

Education, Children and Young People Committee

Scottish Attainment Challenge inquiry

Informal engagement with teachers

St Roch's High School, Glasgow

Monday 25 April 2022

Note of meeting

Purpose of the session

This engagement session was arranged to allow Committee members to hear directly from teachers about their experiences of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

The Committee agreed to take evidence from case-study local authority areas involving witnesses from primary schools, secondary schools, and local authority representatives from the selected areas.

The Scottish Attainment Challenge is intended to provide significant autonomy to local authorities and schools and there will be a multitude of approaches within localities. Local authorities are grouped regionally in 'Regional Improvement Collaboratives' (RIC). Scrutiny of the Scottish Attainment Challenge at the level of a RIC will allow the Committee to compare different local authorities and how they work together and with Education Scotland.

The Committee agreed that the West Partnership RIC, which consists of eight local authorities across the west of Scotland: East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Glasgow City, Inverclyde, North Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, and West Dunbartonshire, form the case study area for this inquiry. Thirty-five percent of Scotland's school population attend a West Partnership school. There are over 1000 nurseries, primary, secondary and special schools in the West Partnership, serving mainly urban but also many rural communities.

The teachers attending this event were from schools within the West Partnership Area.

Notes of meetings

The teachers split into three groups and notes were taken of each discussion. These notes are attached in the annexe.

Annexe: notes of group discussions

GROUP ONE: SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM MEMBERS

This group consisted of headteachers, depute headteachers, principal teachers and SAC staff based within local authorities. The group were drawn from across eight different local authority areas. The group was led by Kaukab Stewart MSP (Deputy Convener).

What has been working well?

Different models and strategies have been deployed in different local authority areas.

In one, SAC funding was focused on a group of schools, and used to build capacity within them, using experienced staff. This approach led to huge improvements.

Collaboration with other teachers, other schools, and also with the third sector has worked well. Several teachers highlighted the critical impact that family support workers had in their schools.

The impact of the last few years, through Covid and the cost of living crisis, has meant many young people and their families have experienced bereavement, been impacted by being away from school for extended periods, and experienced financial hardship. Additional services, such as the ones provided by family support workers, have been essential to help support these young people.

A headteacher from another area stated that, rather than staffing, their school had used Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) money to fund curriculum innovation / increase the quality of the service, which they thought was more sustainable. They also used the funding to pay for the 'Top up' and 'Reach' service for their pupils.

The group agreed that the SAC has been an overwhelmingly positive experience, allowing schools to make huge strides. Aspects praised by the group included—

- support from their local authorities, who provide strategic focus and vision;
- autonomy in how schools can spend their funding;
- support and challenge from local authorities to help schools to identify interventions that would work best for their own circumstances; and
- funding focused on additionality and Covid-19 recovery.

Several of the group agreed that, when compared with five years ago, there had been a noticeable increase in what schools can achieve and offer to their pupils.

Has it become part of the core funding expectation?

Several participants, who were in senior management roles in primary schools, were concerned about losing SAC funding and said that the cut to local authority funding would have a significant impact. One headteacher said that staffing is critical, and some positions are only possible because of this funding. A few headteachers

agreed that there was an element of panic setting in about what the next year would look like.

At this point, the Deputy Convener asked if the SAC and PEF had become part of the core funding expectation.

There was general agreement that core budgets should increase. However, the importance of continuing to target funding at specific areas and pupils who need more support was also noted.

Improvements – what could have been better?

There was a strong consensus that attainment is focused too narrowly, particularly in the press which looks at SQA exam results without considering what represents attainment and success. It can't only be measured in the results of National 4s, National 5s and Highers etc

There was agreement that aiming for five Highers is not for everyone. There are other, better, more suitable options; however a teacher encouraging a pupil into a foundation apprenticeship, because it is the best option for them, does so knowing that in such a narrow view, it won't help the reputation of a school in a league table. The teachers agreed that this can be really disheartening and frustrating.

There was strong agreement that there should be more parity between vocational skills / academic courses.

Do teachers have an impact on the choices made?

There was a strong consensus that class teachers do have an impact on the choices made in how to spend PEF.

One headteacher explained that their school improvement plan is based on work streams led by class teachers and sometimes even newly qualified teachers.

Although broad headings are set by the local authority, it is the community that shapes the priorities through mechanisms such as parent councils.

The group also agreed on the importance of involving young people in the shaping of the school improvement plans.

PEF is used to support interventions, to address the priorities identified in the improvement plan.

The Deputy Convener asked how the group, and their schools, were supported by Regional Improvement Collaboratives [RICs].

Views differed across local authorities and whether primary or secondary level.

For one participant, from a primary school, participation in RICs events required a disproportionate level of time/effort in comparison to the benefit but there was a strong agreement that schools can improve by working / talking to other schools. Other participants, mainly from secondary schools, agreed that RICs were really useful to link to / share experience with schools in other local authorities, particularly if you don't have other schools with similar contexts in your local authority / cluster. Examples cited included e-Sgoil, Easter schools and leadership programmes. A recent example of an online session on a Saturday, facilitated by the West Partnership RIC, which 390 teachers attended, was also highlighted.

How do you work with other teachers / schools?

One participant explained that Covid-19 has, in some very understandable ways, led to schools looking inward, as they were literally in their own bubble, and even bubbles within bubbles, as teachers and pupils were broken down into even smaller groups of year group or even class bubbles.

There was general agreement that the needs highlighted by, and as a result of, Covid have required more flexibility. Therefore, schools have had to update their improvement plans / focus to reflect their new and different specific needs.

Several contributors felt that learning communities / clusters within a local authority are good to allow colleagues across a number of schools to share information and support each other – but within learning communities there will be a disparity in the make-up and size of schools and they can have very different local contexts.

One participant explained that their school had been put into a grouping of schools, which all had similar contexts. They said that they found this to be very helpful and it gave them confidence that they could go to others in that grouping for advice, as they would have faced comparative issues.

In terms of development, the Scottish Learning Festival was specifically mentioned. Several of the group highlighted how good it could be but noted that it was difficult for classroom teachers to get the chance to go.

Accountability of the funding

The group was asked how manageable it is to provide the data required as part of the process.

The strong consensus was that headteachers are supported by Education Scotland and their local authorities to make it part of the normal process, for example they receive training in how to complete evaluative statements.

There was strong agreement that it is worth it for the impact that it has in the school.

It was highlighted by one participant, however, that sometimes teachers are being asked to report on the effectiveness of interventions or to choose an intervention

without a clear idea as to how it may impact other actions that they are already taking or estimate how effectively a suite of innovations will interact together.

It was noted that curriculum reform could offer an opportunity to do things differently as needing to provide the data on PEF spending might be worth it, but is there a better way to do it?

Impact of Covid-19

There was consensus that Covid has had a significant impact on many aspects of school life including health and wellbeing and attainment, with the poorest being disproportionately affected.

Participants highlighted some impacts of the pandemic in their schools. Examples included—

- one school experienced a 44% loss in attainment
- another school had experienced 160% more unplanned interventions by the school's nurture team

One participant explained that, in the school, there was high levels of engagement online but stated that engagement is not the same as learning. Schools have needed more staff, to help support children adjust to being back in school.

The readiness of children to learn has been impacted by the pandemic. It has had an impact on relationships which are hugely important. Schools need systems in place to catch children who are being impacted by the disruption in their learning.

It was also highlighted that, in general, children who have English as an additional language have a significant need and require more support now that they are back in the classroom. They often didn't have support at home to participate in home learning, as their parents were unable to fully understand the materials and assignments.

Several expressed their frustration at the loss in attainment after making head way before the Covid disruption. Given the considerable impact of Covid, any expectation of improvement in attainment, from March 2020 compared to now, is completely unrealistic. In the circumstances, maintaining levels is a great success.

There was general agreement that the pandemic increased parental engagement. It is really important to continue this and to encourage more active involvement.

There was general agreement that the additional funding that schools had access to, and the autonomy to spend on what was required for their own circumstances allowed schools to respond to Covid-19. Several participants agreed that they are not sure how schools would have been able to cope to raise / invest in digital or health and wellbeing without it.

There was also consensus that poverty causes the attainment gap so education can't solve it on its own. However, what schools can do is to create aspiration, for

example to have a job, have skills, for a child whose family may have experienced unemployment over multiple generations. There was agreement that it is important for children to see that there are different paths to take, different ways to achieve, so that they can find one that suits them best. Creating an alternative curriculum for children with significant additional needs was cited as an example of this.

Views on the changes to the SAC funding model

Several participants, whose schools were likely to see their SAC funding decrease, said that they understand the reasons for the change, but said that the answer isn't to take away money from the schools / areas that had and needed it, but to add more money into the fund.

One participant stated 'It's not our money, it's the children's and their families' and it is the responsibility of headteachers to know what their pupils need, and it is a huge decision to take to ensure that they have what they need. The gravity of that is in itself a check on how the money is spent.

Several teachers said that they worried about that impact of a cut to their SAC funding, with a concern about the possible impact of their staffing complement.

There is concern for some that while they will be able to keep their recovery teachers, owing to an increase in the baseline funding, those teachers may end up having to be used to cover non-contact time, when that is increased.

There can also be issues when needing to rely on supply for short term cover as there is a lack of supply teachers available and it can lead to a lack of consistency in the classroom for the children. The relationships between pupils and teachers are so important so instability can really affect the children.

The importance of relationships between schools was also highlighted. Some schools have employed staff to help aid transitions of pupils between nursery and primary; between primary and secondary; and between secondary and their next step, whether college, university, training or work.

Implementation of PEF

There was strong agreement that headteachers are supported, by their local authorities and Education Scotland, to take the financial decisions involved with PEF. Some of the supports mentioned by the group included—

- access to a finance officer
- access to an equity team
- access to a data analysis officer, who assist headteachers as they look at data on the interventions that have been used in other schools etc.
- access to the focus tool, which provides information on interventions, including from peers.

The group agreed that the advice from these officials was useful.

There was also agreement that in having to justify and account for your choices, headteachers were more confident of those choices, and felt that this part of the process acted as a safety net.

Engagement with parents / carers on PEF

There was consensus that a report would be prepared for the parent council, which explains what funding has been used for previously, and offering suggestions as to what the funding could be used for next and asking for their input.

The group agreed that discussions on the cost of the school day were widespread and, in one school, it was the pupils who took ownership of their school's cost of the school day project. The result was accessible and considered.

In terms of engagement, there was consensus that - in many ways - Covid broke down barriers between schools and their families and increased the presence of schools within the local community, as they were one of the only places that remained open.

It was also said that Covid showed the interconnected nature of poverty and ability to learn. SAC and PEF can be used to ensure that a child can go to school fed and clothed etc, rather than solely focused on ensuring that they get into a Higher class. Children being in school more comfortably, and more able to learn, is a win.

Schools take their community / supporting role seriously, for example by sending out communication to parents highlighting resources that they are entitled to, to ensure that they know when there is something there for them; that it isn't charity. Such communication needs to be quite explicit.

Digital devices

Experiences differed in relation to digital devices. One participant said that, in their local authority, they got everything that they needed in terms of devices, however, parents were not upskilled to help their child to learn online.

Another participant, in another local authority, said that they didn't have the equipment that they needed. There was a variety of devices and multiple technical challenges including devices which couldn't work with the necessary platforms.

In that case, the hub was a great relief and that worked for a lot of their children. Some education hubs were very large because of the number of pupils with additional support needs.

Also, it was noted that, in some areas, attainment actually went up as their parents, e.g. lawyers etc, were at home and more actively engaged in their children's education.

There was a general appreciation of what digital devices could provide; however, the following issues were raised by participants—

- Some parents need / want physical rather than digital resources, and schools responded / respond to this;
- Some parents have questions / concerns as to how the device is maintained, who is responsible for that and what is the shelf life of the device?
- It isn't just a question of whether someone has a device, but how do they use them? What level of digital literacy does the child or their family have?
- Some children who were given a device did not have a broadband connection.
- Some devices were abused.

Schools tried to make sure that, on return to school, young people had what they required. In one school, however, it was highlighted that 9% of SIMD 1-3 children still need a device.

It was noted that different local authorities have different processes when distributing devices. In one, a parent / carer only has to sign a note, in order to receive the device. In others, proof of ID or address is required. That requirement is a blocker for some so the school can't get the device to the child.

GROUP 2: CLASSROOM TEACHERS

This group consisted of four classroom teachers from different local authorities. The group was led by Stephen Kerr MSP (Convener) and also included Stephanie Callaghan MSP.

Teachers' experiences

To start each of the teachers highlighted the additional work they were personally involved in which supported pupils from families affected by deprivation.

Use of PEF to support a deprived rural community

One teacher from a primary school in a deprived rural community explained that PEF was being utilised for several purposes. This included: paying for additional wellbeing and mental health support; bringing third sector support into the school; additional staffing; providing opportunities for enrichment opportunities, such as trips and so on.

Numeracy intervention in Primary Schools

The group heard from a teacher who was seconded to a post to provide support to teachers in mathematics and numeracy teaching across a number of primary schools. The training was developed and is funded by the local authority and seeks to build the capacity of teachers to improve numeracy and literacy outcomes. The project was focused on schools with higher levels of deprivation and lower achievement in numeracy and mathematics.

The fact that the support came from a fellow teacher helped to ensure a positive reception from the schools in the project. The project was able to show demonstrable improvement in attainment and this also helped to ensure that teachers saw it as a credible and useful intervention.

Another teacher in the group was aware of this project and similar work in their local authority was being undertaken using the same model.

Secondary School enrichment programme

The third teacher explained that she is leading an enrichment programme of events and activities on a Friday afternoon in a secondary school. She encouraged and organised teachers to volunteer their time to support activities such as 'Rock School', sports clubs, entrepreneur clubs, photography, and much more. She also worked with local clubs and services to bring them in to provide activities. In addition, Friday afternoon is also an opportunity for employability and careers support.

The teacher explained that through subtle targeting and conversations, she was able to encourage greater attendance from pupils from more deprived areas and care-experienced young people.

Around a third of the staff of the school volunteer in the programme and it is also supported by the work of senior pupils. An important aspect is that school transport

is available at both the end of the school day and after the Friday afternoon activities, further supporting participation.

The programme was started as part of the work to recover from the pandemic. The school identified that some pupils may be nervous about returning to school and may need additional support in building friendships. This programme of activities was, in part, aimed supporting young people in this way.

The teacher identified a number of outcomes in this work—

- Pupils enjoying the activities and building relationships with each other and staff;
- Improved morale and ethos in the school;
- Pupils learning additional skills which are complementary to skills required in the classroom;
- Improved engagement with learning and the school.

Reading Recovery

The fourth teacher explained that she practices Reading Recovery in her school. [UCL describes Reading Recovery](#) as—

“A literacy programme designed for the lowest achieving children aged around six that enables them to reach age-expected levels within 20 weeks.

“involves a short series of daily one-to-one lessons for 30 minutes with a specially trained teacher. Reading Recovery is different for every child, starting from what the child knows and what he/she needs to learn next. The focus of each lesson is to comprehend messages in reading and construct messages in writing, learning how to use letter and word detail fluently without losing focus on meaning and comprehension.”

The teacher explained that two senior teachers in her area had trained at UCL to develop their skills in this programme those teachers supported other colleagues to deliver it in schools. This support involved observation practices, feedback and reflection.

The teacher said that data had showed that the programme was effective and being able to quantify success gave the programme credibility with colleagues.

The teacher also stated that the skills and knowledge she and her colleagues had gained from the programme had enabled them to develop other programmes aimed at older primary children to support literacy.

Wider themes

A number of wider themes were identified through this conversation.

Networking

A key element of much of the discussion was on networking and sharing experiences and best practice. This could be part of the design of the programme (such as in the numeracy intervention) but it could also be more informal sharing of practice. The teachers said that there is now more opportunities and openness to collaborating with colleagues both within their local schools and local authorities and beyond (e.g. through RICs or Education Scotland's national networks).

The groups noted that greater familiarity using online meeting tools had supported more opportunities to collaborate and move knowledge around the education system.

Measuring Impact

As noted above, the availability of data which shows improvement in attainment was seen as important in ensuring credibility of the numeracy and literacy interventions described above. However, the group stressed that such measurables are not the only aspects of success. They noted the importance of more intangible outcomes – happiness, enjoyment, engagement and so on.

The group all took the view that short-term achievement or attainment measures should not be the sole measures of success.

Links to families

The group highlighted the importance of the family environment and the limits of what schools might be able to achieve to militate against the impacts of poverty. The group also noted both the importance and sometimes the difficulty of building positive relationships with parents.

The group argued for a holistic approach to supporting families. This included considering what barriers may exist to families accessing support, such as the bureaucracy in accessing clothing grants or free school meals offers.

Ownership of programmes or approaches

The teachers noted that they and their colleagues know their pupils and their pupils' contexts best. They also listen to and seek suggestions from their pupils. This knowledge means that they are well-placed to be involved in the design and delivery of programmes and to contribute to school improvement plans.

Through involvement in the specific programmes discussed, the teachers felt they had developed expertise which they could share with colleagues and support teaching practice across the school.

The teacher who supported the Friday activity programme explained that she ensured that any new staff and especially probationers were encouraged to contribute and develop their own activities. One teacher noted that being involved and taking ownership was unavoidable when working in a small school.

One aspect the group was not always clear upon was how programmes were being funded.

GROUP 3: CLASSROOM TEACHERS

This group consisted of four classroom teachers from different local authorities. The group was led by Graeme Dey MSP and Bob Doris MSP.

Decision Making

There was a strong consensus that one of the greatest strengths of PEF was the level of autonomy given to individual schools. All expressed that schools were best placed to make the decisions on how the money should be spent. A number of teachers told how clusters or 'family groups' of schools had been established. This allowed schools to draw on each other's approaches and to share learning in regard to the attainment challenge. All agreed that they were closely involved in the decision-making process and had reflective discussions with their headteachers about what had worked well – or did not work well – and that this informed improvement planning for the following year.

The ability to try new approaches, even if they were unsuccessful, was highly valued by all teachers in the group. One teacher stated that an approach of 'adopt, adapt, abandon' has been used quite often in their school. The teachers in the group also noted that parents and families of children were consulted in the planning process. One teacher said that it would be beneficial if schools were able to know further in advance what funding they would receive to enable more effective planning.

Measurement of Impact

There was a strong emphasis from the group about teachers being data informed. Several teachers in the group detailed their experiences of tracking attainment in their own classrooms, allowing them to reflect on the success of their practices in relation to closing the attainment gap. One teacher reflected that there had been some resistance to the focus on data, however. Some teachers felt that all children in their class should be treated equally and did not want to identify individual children as living in an SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) 1 or 2 area, or as recipients of free school meals. Nevertheless, within this group, there was a general agreement that being data informed had made them more effective teachers.

One teacher described an authority wide dashboard through which teachers and other staff could access data across all schools in the area. One teacher was keen to stress that this data told a story about each individual child and was not 'just numbers'. Being able to track data over a longer period of time was valued by all teachers in the group. By measuring both attainment and measures of health and wellbeing, the group all agreed with one teacher's assertion that the data revealed these were inextricably linked for children.

The teachers discussed working collaboratively with other schools to plan lessons and mark them together, creating consistent benchmarks for literacy and numeracy. All agreed that moderation is widely supported by teachers. One teacher reflected that having clear measurements to understand where children were in terms of attainment has been very beneficial.

All teachers in the group strongly expressed a need to go beyond measuring exam performance and other traditional indicators of attainment or success. All teachers in the group said that the definition of a 'positive destination' should be widened. For instance, one teacher noted that securing an apprenticeship should be viewed as positively as a place at a university. Others noted that there should be more of a focus on improvement as a whole rather than just measures of literacy and numeracy. One teacher said that some children may never meet those standards of literacy and numeracy but there is a need to recognise that a child may have made significant progress over their school career. As it stands, the current system of measurement does not recognise this. It was noted that achievement is difficult to quantify and measure but equally as important as attainment. There was a strong consensus that there is a need to find a way of celebrating and capturing children's achievements that are not necessarily academic.

Uses of Funding

Several of the teachers noted that PEF had been used to build the capacity of staff. One participant reflected that in the first year of PEF their school had used it to employ an art therapist and other initiatives they considered to be unsuccessful and 'fads'. Now, however, they felt that the resources had been used more effectively to employ more teachers and other support staff. Participants shared a number of other examples of how the funding had been used in their schools, with some being more successful than others. For instance, one school had employed a social worker for three days each week. This had been well received by families. Another example of the use of funding which a teacher felt had worked well was the employment of transition teachers who act as a bridge for children moving from primary to secondary school. One teacher noted that there was sometimes some conflict between primary and secondary schools and that transition teachers had helped to ease that.

Working in Partnership

The teachers all expressed a feeling that innovation was being driven at a school level and a local level, more broadly. They all felt it was very important to have partnerships with local organisations and other agencies. A number of teachers in the group shared their experiences of working in partnership with third sector organisations and other groups in the wider community. One teacher noted that those working for third sector organisations can have a different relationship with families than teachers can. The group were asked if they felt that the police had been supportive of schools. All teachers in the group agreed, particularly community police officers who often visited at their request to talk to classes about subjects such as social media. With that being said, one teacher noted that since the Covid-19 pandemic their school no longer received visits from community police officers, and this was a great loss to the children.

All teachers in the group expressed concern at the lack of capacity for CAHMS (Children's Mental Health Services) to deal with the increasing number of referrals being sought by parents. One teacher noted that in their area the waiting list was around 18 months to 2 years. All expressed a need for CAHMS to have additional funding. One teacher noted that PEF was used to support children in crisis for whom the waiting list was too long at CAHMS. One teacher also noted that they had trained some members of staff as mental health first aiders and they felt this had been a good use of the funding.

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

All teachers in the group strongly agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic has undone some of the progress made in terms of closing the attainment gap. The group found that the Covid-19 pandemic had changed what children and staff needed in order to revise attainment. One teacher reflected that a continued emphasis on children's health and wellbeing was a positive change.

Several teachers spoke about the ongoing challenge of poor attendance. One teacher shared that 40% of classes in their school had an attendance rate of below 85%. This was attributed to several factors, namely, self-isolation, being unwell with Covid-19 or a family member who was unwell with Covid-19. Despite the easing of public health restrictions, all of the teachers were experiencing attendance as an ongoing and significant issue. All teachers in the group felt that most PEF initiatives required face-to-face interaction with children. There was a strong consensus that the pandemic had widened the attainment gap even further.

The teachers also highlighted major issues with access to IT resources for both staff and pupils. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, all had felt that teachers' digital skills had improved significantly. The group agreed that the digital divide had long existed but that the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic had brought it to light. The teachers also expressed that the children who were given devices for home learning still have access to them and as a result, the digital divide has narrowed.

Reflecting on PEF

The group were asked what could be better about PEF. All expressed strongly that they did not want the funding to be diluted. Several teachers noted the negative impact of the dilution of funding as it became less targeted. One teacher noted that their school was in an area of very high deprivation and they had felt the impact of the dilution of funds. One teacher said that realistic expectations were necessary as to what could be achieved by teachers and that they had felt under significant pressure.

All teachers in the group agreed that developing similar funding for early years would be welcomed as long as it did not dilute the support available at primary and secondary school level. One teacher noted that many children were starting primary school on the 'backfoot' as gaps in literacy and numeracy were already evident.

All teachers in the group said that financial struggles had become much worse for the children in their schools. One teacher noted that they were already witnessing the negative impact of the cost of living crisis on the children. All felt that they were now tasked with repairing the damage of the Covid-19 pandemic. All said that in order to do this they would need significant financial support.