Discussion Group on impact on outcomes of Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority

Wednesday 5 October 2016

Background

1. The Committee agreed to meet a number of teachers who were visiting the Scottish Parliament on 5 October 2016 to discuss their experiences in relation to the work of Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). The group were met by two members of the Committee, James Dornan MSP (Convener) and Ross Greer MSP.

2. The group of teachers were a mix of primary and secondary teachers from across Scotland.

3. The group was asked a number of questions focusing on the impact that Education Scotland and the SQA had in their schools on the outcomes for pupils and teachers.

Education Scotland

Inspection

4. The group was asked about their experience of HMIE inspections and the short and long term effects of being inspected.

5. The teachers described how in their experience an impending inspection led to a flurry of activity for a short period to ensure that paperwork, preparation and the visual aspects of the school were to a standard for the inspector. These changes were considered transitory, unsustainable in the longer term and simply aesthetic. Inspectors therefore did not gain a real insight to how the school works.

6. Short term impacts of an inspection were largely regarded as negative by the group. Preparation required a great deal of work, was a distraction and was very stressful. The levels of stress of the teachers were also felt by pupils; in addition one teacher suggested that the fact that the school changes significantly and temporarily for an inspection undermines the confidence of pupils in the normal running of the school. The only positive in the short term identified was the feel-good factor of getting a positive report.

7. The teachers were asked specifically about the impact of inspection on the contribution to the success of individual teachers and learners. Some in the group suggested that some recommendations from inspections can lead to improvements in the school; an example given was around the openness of decision making of senior staff and communication within the school. However, feedback was considered to be neither timely nor specific enough to be of significant value.
8. Some considered inspection as a bureaucratic exercise. One contributor suggested that inspection has become largely redundant to the profession as teachers themselves employ reflective practice and focus on continuous improvement. The group was unable to provide examples of how the last inspection they had experienced had improved their or their colleagues’ performance.

9. The role of inspectors in supporting a world class curriculum in schools was questioned. The group felt that teachers have a realistic understanding of where they are in terms of delivering a world class curriculum and are in a good position to identify what steps are required to improve.

10. The independence of inspectors was welcomed. Some contributors suggested that HMIE’s national role in comparing schools across the country, especially in the absence of a national curriculum, was valuable in ensuring quality.

Guidance and advice

11. There were a small number of recently qualified teachers. They valued using Education Scotland’s guidance and advice when at university and agreed that it supported their practice. Since starting teaching they had less time to access the materials.

12. Others agreed that the advice and guidance was necessary and useful but they lacked the time to access it. In addition, guidance was difficult to locate quickly. Knowing that the resources were there if required was a comfort to the teachers.

13. The teachers indicated that advice and guidance is communicated to them by senior staff and can lead to changes in schools’ practice. Particularly, a move towards benchmarks within CfE was welcomed. In more general terms the potential using Education Scotland’s guidance and advice to support good leadership in schools was recognised, although it was considered somewhat dependent on the individual school leader.

14. The teachers were positive about the impact of Education Scotland’s teaching resources and pedagogical advice on their performance, on the limited occasions they had to access it. Some suggested that using those resources to reflect on their practice was particularly helpful.

15. The group talked about the benefits of Education Scotland’s guidance on providing a consistent approach across Scotland, albeit that differing local authorities will filter and emphasise different aspects of Education Scotland’s work.

16. Having a similar language and access to similar documents helped to facilitate conversations with teachers from other schools and local authorities across Scotland. Again this was considered helpful in reflecting on their teaching and adopting others’ practice.
Scottish Qualifications Authority

17. The group was a mix of primary and secondary teachers. Most of the contributions on the SQA were from secondary school teachers.

Links to the curriculum

18. The group was first asked about the alignment between SQA assessments and CfE. Particularly in terms of exams, the teachers were not clear on the links between national outcomes and the scripts. One teacher reported that a senior official at the SQA was content for an exam to be a “memory test” rather than assessing the broader skills and outcomes of the pupils. This creates, they argued, a disconnection between the CfE and assessment.

19. The teachers thought that schools remained too focused on exams and assessment and there had not been a cultural shift to valuing outcomes. Broad General Education (BGE) was considered by the group to be vital, however their experience was that schools often focused much more on the senior phase.

20. One teacher indicated that there had been a regressive step from more formative assessments to more summative assessments, i.e. from being used to monitor students’ learning to influence and improve teaching and learning to more of an evaluation or summation of students’ learning.

21. Some of the teachers were assessors or markers for the SQA. Their view was that Unit Assessments could have been successful in assessing pupils’ outcomes, however they were inconsistently utilised and evidenced and added to a busy assessment schedule.

Stress

22. One theme that surfaced in the conversation several times was the stress that children and teachers suffered due to an over-emphasis on assessment and exams. Particularly, the change from BGE in S3 to a heavy examination workload in S4 was thought to be a difficult transition for children.

23. When taking internal preliminary examinations into account, the assessment schedule for pupils was considered to be too onerous for pupils. Teachers reported that they had seen significantly increased numbers of children taking time off school due to stress.

24. The teachers argued that the rate of change of examinations has been too fast. Which added to the stress experienced by teachers and that this can be transferred to pupils.

25. One concern raised is that exams could become harder as a result of the removal of Unit Assessments which could have the result of displacing, rather than removing, workload and stress from administration on Unit Assessments to preparation for exams.
Communication

26. The communication of the SQA was not considered to be of a high standard. The teachers thought the messages provided by the SQA were inconsistent and lacked rationale. The teachers suggested that the SQA’s “confusion” was disheartening. Where the teachers had sought advice and clarification from the SQA, they reported that they were unable to obtain the help they required. This meant that they were unclear what was expected of them and their pupils and so they, in turn, could not provide clarity to the learners.

27. The teachers felt that the SQA was aloof and the relationship between the profession and the SQA had become antagonistic. One teacher suggested that the profession did not respect the SQA and she went on to say that teachers and the SQA should work better together to deliver better outcomes for children.

Breadth of qualifications

28. The breadth of qualifications offered by the SQA was considered to be good and relevant to learners and the Scottish economy.