OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 6 December 2017

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Wednesday 6 December 2017

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
31st Meeting 2017, Session 5

CONVENER

*James Dornan (Glasgow Cathcart) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*George Adam (Paisley) (SNP)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab)
*Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP)
*Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP)
*Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP)
*Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Frank Lennon (Commission on School Reform)
Danielle Mason (Education Endowment Foundation)
Dr Rebekah Widdowfield (Royal Society of Edinburgh)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 6 December 2017

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Education Reforms

The Convener (James Dornan): I welcome everyone to the 31st meeting in 2017 of the Education and Skills Committee. I remind everyone to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent mode for the duration of the meeting.

Our first item of business is our second evidence session as part of the early scrutiny of the Scottish Government's proposed education reforms. Last week, we had a very interesting evidence session with academics. This week, I welcome Frank Lennon, who is a recently retired headteacher and a representative of the commission on school reform; Danielle Mason, who is head of research at the Education Endowment Foundation; and Dr Rebekah Widdowfield, who is chief executive officer of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Good morning to you all.

Before I invite contributions from other members, I begin with some questions. Last week, we heard about the evidence base for the proposed education reforms. Do panel members have any views on how best to implement those reforms, particularly with regard to the change in governance and accountability structures? As your views on the reforms might differ, it would be helpful if you were to expand a wee bit on any alternative proposals that you have. Would anybody like to begin?

Danielle Mason (Education Endowment Foundation): In preparing for this session, my starting point was to look at the evidence for what works to improve outcomes for pupils in education. At the Education Endowment Foundation, we aim to improve education by supporting schools to act on the evidence. At the highest level, the evidence tells us that approaches that focus on the quality of pedagogy and the interaction between pupils and teachers can make the biggest impact for the lowest cost.

I find it valuable to consider how the different elements of the reforms can deliver better quality teaching and learning. I will start with two important points. First, autonomy needs to be accompanied by support and good evidence. It is no good for teachers to have the freedom to make decisions if they are not provided with high-quality evidence to support their decision making. To illustrate the point, many individual school-level interventions are not effective in raising attainment. When they are robustly evaluated, only one in four of the projects that we assess demonstrate enough promise to warrant further funding. That figure is in line with the figures for organisations that are similar to ours. School leaders who make decisions about teaching practice and curriculum implementation need high-quality evidence of what works and what does not.

Secondly, collaborations need to maintain a strong focus on pupil outcomes. Again, we have evaluated a number of projects that involve collaborations, or the sharing of interventions and approaches, between schools. As one would expect, collaboration in and of itself is not enough to improve outcomes. In our experience, collaborations work when they are structured around interventions and approaches that focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning.

Dr Rebekah Widdowfield (Royal Society of Edinburgh): To build on that, I will highlight a key point. We often talk about how we put evidence into policy, but it is equally important to look at how we put evidence into practice and at how policy is implemented. The policy might be sound, but if it is not implemented effectively on the ground, it will not achieve the outcomes that are being sought.

I am not an education expert and others, such as Danielle Mason, are better placed to talk about the specifics of education reform, but there seem to be some fundamental basics that relate to engagement with people. You need to take folk with you—a consistent aim of any change programme—and to be willing to learn as the changes are implemented so that you continually improve on what is being done. As Danielle Mason said, it is important to build capacity and capability and to allow sufficient time. The Scottish Parliament information centre paper gives the clear example of Sweden, where rapid decentralisation did not produce the best outcomes because it was done very quickly. In order to ensure that implementation on the ground is as led by evidence as the policy itself, it is important to take account of the readiness of a system to change and to pilot changes when it makes sense to do so.

Frank Lennon (Commission on School Reform): The focus on implementation is critical to where we are in the reform of schools. To be frank, structure is important. If pedagogy and pupil relationships are central to the improvement of learning and teaching, the culture in which those things thrive is determined by the structure, so the Scottish Government is quite right to reform the structure and push in the direction of more

autonomy. Based on my experience as a headteacher, and as someone whose own children have gone through the system, I am very much in favour of the idea that it is worth pursuing more autonomy at school level.

The difficulty lies in how that is done. I am a bit puzzled as to why there is no sectoral identification in the Government's proposals, which, it would appear, relate to all schools. Schools will have to undertake the reforms, irrespective of whether they are primary or secondary schools and irrespective of their state of readiness or willingness. There is an irony there: we want schools to have more decision-making power through a school-led system—I am strongly in favour of that phrase, and the commission on school reform has been arguing that point for at least four years, and possibly longer—but, in order to give them more autonomy, we are compelling them to take more autonomy. That seems to be a bit perverse, although it is possibly necessary.

To go back to Rebekah Widdowfield's point about the need to get the pacing right, why can we not have more incremental change? More autonomy is likely to be more successful if the schools judge themselves to be ready for it, and if they assess their own capacity and readiness. I am in no doubt that a significant number of schools would judge themselves to be ready. Those schools are likely to be in the secondary sector—there is some survey evidence that indicates as much. On the whole, primary teachers are much less willing to take on the risks, as they see it, of being cast adrift from the local authority, if that is an accurate way to describe the situation. However, if schools had a degree of control over the timing of the increase in autonomy and the extent to which they embraced the detail of the headteachers charter, that would encourage buy-in and reduce the chances of grudging compliance.

One of the current problems in education in Scotland is the notion of compliance with whatever the employer—the local authority—says that a school must and must not do. Recently, some local authorities were able to determine the number of subjects that had to be offered in fourth year—that is clearly not a wise policy. If there was some school involvement in the process, it would reduce the chances of perpetuating the grudging compliance and conformity that is characteristic of the Scottish education system.

Secondly, such an approach would encourage more diversity. Depending on their circumstances, schools might well come up with much more imaginative ways of engaging parents and ensuring some democratic accountability. I know that local authorities would argue that we should consider what would happen if schools were to become completely autonomous, and I am personally not in favour of schools becoming employers, but there ought to be a way of ensuring a high degree of local accountability by requiring school boards, parent councils or whatever organisational set-up we choose, to help to monitor schools. We could require those organisations to allow every elected member to participate; most schools are now in multi-member wards, and four elected members on a school board would guarantee a degree of democratic accountability.

Autonomy and structure can lead to culture change and encourage innovation. There is a lack of innovative thinking in Scottish education. I do not blame anyone for that; it is just the way that it has been recently. The most urgent issue that we currently face, given that the headteachers charter spells out pretty clearly what decisions schools should control, is how we implement the reforms. At present there appears to be a lockstep change and everyone is moving forward at the same time. That is defined by the political timetable, given that there must be measurable improvement during the current parliamentary session. Rebekah Widdowfield suggested that improvement could take a lot longer than three or four years. Although the current session of Parliament has been extended by a year, there is still not enough time in which to demonstrate real improvement or narrowing of the attainment gap, although there might well be some indication of it. We need to consider seriously how we do this, and we need to take a serious look at allowing schools to evaluate in some way their own readiness and capacity to take on the new responsibilities.

The Convener: Part of the reason that we are here is to take a close look at the process and see whether anything needs to be done or whether we can make any suggestions. To come back to your point about lockstep change, is there a danger that, if a date is not set, some schools might be comfortable with what they are doing and decide to stay as they are, even if that benefits only certain people and not the pupils?

Frank Lennon: I can see your argument—if we go for lockstep change, everyone is in the same boat, even if the boat is sailing round in circles for years, which is in itself a bit of danger. I suppose that, if we allow a degree of incremental change, early adopters might gain an advantage or experience a disadvantage, and some concept of equality or equity might be jeopardised. However, we have been here for four decades—I have been in education for that long—and we have hardly narrowed the attainment gap, or any other gap that you care to look at, between the most and least advantaged.

The change of direction is long overdue; I am just disappointed that it is not more widely supported. That is partly because the education debate, probably since the implementation of curriculum for excellence, has become party politicised in a way that was not previously the case. In the national debate that immediately followed the implementation of CFE, there was tremendous consensus on the purposes of Scottish education. Looking back on it, that was a remarkable achievement. We got a fairly clear definition of the philosophy of Scottish education—no one argues any longer about the four capacities; it is all about the implementation. Nonetheless, here we are, following the implementation of CFE during a period of budgetary constraint, which certainly did not help matters. I deeply regret that there is now a feeling that the position that someone adopts in certain parts of the education debate is determined by whether they support one party or another. It is about time that we set that aside and looked closely at the Government's proposals for a headteachers charter. Those proposals should have overwhelming support, and the fact that they do not bothers me. That is the case partly because we have not made clear the sectoral differences nor signalled to the profession as a whole that their anxieties, based on their specific circumstances, including the size of their school and their particular sector, have been acknowledged. Those anxieties are simply not mentioned at all in the consultation document "Empowering Schools: A Consultation on the Provisions of the Education (Scotland) Bill". That is a mistake, but it is rectifiable.

The Convener: We are at the beginning of the process.

Frank Lennon: Yes.

Dr Widdowfield: To pick up on the points about lockstep change, I am a researcher by background and so I take the evidence base as my starting point. As I said, I am not an education expert, but it seems that, in certain spheres, the evidence base is contested or is at least not unambiguously clear about the right approach. Unless we are clear about what works, there is sometimes an advantage in piloting changes so that we can test different approaches and learn from them in order that, when a change is rolled out more widely, it is based on informed knowledge and learning. The same size will not fit all schools across the country in different schools, but piloting has a real advantage in that it enables people to learn and ensures that that learning can be shared more widely.

Danielle Mason: One thing that we and our partners in other countries have found effective in getting buy-in from teachers goes back to my earlier point about the fact that interaction between teachers and pupils in the classroom can have the biggest effect on pupil outcomes. We have found that teachers can make the biggest difference. Some of the practices and interventions that we have worked with could be viewed as top down, but when we focus on the fact that the evidence shows that it is teachers who can make the difference, that tends to be a really good starting point for a collaborative approach, with people sharing responsibility for progress.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): To help us to understand the context better, perhaps Frank Lennon could expand on the factors at play that moved us from general agreement about the direction of Scottish education towards greater conformity and less appreciation of diversity and of the issues. Why have we got into this lockstep, which does not seem to be doing much good?

Frank Lennon: There is a paradox there. Before 2010, prior to the implementation phase of curriculum for excellence, there was a high level of consensus and a uniform approach on the direction that the Scottish curriculum should go in and the idea that it should not be legislatively backed. At this point, I pay tribute to the MSPs—when the Parliament first opened, I thought that we would get nothing but legislation on the school curriculum, given its significance, but that did not happen, and we do not have a legislatively backed curriculum.

10:15

There has been a great willingness across the profession to accept the general direction of the curriculum, which has carried us through quite a difficult period in terms of funding. To be frank, a reform on that scale should have had far more funding than it did, but it coincided with the financial crash, and no one really blamed Education Scotland or the Government for that—we just kind of got on with it.

I was a headteacher throughout that period, and it seemed to me that, whatever criticisms one might have had at school level, one was very reluctant—certainly as a headteacher—to voice them for fear of jeopardising the general flow. There was a sense that one would not want to contradict or in any way upset the general thinking on curriculum for excellence, so we simply put up with a lot of issues. To be frank, however, the management of the implementation phase—whenever any kind of concern was detected in the system, we got another 10,000 pages of guidance—was very poor. Again, I am not trying to blame anyone, but that is what happened.

That led to a feeling throughout the implementation period that we would just have to

put up with it. How many subjects were we going to offer, given the number of hours per course that the Scottish Qualifications Authority stipulated? The SQA was given a brief to work to, of course, so I am less inclined to criticise its actions at that stage. The thinking around how many hours the new national exams should take could have been better handled. We ended up with an arithmetical division of the total number of hours in a school year multiplied by the number of hours on a course to end up with five or six subjects—in other words, we got the same number of subjects in fourth year as in fifth year because the SQA had specified the same length of time for national 5s as for highers. Looking back, that was clearly a mistake.

It is unfortunate that that consensus did not allow for honest, reflective criticism to emerge. That was partly because, as is always the case—it was certainly the case during my last six years as a headteacher—the imminence of an inspection by HM Inspectorate of Education figured fairly largely in one's mind. The idea that one would do anything different from what appeared to be the consensus was quite tricky. In fact, my school did do things a bit differently—we made sure that we offered seven subjects—but that required quite a bit of self-confidence and a degree of risk, of which parents were very conscious. We have now got to a stage at which we could do with far more open criticism.

Liz Smith: I want to pursue that point, because it is very interesting and fits with what you say in your submission about the conflict between autonomy and top-down structures. The committee will have to wrestle with the central issue of governance reform: to what extent do we move to a system of autonomy for headteachers without all the top-down structures? I agree entirely with your comments about the way in which the process was led. That raises another question: if we did not have those structures, that would allow for very considerable autonomy and diversity in the system. Would that be predicated on the governance reforms perhaps attending first to the headteachers charter in order to give heads the confidence to be able to lead and make changes and to be more critical of their own schools in a way that you suggest has not happened so far?

Frank Lennon: It is a genuinely complex question. I am not in favour of telling headteachers, "You now have confidence"; it cannot be mandated in that way. However, the direction of travel ought to be clearly signposted. I regard the headteachers charter as a major step in that direction, but I understand the complexity of what happens at local authority level—or, now, at regional level.

It is not at all clear what will result from the removal of the local authority improvement plan, with which all schools currently align first and foremost to give themselves a sense of the national improvement framework and so on. If that goes, what authority do the regional leads in the regional improvement collaboratives have over individual headteachers? If the heads decide on one thing and it does not quite fit, to whom do the regional leads report? I know that they report to the new HM Chief Inspector of Education, but it is unclear what their relationship would be to individual headteachers who are working to a charter. That issue needs to be cleared up.

Liz Smith: Finally, what relationship ought there to be between Education Scotland and the regional collaboratives?

Frank Lennon: To be frank, the relationship with the regional collaboratives is not the critical relationship. Education Scotland's recent track record suggests that it ought to focus a bit more on schools. The idea that Education Scotland focuses its attention on the Government because the Government is the customer, as it were, has been part of the problem. Whatever role Education Scotland has, my concern as a former headteacher is that it should not interfere with genuine innovation at school level. We could trust schools much more to undertake genuine innovation if we reduced the amount of guidance and accountability that is required of them.

It is interesting that the recent move in the direction of more autonomy for schools has been hedged with so much guidance that we are not entirely sure whether or not it has worked. The pupil equity funding system is full of accountability and headteachers are constantly—two or three times a term—producing paperwork for the local authority to account for what they have done with the money. Some local authorities have set up additional boards to monitor that spending.

What should have been a tremendous freedom for headteachers has in fact been hedged with all sorts of concerns about whether or not they will spend the money appropriately. That is part of the difficulty with the role of Education Scotland. As a head, certainly throughout the implementation of curriculum for excellence, I did not find Education Scotland to be particularly helpful at any level, so I am sceptical about whether, structurally, Education Scotland can be reformed sufficiently to improve its relationship with schools. It may well be stuck with a quasi-Government role in which it is constantly looking to Government; I do not know. I greatly welcome the appointment of the new chief executive of Education Scotland, and she may well change the culture and take the organisation in a different direction, but the

evidence so far does not lead me to be very optimistic about that.

The Convener: We will take evidence from Education Scotland next week, so we will have the opportunity to ask about the organisation's future direction.

Daniel Johnson may want to come in on the subject of cultural change.

Daniel Johnson (Edinburgh Southern) (Lab): The witnesses have more or less answered my question about Education Scotland and its role, so I will not.

The Convener: Okay—I will bring in Tavish Scott.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Frank Lennon spoke about the difference between primaries and secondaries. Can you elaborate on why they should be dealt with separately? My observation is that all bar two of the primary heads in my constituency teach, so quite where they find time to do anything else is beyond me. I would rather that you gave us some intellectual clarity on that.

Frank Lennon: That is precisely the issue. The level of flexibility for leadership and management in primary schools is much more constrained. One staff absence can remove a head—well, it does not remove the head, but she has to cover herself and an absent teacher. It runs a coach and horses through the idea that headteachers are there to lead learning and to develop and support staff when they are simply trying to plug gaps in the cover. That is a fundamental difference.

The other difference concerns the range of leadership posts, which is why management structures and the headteachers charter are so important. The charter will give individual heads the right to design their own leadership structure within the budget, although what the overall budget is and how it is determined remains to be seen. If there is a defined overall budget, and a primary head of a relatively small school is allowed to design a leadership structure, how will she or he be required to define a promoted structure if it is largely dependent on covering for absent colleagues in the course of the year? The amount of flexibility that would have to go into the budget to guarantee that would, in some small primaries, be absolutely enormous—their budget would be doubled.

Tavish Scott: So, the best way to reform that area would be to let secondaries develop in the ways that you have all been describing.

Frank Lennon: That is my inclination. I do not know enough about the primary sector from personal experience—my evidence is all anecdotal. Nevertheless, having worked with several primary heads during my time as headteacher of a secondary school, it seems to me that the secondary sector is certainly more amenable to providing autonomy at that level—it may well be more important. By and large, primary schools, certainly in Scotland, do a pretty good job. Secondary schools do a good job too, but there is more scope for real improvement, as we all know from looking at some of the statistics from the lower school. The issues seem to be pretty similar. If we give more control to the headteacher, we give more control to learning and teaching, and therefore to pedagogy, which will produce a culture change. However, that will be expensive, and it will be very expensive in primary schools, which do not have the same efficiencies of scale as secondary schools.

Tavish Scott: Do our other witnesses have a view about the important distinction between primary and secondary schools?

Dr Widdowfield: I will not comment on the specifics, but the points about capacity and capability, and the resourcing that might be required, are well made.

Danielle Mason: Again, I am not an expert in these particular reforms, but I probably do not even need to say that we have found capacity to be a massive issue in the work that we have done through trials and projects in schools. One of the main reasons that we find for why things do not work and are not implemented well is that there is neither the time nor the capacity to enable teachers to step outside the standard classroom activity and get involved in continuing professional development and innovation and change. I take on board the points that have been made—we need capacity in the primary sector.

We should also take account of the job that we want to do and the fact that narrowing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils needs to start in primary school; we cannot wait until secondary school. From all our evidence on interventions that start at secondary school—well, I do not want to say that it is too late then, but it is best to start as early as possible, rather than at age 10 or 11.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I will ask about the definition of autonomy, the role of headteachers and so on, but first I have a question for Danielle Mason. You said that interaction between teachers and pupils is the most important element. One might argue that there are challenges in some places around what pupils bring to the classroom with them, in addition to what the teacher brings. Have you thought about the extent to which autonomy should rest with the individual teacher rather than with the headteacher? When I was in education, I was, as a classroom teacher, at the bottom of what was

very much a top-down structure. A lot of autonomy seems to settle at headteacher level. Is there any evidence on the degree of autonomy that individual classroom teachers should have?

Danielle Mason: I do not know of any specific evidence on the impact of allocating autonomy at different school and teacher levels. In our experience of working with teachers, and from looking at the impact of different types of interventions, it is evident that there is a group of pupils for whom there is no way that change can be produced without having teachers on board. Of course, teachers already have a great deal of autonomy in the classroom. What they choose to do and the way in which they choose to interact with their pupils is hugely significant in deciding whether teaching and learning is effective in their classrooms.

Teacher autonomy already exists, whether we like it or not, even if we wanted the most top-down system in the world. We need to combine that autonomy with another level of interactions that are about headteacher responsibility rather than individual teacher responsibility. We talk to heads and teachers, and we try to demonstrate that so many of the interventions that make a difference are the responsibility of either teachers or heads. We are trying to empower the profession by saying that headteachers and teachers have decision-making powers that can make a genuine difference to pupil outcomes.

Johann Lamont: I am talking about secondary education, in which there is an intermediate tier at subject level. One might argue that, in terms of education in the classroom, that relationship is more significant than the relationship with a headteacher in a large secondary school, who may have overall responsibility but who may not necessarily be in a position to direct the quality of teaching in a particular subject. Is there an argument for autonomy at the subject level?

10:30

Danielle Mason: Absolutely—but I am not the best person to decide whether such things need to be in legislation. We want a culture of autonomy in schools. The headteachers charter could be the driving force behind that, but we hope that autonomous teachers who have access to good evidence, good continuing professional development and the tools that they need to support them could bring the whole school into that culture at the necessary levels. There is a headteacher and there are subject leaders, and there are many other senior leaders in a school who have important decision-making powers in respect of deciding which interventions will make a difference to pupil learning.

Johann Lamont: In that case, is the argument around autonomy for the headteacher shorthand for taking decision-making into schools, as opposed to saying that that person gets autonomy and then directs what happens in the school?

Danielle Mason: There is a difference between autonomy and accountability. There are obvious arguments for having a clear line of accountability, but autonomy in practice and empowerment as a professional must run throughout the school rather than being about a single individual.

Dr Widdowfield: That comes down to leadership, too. It is not just about having responsibilities, but about how those responsibilities are exercised. One would expect a headteacher to engage with teachers, parents and learners, so the distinction between autonomy and responsibility is important. The headteacher might have the accountability, but that does not mean that it is not exercised through engagement with other people.

Gillian Martin (Aberdeenshire East) (SNP): I am interested in the idea of pilot schemes. Is there merit in being a little bit bolder—a lot bolder, in fact—in piloting different methods in different areas, and then analysing the results?

I mentioned this point to the panel of witnesses who appeared before the committee last week. The secondary and primary schools that work in close partnership with one another are always the schools with which I am most impressed. For example, secondary school pupils in languages may be involved in primary teaching, so there is a flow between the two tiers. Is there merit in looking at different methods of building clusters, perhaps by targeting areas where attainment has not been particularly good, and to try some new models in a bold way, and then report on that?

Dr Widdowfield: There is a lot to be said for that—especially where the evidence base is contested or incomplete, or we are doing new things that have not been tried before. We will seldom know all the answers before we do something—it is not a perfect world—so it would be helpful to try out different things in different areas, especially if some of the challenges or the existing structures are comparable, to some degree. That does not always require that a pilot be set up—it could simply involve natural experiments about which things already work differently in different areas and can be compared and contrasted. Controls can be set for the parameters.

That approach would enable better and greater learning, and it would allow us to look at what has worked in one place but has been less successful somewhere else. We could then share that learning and think about how we might adapt

things for use in areas that have similar characteristics. There is a lot to be said for that approach.

Gillian Martin: Maybe we should be a little more relaxed about the risk that is involved, and about the possibility that, although some things may not work out, we can learn from the experience.

Dr Widdowfield: That is critical—in fact, it is critical for the whole debate. We need to build in that learning culture at all levels. Something may not be as effective as we thought it would be or as we wanted it to be, and it might not achieve its outcomes, but we can learn from that if we have put in place mechanisms to evaluate it from the start, and as long as it is a calculated rather than reckless risk. Otherwise, we do not get innovation.

However, that approach requires maturity at all levels in terms of being prepared for things not to work and of being ready to amend and change them without that being seen as a U-turn. A culture change is required in terms of how we respond to such learning, because there is currently a real risk that a fear of failure prohibits innovation. Pilot schemes have a significant role to play in that respect.

Danielle Mason: It is extremely important to think about how we design pilots well. There are many ways—which can be relatively inexpensive and straightforward—to learn from piloting, but there are countless examples of Governments piloting and innovating but not learning, because they have not laid the groundwork through understanding how to evaluate impacts. It sounds like a great idea to learn from pilots, but we need to ensure that we build into that real learning about impacts, and about cause and effect in relation to a particular partnership and a particular outcome. That is essential.

Dr Widdowfield: It is very important to identify right from the start the outcomes that we are trying to achieve and the data that need to be collected in order to determine whether outcomes have been met. Piloting is not about doing things in a few places and then rolling them out more widely without learning from what has happened in those places.

The Convener: Oliver Mundell will move on to governance and outcomes.

Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con): I will sort of address that subject, convener, but I will link it to a few things that we have heard about already.

I hear from teachers in my constituency—this is not dissimilar to Tavish Scott's point—that a number of small rural primary schools do not currently receive any pupil equity funding because of the way in which the funding formula has been worked out.

Those teachers worry in particular about flexibility, and the idea that if governance reform goes ahead as proposed, good schools with flexibility will improve whereas those that are already struggling or which have limited flexibility could go backwards, and the attainment gap for their pupils could widen. Is that a realistic possibility?

Frank Lennon: First, I say that governance is not going to close the attainment gap; no one thing will do that. If we are seriously concerned about developing the Scottish education system and the quality of education across the four capacities, we ought to be open to flexible forms of governance. That is basically all that the commission on school reform has been arguing for. We are not suggesting that we scrap the current system and introduce a new one in lockstep, as it were: the argument is a bit more sophisticated than that. We need to take account of the nature of schools as they are—not only their capacity but, crucially, how they see themselves. Some schools may well need to be encouraged to see themselves as being much more effective than they may currently feel. It is certainly possible that some schools have greater capacities than they are aware of.

Changes in governance could include allowing schools to form their own clusters. There are plenty of clusters of secondary schools that have very good working relationships—as has been mentioned—which could be built on and developed. However, there is nothing to prevent an individual secondary school from participating. The problem is what cluster a secondary school is in—we need a secondary school network as well.

None of that is outwith the bounds of possibility. I just feel that, given the way in which the headteachers charter is currently set up, there is a kind of lockstep approach in which every school is driven by a timetable that is not its own—nor, probably, is it even the local authority's. The idea that we should look at individual circumstances and allow schools a far higher level of participation in such decision-making seems to be crucial. That is the kind of thing that might change the culture.

It is as important that we create an embedded learning culture at management and leadership level as it is that we do so at the teacher level. Teachers are very much predisposed to reflecting on their own work and to being self-critical, but they will not do that if they think that they are going to be rated on their work every two weeks, every term or whatever. We need to change the culture to allow people to make mistakes without their professional reputation being impugned: that applies equally to schools. We should signal at this point in Scottish education a change of culture

for the profession, rather than just focusing on the idea that it would be better for everyone to have more autonomy.

Oliver Mundell: You hinted—actually, it was stronger than a hint—that there are problems with implementation of curriculum for excellence. Have those issues been resolved sufficiently to allow enough trust to be built up among teachers to enable the proposed governance changes to be implemented at this time?

Frank Lennon: The jury is still out on that one. The experience of implementing curriculum for excellence was so bruising for schools that some of the damage that was done may well be irreparable. I do not know—I hope that it was not. The current proposals signal an intention nationally to do something about that.

No one is arguing for the status quo—at least, I hope that no one is. The idea is to ask what the best way forward is. My view is that the process should be consensual, but it should not forbid rigorous debate such as the committee has so effectively contributed over the past few years, in particular through its scrutiny of curriculum for excellence and management of that reform.

I am optimistic, at the moment. Provided that we do not fall into the trap of mandating everything from the centre, to be policed by Education Scotland in a combination of regional and improvement collaboratives and local authorities, we may well have the opportunity to create a more diverse system that would allow for different types of clusters and partnerships to be built, and release schools to feel that they can be creative. There is huge pent-up potential in schools, which have been held back by a fear of failure and a culture of compliance with the local authority. Some local authorities have set up points systems for schools to make sure that they all have the same leadership and management structure. In retrospect, that is beginning to look really bizarre, given the range and diversity of schools.

The primary sector has suffered badly from the comparison with secondary schools. Pro rata, there are far fewer promoted leadership roles in primaries than there are in secondary schools, where the number of such posts has also been reducing. If headteachers had much more authority at school level, it would be a better guarantee of teacher autonomy than would something that was mandated through the curriculum. We have tried that with curriculum for excellence, and it did not work. My only worry is that curriculum for excellence is beginning to sound like a national curriculum. There ought to be opportunities for individual schools—perhaps individual small primary schools—to deviate from the curriculum quite dramatically without being punished, as it were. There ought to be that kind of flexibility in the system.

Dr Widdowfield: A discussion point in the Scottish Parliament information centre paper asks whether policy makers can create culture change, and Frank Lennon spoke earlier about a culture of compliance. I, personally, do not feel that Governments and policy makers in and of themselves can create a culture change, but they can create frameworks that support and incentivise such change. For example, policies to support a different attitude to homosexuality have enabled gay marriage to be introduced, and other policies have enabled the introduction of more restrictive changes, such as the smoking ban.

To go back to the point about trust, it is about developing and delivering policy with people, rather than handing it down to them. That is a bit of a cliché, but it is an important point. We need to get people excited about a shared goal and a shared vision, rather than create the culture of compliance to which Frank Lennon referred. Building trust in the system comes down to fairly fundamental issues such as transparency, openness and mutual respect. That is how we get trust in the system.

Danielle Mason: There is high-quality research evidence to draw on regarding the best way to implement change. Trust and shared responsibility are key factors in that respect. Next year, my organisation will produce evidence for schools to enable them to put that approach into practice.

George Adam (Paisley) (SNP): Good morning. I take on board Frank Lennon's point that governance itself will not bridge the attainment gap, as only a whole basket of measures will do that over the long term. Nonetheless, what is the role of governance in improving outcomes for teachers and for young people in the classroom? Is there a role for governance in helping to make things better and drive improvement?

Frank Lennon: I certainly think so. Part of the current difficulty relates to that issue. A teacher knows when there are problems with school leadership: when the only rationale that they are given for a particular teaching and learning policy at school level is that HMIE or Education Scotland, or some outside agency to which they feel accountable, wants that policy to be put in place, and the local authority has appointed someone to go round schools and check that it is there. That is the very worst type of governance.

10:45

We need to create a situation in which schools are genuinely leading the system. Some of the language in the Government's consultation document is just wonderful. It refers to

"a school and teacher-led system"

and says that decision making in schools

"should not be overridden".

There is a lot to build on in the consultation document, and it seems to be going in exactly the right direction.

There is currently a structural problem. If we create more autonomy at school level, we will not, by and large, get a series of rogue headteachers who are out to feather their own nests or develop their own careers. Instead, schools will be more likely to focus much more closely on their intake and their parents, on diversity and on the challenges that their children face. Resources will be deployed far more imaginatively if headteachers feel that they are in control.

Again, there is a paradox: we will not get collaboration unless there is a very high level of autonomy. Mandated collaboration is not collaboration—we have to encourage people. The northern alliance worked precisely because it was not mandated from the centre. We now have in post a chief inspector who understands that, so we have every right to be hopeful about the future direction.

My worry is that the regional collaboratives will become just another policing measure that enables local authorities to say to headteachers that they must have X because it is in the regional plan, in the way that they used to say to headteachers that they had to have Y because it was in the local authority plan. That is the difficulty. Governance can, and traditionally has been, very intrusive at school level. Much of it is required—I am not for a free-for-all approach—but policy making at a national level must be much clearer than it has been, which would allow for a much wider range of innovations at school level.

Dr Widdowfield: That is one of the key issues that the RSE has raised in its submissions to date. It is not that governance is not important, but we need to understand better the evidence on how a change in governance will lead to improved outcomes. The Government has sought to provide more evidence in its more recent publications, including the consultation document, but it would be useful to see a comprehensive review of the evidence base that documents how reform of governance can make a difference. That would give credibility and weight to the proposals and help to build support, because it will be easier to see exactly which governance changes lead to improved outcomes and how and why they do so.

George Adam: Is Frank Lennon saying that more flexibility between the regional and national bodies would make the system work better than if there was a rigid approach that came from the top? We would, of course, still have national outcomes, and each region would probably have its own outcomes.

Frank Lennon: I am still not too clear about that. To whom is the chief inspector reporting? Who is line managing Education Scotland? That is not clear to me. There is some kind of reporting, but is it at the information level, or is there a line management link between the chief inspector and the Government?

There is a residual problem of the inspectorate inspecting its own policies. We will never have policy failures in Scotland as long as that arrangement keeps going. The need for separation and for clarity about roles is another structural issue that urgently needs to be addressed.

At school level, a far higher level of autonomy will be empowering for individual teachers. That is probably truer in rural primary schools, where teachers feel dragged by local authority policies into whatever conventions or formulae are currently being used. At the other end of the scale, we might get a much more interesting and open approach to pedagogy, which—to be frank—we have not had in Scotland for a long time. We have become professional bandwagon jumpers—there is a view that, whatever comes along, we had better jump on it because that is what HMIE will be looking for. We need to stop some of that and allow people to try things out, fail and not be pilloried.

George Adam: You list four points in your submission. You have told us today that you believe that there is a "breakdown of political consensus" and a "culture of compliance", but your paper also mentions "systemic leadership weaknesses" and

"the lack of diversity and innovation".

You have mentioned those concerns briefly today, but you have not gone into them in detail. What exactly do you mean? Can you give me some more detail?

Frank Lennon: The lack of diversity and innovation is evidenced by school structures. We have 358 secondary schools, and much of what I have to say is about secondary schools. The issues with diversity and innovation that I am thinking about come largely from my experience and my reading over the past few years about where we are.

It is remarkable, given the diversity of Scottish schools, that virtually every state-run secondary school in Scotland is led and managed in exactly the same way. They have proportionally the same number of deputies, who probably have similar remits, and their accountability systems at school

level are pretty much the same. When staff are sent on development courses, they come back with stuff that they are already doing, or think that they are already doing. Finding or hearing of something that is genuinely innovative is therefore problematic. That is partly because local authorities, for reasons of equality, do not want one school to look very different from another. I understand that, because authorities are responsible for all their schools.

However, let us say that a school wanted to double its number of principal teachers of pastoral care. A local authority could quite easily say, "No—the norm for a school of your size is three, and that is all you are allowed." The headteachers charter does away with that. A school can look at the principal teacher salary points and say, "No—in this school, we want 12 PT1s instead of three PT6s under the same budget." Until the headteachers charter was proposed, no headteacher could guarantee that they had that authority. That is what I mean when I refer to a lack of diversity. If we get that diversity in the school structure, it will inevitably have a knock-on effect on the climate in the school, and we will see genuine innovation at pedagogical level.

Plenty of teachers are innovative in the classroom, of course, and many of them will now be picking up the Education Endowment Foundation toolkit. I have been a headteacher since 2008-09, and it is as if the toolkit is a new thing that has suddenly arrived in Scotland, although it has actually been around for eight years. I am delighted that Danielle Mason is here today. That kind of mechanism has not been part of our culture because it is too innovative and it does not have the HMIE imprimatur. We have to have a Scottish version of it, not just for reasons of alignment but because it has to be Scottish before anyone will really look at it.

George Adam: I have a quick wee question that follows on from something that Oliver Mundell said. Last week, Keir Bloomer told us that the important thing was not the amount of money that was spent but how and where it was spent. We have previously debated the question whether the Scottish index of multiple deprivation is a pretty crude measurement—some people see it in that way. In areas such as my constituency of Paisley, it is probably pretty accurate, but in the areas that Oliver Mundell and Tavish Scott represent, it is not really able to highlight rural poverty.

Keir Bloomer also mentioned entitlement to free school meals—I read the RSE's submission on that subject, but it did not appear to suggest another way of doing things. Are there other ways of trying to get that data, and of trying to get the money into the right places?

Dr Widdowfield: The Government's commission on widening access recommended looking at unique learner numbers, and I understand that some work has been done in the Government to explore the feasibility of that idea. It is not that the SIMD should not be used at all, but it needs to be used with individual-level base data. The idea of unique learner numbers is worth exploring further.

Danielle Mason: I absolutely agree. Area deprivation is not a great measure for identifying individual need. The majority of deprived children do not live in deprived areas. Back in the day, I used to work on the IMD, and I believe that it is important that we find a more individually targeted way to ensure that children in particular areas that are not deprived do not miss out.

Dr Widdowfield: The issue is not insignificant. You will have seen from the RSE's submission that we reckon that if we use only the SIMD, we are missing out around a third of deprived children and including a quarter of children who are not deprived.

Johann Lamont: I feel quite strongly about that issue. There is an impact on communities where there is a lot of deprivation—I am talking about the impact not just on deprived individuals but on schools. Their capacity to deliver anything is affected by the fact that three quarters of their children are deprived, notwithstanding the fact that a quarter of them are not deprived. All the services in such a community are affected by the density of deprivation. I wonder whether that issue is recognised.

I understand the argument about identifying individuals, but anybody who has taught in a school where a significant proportion of the children are deprived knows that there is an impact not only on those children but on the other young people in the school.

Danielle Mason: If we are looking at the individual level, we are recognising the density of deprivation in a school. If three quarters or half the young people in a school are deprived, we recognise that density at the individual level.

Johann Lamont: I will give you an example regarding the capacity to teach a child who is coping very well and who wants to do five highers. The chances are that their ability to get the quality of education to enable them to get five highers will be affected by other choices, because three quarters of the kids in their school are deprived. It is not that there are not a lot of bright children in the school, but there is an impact from deprivation on not only the deprived children and their families but everybody in the community. The idea that somebody has developed the SIMD because they do not want to do the hard work of finding out

where poor children live misses the point: it is about the impact on services more generally in areas where there is a density of poverty.

Dr Widdowfield: As I said, it is not that we should not use the SIMD—no one is saying that—but we need to supplement it with unique learner data. It depends on what we are trying to achieve, how we are trying to achieve it and what we are trying to measure. As Danielle Mason said, a unique learner number would allow us to see how individual deprivation plays out at the school level.

Tavish Scott: I have a brief supplementary to George Adam's very fair question about Education Scotland. Mr Lennon, your submission makes clear your concerns about Education Scotland as it is currently constituted, and you have just told us that inspection and policy should be separated. Aside from that pretty fundamental point, what should Education Scotland's role be in the future?

Frank Lennon: It is quite a difficult structural issue. If schools are to lead the system, and additional responsibility comes the way of schools and teachers, Education Scotland should serve the schools. The problem with Education Scotland is that, in its six years of managing curriculum for excellence, it was seen as keeping the train on the tracks while not doing anything about the quality of the carriages—or whatever the metaphor might be. We need to turn that around a wee bit. Schools need to be much more focused on the curriculum and seek advice from agencies. In the past, that has tended not to happen. A school that went to an agency was seen as admitting failure, so there is now a culture of reluctance to seek advice.

I do not blame Education Scotland entirely for that conundrum, but there is now an opportunity to try to change that culture. Regional collaboratives may work, but if we are going to improve the quality of learning and teaching, it has to be done through staff development. The schools know who needs to be developed and where. Subject development is a particular issue in secondary schools—if there are relatively few subject specialists in a particular school, how do they get their professional development? We have to find a way forward. It ought not to be beyond the wit of our professional community to come up with a system that empowers schools, as part of a cluster or a network, to seek advice on X, Y or Z. The worry is that everything is initiated, and then evaluated, by Education Scotland.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): As has been mentioned, genuine empowerment, particularly at primary level, is expensive. A number of the issues with the implementation of curriculum for excellence were compounded, and in some cases created, by the fact that it was happening at the same time that significant budget cuts were being made.

Regardless of the specifics of the structural reform proposals and whether they are right or wrong, would any such fundamental reforms be destined not to succeed if they took place at a time of continuing and significant budget cuts? If any such drastic change is not resourced, what chance does it have of succeeding? Will any failure be put down to the reform itself? Will the conventional wisdom be that structural reform is a mistake, or will people be able to identify correctly that failure was a result of budget cuts rather than to do with issues inherent in the proposals?

11:00

Frank Lennon: That is a key question. It is exemplified by the requirement in the headteachers charter that heads appoint every member of staff in their school. An obvious issue arises when a school roll declines and someone is declared to be surplus, and a head in that authority chooses not to employ that person. There will have to be some mechanism to deal with that, and it will have to be a financial mechanism. Part of the difficulty with the implementation of curriculum for excellence was precisely that it took place at a time of drastically shrinking local authority budgets. Resource was available where it needed to be, but schools were constantly being asked to cut staff, which is just about the only way that a school can save money, given that the staffing budget dominates the 2 per cent of the budget over which headteachers have control.

It is a bit of a worry. The funding of schools probably needs to be much clearer, and the formula—or whatever mechanism—that is used to decide the budget has to be in the public domain and open to scrutiny in order to make clear where issues might arise. There is talk of fair funding for schools, but it may well be that the success or otherwise of the governance review will come down to funding.

Danielle Mason: It really depends on how the reforms are implemented. The consultation document makes clear that the reforms are not intended to create an extra layer of bureaucracy and demands on schools. If it is possible to manage that and create a freedom to focus on the things that are most effective, including things that are most cost effective, a time of tight budgets is when we need to do that. Schools need to identify the things that they are doing that do not work and are generally not effective and focus their money, resources and capacity on the things that have been shown to be most cost effective in improving outcomes.

Dr Widdowfield: A common theme in the evidence sessions today and last week has been the need to ensure that there is sufficient capacity and capability. There are a number of dimensions to that, one of which might be funding. Danielle Mason's point is well made, but there is also a question of the time involved, because successful implementation will depend on how much capacity and capability people can bring to bear on it.

Ross Greer: Dr Widdowfield, you mentioned quite correctly that evidence in this area is contested. In a recent paper, the Government's council of education advisers stated its belief, based on the evidence, that culture and capacity were the most significant issues. That seems to chime more with the response from the teaching workforce, as well as with the responses from parents and pupils, to the Government's initial consultation on the reforms.

Regardless of whether the reforms are correct, is there a danger in trying to implement them in the face of opposition that is really quite strong and significant, in particular from the teaching workforce? What are the dangers in the Government being unable to carry with it a workforce that does not believe that its primary concerns have been addressed?

Frank Lennon: The way to implement reform is to do so incrementally. You describe a scenario in which everyone does it, whether or not they want to. I would offer the argument that we should not do it in that way. We should find those areas—they may be significant; we just do not know—in which there is genuine enthusiasm and willingness to go forward. We should remove the timescale, which seems to be part of the difficulty. The idea that, by the end of the current session of Parliament, there must be a set of statistics that show that the attainment gap is narrowing or closing is a pressure on schools that they could do without.

Dr Widdowfield: I come back to my point about the evidence base. If it could be more clearly articulated, that would be a way, although it is not the only way, to get greater credibility and support for the reform proposals from people who might otherwise be opposed to them because they do not know what the evidence says about how effective—or not—the changes might be.

There is always resistance to change in any major change programme. That brings us back to the point about the importance of trust, respect and transparency in the way that the process is undertaken, and not just in what is done.

Richard Lochhead (Moray) (SNP): I have a couple of questions, one of which follows up on one of Ross Greer's questions. Danielle Mason said that there is potential to lighten teachers' workload. As MSPs, we hear a lot of about the issue of teacher workload in our local schools, so I hope that the proposed reforms will provide an opportunity to lessen that workload. Is that your view?

Danielle Mason: It very much depends on how the reforms are implemented and how the different governance structures and relationships work. In our experience, workload is a huge issue for teachers. There are definitely ways to improve performance while reducing workload. I will give one example. There are currently a lot of marking practices that teachers find very resource intensive and that have no evidence behind them whatsoever. We produced a report that looked into the evidence for those practices. It is important that schools stop doing things for which there is no evidence—and which have even, in some cases, been shown to be harmful—and put more resource and time into things that are known to be effective. That sounds simple, but it requires strategy from a headteacher and buy-in from teachers. Nevertheless, there are ways to make things better at the same time as reducing workload. It can be done.

Richard Lochhead: We are debating the education reforms in Parliament and throughout the education community in Scotland, but teachers in classrooms will, in one sense, judge the success of the reforms in terms of the impact on their workload. Do you have any comments on that?

Frank Lennon: Teachers complain not about their workload but about the pointlessness of a lot of their workload. That is part of the difficulty. Teachers do not resent working hard. What exacerbates stress in a teacher's working life is that much of their time is spent repeatedly engaging with pointless bureaucracy that masquerades as quality assurance.

Again, we need far more control at school level, so that schools can say, "We're not going to do that," or so that they can look in detail at precisely the kind of advice that the Education Endowment Foundation provides and have the confidence to say, "We're going to stop doing this." That would definitely be a way of taking things forward.

My worry is that we talk about workload as if it was uniform. I am quite sure that there are schools and individual departments in which teachers work as hard as any others but do not feel that they are oppressed in a way that some other teachers do because of the nature of the culture and environment in which they are working. I am all for being a bit more specific in looking at teacher workload.

Richard Lochhead: My final question is—

Dr Widdowfield: Sorry—I have two quick points on what has been said. First, we should not see the governance reforms as a stand-alone intervention; there are other initiatives and interventions going on across the education system, and those will all come together and play out in different ways.

Secondly, on the point about the need to stop doing things, I offer the caveat that we often need to invest time in order to save time. Schools need the time and capacity to step back and look at the evidence base to see what is working and then make decisions on whether to stop doing things.

Richard Lochhead: My final question is very parochial, as it relates to my constituency of Moray, where our schools face some well-publicised challenges. One of those is the shortage of teachers, and supply teachers in particular, which is putting huge pressure on the workforce. To what extent do those issues relate to the fact that Moray is a small education authority? That links into our debate about the need for regional collaboration as well as more autonomy for schools. How do those two themes that surround the education reform debate impact on small education authorities? Is the small size of Moray a factor in some of the big but not necessarily distinctive challenges that our schools face?

Frank Lennon: That could be a factor. I have not taught in a particularly small authority, but I understand the issues.

Currently, there is limited flexibility to share staff between primary and secondary schools. I would hope that, paradoxically, reform of the General Teaching Council for Scotland might loosen up some of those arrangements and make some of the demands for cover a bit more manageable.

I am pretty sure that the professional associations will be alert to that sort of thing. For example, in a cluster of seven or eight primary schools and a secondary school, there might be more flexibility, even in a smaller authority, to address personnel issues holistically without constantly having to worry about the individual situation. That kind of innovation might come with some of the proposed structural changes, including the establishment of an education workforce council.

Daniel Johnson: To paraphrase some of the things that have been discussed, we have heard that an increase in autonomy is a necessary condition but will not necessarily be sufficient, and that collaboration is the other critical factor. At last week's meeting, I spent a bit of time asking the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development about the comment in its 2015 report on the need to strengthen the middle. Is that what is required in order to bring about collaboration? Is there enough focus on that in the governance review? If not, what would you like to see on the subject of strengthening the middle?

I put that question primarily to Frank Lennon and Danielle Mason.

Frank Lennon: I am not so sure about that. The danger is that the regional collaboratives could become weak in the middle because there would be another layer of accountability. The intention to share expertise across a wider base is entirely laudable, and there is evidence from the work of the northern alliance that that has worked. The answer is that, although we need to do something about strengthening the middle, it should not be done at the expense of school autonomy, to go back to that issue. If there is not a high level of school input to the middle area, we will not have moved forward significantly.

Danielle Mason: At the Education Endowment Foundation, we look at the challenge of how evidence is put into practice. In our experience, teachers listen to other teachers. In England, we are currently setting up a network of research schools to share best practice—to be clear, it is evidence-based best practice. As an organisation, we definitely recognise the need for a layer above schools where collaboration can take place and learning and evidence can be shared. I know that there was a lot of discussion at the committee's meeting last week about the definition of "the middle." I do not want to wade into that, but there is certainly value in having space somewhere above the single-school level in which to share experiences and learning.

Daniel Johnson: Do we need to ensure that the regional improvement collaboratives are accountable downwards as much as upwards? Does that have a clear implication with regard to the consultation on the funding mechanism? Regardless of how we state that things should be, behaviour ultimately follows the money.

Danielle Mason: The collaboratives could be an opportunity to provide a space for shared learning and high-quality, focused collaboration. There are many things that they could do. We have talked about some things that would be unhelpful but, if they were to provide a space at that level for high-quality collaboration with a focus on outcomes and on improving the quality of teaching and learning in a way that is school and teacher focused, that would be a valuable contribution.

Daniel Johnson: Finally, there has been an awful lot of discussion from all the panellists about the role of evidence and the need to demonstrate what works. Does the governance review need to include a component on how we build and use evidence to demonstrate things?

As a supplementary, do we need to have another look at which international measures we use and what role they play? I am thinking in particular about the programme for international student assessment, which we use, and the trends in international mathematics and science study, or TIMSS, and the progress in international reading literacy study, or PIRLS, which we do not currently use.

11:15

Danielle Mason: I will let Rebekah Widdowfield speak about that in more detail. My organisation focuses on specific evidence that allows us to assess whether something has had a particular impact. We look at whether a particular intervention or reform has caused the change that we see in schools. There could be a greater focus on that type of causal evidence. There are many types of valuable data and evidence, but without looking at that type of causal evidence it is difficult to predict impact and, after the fact, to say whether something was responsible for the change that we see, to come back to Ross Greer's point. We advocate a greater emphasis on that aspect.

In addition, it is important to say that evidence in isolation is never sufficient, as it is obviously essential to bring to bear professional judgment.

Dr Widdowfield: The type of evidence that you need depends on the questions that you are seeking to address. In a major reform programme of this nature, you need to draw on a wide range of evidence that includes formal statistical evidence as well as judgment and experience.

One source of evidence can seldom tell us all that we need to know, particularly when we are evaluating the effectiveness or otherwise of particular interventions. The causal data that Danielle Mason spoke about is important. We might have statistics that show how things are changing, but it is much more challenging to find out why that is happening.

What is important is not only the type of evidence but the quality of the data and the robustness and rigour of the interpretation. That is a skilled task, particularly when it involves bringing together evidence from different places. It is important that we get better at harnessing the capability and capacity that exist in Scotland, as well as in organisations south of the border, to help with that. Evidence must be a key part of the reform implementation. We need to think early on about what we are trying to achieve, what the key indicators of success are, what data we are already collecting and where the gaps are. We can then ensure that we have the right data to enable us to make judgments and assessments about whether something is achieving the outcomes that it set out to achieve.

Danielle Mason: It is worth saying that, in our experience in England and in some of the other countries in which we work, schools are really enthusiastic about being part of the evidence-building project. More than a third of all schools in England have been involved in one of our evaluation trials, and there is real enthusiasm. People said that it would not be possible to do that kind of trialling in schools, but it has been, and there has been enthusiasm for the process. It pulls schools, and teachers and professionals, into the process of evidence building, learning and improvement.

Dr Widdowfield: That is critical—the approach must involve more than simply the academic community producing evidence that is then presented to schools. Schools must take part in building the evidence base and understand and learn how they can use it to best effect.

Johann Lamont: I am interested in exploring what I see as the tensions and contradictions in the policy. It looks as if we want to direct authority down and to create collaboratives that are directly accountable right up to the minister, and I think that there is a contradiction there. There is competition between what I would see as entitlement for young people and staff, and autonomy.

Frank Lennon mentioned the structure at school level acting as a check and a balance against what the headteacher might do. He talked about rogue headteachers; heaven forfend that there would be such a thing. Would you accept, however, that there must be limits on what headteachers can do? Where would the checks and balances at a local level be, and what would they look like?

Frank Lennon: I agree that there is a challenge in that respect. If we need to have democratic accountability, there must be a mechanism at school level where that is evident. To be frank, it does not currently exist. You can ask your local councillor whether this is the case, but in my experience elected members rarely, if ever, attend a parent council meeting.

I am now at the stage in my career when I look back longingly to the days of Michael Forsyth and his school boards. I think that school boards are an ideal mechanism, or rather an idea for a mechanism, that could be reintroduced to provide high levels of accountability. The schools that choose to go forward with reform may well do so on the condition that they have in place an accountability mechanism at local level that would allow for scrutiny from elected members or an

officer of the council. That is not incompatible with a high degree of autonomy.

At present, local authorities are struggling to provide any kind of meaningful support other than personnel support—and even then, headteachers complain repeatedly about delays in appointments or blame the local authority if they cannot get staff. The truth is that local authorities have slimmed down their staff to the point at which they are incapable of offering high-level, quality support.

We currently have a de facto system in which local authorities cannot fully service the needs of schools. I see the reforms as an opportunity to do something about that. I accept that there will be a tension if the regional collaboratives end up having a powerful middle-tier role—in other words, if the regional leads are line managed by the chief inspector of education. They may be appointed by local authorities, but I am still not clear from looking at the situation whether the local authority leads will report to elected members from the consortium or whatever the mechanism is. I am not even sure about the constitution of the panel that makes the appointment—that might give us a clue as to who has the real authority in that situation.

The accountability issues will certainly have to be clarified before we take forward the headteachers charter, otherwise headteachers will be in the really awkward position of having to decide whether a school's decision that is taken at school level—whether or not it is tacitly backed by the local authority—might conflict with the regional plan. Which one would prevail?

Johann Lamont: I get that. To go back to the days of placing requests, we thought that school boards and all the rest were the most dreadful thing that had ever been invented. I accept that that view was partly the result of a reluctance to change. However, there is another tension in the idea of the school being represented by the headteacher as opposed to following what the school community believes to be right.

I will give you an example that is rational and logical. I have worked in communities where I would say, "You know what? To meet the needs of this community, we should invest in learning support or behavioural support as opposed to providing five highers." However, that can come right up against a school's desire to be a community school that serves the needs of all the young people in that area. In those circumstances, how do we get the balance of autonomy right when the headteacher is allowed to make a decision that the school community might find difficult? They might be able to see the logic of such a decision, but it might end up creating a school that is very different from the kind of school that exists down the road.

Frank Lennon: I can see the danger there, but I do not recognise the idea that headteachers, given the way in which their role is currently defined, exercise that degree of feudal power. They would not simply make a decision and say, "Oh well, we're not having support for learning—we're having five highers."

At present, every school in almost every authority—in fact, probably in every authority—is required to have a school negotiating committee that is representative of the staff, who elect its members. That is true for primary schools as well. The negotiating committee will agree the workload for teachers, the development plan and so on for the school year. It is usually the organisation that fits the school workload or the overall division of budget allocations to school priorities; that tends not to be done by the headteacher sitting in his or her office speaking to like-minded individuals.

It is important—if for no other reason than the possibility that people in the community might have such concerns—that there is a clear definition of the accountability measures for individual headteachers. The parent councils do not currently provide sufficiently robust scrutiny of what is being done, but one could argue the same with regard to local authorities.

Johann Lamont: I will highlight one final tension that I have observed. The profession, through the professional organisations and the trade unions, wants to have a level playing field for its members, so there are national negotiations and national bargaining. Being a principal teacher in one school should be much the same as it is somewhere else, with the same terms and conditions. Is there a tension there? You alluded to that earlier when you discussed the question of someone who is surplus to requirements in one school, and where they would go if individual schools had authority over staffing, yet autonomy for schools without control of staffing does not feel very logical. How is that tension managed? In your view, is it reasonable of the trade unions and professional organisations to say that there should be an evident view of what principal teachers or deputy heads should be doing across all schools?

Frank Lennon: I do not think that that is possible. The arrangement that we have is as good as we are going to get. We have a national pay scale. For principal teachers, for example, there are six points on the scale depending on the level of responsibility. A job-sizing toolkit, which was agreed and developed with the professional associations, is used in every authority. At present, someone can be a principal teacher of history in one school and be on a different salary point from a principal teacher of history in another school, depending on how the job sizing turned out. Job sizing takes into account the number of

pupils, the number of sections in a subject, line management responsibilities, the size of the budget and so on. There are already mechanisms in existence to ensure that there is a degree of fairness.

Part of the difficulty is that schools are so diverse, in both their intake and the amount of money that they can attract from pupil equity funding or other forms of deprivation allowance, that it is impossible to match individual principal teacher posts exactly across the system. At present, the system is as good as we need for that kind of thing. It permits a degree of judgment at school level without the professional associations feeling that one of their members of staff has been unfairly treated.

Ruth Maguire (Cunninghame South) (SNP): Good morning, panel. We have covered regional support structures and collaboration quite a bit this morning. Danielle Mason said that collaboration has to focus on pupil outcomes, and we have spoken quite a bit about the challenges of collaboration. I am interested to hear how regional improvement collaboratives can improve the quality of support that is provided to schools and teachers and thereby improve the interaction between teachers and pupils in the classroom, which is the most important thing.

We have probably covered accountability, which is the other area that I wanted to ask about, but if you have anything further to add on that aspect I would be interested to hear it.

Danielle Mason: As I said, the evidence suggests that, for collaboration, what is important—it is no surprise that collaboration in and of itself is not enough—is a clear focus and structure, and a sort of scaffolding around what it is that everyone is trying to achieve. We have looked at interventions in which, broadly speaking, teachers meet and talk about evidence, then go back and talk about it with their colleagues, but that does not seem to have a huge impact on attainment in schools. Where collaborations involve teachers coming together with a school that has developed and tested an intervention that is surrounded by a good structure, and where there is a manual and a clear link between the evidence on teaching and learning and how an intervention is going to improve outcomes in schools, we see greater and clearer effects. That is what I mean when I talk about the need to focus on teaching and learning.

Accountability is a slightly different topic, but, seeing as Ruth Maguire asked about it, I will highlight something that came up when we were preparing for this session. It is important to look at the range in schools as well as at the average attainment. If we look only at the mean scores or results in a school, it can mask poor attainment among particular groups of pupils. When we introduce change and reform, as is happening at the moment, we have to ensure that all pupils are benefiting and that all teachers and all lessons in a school are delivering for pupils. That is really important, and one way to address that is to look at the range of outcomes that a school is achieving rather than just at the averages.

Frank Lennon: The most important thing about collaboration is that it should be school led. If it is imposed or mandated from the top down or from outside the school, it is unlikely to get the buy-in that is necessary to bring about real, effective change at classroom level. If we can encourage schools to identify where they need development while ensuring that they do not feel that they are somehow selling their staff down the river by saying that they are ineffective or no good, it would be really helpful.

The regional collaboratives might be able to facilitate that. In a small authority—I am not sure of the size of Moray, which Richard Lochhead mentioned—where there are five or six secondary schools, there might be only three or four teachers of modern studies, and one may say that such an environment is not wide enough as a professional base to encourage real professional development. A regional collaborative might be able to set up something that would help to address that. For primary schools, similar offerings could be made; I just do not know. The difficulty would be the mechanism by which schools access the collaboration on offer. We have to get to a stage at which collaboration is genuinely school and teacher led and comes from full and frank self-evaluation rather than from a judgmental decision on where the weak subjects or teachers are.

11:30

Ruth Maguire: I heard what you said about bringing people along and ensuring that change is incremental and school led. I agree with that in terms of getting buy-in from people, but how do we marry that approach with the need to say that structure is important and that the changes are important and have to happen? How do we get that balance right? What would that look like?

Frank Lennon: We need the moral authority before we get to that stage—that is part of the difficulty. The only authority that counts in schools now is moral authority. Children do not respect someone just because they are a teacher; there must be a better justification than the fact that someone holds a position of authority. The same is true for the profession as a whole. I understand that this is difficult, and even more so if we are dealing in timescales that are defined by the Scottish Parliament. It may take longer—we do not know how the momentum might build. Part of the

difficulty with an incremental approach is that it has not been tried yet. We think that we can create change only by mandating it—arguably, that will produce as many challenges as any other approach. I am simply arguing, from a school-led point of view, that schools must be individually involved in deciding when they are ready to take on the full headteachers charter responsibilities.

I suspect that, initially, there will be reluctance, but there will also be enthusiasts who will build momentum. There could be—perhaps not in the current session of Parliament, but thereafter—a significant evidence base that will be worth scrutinising. We have not been good at that in Scotland—we had no independent evaluation of curriculum for excellence, astonishing though that may seem. We have social science departments in our universities that could come up with metrics other than SIMD. Are we asking them to do that? I do not know; we do not appear to be.

The difficulty is a lack of imagination about what we might do. At what level are we really engaging members of the profession and harnessing their enthusiasm and passion for learning and teaching?

Gillian Martin: There is precedent for collaboration, of course: I want to highlight the regional partnership of the northern alliance. My previous question was about pilots. The northern alliance is not a pilot, because people just went ahead and did it, but it is an unofficial pilot. What can we learn from the northern alliance? Its success is one of the reasons that collaboration has come to the fore as something to be discussed in the governance review. The idea is that a regional collaboration has worked in the north of Scotland, so we can learn from that and roll it out further. What has been good about that collaboration that may allay some of the fears that have been expressed with regard to the possible creation of another tier of administration?

Frank Lennon: It appears that it has worked, but what is the evidence for that? What evidence are we evaluating when we say that the northern alliance has worked? What appears to be attractive about it is that it was not mandated from anywhere outside the authorities. It seems to be authority led rather than school led. Presumably the authorities are working under pressure from schools, so it has the right feel about it. I know that that sounds a bit nebulous, but it is a hair worth splitting. Our biggest problem with the direction of policy on governance, which I strongly support, will be grudging compliance, which will set the culture back. There is no neutral gear in education. If we are not moving forward, that grudging compliance will become a drag on the entire system, and it will be very difficult to move. That is a big danger in the current reforms.

I simply do not know enough about the detail of the northern alliance to answer Gillian Martin's question fully, but if the pressure has come from schools and the authorities have got together themselves to move things forward, that is exactly the model that we should be looking at.

Gillian Martin: There is probably a really pressing case for an evaluation of how the northern alliance has worked and how it can share its experience with the rest of the country so that people can build on that to develop regional collaborations that are right for their individual areas.

Frank Lennon: Possibly. The difficulty is that the Government has defined the regional collaboratives: it has told the authorities which collaboratives they are in, so they have not come organically from the authorities themselves. In fact, Argyll and Bute is in the same regional collaborative as Aberdeen.

Dr Widdowfield: When we say that the northern alliance has worked—I am not close enough to it to know whether or not it has—it is important to be clear about what we mean by that. On what basis has it worked? Has it improved educational outcomes and performance, or has it worked in the sense of getting buy-in and support for change? It fits into the category of a natural experiment, but we need to be clear about the indicators of success against which it can be measured and evaluated so that we know whether it has worked, and so that we have an idea of what might have contributed to its success or otherwise.

Gillian Martin: Of course, if we want to be flexible, we should understand that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. It might have worked for that region, but it might not work in another part of Scotland.

Dr Widdowfield: That is why we need to know about the context and the wider factors, instead of just saying whether or not it has improved educational performance. That would allow us to understand how far it might be transferable, in full or part, to other places.

Oliver Mundell: I have a tiny supplementary on that point. Is geography is the best, or sole, categorisation for collaboration, or are there are more imaginative solutions?

Frank Lennon: I am in favour of multiple collaborations. That is part of the difficulty—there is not a collaborative structure that can be set up that is appropriate for everyone. I think that it will be possible for a secondary school to be on a nationwide network of similar or dissimilar schools, depending on what they are looking for, and to be very closely associated with a cluster and—perhaps for some other purpose—with other

schools that are much more geographically convenient.

We have to get away from the idea that there is a single model of collaboration that we can roll out to all schools. It is not going to be like that. We need to allow and encourage the system to generate its own innovations. Why do we not do that? Why do we not allow schools to decide for themselves when they are ready to accept the national policy framework, and give them a period of time and review their progress independently on the basis of the evidence that we have accrued?

Danielle Mason: The Education Endowment Foundation has something called the families of schools database, which is based on data from English schools. It collects schools together based on various attributes such as the proportion of disadvantaged children, where the schools are and their results. A school can look at how they are doing in comparison with similar schools. Experimental statistics have now been released in Scotland that would allow a similar database to be produced.

The database can be very revealing. We often find that a school with a high level of disadvantaged pupils is doing really well for those disadvantaged pupils and for its pupils on average, whereas another school in a seemingly similar context is doing much worse. That is not about accountability or blame, but about making the comparison and saying, "My school is similar to that school. It is achieving something, and we can make a change to make that happen in my school."

The Convener: I thank you very much for your evidence, which is very helpful. As a point of interest, we are going up to the north-east soon to speak to the northern alliance—it sounds like a "Star Wars" site or something like that—so perhaps we will see for ourselves how effective it is and what impact it could have on other parts of the country.

11:38

Meeting continued in private until 12:18.

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