

How I discovered Scotland's teachers really are amazing

by Prof. Joe Goldblatt

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Last year, as a retired university professor, I volunteered in dozens of Scottish state primary and secondary schools from Westray in the Orkney Islands to the Scottish Borders. In each of these fantastic schools, I met hundreds of teaching staff who, on a daily basis, are delivering high-quality education that is underpinned with selfless compassion for their students.

It should not be surprising that the Office of National Statistics recently found that the Scottish people are the most highly educated in Europe with 47 per cent completing further and higher education, which is 16 per cent above the European Union average.

The American educational philosopher John Dewey was among the first to understand the amazing phenomena of the Scottish education system. He once stated that "if we teach today's students as we taught yesterday's, we rob them of tomorrow."

In my many observations of many different types of educational institution with Scotland, I have been greatly impressed with the consistency in terms of commitment to preparing our students for the world of tomorrow by embedding today's principles of curiosity, imagination, innovation and, of course, hard work.

'Creme de la creme'

The revered image of the Scottish school teacher is perhaps best known internationally through the character created by the writer Muriel Spark in her novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Spark attended James Gillespie School in Edinburgh, which is now a state school. Her character famously told her young and impressionable students: "Little girls, I am in the business of putting old heads on young shoulders, and all my pupils are the creme de la creme. Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life!"

In 2019, reading scores in Scotland rose, according to the international Pisa study, while maths and science scores declined. These scores vary from year to year as evidenced in 2018 when Scottish maths and science scores were similar to average in the Pisa testing system, set up in 2000 among countries from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

I began my journey into the Scottish state school system through the development of a programme entitled Jewish Objects for Education in Scotland ([JOES Boxes](#)). This programme is sponsored by the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) and is designed to provide an overview of Judaism within the religious and moral education curriculum in our schools.

Respect and tolerance

SCoJeC developed 32 boxes, one for each local authority in Scotland, that include typical Jewish objects used for ritual, prayer and other purposes. Each of these boxes also includes a study guide for students and teachers. I visit several schools each year to talk about Jewish people and answer questions.

During the past three years of this programme, I have been greatly impressed with the commitment that our teachers and headteachers have for making certain that their schools are more than places for merely transmitting information.

In my experience, the majority of teachers I have met are committed to developing future citizens for our country and the world who will possess deeply embedded skills and traits of respect, tolerance and a commitment to creating a better world.

For example, in one local primary school, I met a P5 teacher who invested her own significant personal funds and also solicited donations from others to create a meditation garden on the school grounds to remember students and staff who had passed away, as well as provide a quiet place for members of the school community to reflect and meditate. Her students painted dozens of rocks for this garden and each one contained an inspiring thought such as “peace”, “tolerance”, “respect” and “love”.

Life-changing

In recent months, I have volunteered for another excellent programme created by The Super Power Agency. This innovative scheme delivers writing support for secondary school students. The quality of the writing and the depth of emotional intelligence demonstrated by the students greatly impressed me. I attribute their success directly to the devotion of the individual teacher at the front of each classroom. In each school I visit, I witness the seemingly boundless levels of commitment, encouragement and individual attention that is customised for each learner.

Our Scottish school staff have well earned our support and acknowledgement of the life-changing activities they are conducting each day. I have seen first-hand how they are producing positive outcomes whilst working under the constraints of limited time and financial resources.

Therefore, I encourage my fellow citizens to not only provide even more public support to ensure they receive all of the resources our Government may offer but also to consider serving as a volunteer. Because then you shall discover, as I have, why the Scottish education system is often referred to as one of the best in the world.

Professor Joe Goldblatt has been an educator for nearly 50 years. He recently retired from Queen Margaret University and is now professor emeritus of planned events. This article first appeared in [The Scotsman on 17 January 2020](#)