*

Participants shared how this enhanced political awareness had given them a more nuanced view and the ability to recognise complexities and counter-agendas within the system. They acknowledged the importance of being able to see that wider political picture and to have a strategic long-term view to avoid the pitfalls of 'short-termism'. They spoke about having developed confidence and skill in being able to ask questions of policy and problematise it in a way they had not before and to consider *whether* something should be implemented rather than just considering *how* to implement it. This more critical approach was seen by one as challenging the common, top-down, 'quick fix approach'. Others spoke of being 'less accepting of what comes from above' and being able to 'disagree agreeably' which typifies the essence of developing critically informed professional judgement, i.e. school leaders who can

make sound decisions in line with their values and are able to defend their position because they have a greater depth of understanding about the stance they are taking.

## **Conclusion**

Developing criticality and agency to upwardly challenge policy directives and say ‘no’ at times takes courageous leadership because there are risks and challenges involved. Scotland’s educational policy landscape mirrors others internationally which contain rhetoric around the need to increase the empowerment, agency and criticality of school leaders but when set against a backdrop of a neo-liberal performative policy ideology, tensions are inevitable (Blackmore et al., 2019). However, completing the *Into Headship* programme and engaging with critical reading and research gave participants a greater sense of agency, not only to be able to better understand and navigate complexities of the educational system but it also increased their confidence to make decisions aligned with their values and the needs of their school community. One participant summed this up well by saying:

*Criticality and challenge, this has deepened as a result of the course, constantly questioning policy with greater confidence, asking yourself questions about who authors policy, how front line colleagues have been involved. My skill of criticality has been developed as part of the course and I am less accepting of what comes from above and have more confidence in putting across my views.*

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## **The Effects of Poverty on School Education – Research from the Poverty and Education Network**

**Stephen McKinney, Alastair Wilson, Rachel Shanks, Dean Robson, Lio Moscardini, Peter Mtika, John McKendrick, Lindsay MacDougall, Kevin Lowden, Kat Lord, Angela Jaap, Katie Hunter, Stuart Hall, Archie Graham and Kirsten Darling-McQuistan.**

### **Introduction**

According to recent statistics, 4.3 million children are living in poverty in the UK which amounts to 24% of all children. The statistic is much higher for children who belong to a black and minority ethnic group: 47% (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024). Living in poverty means that there is a constant struggle for the household resource to meet the needs of the members of the household, and children and young people can lack access to sufficient food, adequate heating and clothing and, at times, appropriate accommodation. The Poverty and Education Network was founded in 2014 and has a national and international perspective on the impact of poverty on school education for children and young people. The Network has forged effective working relationships with many of the University providers of Education (and other subject areas) and external bodies such as Scottish Government researchers and NGOs. In recent years, one of the main aims of the research conducted by members of the Poverty and Education Network has been to uncover ‘hidden poverty’. This refers to forms of poverty that affect children and young people that are not known, or less well-known. This work includes, for example, inequalities in access to music education in Scotland (Wilson et.al., 2020). Much of the research by members of the Network, has been presented in the two symposia that we, as a group, present at the annual SERA conference and in some shared publications (McKinney et. al., 2020; McKinney et al., 2023). In this short article we examine some of the research within three periods of time: pre-Covid-19; Covid-19 and post-Covid-19. We justify this on the grounds that the effects of Covid-19 (and world-wide economic crisis) has increased levels of poverty, and this has had a serious impact on many aspects of society and, most notably, school education.

### **Pre-Covid-19**

Covid-19 disrupted almost all aspects of the social, professional, educational and economic spheres of life, as well as having a major effect on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of many people. As needs to be pointed out repeatedly, poverty and the impact of poverty affected many children and young people in the pre-Covid-19 era. One major issue was food poverty, or food insecurity. This was evidenced by the number of children and young people who were eligible for free school meals (beyond the universal provision of school meals for children in the lower years of primary schools in Scotland). One of the deficiencies of the free school meal provision: the lack of free meals during extended holiday periods, had been identified and was beginning to be addressed in parts of the UK. The increase in food poverty was further evidenced by the necessity for free breakfast clubs in schools for the most deprived children and the increasing rise in demand for assistance from foodbanks across the UK and

(Crawford et. al., 2016; Graham et. al., 2017). The Trussell Trust, the largest group of Foodbanks in the UK, recorded a rise in the number of food parcels distributed from 0.3 million in 2012-2013 to 1.9 million in the immediate pre-Covid period in 2019-2020 (Pratt, 2023). As shocking as these figures from the Trussell Trust are, there are also many independent food banks (supermarkets, community centres, churches, synagogues, mosques) throughout the UK, and the overall uptake of food parcels will be much higher, but difficult to calculate. An interesting focus of research in Glasgow, conducted by members of the Network, has been the successful ‘mentoring’ of young people from working class and lower-income households as they prepared for public exams (Wilson et. al., 2014; Wilson & Hunter, 2023). These young people were mentored by (predominantly) retired middle-class professionals. The aim was to support these young people in acquiring the appropriate forms of social and cultural capital required to access and adapt to Higher Education.

### **Covid-19**

Forms of poverty that had been identified pre-Covid were exacerbated during the pandemic. One of the troubling yet ironic effects of Covid-19 was that this period also served to illuminate some hidden forms of poverty that affect children and young people. This was troubling because these hidden forms of poverty were quite prevalent but less well known. This was ironic because forms of poverty that were once hidden are uncovered, even in unusual circumstances, and there are opportunities to intervene and support the children and young people who are affected. Covid-19 served to promote a greater awareness of the digital divide, the situation of young carers and the increase in food poverty (McKendrick & Campbell, 2020; Treanor & Troncoso, 2023). A greater public awareness of the digital divide, or digital poverty emerged as it became clear that not all children and young people were able to engage in online learning and teaching in a consistent and effective way. This was due to some, or all, of the following issues: (1) access to devices; (2) learning space; (3) connectivity; (4) digital literacy and (5) parental engagement (McKinney et al., 2023). Another issue that received greater attention was the challenges faced by young carers in the UK. Young carers are children and young people who are below 18, or are 18 and remain in school, who care for a family member, or members, or a friend (ME WE Young Carers, 2022). The caring can be for adults or siblings and the adults can suffer from illness, have a disability, a mental health condition or suffer from drug or alcohol addiction or related health problems. The young carers often belong to households that have limited income. During periods of restrictions and lockdowns, the young carers had to assume greater caring responsibilities, as Social Service support decreased. Further, they were unable to attend school (a respite from caring duties) and connect with friends which led to a deterioration in the mental health of many young carers. As regards the rise in food poverty, the Trussell Trust recorded an increase in distribution of food parcels in 2020-2021 to 2.6 million although there was a dip in uptake in 2021-2022.

### **Post-Covid-19**

While there continues to be some debate about a ‘post-Covid’ period, the effects of Covid have lessened considerably. However, in the last few years, there has been a cost-of-living crisis in

many parts of the world, including the UK. The uptake of food parcels reported by the Trussell Trust continued to rise and reached an all-time high of 3 million parcels in 2022-2023. More than a million of these food parcels were distributed for children. Although uniform poverty predated Covid-19, it became more pressing in the immediate post-Covid period as research revealed that there were inconsistencies in the amount of the school clothing grant and the eligibility criteria in Scotland (Shanks, 2022; Shanks and McKinney, 2022). Post Covid-19, some school uniform banks were insufficiently stocked to meet the post lockdown demands. Further, there has been an increased uptake in uniform banks in the cost-of-living crisis since 2022. One of the issues that will have to be explored is the extent to which the restrictions and lockdowns that were precipitated by Covid-19 violated the rights of children and young people, albeit inadvertently, and threatened their health. The limited access to school and school closures prevented children from accessing free school meals throughout the world. While these rights were violated (arguably) to protect other rights, the implications of the lockdowns meant that food security for many children and young people was jeopardised. While remedial measures were introduced in many places, this does raise serious questions about the precarity of the dependence on the school as the locus of free meals.

Rural poverty and the higher cost of living in rural areas were, and remain, a serious challenge. The cost of food and transport fuel are high and living costs are typically higher than in urban areas (Glass & Atterton, 2022). In the post-Covid period there is a greater focus on the students in Further and Higher Education. There are currently issues about the effects of the cuts in recruitment to Further Education Colleges in Scotland and the very real possibility of a more limited curriculum being offered to students in these Colleges (Rocks and Hamilton, 2024). This will have an impact on widening participation in university for students from the most deprived areas. Another urgent, and under-researched, issue is the impact of poverty on students in Higher Education in the UK. Around a quarter of students are experiencing food poverty and are unable to afford other necessities. This is having a detrimental effect on the mental health of many students and affecting their studies (Russell Group Students' Unions, 2023).

If you would wish to know more about the work of the Poverty and Education Network or participate in the activities of the Network, please contact Professor Stephen McKinney [Stephen.mckinney@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Stephen.mckinney@glasgow.ac.uk)

Stephen McKinney, Kevin Lowden, Angela Jaap and Stuart Hall are at the University of Glasgow.

Alastair Wilson and Katie Hunter are at the University of Strathclyde.

Rachel Shanks, Dean Robson, Peter Mtika, Lindsay MacDougall, Archie Graham and Kirsten Darling-McQuistan are at the University of Aberdeen.

Lio Moscardini is at the Royal Conservatoire, Glasgow.

John McKendrick is at Caledonian University.

Kat Lord is at Queen Margaret University.

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## **Inclusive Education in Scotland: Reflections on current status and implications for future research**

**Lisa McAuliffe, University of the West of Scotland, [lisa.mcauliffe@uws.ac.uk](mailto:lisa.mcauliffe@uws.ac.uk)**

**Donna Dey, University of Dundee, [d.dev@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:d.dev@dundee.ac.uk)**

**Stella Mouroutsou, University of Stirling, [stella.mouroutsou@stir.ac.uk](mailto:stella.mouroutsou@stir.ac.uk)**

This is an important year for the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA) as we are celebrating our 50th anniversary in 2024, having made a remarkable journey of dedication and impact in the field of education. This is also the 30th anniversary of the Salamanca Statement which was a watershed moment for inclusive education. The Salamanca message that inclusive schools are ‘the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all’ (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix) has been reiterated through several UNESCO projects and reports, including Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasises that every learner matters and matters equally (UNESCO, 2017; Ainscow, 2024).

The Salamanca statement was adopted by many governments around the world and became the impetus for change in many education systems. In the Scottish context, the Salamanca statement paved the way for the ‘presumption of mainstreaming’ through the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc. Act (2000) and the Additional Support for Learning Act (2004). By stipulating that all children (unless exceptions apply) will attend their neighborhood school where they will receive any additional support, they need to enable them to participate fully in education, Scotland conveyed a commitment to inclusive education. This commitment has been reaffirmed through further policies, such as Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government, 2022), which highlights the importance of ensuring that all learners receive the right support at the right time, as well as legislation such as the Children and Young People Scotland Act (2014), which places greater emphasis on giving children and young people more autonomy and voice with respect to decision making about their support (Riddell & Carmichael, 2019).

These developments were accompanied by a culture shift in teacher education from a special needs agenda to a focus on rights-based inclusive education. In 2008, the Scottish Teacher Education Council (STEC) established a group to work towards embedding the principles of inclusion into all Scottish teacher education programmes. In 2009, the STEC inclusion group produced the National Framework for Inclusion, which was revised in 2012 and then again in 2021 in line with the refresh of the GTCS professional standards (SUIG, 2022; GTCS, 2021). The National Framework for Inclusion has become an important tool for the development of the knowledge and skills teachers need in order to help all learners flourish. The STEC Inclusion group, latterly renamed Scottish Universities Inclusion Group (SUIG), continues to work with student teachers, teachers and other stakeholders, including the SERA Inclusive

Education Network, to ensure that the principles of inclusion inform and shape educational policy and practice.

A growing body of research highlights positive developments in the area of inclusive education in Scotland. Since its inception in 2016, the SERA Inclusive Education Network has showcased some of this research, including work on teacher agency for inclusion (Pantic et. al., 2020), and the ‘Seeing Me, Seeing You’ project (Jones & Uytman, 2022) which focuses on how toys depicting disability can be used in the classroom to positively influence children’s responses to disabled people. However, alongside these encouraging developments, persistent challenges are also being reported. A recent review of Additional Support for Learning (ASL) has indicated that provision is ‘fragmented, inconsistent and [...] over-dependent on committed individuals’ (Morgan, 2020, p. 63). This aligns with Riddell and Carmichael’s (2019) findings about the gap between the rhetoric of policy and the reality of practice.

Whilst we know that there are many committed and dedicated teachers in our schools using innovative pedagogies to enable all learners to thrive, their commitment and dedication cannot overshadow the continued need for substantial investment to ensure that the right of children and young people with ASN to be included is guaranteed (McAllister & Riddell, 2019). We are writing this paper knowing the current state of the challenges facing Scottish education, particularly when there are continued cuts to the funding that is available for public services. However, without investment it can be very difficult to realise the inclusion aspirations of policy and legislation.

While we recognise the need for investment in inclusive education, we are also mindful of other factors that have an impact on schools’ and teachers’ capacity to include all learners. This is a good time to revisit our values and examine how we are working to develop inclusive practice at all levels of our education system (Morgan, 2020). For teacher educators, this means continuing to embed learning around inclusion, equity and social justice to better prepare teachers for working in diverse classrooms (Cochran-Smith & Keefe, 2022). This should involve opportunities to consider the impact of societal injustices on education while questioning assumptions about children’s capacity for learning based on socially constructed notions of ability and individual characteristics such as cultural, ethnic and social background (Kennelly & Mouroutsou, 2020; McGillicuddy & Devine, 2020; Swanson et al. 2017). It also involves supporting teachers to develop inclusive philosophies and pedagogies (Aisncow et al, 2019) that will enable them to reach all learners. In doing so, we should also promote teachers’ understanding of the ‘dilemma of difference’ (Artiles, 1998) to help them approach learning and teaching in ways that support learners with ASN without marginalising them (Florian, 2014). Furthermore, by extending learning of inclusion through a rights-based approach, we can commit to preparing teachers who understand the value of learners’ voice(s) and see this as a key part of inclusive practice.

Morgan (2020) suggested the development of partnerships to explore innovative pedagogies that may support all teachers working with learners with ASN. Research can be central to this. One of the concerns that often crop up in discussions about inclusive education is teachers’ lack of confidence to meet the diverse needs of students in their classrooms. Some studies refer

to it as lack of preparedness and recommend that teacher education should do more to prepare teachers for inclusive education (Ballantyne et. al., 2022; Ferriday & Cantali, 2020; Ravet, 2018; Wilson et. al., 2023). However, a key aim of teacher education programmes across Scotland is to help student teachers become ‘agents of social justice and inclusion’ (Pantic & Florian, 2015). Central to our work is a focus on promoting a sense of purpose, commitment, and a culture of reflexivity that can facilitate understanding of and responsiveness to context-specific needs (Pantic & Florian, 2015). Arguably, it would be unrealistic to suggest that at the end of initial teacher education, teachers’ professional learning is complete. Teaching is a lifelong process of learning how to meet learners’ needs. This learning starts in initial teacher education but continues in school through reflection and collaboration with colleagues and learners. Teacher educators can be part of this process. Through research partnerships with schools, they can engage teachers and learners as co-researchers and work towards co-creating evidence-based solutions for the challenges they face.

Furthermore, such partnerships between teacher educators and schools can become fertile ground for co-creation of content that can be included in our teacher education programmes to ensure that they remain responsive to schools’ evolving needs. Whilst the Framework for Inclusion (SUIG, 2022) is used within teacher education across Scotland as a reflective tool, it remains unclear whether this valuable resource is being used in practice (Barnett et. al, 2015). School based participatory research (Lau & Stille, 2014) can help us identify how to optimise its use and impact.

As we are celebrating SERA’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we are looking to the future with a sense of optimism and responsibility. The principles of inclusion are central to legislation and policy in Scottish Education, and considerable progress has been made since the Salamanca statement called for the provision of quality education for all in the neighborhood school. However, efforts to ensure that all learners are present, participating, achieving and supported (Scottish Government, 2019), are undermined by challenges. Insufficient funding is a key challenge and needs to be addressed because investment in education is investment in the future. An equally important challenge is teachers’ lack of confidence in meeting all the needs in the classroom, particularly high intensity and complex needs. Teacher education in Scotland has demonstrated commitment to inclusion by making it a central focus in all teacher education programmes across Scottish Universities. However, we recognise that, when teachers are in the classroom, there may be situations when the application of the knowledge and skills they have learnt in their teacher education programme is not straightforward. Research can help us identify the reasons for this and develop appropriate solutions. However, for this research to make a difference we need to engage teachers and learners as co-researchers. Establishing research partnerships between teacher educators and schools and conducting school based participatory research should be a priority in the research agenda for inclusive education in Scotland. We hope that, before too long, the SERA Inclusive Education Network will be in a position to host events sharing findings from this type of research and highlighting its contribution to improving outcomes for children and young people in Scottish schools.

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