OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 1 May 2019

Session 5

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
14th Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
*Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP)
*Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab)
*Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green)
*Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP)
*Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP)
Oliver Mundell (Dumfriesshire) (Con)
*Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD)
*Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Joanna Murphy (National Parent Forum of Scotland)
Linda O'Neill (Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection)
Eileen Prior (Connect)
Magaidh Wentworth (Comann nam Pàrant)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 1 May 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Subject Choices Inquiry

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning and welcome to the Education and Skills Committee's 14th meeting in 2019. We have received apologies from Oliver Mundell. I remind everyone to turn mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Our first item of business is our third evidence session on the committee's subject choices inquiry. Before we begin taking evidence, I take this opportunity to thank all the teachers and parents who took part in our discussion groups on Monday evening in Dunfermline, and I also thank the committee members who took part in the event. The contributions were valuable, and we appreciate the time that people took to attend.

I welcome Eileen Prior, executive director of Connect; Joanna Murphy, chair of the National Parent Forum of Scotland; Linda O'Neill, education lead with CELCIS, the centre for excellence for children's care and protection; and Magaidh Wentworth, oifigear phàrant, Comann nam Pàrant—I hope that I got that reasonably right. She is the parents officer with the parents organisation CNP. I give a warm welcome to you all. We will go straight to questions.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): Alasdair Allan will sort out the pronunciation in due course. Coming from Shetland, I am glad that I am not the convener on mornings such as this.

I want to ask about your involvement, as organisations representing parents, in the construction of the broad general education part and the senior phase of Scottish education. One aspect of subject choice that the committee has struggled to understand fully is the origins of how we are where we are. My colleagues will get on to the debate about how well the system is working, on which we have heard lots of evidence, but were your organisations involved in the construction of the way in which education in secondary schools now operates, in relation to the split between secondary 1 to S3 and then S4 to S6?

Eileen Prior (Connect): The simple answer is no. The curriculum for excellence format was basically presented as the vision. That was some years ago now, and we were not involved.

Tavish Scott: Who was it presented by?

Eileen Prior: It was the Scottish Government and Education Scotland.

Tavish Scott: At that early stage, were there any forums in which you were asked to reflect on that, give some thought to it and consider any unintended consequences?

Eileen Prior: No.

Joanna Murphy (National Parent Forum of Scotland): In the early days, the National Parent Forum of Scotland was a member of the curriculum for excellence management board, although it was one of the previous chairs of the National Parent Forum who attended that. As Eileen Prior said, we were not really consulted on the design, although we were party to some of the discussions about how it would work. The National Parent Forum has always said that curriculum for excellence will not work unless information is shared with parents, and that has been the major failing. Across the curriculum, parents' experience is that they do not know what is happening, so they do not understand how it works. They do not know whether it is good or bad—they just do not know about it at all.

Tavish Scott: You talk about sharing information. What kind of information did you ask for at that time?

Joanna Murphy: We always ask for information that is relevant to the parents. Naturally, parents are interested in their children who are attending school, so they need to know that the system has changed from when they were at school, because otherwise they just think that it is the same—why would they not? Parents want information that is relevant to their child and the stage that their child is at. If a child is in primary 3, the parents will want to know about what happens in primary 3. If a child is in S4, the parents will want to know what happens in S4.

Tavish Scott: You said that one of your predecessors had that responsibility all those years ago, but do you have any reflections on the situation now? Is information being shared adequately and successfully?

Joanna Murphy: It is not being shared adequately or successfully enough. Some pockets of schools share information, but that is not widespread enough. Schools are busy places; they have lots of things to do. During the roll-out of the new qualifications, for example, schools consulted parents, but unfortunately communications have dwindled considerably since then. Generally, parents who have come in during the subsequent years have not had the information. They missed the big mailshot.

Schools need to concentrate on sharing information every year. It is a big ask for schools, but, until the general population has a better idea of curriculum for excellence and all the ins and outs that make it different from our previous system, or even the system when I was at school, it will be difficult for parents to understand the differences and see the benefits.

Tavish Scott: In evidence to the committee last week, Professor Jim Scott said that each school should publish its approach to the curriculum—it is as simple as that. Would that be of benefit to parents?

Joanna Murphy: I am sure that it would benefit some parents in the school, but it would go over the heads of others. Basic information is lost sometimes, so it is difficult for people to come in at the highest level. Sometimes there is a need for more basic information across the board that people pick up as they go on their child's journey through school.

Eileen Prior: Joanna Murphy is absolutely right. There is a fresh cohort of parents and children every year, so a refresh has to be done; that is the very nature of schools. However, schools will manage the message. What they present to parents as being the best choice and option is rarely challenged by the parents, because they trust their school. The information that comes from the school and the decisions that senior management makes about how it will design the school's curriculum will rarely be challenged. Most parents will take it as being the best choice for their school.

Schools need to re-message and have conversations about the options rather than talk about their vision of what is best for the school. That nuance is missing in many schools.

Linda O'Neill (Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection): I echo what Eileen Prior and Joanna Murphy said about the importance of communication with parents. We see that as being extremely important.

Looked-after children live in a variety of settings and with a variety of carers. They could be living with foster carers, residential childcare workers or kinship carers, and if they are being looked after at home, often their parents will have had poor or difficult care experiences, which will affect their willingness and ability—or their feelings about their ability—to engage with schools.

It is important to think about how we communicate information and involve parents. In our work on parental engagement programmes in North Ayrshire and Renfrewshire, parents tell us that they do not understand curricular structures or content, particularly in the transition from primary school to secondary school, and they feel anxious about engaging with schools. Schools need the skills and the time to work alongside parents and build relationships. They also need to think about how to have meaningful two-way conversations instead of just imparting information and how to bring parents into schools and work alongside them to construct what is best for children.

Tavish Scott: Thank you for that. Now that we have the two phases of secondary school, how is that working for subject choice? What is your perspective on how the system is now working for parents and, more importantly, for pupils?

Eileen Prior: Unfortunately, it is not working across the board. Part of the issue is that there is a huge variety. We hear from parents that, in some cases, nothing has changed and it is still the old approach of 2, 2, 2, so youngsters start making selections at the end of second year and start working on their national qualifications in third year. There is a no-change mentality, which says, "That has worked for us in the past"—it is a very traditional perspective.

Sadly, we end up with a series of one-session dashes—to national 5s, to highers and to advanced highers. That is not what the promise had been. We are still pushing many youngsters through national 5 when they could be going straight to higher. The flexibility of curriculum for excellence in relation to different pathways and moving straight through to highers rather than going through the assessments associated with N4 and N5 has not been embraced across the board. Some schools are doing that, but many are not.

Tavish Scott: Is the picture patchy across Scotland?

Eileen Prior: Yes, it is very patchy.

Joanna Murphy: It is true that it is patchy, but more and more schools are moving from the 2, 2, 2 to the 3-plus-3 model. More schools are not narrowing choices as quickly as they were. More schools are offering much more broad personalisation: children are doing all the subjects in S1 and then picking two or three from each curricular area—taking geography and history in social sciences, for example—then slightly narrowing their choice again in S3, before going into S4 and doing their actual subjects. In different models that I have seen, there seem to be more options for doing voluntary or extracurricular activities during the school day and as part of the timetable.

It is fair to say that that is not the picture across the board, but there is optimism about it across the board, and more schools are looking at neighbouring schools and seeing how they are doing things. It is a big ask for a school to move in a new direction. Schools are unwieldy places, and

it must be exasperating for a headteacher to think about that and ask, “How am I going to move this beast in another direction?” Looking at how other people are doing it must make it an easier job.

Tavish Scott: Is it possible to define that? Last week, we saw tables of 358 state secondary schools in Scotland and what is happening around subject choice. You have just given a very fair reflection of your perception of that. Do you have any numbers to back up your perception of the general direction of travel?

Joanna Murphy: I do not have better numbers than the committee has.

Tavish Scott: We have quite a lot of numbers.

Joanna Murphy: Five or six years ago, only a handful of schools were taking that approach. In my experience of talking to schools, we are now moving towards half of schools starting on that journey. They cannot do it all at once.

Magaidh Wentworth (Comann nam Pàrant): I know that the committee is aware from previous evidence that there are concerns about the dramatic decline in the number of pupils—both learners and fluent speakers—who are continuing with Gaelic and other languages. Several factors have an impact on that, and, in many schools, the subject choice limitation of six subjects at national 5 is one of them.

In smaller, rural schools, if the pupils have the choice of six subjects, it makes column choices very difficult. Pupils often feel that there is no option to continue with their Gaelic studies. For children who have come through Gaelic-medium primary education, in which all their teaching is through Gaelic, and have gone on to have very limited access to Gaelic in secondary school, to leave school with no qualification in Gaelic is a huge loss—and they often lose their Gaelic language skills.

There is an answer. It is easier to manage that in the bigger schools. In Sgoil Ghàidlig Ghlaschu, all children do Gaelic as a compulsory subject, along with English and maths, up to national 5. James Gillespie’s high school in Edinburgh is moving towards building on the curriculum through Gaelic. I feel that children who have had all their primary education teaching through the medium of Gaelic should be given the opportunity to leave school with at least one qualification in Gaelic.

10:15

Tavish Scott: Or in another language.

Magaidh Wentworth: Yes. The concern is across languages.

Tavish Scott: How would you make that happen?

Magaidh Wentworth: I would increase subject choices to at least seven at national 5, which would give more flexibility in the curriculum.

Tavish Scott: Do you mean in terms of languages?

Magaidh Wentworth: Yes. There is a question about what advice pupils are being given regarding languages when they are making subject choices. Other factors also probably affect the take-up of languages in secondary school. I certainly think that it is concerning and something that we need to look at. There is the question whether the focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects lately has been at the expense of languages.

The Convener: Before we move to the next committee member, I will ask about an aspect of curriculum for excellence that we discussed with parents the other evening. Through the use of school clusters, pupils can go to a neighbouring school to study for a higher qualification that is not available at their own school. There is also the use of colleges to deliver some subjects as well as foundation apprenticeships and the fact that, in some cases, college lecturers come into schools. What is your experience of those models and what do parents tell you about them?

Joanna Murphy: Parents are happy for their child to do a subject at another school, but real life unfortunately gets in the way sometimes. The schools in a big city can be quite near each other, but sometimes the distances between them are not manageable. There is also a cost implication of getting to another school, both financially and in terms of time, because the pupil has to get there and back again. The pros and cons therefore have to be weighed up.

I cannot see why, though, with the digital means that we have today, a pupil cannot sit in a classroom in their own school and link to a classroom in another school. I do not see why that is not an option. I know that e-Sgoil has been rolled out across the Highlands. I do not see why something similar is not an option for other classroom lessons. Certainly, young people coming together in one location for a subject is fine, if it is possible.

I know that there is a territorial issue in some cases, though, because young people do not want to go to a neighbouring school if that would take them out of their comfort zone. Parents do not want that if young people cannot learn because they are frightened about being in a school where they do not know anyone. My daughter would not go to another school that is about 300 yards from our house to study for an advanced higher. She said, “We all wear skirts at school and they don’t, and I’m not going if I’m the only one wearing a

skirt." It was as basic as that. Young people have to feel comfortable, which is why we have to think about how they can stay in their comfort zone and learn.

The Convener: Just as a matter of interest, what advanced higher was it?

Joanna Murphy: It was design and manufacture. However, it was not about doing the advanced higher; it was about her wearing a skirt and girls at that school not wearing skirts. That is the reality of her day, though.

The Convener: That is interesting, because part of what we are looking at in relation to STEM subjects is unconscious bias and what dissuades young women from doing those subjects. Your example might have been about something that feeds into that process as well. It was interesting to hear about that, so thank you for sharing it, and thank you to your daughter for helping.

Joanna Murphy: She will absolutely kill me. Part of that is to do with me, because I was the one making her wear the skirt.

The Convener: A couple of members want to come in, but I will bring in Ms Prior first.

Eileen Prior: Technology has its place, but if youngsters, particularly in city authorities, are able to travel to college or another school campus to study, that is good. Certainly, once parents understand the options and the different pathways that are open to youngsters, they are generally happy to encourage them to undertake such travel to study.

Regarding technology, I do not know what some schools are built of, but I know that there are technological barriers that do not allow wi-fi. We have to address such barriers in order for schools to use technology as a teaching solution. Technology cannot replace face-to-face teaching, but it can help.

Linda O'Neill: At CELCIS, our work is focused mainly on working alongside schools, local authorities and further and higher education providers to improve educational experiences for looked-after children, rather than on working directly with looked-after children and their families.

Over the past few years, we have definitely seen a big increase in the flexibility of pathways and collaborations between schools, further and higher education institutions and workplaces, but for looked-after children—especially those at the upper end of the spectrum—it is important to think about the additional needs that they might have if part of their timetable will involve their studying somewhere else. We know that those young people have faced significant adversity in their lives, which might have an impact on their developmental stage relative to their chronological age. Although they might be 15 or 16 and capable of independent travel, they might struggle socially and emotionally with their timetable being split between different institutions. They might need to feel very safe in the school that they are in, and they might not cope well with going to a college or a placement somewhere else for half the time.

If we are to have such flexibility, it is crucial to the success of that approach that we think about the planning and support that we provide for children. A young person's additional support requirements do not cease just because they are at the upper end of their education.

Ross Greer (West Scotland) (Green): I acknowledge absolutely the benefits that Joanna Murphy mentioned of young people getting the opportunity to study a subject that they might not otherwise be able to study, particularly if it is one that they need to study to get to the next stage of their education.

However, when we asked Education Scotland about the issue a couple of weeks ago, it gave an interesting response, to which I would like to get the panel's reaction. I highlighted the lost opportunities that result from travel. Young people who travel to another school might miss out on extracurricular activities at lunch time or after school, and they might also miss out on other classroom teaching time, depending on how the timetable is structured. Education Scotland's response was to say that the motivation that such pupils receive from travelling to another school to learn more than makes up for the loss of opportunities to take part in extracurricular activities, or for the loss of class contact time at their school. What is your response to that?

Eileen Prior: A cost benefit analysis has to be done; we must look at what the benefit of that approach is versus the cost of it. The school will have to have that conversation with the young person and their parents or carers, and a decision should be made on that basis. It is true that there will be wins, but there will also be issues.

In the authority area in which I live, timetabling was changed so we now have a short lunch break, which means that a lot of extracurricular activities that would previously have taken place at lunch time have gone. As a result, there is now a focus on after-school activities, but pupils who are from a rural area and have to travel miss out because they have to get the bus home.

Such decisions are never simple and there is no single answer. The decision must be based on the priorities for the young person.

Linda O'Neill: I agree with Eileen Prior. It is important that schools have good relationships and that they have the ability and the skills to get

to know their children and young people and their families, so that they can have conversations about what is most appropriate for them, what will be of the greatest benefit and what additional support is required to enable them to achieve and to have the best possible experience. We know that inclusion can be extremely difficult for looked-after children, and that they often miss out on extracurricular and after-school activities. Such social and emotional enrichment is crucial for their experience of education.

Unfortunately, we know that the young people whom we work with often attain at lower levels than all other pupils, which is why it is so important that we have a relational approach that involves having conversations about what will be of most importance and most benefit to those young people. That is crucial in ensuring that they get the best out of their school experience.

Joanna Murphy: It is all very well saying that the motivation of the child will get them through the class, but education is for all young people, not just those young people who are highly motivated, who know that they need to take a subject and are desperate to do it, which gets them through. Personalisation and choice are also needed for the kids who kind of want to do a subject and know that they would quite like it, but perhaps cannot think about going to another school every day—for a higher, they would have to do that a significant number of times—because it would really upset their routine.

We want our young people to be happy and confident, to have friends and to have their lunch, and making them go to another school can sometimes tip the balance, so they pull back. It is a vulnerable time in young people's lives; generally, they just want to be one of the gang. It is unfortunate and I am not saying that there are not lots of things wrong with it, but that is the situation.

It is up to schools to think about having more than one person going to another school to do a subject, because that would be beneficial to the young people. Schools could organise it so that classes for different subjects were held at the same time. If more young people were going to another school, they would not feel isolated by going by themselves.

Magaidh Wentworth: In rural areas, travelling to other schools is not an option, so technology is the only answer. It is the only way to deliver equality in provision for children who are in small classes in small schools with limited curriculums. We need to develop the use of e-Sgoil and other hubs that can deliver to schools through technology.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On the need for things such as e-Sgoil, I want to make the point, without sounding too pedantic, that Joanna Murphy referred to e-Sgoil as being there for the Highlands and Islands, just because it is based in Stornoway. It is not there only for the Highlands and Islands; apparently people in other countries are using it as well. I am making the point—rather than asking a question—that e-Sgoil and things like it can be used nationally and not just in the Highlands and Islands.

Joanna Murphy: I was just making the point that e-Sgoil is used well there—I was giving a compliment.

The Open University, for example, has been going for 50 years. In Australia, they do such things with people who live significantly further away from schools than people do in Scotland, but they seem to manage all right. It is a shame that we do not do that here.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow) (Lab): I am interested in the extent to which parents and young people should have an impact on or influence over the curriculum, and in what proper engagement with parents and young people should look like. I do not mean at the level of individual subject choice, which we might talk about in a minute, but in what the school offers. Should young people have a right, for example, to choose from a certain number of subjects? If so, what would that number be? Does it matter if different schools do different things?

Eileen Prior: This part of the conversation—the focus on subject numbers and choices—makes us lose sight of our purpose. The purpose is to give young people the opportunities that they need to make the best of their futures, which will look very different for different youngsters. My feeling is that it is not about numbers of subjects or whatever; it is much more fundamental. It is about school management, families and young people sharing a vision for what they need, as a school community, to support their children.

Some young people have a clear vision; for example, they might want to go to university, so they need certain highers. What we design for their school should enable them to do that. However, that should not inhibit the youngsters who need more support or those who are on a different pathway. The focus on numbers takes our eye off the ball. It should be about our young people doing the best that they can. Fundamentally, it is about the school community, the school management and the wider community understanding what they need and what suits their circumstances in order to enable their youngsters to do what they want and are able to do.

10:30

Johann Lamont: How does the system manage a child who wants to do five highers in a school in a more deprived area, in which a disproportionate number of young people will not sit five highers, and who is, as a consequence, more likely to have to travel and to be in multilevel classes than would be the case if the school were in a more prosperous area? How do you manage that child when their school cannot offer what the school down the road can? I hear what you say about numbers, but at what level is the decision made? If a school will not offer five highers but directs resources elsewhere—because the majority of young people in its community will not do five highers—there will be young people in that school who cannot achieve their ambitions. How do you manage that? That feels to me like a dilemma for schools, local authorities and families—families as a general group, as opposed to individual families.

Eileen Prior: I would not deny that that is a dilemma, but it is not beyond us to come up with solutions. We have talked about the use of technology and accessing other programmes. Also, of course, Scottish Qualifications Authority exams are not the only route for young people. We are a bit fixed on it being about nationals, highers and advanced highers, but there are many other qualifications for young people. That is what I was alluding to earlier when I said that the message that parents get is managed by the school. If the school and school managers say that their best route forward is to focus on X, Y or Z, that is what parents will buy, for the most part.

One of the conversations is surely about the range of opportunities for young people. Something that exercises me is that many parents get very wound up about the number of nationals a young person can take, although we know that the number of nationals that they accumulate will not have any impact if, for example, the young person wants to go to university. Therefore, that is not the right conversation for that young person, and we should focus on highers. I get a sense that we, and the system, are caught up in the rigidity of nationals, highers and advanced highers when the conversation should be a more flexible one about the range of opportunities that are available to all our young people.

Joanna Murphy: We need to remember that the senior phase is a three-year programme. More and more of our young people are staying on for the full three years; the focus should be on the qualifications that they leave with, not the order in which they sit them and that progression.

The system is completely new for parents in Scotland: there was nothing like it for them, so why would they be able to imagine it? Parents do not know about the system and they do not support it, because they do not know about it. It is human nature that they default back to what they know, which was alright and appeared to work. However, it was not working, so we decided to change it. We need to put a lot more into helping parents to understand the system, let alone to understand the fact that it does not matter when students sit their national 5s or their highers.

I do not know of any schools that do not allow children to sit five highers; there is always that option for young people who are able to do it. I believe that every secondary school allows that. However, although those young people are important, we cannot run our whole system around the kids who are doing five highers. We have to think about the rest of them, so that the options are right for them as well.

Magaidh Wentworth: A growing number of parents are enrolling their children in Gaelic-medium education in primary school. Their assumption is that their children will be able to go through Gaelic-medium education until the end of secondary. However, once the child gets to secondary school, they realise that that is not the case and that, at the moment, they can sit only one higher in Gaelic. There has been slow progress for Gaelic-medium provision at secondary. We need more qualifications and we need to increase the opportunities that children have to continue their education in the medium in which they started it. At the moment, we are not doing the best for those children. They are immersed in Gaelic until secondary but then have very little provision and their needs are not being met.

There is a good example of parental engagement in Edinburgh, where a group of parents are working with the City of Edinburgh Council to develop Gaelic provision at secondary. They hope to deliver nine subjects in the medium of Gaelic from August this year, which is good progress. There are answers, but Gaelic's national priority is often not reflected in local decision making at school and local authority levels.

Linda O'Neill: There is certainly a role for the pupil and parent voices in thinking collectively about how we make those decisions. Through our work in some local authorities, we know that the voices of children and parents, and of education as a whole, are often missing from the planning process for the child. Placing education prominently in a child's plan will go a long way towards improving educational outcomes and experiences for children.

Consideration of how to work with schools to help them to become better and more confident at gathering data on the views of children and parents meaningfully—making sense of it and

collectively using it with insight and wisdom, alongside the structures and systems that are in place—might take us some way towards decisions being based on the needs of the whole population of a school, cluster or local authority. Decisions would also be rooted in what children and parents tell us will be most beneficial for them.

Johann Lamont: I am particularly interested in the issues for looked-after children. I am interested in two areas. What would be the consequence for a looked-after young person who has to move to another school if schools have complete flexibility about their curriculums? Do you have any evidence on what happens? A decision might have been made at school level about the young person's capacity to fit in, but they might be moved at short notice—when there is a family crisis or whatever—and be unable to fit into the other school's curriculum. How can that be addressed?

My other question is about the impact of the decision to get rid of certification for all. The young people whom I taught who were looked-after and vulnerable perhaps got foundation qualifications—they might have managed to squeeze in general qualifications—and felt valued by the school because they were external exams and resource was put into them. Has there been a consequence for such young people of the decision to end that kind of bridge into higher education and that way to engage them in education? Were you consulted? We cannot establish who decided that it might be a good idea to make national 4s, for example, not examinable externally.

Linda O'Neill: School disruption for looked-after children is a significant issue that we see in the educational outcomes statistics for looked-after children. The statistics tell us that the more placements a looked-after child has in a school year, the less well they do across the indicators for attainment, attendance and exclusion compared with their peers. As Johann Lamont said, looked-after young people often have to change placements at short notice, and that can have an impact on their educational journeys. In an ideal world, such moves would be planned: schools and young people would be consulted in a planned way to enable young people to settle in their new placements. However, for care and protection reasons, that is not always possible.

Another issue for children who are looked after outwith their local authority area is that they often have delayed access to education due to concerns about provision for additional support needs. We do not have enough data about how many children are currently affected; we know that some local authorities have significantly high numbers of children who are looked after and that others have high numbers that they host, as it is termed. All those factors impact on children's ability to engage with education.

We know, too, that children who have had to move placement and, consequently, to move school are at much higher risk of exclusion on admission. That means that they are admitted to a school but are subject to a tiered exclusion approach in which they might miss a particular subject because it is not offered on that curriculum, or they might be on a part-time timetable because they might have already covered a subject, or the school to which they move does not have appropriate additional support needs qualifications. It is an extremely complex issue for the young people with whom we work, but we see it reflected in the educational outcome indicators.

As we know, really robust planning for looked-after young people using the getting it right for every child principles, and involving the whole team around the child and incorporating the views of the child and the family, goes some way towards keeping moves to a minimum and ensuring that school moves are as unimpactful as possible. However, it is certainly an area to which we need to attend in order to ensure equity in access for children in such vulnerable situations.

Johann Lamont: Am I right in thinking that a disproportionate number of young people who have been looked after will leave school at the school-leaving age?

Linda O'Neill: Around 72 per cent of children who are looked after leave school at the statutory school-leaving age.

Johann Lamont: So, if our exam system is based on the three years up to sixth year and a young person could be told, "You might not get to do this option in fourth year, but you can do it in sixth year," this group of young people, a disproportionate number of whom leave in fourth year, will not have that option. Should more work be done on that?

Evidence that we received last week suggested that an unintended consequence of some of curriculum for excellence is that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged young people are actually faring worse—partly, in my view, because of the issue that I just raised. What work should we be doing on the offer in fourth year for disadvantaged groups?

Linda O'Neill: You are absolutely right. Because our young people tend to leave school earlier than all other young people, there are additional risk factors with regard to whether they feel able to go on to fifth and sixth years. According to the achievement of CFE levels data, there is at P1, P4, P7 and S3 already quite a significant gap in reading, writing, literacy,

numeracy and talking for our looked-after children. That not only goes some way to explaining their experience in education but helps us to think about the supports that need to be put in place before children even get to fourth year, to ensure that we are making plans right from that very early age, at which we are initially spotting these concerns.

Young people are presumed not to have additional support needs unless they are assessed otherwise, but we know that not all schools routinely assess looked-after children for such needs. Given the significant adversity and trauma that they have experienced, it would be quite unusual for those young people not to require some level of additional support so that they have equity of access to the curriculum.

Therefore, planning for these young people's education has to take place from what they do at a very early age—indeed, right from primary school—up to what they are going to do when they reach the senior phase. Looked-after children have exactly the same aspirations as all other young people and tell us that it is often we professionals who set the bar lower and that they want us to want more for them. As we have acknowledged, schools are busy environments, and working alongside looked-after children and getting the best for them can be a complex task. That is why we need to do the things that we know will work and make the biggest impact, such as putting in place good planning structures and routinely assessing for additional support needs, involving parents and carers in the most meaningful way possible and understanding what children need to support them through their whole journey, not just in the senior phase of the curriculum.

10:45

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I will continue Johann Lamont's line of questioning. Before I do, however, I have to say that I identify absolutely with everything that Ms Wentworth said about Gaelic education. In my constituency, there is a major issue that is exactly along the lines of what she talked about, which I am working hard to resolve.

In advocating for looked-after children, does CELCIS deal with schools directly or with local authorities?

Linda O'Neill: Sometimes, we work directly with schools to support them to improve educational outcomes; other times, we work with local authorities. Our work is focused mainly on building the skills and capacities of those who work in and around education, with children and families. We focus on getting them to think about how children are experiencing education. We want them to have the most positive experience possible in order that they can attain.

Rona Mackay: You talked about issues around flexibility, young people not being able to take part in extracurricular activities and all that stuff. Are schools doing enough to accommodate the needs of looked-after children? Do you feel that they are listening to what you are saying on behalf of the children in order to support them properly?

Linda O'Neill: The situation is certainly improving. Particularly over the past few years, people have become much more aware of the needs of looked-after children and some of the issues that they face.

The feedback that we get from our education forum members is that it is a complex issue. Looked-after children are often a priority among priorities, and, on a daily basis, our members work to improve outcomes for a range of vulnerable learners. We recognise that schools are doing their best, but it can be difficult to determine the most effective things and the most effective ways of doing them.

Part of our role is to support people who are in those jobs. We have developed our blueprint for education, "Looked After and Learning", which lists the six areas that we know make a difference in improving educational experiences and outcomes for children. It is a benchmarking and self-evaluation toolkit that schools or local authorities can use to really focus their resource on what makes the biggest difference. Although it looks at improving outcomes for looked-after children, the real benefit of it is that none of what it suggests that services could do will not be of benefit to all children—it just comes at the issue through the lens of looked-after children.

We encourage schools to use evidence-informed approaches alongside practical solutions to embed improvements.

Rona Mackay: You said that having more data would help you to make comparisons. Is there much variation throughout schools, even in geographical terms? I am thinking about urban schools, rural schools and schools in less-affluent areas.

Linda O'Neill: The educational outcome statistics, which are a snapshot of how children are doing in education, focus mainly on the school leaver population, but they break the data down into local authority areas for some indicators such as attendance, exclusion, post-school destinations and the return of Scottish candidate numbers, which helps us to understand where children are and shows us the regional variations. That is important, because it shows us the areas where things are working really well. It is important to

recognise that many schools are doing really good, innovative things for our young people and that care is not a determinant of doing more poorly in education. We know that children in foster care actually have a higher average attendance than the general school population and that fewer children in foster care than in the general population leave school with no qualifications. We can celebrate that. The data allows us to look at the areas where things are working, find out more about that and think about how we can share those messages and how we understand what is being done. We can also look at the areas that are struggling—the ones that need a bit more support—and at what support would be most beneficial to them.

Rona Mackay: That is really helpful. Thanks.

Ross Greer: I want to return to Johann Lamont's line of questioning. We have already covered the inequalities in subject choice that exist in rural communities where there is a geographical challenge. Have you seen any particular trend in relation to the socioeconomic make-up of an area? In your experience, are schools in more deprived areas placing greater restrictions on the subjects from which young people can choose?

Eileen Prior: We could not say that from the information that we have gathered. However, intuitively, I suspect that that can be the case, for all sorts of reasons. This committee has rehearsed many of the reasons for that, such as the difficulty in recruiting staff to more rural or deprived areas. There is a series of possible causes of that, and they are multilayered. Schools that have a strong focus on league tables, tariff points, the number of passes at higher level and so on will focus on the more traditional routes. In the more deprived communities, the schools are often more focused on outcomes, whether those are highers, routes into university or whatever. There are different driving forces in different schools.

The Convener: I do not think that anyone else wants to answer that question.

Ross Greer: That is fine. Quite a lot of the data that we have on the issue of subject choices has been compiled by independent academic researchers. Do you believe that there is a role for Education Scotland or the curriculum for excellence management board in trying to get an overview of the situation? If so, what is that role and what should they be doing in relation to subject choice at the moment?

Eileen Prior: Education Scotland absolutely has a role, because it is the agency of government in that realm. Whether it does the work alone or commissions universities or whatever to conduct research, we would expect Education Scotland to have a firm handle on the issue. It is about meeting the needs of young people, which is our organisations' focus. It is about how families and carers can support young people to reach outcomes. We must have a clear picture of the various impacts on our young people across the country.

Linda O'Neill: Any new, emerging data in the area would be very positive, because it would give us a more accurate idea of the national picture. Given the range of data that we have, we would want to ensure that anything new aligns with what we already have, which would help us to make more sense of the story that the data is telling us. If we are clear about the purpose of collecting data and how we intend to use it, that will help us to set up any new data collection methods.

Dr Allan: I am interested in hearing what the issue of subject choice feels like from a parental perspective. I appreciate what has just been said about all schools probably offering the option of taking five highers, but I am keen to hear what Ms Wentworth and Ms Murphy have to say about how the issue of subject choice is experienced by parents, particularly given that more young people are leaving school with more highers. How early in their school career do young people feel they are anticipating, if not choosing, what highers they will be taking in their fifth year? What are young people's and parents' perspective of that?

Joanna Murphy: Across the board, parents are not involved enough in subject choices or the overall curricular development of the school, and they are not involved enough in their own children's choices. Part of the Skills Development Scotland offer is to have a parent-child-teacher meeting when children are making those subject choices, but that very rarely happens. We can say that, if young people do not have a problem, there is no need to have a big discussion, but we do not get to the bottom of the parents not knowing the system until the parents are involved. The young people are in school every day and generally know what is going on as they go through the system, which is great for them. However, the young people are at an age when they are probably at their least communicative with their parents and are not really that bothered about telling them what is going on.

My own experience is that a parent gets a paper, signs it and sends it back, and that is really all they get. If there is a problem with the columns, they might be able to write on the other side of the paper that their child does not want to do a certain subject or whatever. In my experience, the school negotiates and things get moved about, but I know that that is not always the case.

Dr Allan: I know that we should not be fixated on numbers, but, if a school is offering six subjects in fourth year, does that determine the highers that

somebody can do in fifth year, if they plan to do four or five highers?

Joanna Murphy: In theory, it does not determine that because, in theory, they should be able to pick up other subjects and take crash highers, so they should have enough breadth of subjects. However, in practice, it probably does determine which highers somebody does. In reality, for young people in schools, it becomes more difficult to move out of classes. If there is a space in a class, they can sometimes move in; if there is not, they have to find somebody to swap with.

In some schools, there is free choice and much more flexibility around the columns—or no columns at all. It is still early days in the experience of pupils being able to pick up subjects that they dropped previously.

Magaidh Wentworth: It is often frustrating for parents, because they want to advise their children on what to do but the children are under different pressures at school. Often, in small rural schools, there will be some competition for classes as well.

I am not sure what the data is, but, anecdotally, teachers say that it is difficult for someone to pick up a language if they drop it and do not have continuity through fourth year. Pupils are less likely to go back to language learning if they have not continued with a language.

Dr Allan: Is that more true of Gaelic learners than it is of fluent Gaelic speakers who are studying for qualifications?

Magaidh Wentworth: I think that it applies to both groups. If pupils have an opportunity to study other subjects through the medium of Gaelic, that mitigates, to some extent, the impact of their not studying Gaelic as a subject, because they maintain some of the Gaelic language skills. However, as we know, very few schools at the moment offer an opportunity to study subjects through the medium of Gaelic beyond first and second year.

Eileen Prior: It is too late to have that conversation about choices at the end of S3, going into S4, or even at the end of S2. We need to have conversations with the young person and their family or carers earlier than that about their direction of travel, where they might be going, their interests and their strengths. It is not just me saying that—there is a policy around that. Skills Development Scotland is working with schools to have those conversations much earlier, so that there are no surprises. We should not get to the end of S2 and suddenly find that there is a major decision to be made. The reality is—as you will have seen from our evidence paper—that parents are invited to an evening meeting to discuss pupils' choices after the choices have been made. In what world is that okay? Quite simply, it is not okay. We need to sort that out and have those conversations much earlier.

The point about continuity in learning languages is interesting. I have talked to the committee about the one-plus-two model, and I have had the same conversation about the move from primary to high school. People learn Spanish, German or whatever but then find that they cannot study that language when they go to high school. We need to read across, not just for Gaelic but for other languages. If a youngster shows a talent for whatever language in primary school, we should ensure that they can continue with it in high school and, if they wish, get a qualification in it.

11:00

Dr Allan: There is understandable pressure on qualifications in fourth and fifth year, and—to pick up an earlier point—a language may have been dropped in third year or even in second year. That applies not only to Gaelic but to other languages. Realistically, for many young people, the only opportunity to pick up a language again is in sixth year. Do we have any information about that?

Eileen Prior: You would need to ask the SQA.

Magaidh Wentworth: Not that I am aware of. The information from the SQA on the number of pupils who are sitting Gaelic higher indicates that, for whatever reason, the majority of pupils are not picking up a language again. There has been a fairly catastrophic drop in numbers, especially among Gaelic learners, although I believe that the same is true for other languages. There are a number of factors involved, and what is happening with language teaching at secondary level would certainly bear more investigation.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): People from various quarters have told us that there is quite a lot of concern about multilevel teaching, whereby youngsters in the same class are studying for different levels of SQA exam. It is difficult to get a handle on exactly how widespread that is, but we have heard concerns about that issue from a couple of professional associations that represent teachers of certain subjects. Are you aware of parental concern about youngsters being asked to study in the same class as pupils who are studying at a different level from them?

Eileen Prior: All I know is that it happens. We have never heard any concerns from parents about it—quite the opposite, because we have had parents say that their youngster enjoys the experience. It is quite stimulating to be in a class with learners who are working at different levels, and that can draw young people through the

levels. In some rural schools, it is the only way to work.

I suspect that the concern among the professionals is based on the number of teachers employed in different departments and so on rather than being based on the actual experience of young people. It is the experience of young people that we need to try to gather on that issue.

Liz Smith: We heard last week from Dr Britton, who said that it is perhaps not ideal for the teaching profession to be asked to cope with multilevel teaching, as it builds a lot of pressures into a class. As you rightly say, the issue is about young people, but the Scottish Association of Geography Teachers—I think—said that it is not acceptable to have national 5, higher and advanced higher all being taught in the same class. Can I be absolutely clear that you have not heard any concerns whatever about that from any quarter?

Magaidh Wentworth: I think that that approach is taken in rural schools in quite a few subjects, but that is the only option—from a parent's viewpoint, that is the only way that their child can study the subject. Rural schools can often have national 5, higher and advanced higher taught in the same class. It can be quite challenging to timetable children from different year groups, but my understanding is that it is fairly common and not problematic. There will be small numbers in the class, which will make it easier for teaching.

Liz Smith: How do you think that that situation, if it does exist, has come about? Eileen Prior suggested that it is beneficial for youngsters' motivation to be in a class with different levels. Do you think that there are educational reasons behind multilevel teaching, or has it come about because of pressure of teacher numbers?

Eileen Prior: I suspect that, for many schools, the issue involves trying to provide the best opportunities for young people. They are trying to fulfil the wishes of the youngsters by opening up those options. If they did not do that, some of those youngsters would not be able to study the subject. It is a really stark choice.

Joanna Murphy: We should also think a bit more broadly about the two-year higher. Some of those young people do not necessarily need to do the national 5. That would be a leap of faith for a parent or young person, because they would always worry about what would happen if they did not pass it, as that might mean that they would not have any qualification in that subject. I suppose that that goes back to having faith that the practitioner knows what the young person is capable of, which would solve some of the issues in classes.

Liz Smith: You have made a very interesting point. I am in favour of people being able to take a higher over two years and to bypass the national 5, if that would be educationally beneficial. Do you have any advice to those who will be looking at the structures in curriculum for excellence in relation to whether there would be benefit in restructuring so that it is more possible for young people to bypass the national 5 so that, in S4 and S5, they take two years to get a higher? I think that it was Eileen Prior who mentioned the horrible one-term, two-term dash. It has been put to us that universities still value the ability of youngsters to get five highers in one sitting rather than over two sittings.

Joanna Murphy: That approach is beneficial for our young people, and universities might need to think about that issue—perhaps it needs more thought from lots of people. The young people could sit five highers in one go over two years or they could do a mix.

If the issue is about a young person getting a higher or not getting a higher, there is no argument—they should be able to do it over two years. They should also be able to enjoy the time to focus on the subject and not feel as if they are cramming it in, as they have been since I was at school. They have talked about the two-year higher since then, but it is still not a reality, although it was a major focus for curriculum for excellence.

Liz Smith: That is absolutely correct. There is a strong educational argument for doing a higher over two years. I wonder whether allowing for the situation of somebody taking a higher over two years is as easy for schools that have gone down to six subjects in S4 as it would be for a school that offers eight subjects and greater flexibility.

Joanna Murphy: I am not a timetable expert, but I know that young people do not need to do all their highers over two years. The whole idea is that they can do a mixture of national 5s and highers over the three-year period. The issue is what they come out of school with.

It seems slightly basic, but the fact is that we want our young people to have knowledge and to know what they are talking about. We do not want a situation in which they leave their higher modern studies exam and think, "Right—I never need to think about war again," or whatever it happens to be, and immediately forget everything. There is no point in that. The whole point in the move towards skills-based learning was to enable them to use their learning instead of having a photographic memory of facts, dates and equations.

Liz Smith: It is important that youngsters have a good base of knowledge across the general curriculum—in science, social sciences and arts

as well as English and maths—and are able to understand why they are learning as well as what they are learning. You are spot on about that. How would you respond to a comment by Professor Lindsay Paterson that curriculum for excellence has gone a bit too far towards a focus on the skills-based side instead of entrenching knowledge in the core curriculum? Do you accept his view that the core curriculum has been diminished at the expense of other subjects for some young people?

Joanna Murphy: I respect his position, and there are probably cases in relation to which it is correct. However, as an employer, I want my employees to be able to take their knowledge about practical tasks and do the job. It might not matter whether they know all the capitals of the world, but we want them to be able to respond to an instruction such as, "I would like you to do these things in whichever order you like," and produce outcomes at the end of the week.

Part of the focus in the movement to curriculum for excellence was the fact that our young people were not skills-based enough, which meant that, when they moved into the workplace, they were unable to manage and do their jobs. School is about more than just learning facts. It is about knowledge, but it is also about the social aspects—meeting your friends and becoming lifelong partners with people. Sometimes, in the cram to do highers, all the rest is lost.

There is no point in creating a mental health crisis in our young people, which we hear is happening, by making them just sit and learn things. You might say 'twas ever thus. It was like that when I was sitting my highers, but I did not have all the social media and different issues going on that our young people have to cope with now. We need, collectively, to look after them. They are in school for a significant part of their day, and therefore part of that has to involve looking after the young people and not forcing them to do things such as take a higher in two terms, as you say.

Liz Smith: Thank you. That was extremely helpful.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): I would like to follow up Liz Smith's line of questioning on timetabling. Joanna Murphy hit on an issue with regard to designing a timetable to meet the needs of all learners. There are classes in which some kids are doing a two-year higher while other kids are doing national 5s, and the school has to timetable for an entire senior phase in a situation that is very different from what happened for standard grade under the previous structure. Are members of the panel aware of schools giving pupils free choice, as opposed to using the regimented column structure that can lead to kids missing out?

Joanna Murphy: There are schools that give free choice. However, inevitably, there has to be a column somewhere, because they cannot all just turn up when they feel like it. I know of schools that ask the young people what subjects they want to do, the pupils write that down and the school takes it away and sorts it out. Other schools have the columns in place, but there is a much wider choice of subjects within them and more flexibility—two or three different options. Lots of schools now have two or three columns that say, "any of the above", so there is greater flexibility.

It was always possible to do two sciences, but not two or three arts subjects or social sciences. It sometimes seems that in Scottish education—or any education system; let us not just blame Scotland—we take what our young people like doing and are good at and then make them do something else altogether. The flexibility that is now in the column-choice system is welcome. I hope that schools can go to neighbouring schools that are using a flexible approach to see what they are doing, so that they can make the transition more easily.

Eileen Prior: I completely agree. There are schools that are successfully doing that. It is, of course, about prioritisation. Young people have to think about how they prioritise their top choices and so on. Those schools start with that and work back, as opposed to taking the traditional approach, which involved a poor soul shutting themselves in a room for a week to do the timetabling and trying to work it out according to resource, staffing and whatever. We have flipped that and now start with what our young people say they want to do. They might not always get what they want, because life is like that and that is part of resilience, but we should start with where their skills and strengths are and not, as Joanna Murphy says, push young people down another road.

Magaidh Wentworth: I have a comment about column choices. Too many schools are still using the columns and, when children are taking only six subjects, that is too restrictive to give them a wide enough choice of subjects at that early level. Pupils will not be clear about what they are going to do at higher level or where their destinations are. There needs to be more flexibility for pupils throughout Scotland, not just in the few schools that are managing to provide that.

11:15

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I will follow up Liz Smith's line of questioning on the possibilities of studying a higher without first sitting a national 5

in that subject. We have had discussions about the advantages of a pupil having two years to study for a higher, but there have been instances in which a school has used that model quite extensively and parents—the members of our panel are, in a sense, representing parents—have proven to be extremely unhappy with that approach to their children's education. The schools in Helensburgh is the example that springs to mind in that regard. Although the panel has been very positive about that approach, if I was the headteacher of that school, I think that I would say, "It's all very well for you to sit and say that, but I tried to do that and had a parents' rebellion on my hands, so parents don't actually support that."

Eileen Prior: We worked with that school at the time. It always comes back to relationships and communication. If school management makes a decision about the direction that it is going in but does so in isolation and without having conversations with parents in which they can express their views about what the best route is, you end up in the position in which that school found itself. It was a very sad situation, which was primarily to do with relationships and communications.

Joanna Murphy: I echo that. We should remember that it is not one or the other. Personalisation and choice mean just that. Not everybody does five highers over two years. There should be a mixture. A young person should be allowed to do the subjects for which they have an aptitude and say whether they do not want to do a particular higher. There should be flexibility.

Again, lots of issues get blown up because they are not communicated well. People are just told, "This is the way that it is going to be," and, if anybody challenges that, a campaign is set up around it.

The situation in Helensburgh was distressing for the young people and their parents. Things like that happen in different schools. The issue boils down to this: the more that you know about what is happening in a school, the less contentious an issue will be, with fewer flare-ups.

Eileen Prior: To echo Joanna Murphy's point, we know what we know. We, as parents, are from a previous generation and our experience of school is entirely different. We take that experience when looking at our child's school and we think that is not what we did or how it worked for us. A lot of work has to be done to help parents to understand the opportunities and to agree—not impose—a route forward for the school and the community.

Joanna Murphy: If a person's main source of information about what is happening in their child's school is the tabloid press and they do not have anything from the school itself, they may make decisions based on that source. Sometimes, the education system neglects to send out information, which leaves a vacuum. Time and time again, the situation arises in which a person is not in possession of all the facts and just has a weird idea about what might be happening in their school. We see how that all too often works out.

The Convener: That concludes our questioning this morning. I thank you all for your attendance, which has been very helpful, as are the submissions that have come to the committee throughout our deliberations.

11:19

Meeting continued in private until 11:34.

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