



# CREATIVE APPROACHES TO CURRICULUM

How can children and young people  
be prepared for life in our uncertain world?

*effe seminar*

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH, MAY 2016

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## REPORT

Education leaders from across Scotland and from Wales, England, Denmark and Germany met in Edinburgh in early May to explore creative approaches to organising the curriculum in order to best meet the needs of children and young people in our fast-changing and uncertain world. The event, which was organised by the European Forum for Freedom in Education (EFFE), followed on from last year's EFFE Symposium on *Improving Social Equity through Education*.

**Fiona Carnie** opened the seminar on behalf of EFFE and drew attention to the key themes from last year's event which recognised that:

- there is a need to create inclusive and supportive environments for learning which are not just about academic achievement but which meet the needs of the whole child
- teachers must be respected and valued - and given opportunities to collaborate
- how schools are organised is crucial: there is a need for greater professional autonomy and more distributed forms of leadership (involving students and parents)
- reform is a slow and complex process – it is early days in the Scottish context

**Professor Graham Donaldson** of Glasgow University who was influential in the development of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence and who has recently completed a review of Welsh education, was the first speaker and he talked about *Ambition and Curriculum Reform*. He referred to the recent OECD review of Scottish education which acknowledges that Scotland is well-placed educationally and that the Curriculum for Excellence sets the right agenda for the future. The report recognises however that Scotland is only '...at the end of the beginning' of the reform process and that the opportunity to build on achievements made so far must not be lost.

Professor Donaldson posited that education is not the same as qualifications and that we need to reflect on how to create space for learning and teaching that is engaging. He called for a shift in focus away from what children should be learning to what children should become. Educational reform has implications for what it means to be a teacher too and he talked about the need to move from a training paradigm to a learning paradigm for teachers

in order that they can respond to the challenges they face. Less prescription and more collaboration are needed as well as rigorous accountability.

One theme, which was repeated later on, was the tension that exists between ambition and the everyday reality of learners' experiences. The challenge in Scotland (and further afield) will be to close the gaps and raise standards without compromising longer-term ambition.

**Kari Jørgensen** (from Denmark), **Mike Davies** and **Lesley James** (both from the UK) all spoke about their involvement with schools and innovative projects which focus on different ways of organising the curriculum to engage learners. They each talked about the importance of making learning relevant to the world beyond school and to children's experiences. They focused on the skills and competences that young people need to develop in our 21<sup>st</sup> century, globalised world. The emphasis must be on learning rather than teaching; on the primacy of relationships and the recognition that we must create schools that children want to go to. Mike and Lesley both talked about schools in areas of deprivation where the development of new and inspiring approaches has been key to engaging young people and the local community. It is clear that in order to improve social equity and raise attainment across the board, education must be recast to meet the holistic needs of children.

The seminar concluded with a contribution from **Alan Armstrong**, Strategic Director for School Years at Education Scotland who talked about the work that Education Scotland is doing to support the development of creativity and digital learning across Scotland.

Time was given during the event to discussion and participants found it valuable to have the opportunity to reflect on principles and practices with colleagues. A degree of frustration was expressed at the gap between the aspirations of the Curriculum for Excellence and the reality on the ground. Indeed in organising this event EFFE had been unable to identify a Scottish secondary school that was able or prepared to share their experience of implementing the curriculum in an innovative way. There appears to be resistance to change in a number of quarters – and there was a plea for more support for innovation. An observation that was made by more than one speaker was that accountability frameworks should not be used by schools as an excuse not to innovate.

The seminar was rooted in the Scottish context, but participants from Wales felt that the day's discussions opened up a host of possibilities as Wales embarks on a new chapter of curriculum reform. As for colleagues from Denmark, they have considerable freedom to meet the needs of their students and were somewhat surprised at the challenges faced by schools in the UK.

It is EFFE's hope that this event will embolden schools and organisations in their efforts to find creative ways forward in the knowledge that others who have done this have reaped significant rewards in terms of improving outcomes for all students.

**Fiona Carnie**

**EFFE**

[www.effe-eu.org](http://www.effe-eu.org)

## **SOME FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS**

*An excellent day. Refreshing to be able to engage with new approaches.*

**Valuable opportunity for discussion with colleagues from other countries**

**Great opportunity to speak to colleagues about their practice and how they have overcome curriculum challenges.**

**Really interesting day which will support our thinking on skills development underpinning our whole curriculum**

**Great opportunity to reflect on principles and practice**

**Enjoyable and useful day. Great to hear from and learn from others.**

**I feel more confident to take forward innovative, student-centred approaches**

**Today's seminar has opened up a whole host of possibilities as Wales embarks on a new and exciting chapter of curriculum reform.**