

The depoliticisation and politicisation of Scottish education

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Across the world governments are engaged in a drive to ensure that education systems are not only ensuring quality education, but that they are seen to be ensuring this. To this end, many employ measures of educational attainment in the drive to ensure 'rigour' and 'efficiency'. Such endeavours employ mechanisms that set out to ensure that the collection of quantitative data enables the objectification of education through seen to be dispassionate means; PISA is but one example of the way in such endeavours are publically lauded and applauded. What this entails are drives to both corporatise education and specify not only the ends to which data should be put but the mechanisms of collection as well. Notably, in some jurisdictions such moves have gone hand in hand with directives which seek to give more power to schools and school leaders and fewer powers to central organising elements such as local authorities.

In Scotland, UK, such moves are in the process of being enacted. Two missives from government seek to both deploy data as a means to observe and drive improvement, and release head teachers and the like from the 'shackles' of collective control. Whilst the former has already occurred the latter is currently being consulted upon. This governance review seeks to shift responsibility for key areas of education away from the collective responsibility of local authorities to the individual responsibilities of schools and school leaders. This governance shift seeks to release such individuals from the political machinations that exist in local government so that they might better enact policies to drive up improvements in test scores and so reduce the gap between rich and poor. In one sense, then, they are an attempt at the depoliticisation of education: they attempt to obviate the need for democratic control from the locality and shift this to the site of the individual school. However, concurrent with this it is evident that such moves are reminiscent of changes in educational governance seen in England which, despite the rhetoric of 'freeing up' school leaders, have actually in many ways ensured that other groups have control of the agenda alongside missives from central government. In this respect they are attempts to politicise education; the alterations seek to shift control to the centre under the illusion of increased agency for school staff.

This paper discusses the ways in which Scottish education policy is currently both depoliticising and politicising education. It will explore the ways in which government edict and consultation is shifting the locus of control away from democratically accountable local institutions (a depoliticisation) towards command and control from the centre (politicisation).

The paper uses positioning theory to examine the ways in which language and action are deployed to sell such moves; the paper examines the Discourses (Gee, 2012) that abound in the drive to improve education through the alteration of roles at the local and national level. It outlines the changes that have come into force as well as the consultations currently being undertaken. It notes the positions held by those currently in national government and the ways that they have outlined and justified their proposals. In summary it signals the ways in which the depoliticisation of education is being enacted whilst at the same time it demonstrates the ways and means by which Scottish education is being politicised.

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