OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 15 May 2019

Session 5

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EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE
16th 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:

Vincent Docherty (Aberdeenshire Council)
Gerry Lyons (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Tony McDaid (South Lanarkshire Council)
Mark Ratter (East Renfrewshire Council)
Pauline Stephen (Angus Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Roz Thomson

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Education and Skills Committee

Wednesday 15 May 2019

[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Subject Choices Inquiry

The Deputy Convener (Johann Lamont): Welcome to the 16th meeting of the Education and Skills Committee in 2019. We have received apologies from the convener, Clare Adamson, and from Ross Greer and Oliver Mundell. Tavish Scott has indicated that he will arrive late. I remind everyone present to turn their mobile phones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

The first item of business is the fifth evidence session on the committee's subject choice inquiry. Today we will hear from local authorities. I welcome Gerry Lyons, from the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland; Dr Pauline Stephen, the director of schools and learning at Angus Council; Tony McDaid, the executive director of education resources at South Lanarkshire Council; Dr Mark Ratter, the head of education services, quality improvement and performance at East Renfrewshire Council; and Vincent Docherty, the head of education at Aberdeenshire Council.

Members of the panel do not have to answer every question. If you indicate when you want to respond, I will try to call you. If members and witnesses can keep their comments focused, we will get through the evidence—that is more of a warning to me than to anybody else on the committee. Thank you all for being here.

I ask Jenny Gilruth to open the questioning.

Jenny Gilruth (Mid Fife and Glenrothes) (SNP): Good morning. I want to start by taking you all back in time to the development of the senior phase in schools and your involvement in that. Having been a development officer in Education Scotland around 2012-13, when—I think—Michael Russell was the cabinet secretary, I remember that a commitment was secured for the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland to provide core support material with the Government. That material was to support national 4 and 5 and higher. A commitment was also secured to develop professional focus papers, which were about empowering the profession to understand the main exam changes for the new qualifications. This morning, I want to find out what your involvement was in the development of the senior phase, and what it looked like back in 2012-13. What was the involvement of your respective organisations in that process?

Gerry Lyons (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): ADES was involved with the stakeholder groups that existed and the groups that were having discussions about the development of the curriculum at that time. My understanding is that ADES was not directly involved in producing materials or developing resources. Education Scotland is the agency that would have been most charged with that responsibility.

Tony McDaid (South Lanarkshire Council): At that time I was a headteacher in a local authority, and I remember it quite well. As schools and as a local authority, we worked together to shape some of the information that was coming out nationally and to consider how it would look locally and how it would then translate into practice. Obviously, we were looking across the scale—at the development from S1 right through—not just in terms of the broad general education but in terms of the kinds of qualifications that were coming on stream. As headteachers and as a local authority, we were involved in considering how it would look best as we moved forward.

The Deputy Convener: I will come back to you in a minute. Does anybody else on the panel want to respond from their experience?

Gerry Lyons: Also speaking as someone who was a headteacher at the time, I remember that one of the interesting discussions that were taking place was on the support materials that had been produced as part of higher still. Jenny Gilruth may have been familiar with them—the massive folders for every subject. There was certainly a decision that such a bulk of paper and prepared material would not be the way forward. As a headteacher, I remember that it was very much about working with teachers to see what guidance we had, what the experiences, outcomes and core descriptors were saying and how we could develop that in a way that would be of most value to our young people. It was a different model from the kind that is about getting a course for everything. My memory is that what was happening at that point was about the whole concept of teacher agency—that is still being talked about now—and letting teachers develop.

Jenny Gilruth: I will move on to how the senior phase looks now compared with how it looked five or 10 years ago. Vincent Doherty's submission says that curriculum for excellence allows much more flexible timetabling and that,

"Prior to CfE, the S5/6 timetable catered mainly for the most able, concentrating as it did on ensuring that Higher and Advanced Higher classes could run. Now, increasingly,

pupils in the senior phase can access courses ... at the time which is most appropriate to them."

Does the rest of the panel agree with that assertion? Perhaps in the past—certainly when I was at school—pupils who were not deemed to be academic enough were encouraged to leave school at the end of S4. Is Vincent Doherty's approach the right one?

Vincent Docherty (Aberdeenshire Council): The words "it could be argued that" should probably have gone before the words "the S5/6 timetable" in the submission.

I was a headteacher in Maryhill for a number of years, and the school for which I was responsible had fewer than 10 per cent of the youngsters in S5 and S6 achieving five highers. When timetabling, we set a timetable that started with five different columns, so that the youngsters who were doing five highers could progress clearly through a column structure and then onwards from that. When doing that timetabling exercise, I always asked, "What about the remaining 90 per cent of children?"

With how the senior phase is orientated now, the concept is different, because it happens over three years. Young people mature at different rates, and having qualifications available to them over a three-year period gives much greater flexibility and allows them to learn at a stage when they are ready. Taken over that three-year span, there is a much greater pot in which to mix things for the youngsters, leading to the greater flexibility in timetabling that I mentioned in the submission.

Gerry Lyons: I support that completely. The senior phase concept that I was trying to take forward and that I am still taking forward is that it is a learner journey for young people and, as far as possible, we want what we offer to be as close to young people's needs and aspirations as it can be over that three-year period and certainly until they leave school.

One thing that I welcomed with curriculum for excellence is that it gave the opportunity to meet the needs of groups of young people and individual young people that previous models did not give us the chance to meet. The flexibility to which Vincent Doherty has referred was one of the drivers for the evolution of the curriculum, certainly when I was involved—that is, ensuring that what we offer is good for all our young people and gives them all an opportunity. The drivers were the highest level of attainment and achievement by the time young people leave school and the most aspirational destination they can achieve. We always started at that point and worked our way backwards. The current senior phase gives licence for schools to do that.

Jenny Gilruth: I take Vincent Doherty's point about the five-column structure being suitable for the most able but not really meeting the needs of kids who were not able to achieve five highers in one sitting. Gerry Lyons has talked about the needs of young people. Perhaps there is a tension between their needs and those of their parents or wider society. People who are a bit older and have gone through the system might not recognise that that system has changed and, naturally, there is a clash, because folk do not understand that things are different now.

Gerry Lyons: One thing that we must continue to do is get better at telling that story to people who came through a five-column structure, for example, and give them that understanding of what we are trying to do for their children and of the fact that we have a chance to do much more for them than we ever did before and explain how we can do that.

Parental engagement is critical. I was interested to hear about your engagement with parents and your feeling that some of them did not quite understand the senior phase. We have to take cognisance of that and do everything that we can to change that.

Mark Ratter (East Renfrewshire Council): I think that I agree with Gerry Lyons. The issue is very much about ensuring that we have a senior phase that meets the needs of all our learners. In East Renfrewshire, raising attainment has been our focus before and through curriculum for excellence; we have also focused on the breadth of opportunity. One key change that we can see is the focus on developing the young workforce. In the senior phase, the partnerships with our colleges, universities and employers give a far greater choice.

In our high schools, our fifth and sixth years have a choice of more than 130 courses that they can take. Some of those will take place in the school—traditional highers, advanced highers and national 5s—but alongside that is a huge range of courses from level 1 to level 8 of the Scottish credit and qualifications framework, which they can access in partnership with the colleges. That provides the opportunity to make sure that we are meeting all the learners' needs.

Pauline Stephen (Angus Council): I agree with my colleagues. One of our biggest challenges is communicating with parents about all the options that are available to our young people and enabling our young people to explain to their parents what their choices are, what the implications of those choices might be and where they might lead next. We could perhaps work together nationally to look at how to make that clearer and more accessible, so that families

understand the range of choices for youngsters. That would benefit from a closer look.

Jenny Gilruth: Finally, on the point that Mark Ratter made about raising attainment, I guess that, in the past, local authorities were responsible for looking at how to do that locally—for example, through quality improvement officers. We know that those posts have diminished over the years. What responsibility do regional improvement collaboratives have? Do you see it as their role to provide challenge and support to the profession, or does ADES have a take on what such support should look like at local authority level? Should we go back to the QIO structure? I know that there was a lot of good local expertise under the previous system and there is a fear in the profession that that will be lost because we no longer have those posts. Is it the responsibility of the RICs to come in and fill that gap?

Mark Ratter: I can talk about East Renfrewshire. We still have the expectation and focus that the central team, along with our headteachers and schools, has responsibility for bringing about improvement and raising attainment. We collaborate and work very closely with our headteachers to look at the curriculum, design reviews, look at attainment and respond to that. As a member of the west partnership, the regional improvement collaborative provides the additional value of allowing us to learn from one another and see what is working effectively in other local authorities.

I have been working closely with Glasgow recently. Groups of secondary headteachers from East Renfrewshire and Glasgow had the opportunity to work together, looking at best practice in learning and teaching and considering how to bring about improvement. The responsibility should still sit with the local authority, but the regional improvement collaboratives add that value to the system.

Tony McDaid: Within the local authority, there is still a need for that degree of support, and we would base that centrally. However, our headteachers definitely see themselves as having a responsibility beyond their own school. They look at how they can build up and support one another from the improvement perspective. There is an evolving picture, which needs more than a QIO coming out to hold people to account or to support them. The whole point of empowerment is that schools take responsibility for action and are able to work together with the local authority. With the regional improvement collaboratives, we have the opportunity to scale up and genuinely look at best practice—to find schools where the demographic is similar and add capacity to that work.

Gerry Lyons: From a Glasgow perspective, and a local authority one, I reflect that view completely. Something that was, and remains, incredibly positive is the networking that is taking place between schools. The other day, we were at an event run by the building our curriculum self-help—BOCSH—group, which is a group of headteachers who come together to help one another to move forward with the curriculum. More than 200 senior managers were working together to understand how to do that.

ADES's position on having an empowered system is about enabling people to work together and sending a message that people's responsibility as leaders spreads beyond their school. That has been a very positive aspect. Within the west partnership, we see an opportunity to add value to that. The project that Mark Ratter referred to has been really successful. Tony McDaid and I are on a group that is looking at how we can bring subject leaders closer together to network more and learn from one another's practice and, likewise, bring primary colleagues to work together.

People coming together to help one another and work together is a positive element in the senior phase of our current system. From the perspectives of ADES, local authorities and regional collaboratives—if the committee were to let me, I could name 45 other perspectives but that might not be helpful—

The Deputy Convener: You could provide those to us in a paper.

09:45

Gerry Lyons: The message is that we want people to be empowered and to work together, and schools are very much in that space.

Iain Gray (East Lothian) (Lab): I have a follow-up question for Pauline Stephen. You spoke about pupils and parents understanding the potential routes through the different pathways that are available. At one time, they did understand those, because such routes were very similar and consistent across the country. Students did standard grades. If they went on, they did highers. If they went further still, they did advanced highers. That system was well understood. What we now have is much more diverse and offers a lot more choices. You said that you thought that we could work together nationally to make that better understood. By that do you mean that the model would be more consistent? What would be the aim of working together?

Pauline Stephen: My earlier statement was not necessarily about consistency but about finding better ways of explaining to people what their choices are and what the implications of those

might be. I will give a practical example. At the moment, we work with young people to talk about how foundation apprenticeships might open up routes to employment that meet their aspirations about their future careers. My experience suggests that, sometimes, when young people go home and speak to their families about foundation apprenticeships, those are seen as being very new.

I agree with Mr Gray and with what was said earlier: most of us here today have gone through a system that we and others could recognise, but now the system is different and it is shifting. The challenge for us is to communicate that, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of particular choices for individuals. The approach should be about individual learner pathways and what is right for a young person—both for where they are now and for where they want to get to.

Iain Gray: But is the problem not usually the course choice booklets? If the course choices are so complex and diverse that people have trouble navigating them, I am not sure that what you are suggesting would improve that.

Pauline Stephen: Nationally, there are very good examples of excellent course choice booklets, which we, in Angus, are looking at to help us to improve our offer. I go back to what my colleagues have previously told the committee: the approach should be about sharing, and seeing what is out there and what we can learn from one another.

Liz Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I draw the panel's attention to the evidence that has been presented to us in previous sessions, and specifically to that from academics and the Educational Institute of Scotland. The point was made—quite forcibly—that there is a disconnect between the BGE phase and the senior phase. Dr Britton went on to argue that he felt that responsibility—and therefore accountability—for curriculum development was not at all clear, which might account for some of the current concern around CFE. Do the witnesses think that there is such a disconnect?

Gerry Lyons: My first comment is that there should not be. There is an iterative element to the issue. Such a disconnect might have been in place three, four or five years ago, but I suggest that it has lessened as we have come to understand the senior phase better and schools have engaged with the learner journey more effectively. That is as it should be, because one of the design principles of curriculum for excellence was progression. We were charged with planning a progressive education for young people from the ages of three to 18. As a secondary headteacher, I came into the system that applied to students from the ages of 10 to 18. In the schools that I worked in and engaged with, the curriculum was designed so that there should be progression from first year right the way through the BGE and into the senior phase, so there should be a six-year experience.

Liz Smith: I will pick up that issue. Some argue strongly that, with the BGE, progression for languages and the first taste of science subjects is weak, because there is a huge downturn in the number of young people who take up modern language qualifications and science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects. That is of concern in relation to the economy as well as educational experience. If that is correct—and it is clearly correct, given the Scottish Qualifications Authority statistics—is it not a major concern that there appears to be a squeeze in the senior phase in some of the core subjects, which could be detrimental to the core curriculum? Do you accept that?

Gerry Lyons: I do not accept that, although I understand where the question comes from.

Because I was coming here today, I have taken time to check in with modern languages colleagues on the issue. What has not been said but should be said is that modern languages in third and fourth year in the standard grade era used to be compulsory—everyone had to do a modern language. It was inevitable that, when that became no longer compulsory, there would be a reduction in young people taking up a modern language. Some of that was also a reaction to the fact that young people could decide to take up a modern language, so they thought, "That is good; I can do that now, so I will."

However, the feedback from my modern languages colleagues was that we have most success when we can develop a passion for languages and a curriculum for young people that allows them to see the relevance and meaning of studying a language and what it can do for them. Building for that in relation to modern languages starts in primaries. I think that secondaries and primaries should work together to build the skill set of primary colleagues or find ways to collaborate in better developing modern languages in primaries. If I can have a dad moment for a second, my son studied French in nursery and he was a much better French speaker then than he is now.

We can grow modern languages. There was an inevitable reaction to modern languages not being core any more and now we are growing them through primary and through learning and teaching in the BGE. One of the schools where I was head had the squeeze that you described, and it has now gone back to higher French, higher Spanish and young people who are thriving at national 5 and national 4. That has been about the quality of the curriculum that that school developed in the BGE.

Liz Smith: Given the pretty dire statistics for modern languages and the uptake at higher and advanced higher, is your point that the senior phase as now designed will somehow undo the squeeze? Other subject teachers are complaining bitterly about the squeeze. Yesterday, we listened to the geographers, who are worried about the number of core curriculum subjects that are being squeezed out. Notwithstanding all the benefits of the flexibility, that core is so important to the breadth of educational experience across the senior phase. That is a very strong piece of evidence, and it is coming to us from all quarters. Is that not a concern?

Gerry Lyons: I have seen that evidence. I am very interested in it, and two things occurred to me about it. Curriculum for excellence was designed to give our young people a breadth of learning and experience, and the BGE was about that breadth. One way to deal with the concerns from our geography, STEM and modern languages colleagues is to continue to challenge schools to raise the BGE bar. Young people will study in every curricular area until the end of S3—that is my understanding of how we should develop the curriculum. We can raise the BGE bar so that they learn at a level that will meet their needs and those of society and employers.

Liz Smith: It will not get them SQA qualifications if they have to drop those subjects.

Gerry Lyons: If they are motivated enough and see the relevance and meaning of the subjects, they will not drop them.

Liz Smith: But they cannot, in some schools—

Gerry Lyons: That is the responsibility of the subject areas—

Liz Smith: I am sorry, Mr Lyons, but in some schools, because the number of columns is being squeezed, they have to drop them. That is the point that is being made.

Gerry Lyons: That is not the experience in the schools where there is continued growth in those subjects. I absolutely take your point that, nationally, the position that you identify is evident. However, for me, the issue always comes down to the same question, which is whether we can get the curriculum and learning and teaching right, such that young people can see the relevance of those subjects. It might be the case that fewer young people are taking qualifications in those subjects, but those young people will be more motivated and will see the relevance of what they are studying. The young people who do not take qualifications in those subjects will still have studied them at a level that will allow them to deliver what society needs from them in those areas, and I think that that is really important.

Liz Smith: Forgive me for saying so, but I think that parents, in particular, feel very uneasy about that, which is one reason why there is concern about the message. There is genuine concern that the choices in the core curriculum are being squeezed in schools. That is a concern to employers, never mind to people in our education sector.

I have a final question.

The Deputy Convener: I am sorry, but a couple of folk would like to respond to your first question.

Tony McDaid: I want to make a point about the disconnect and the activity on that. The scale of the exercise, which involves implementing the broad general education and looking at changes to the national qualifications, might be part of the reason for that. It was inevitable that people would want to make sure that the technical part of the national qualifications courses was correct, but now that things have settled down and people know what national 4s, national 5s and the changes to higher look like, we probably need an opportunity to reflect on how the S1 experience lines up with the S4 experience. Now that we have gone through the broad general education a number of times, we need to look at the quality of the learning experiences and to assess how progressive those learning experiences are. For example, the inquiry skills that pupils use in social studies in first year are the very inquiry skills that they need at higher level. We need to be able to line those up, and I think that we are now in a position to do that.

Previously, under the five-to-14 curriculum, young people would do their standard grades and then their highers, but there was quite a disconnect with what preceded that. The learning that took place in the history class in first year did not necessarily connect with the standard grade experience or, indeed, the higher experience, where different skills were involved. We now have a chance to line up what goes on in S1 with the skills that are required in S4 and S5. I think that an opportunity exists not only for greater progression, but for better coherence within the structures themselves.

Vincent Docherty: I have a couple of points to make, the first of which is about the broad general education. It is important to say that my local authority has significant staffing issues. That has an impact on the broad general education, because, when a school does not have enough staff, it is inevitable that the staff that it has will be diverted to the national 4 and 5 classes—the senior phase classes.

My second point relates to some preparation that I did for today's meeting. I did a bit of analysis on subject uptake and the numbers and

percentages involved. Aberdeenshire Council has seen no downturn in the take-up of the subjects that Liz Smith mentioned. The philosophy of the broad general education is for 10 or 12 subjects to be delivered to the S3 stage, where the youngster can potentially bank the information that they have learned and the progression that they have made, with a view to picking up those subjects at a later stage, rather than as a direct follow-on at S4.

Liz Smith made the argument that the reduction in the number of subjects that are available in S4 would have a direct impact on the output in terms of qualifications that are achieved. We have looked at the number of entries for qualifications in subjects such as French and art and design, where the point that Liz Smith made could be argued.

Between 2014 and 2018, the number of youngsters in Aberdeenshire who chose to do a national 5 in French went down to 408, but the numbers of young people who took higher French and advanced higher French went up. In higher French, the number of entries increased from 189 to 248, although the number of entries in German and Spanish went down. The figure for art and design increased from 212 to 239, which is an increase of 113 per cent on 2014.

What those figures tell me about my local authority is that, although there is the issue that Liz Smith described—that youngsters may be discouraged from taking those subjects in the initial part of the senior phase—when the curriculum is embraced in its totality, it appears that youngsters are not being disadvantaged. There is no apparent decrease in the opportunity for youngsters to take the subjects that they are looking to take.

10:00

Liz Smith: Back in 2013-14, we were given evidence that, in some Aberdeenshire schools—if memory serves me correctly, they were in the Aboyne area and, I think, Banchory—parental concerns were pointing to a squeeze on the availability of subject choice. What has the local authority done to address that and to bring the situation back to the one that you have just described?

Vincent Docherty: We have encouraged flexibility for headteachers. As I mentioned, the schools in the south of Aberdeenshire, in Banchory and Aboyne, perform very differently from those in places such as Fraserburgh and Peterhead. We encourage headteachers to use that flexibility and to tailor the curriculum to best meet the needs of the youngsters from the community that they serve. Therefore, a percentage of our young people in different areas do seven accredited qualification courses in fourth year. We also have youngsters who are presented for higher courses in S4, so early presentation is encouraged, and the same applies to advanced higher. Again, that is in the spirit of providing the right pathway for the individual. That means that there are trends in local communities. It is the flexibility in the totality of the curriculum and the timetabling flexibility that allow those opportunities to be given to youngsters at the correct stage.

The evidence from my local authority is that that approach has now come through. The initial question that a parent has is that, if their child can take only six subjects, they will not do music or art and design, because they will have to do the six subjects that they want to do in fifth year to qualify for university. That is not relevant, and it is not the way that it should be. That approach is feeding through. It is about the exit qualifications that youngsters achieve.

Gerry Lyons: A certificated course that is growing in the BGE is modern languages for life and work. I do not know whether anyone has mentioned that to the committee, but modern languages departments are embracing it. One of the real strengths at the moment is that modern languages departments are now realising that they have an issue and that they need to find ways to deal with it. The modern languages for life and work course means that young people come to the end of the BGE having done a certificated and accredited course that is focused on how they use the language in life and work. It is important to share that part of the picture.

Rona Mackay (Strathkelvin and Bearsden) (SNP): I want to explore subject choice variation within a local authority area. We all have constituents who come to us complaining that their child cannot take a particular subject in their school, when they could in another school 2 miles down the road. Is there an argument for authority-wide policies on subject choice in the senior phase from S4?

Mark Ratter: Our approach in East Renfrewshire is similar to the one that colleagues have described, in that schools design the curriculum to meet their students' needs. Broadly, across East Renfrewshire, students select eight subjects, sometimes nine, in S3, as they blend the experiences and outcomes into the senior phase. In S5 they generally choose five subjects and in S6 they choose three or four.

The flexibility that the schools have operates within a broad framework of agreed principles. Colleagues have mentioned the need to ensure that there is strong cluster planning from ages three to 18. That has been a key element for us. Another key element for us is that, in the senior phase—S5 and S6—timetables are aligned so that

if, for example, a subject is not available at advanced higher in a school because of its size, pupils are able to access it in another school.

Rona Mackay: Do you know how common that is? I do not think that it is happening in my local authority area. I am not asking so much about advanced highers as about S4 choice. With the columns structure, pupils cannot just take a subject at another school down the road. What you are talking about sounds great, but I am not sure that it is happening in my local authority area.

The Deputy Convener: Can witnesses who represent local authorities indicate their positions on that?

Gerry Lyons: The communities in Glasgow are very diverse, so each school—as Mark Ratter described—has to design its curriculum to meet the needs of the community that it serves. For example, Holyrood secondary school and Hillhead high school serve very different types of community from those that Castlemilk high school and St Margaret Mary's secondary school serve. In that context, it would not be suitable to take one approach.

In the consortium arrangements that Mark Ratter talked about, Glasgow has worked to bring timetables together—in particular, on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, when timetables are aligned so that young people can travel as necessary. There is an understanding that, when schools work together, young people can be offered a wider range of opportunity. Schools are open to taking people from other schools on courses that they run that other schools do not run. That tends not to be a fourth-year scenario; it tends to happen further on in the senior phase—in particular, in S6.

Unfortunately, scenarios such as Rona Mackay describes existed long before curriculum for excellence. We can deliver only so many subjects, so young people cannot always do the subjects that they want to study, even though the subject had been on the table at the start. Vincent Docherty discussed timetabling issues, but the concept of pupils being able to travel and study a wider range of subjects through schools working together is a well-established practice in Glasgow. I imagine that my colleagues across all local authority areas will reflect that.

Pauline Stephen: In Angus, we are striking a balance between individual schools developing their curricula and our eight secondary schools getting the benefit of working together. As colleagues' authorities' schools have, we have a common timetable across all eight secondary schools. Through a strategic partnership arrangement, we have developed that with Dundee and Angus College. That means that our youngsters from across Angus go to college courses on the same day. There are staffing and practical benefits, as well as benefits from young people getting to meet one another.

We are trying to respond to individual communities' needs through the curriculum, while also benefiting from working together and capitalising on partnerships with core employers in the region. For example, on the Brechin high school site we have, in partnership with a local roofing business, developed a construction centre that allows us to offer qualifications alongside the employer, which it has been really successful. For us, it is about trying to get the best of both worlds.

Tony McDaid: In South Lanarkshire, we have worked closely with our schools to develop a framework. It did not make sense for us to follow a single curriculum model. We have rural schools and urban schools, so having a fully integrated model set up for a college day means that young people in rural areas would spend most of the afternoon travelling. We worked with schools in order to make the vocational offer on site. For foundation apprenticeships, we have a blended delivery model, in which we work with local colleges and training providers to deliver the apprenticeships in schools.

There is a strong relationship between the broad general education—what happens in third year—and the quality of the experience moving on over the fourth, fifth and sixth years.

We understand why parents ask why the limit is six subjects in their school while in another school it is seven. At community level, we talk to children and their families about why that is the case, and we say that it is not just about their fourth year, and that they can do other subjects when they move on to fifth year and can get to where they are trying to get. It is important to have conversations with young people about their careers and what they are trying to do, and to say that they can do their qualifications across the full senior phase. Explaining that in schools helps, but we can understand the natural anxiety if there is a conversation between two households from different communities.

Rona Mackay: That goes back to the point about communication.

Tony McDaid: Indeed.

Gerry Lyons: The approach should go beyond course booklets; it should be about encouraging parents to come into schools and have conversations not about the generality, but about the child and how we can best meet their aspirations and hopes. Doing that better and more regularly will lead to parents being more confident about what is happening in our schools.

Vincent Docherty: The geography of Aberdeenshire makes consortium arrangements more difficult.

As Tony McDaid said, the issue has always existed. When I was a headteacher, parents would ask why their son, for example, could not do his five choices. I would ask them for an explanation of why the child wanted to do those five subjects. In the past few years, I have detected a distinct decrease in such conversations, because the concept is better understood that not being able to do a subject at one point does not mean that it cannot be studied later. Banking qualifications in third year sets up students to take up subjects at any point in the senior phase.

The Deputy Convener: What authority or entitlement does a parent or student have in such a conversation? It is all very well to have a conversation, but it is not really a conversation if it starts with, "No—you can't do this" and concludes with, "We've told you why you can't do it." I could reflect my experience as a parent, which predates curriculum for excellence. Are you suggesting a model in which parents and students are entitled to hear something other than, "Sorry—we can't help you with that"?

Gerry Lyons: I use the phrase "learner journey planning" all the time. The senior phase involves a three-year learner journey. Instead of saying to a parent, "You can't do that," we would be more inclined to look at how to fit everything that they want for their child into the three years for which the child is with us. That is a much better start to the conversation.

The Deputy Convener: The conclusion is not necessarily satisfactory if students are still not given the options that they want and if they experience empty-column syndrome.

Gerry Lyons: I am sorry—what is that?

The Deputy Convener: That is when there is nothing that a student wants to choose in a column. I have experience of that; the student would like to do something else, but must do something from a particular column, which is a constraint. How honest do we need to be with parents and young people about the limits on their choices?

Gerry Lyons: The convener has made a couple of good points, one of which is about honesty. Sometimes, although we have looked every way at the situation, we reach a point at which we cannot offer what is wanted. My school was occasionally in that position, and that was often because we did not have the staff to run a subject. You are right to suggest that honesty is important.

More schools are looking at different timetabling models. Using columns is inevitable in order to get everyone into a timetable. However, more schools are starting the process with a free-choice exercise, in which young people are asked to pick their best subjects on the basis of their tracking. I always asked young people to start with their destination, pick the subjects that they need for it, then the subjects that they are best at, then the subjects that they enjoy. That is a positive starting point for the discussion, and the columns are constructed on that basis. Starting with everyone having to fit into the columns leads to empty-column syndrome—which is a lovely phrase that I will steal and use regularly in discussions.

The Deputy Convener: I have copyrighted it, so there will be a small consideration.

Gerry Lyons: The more we engage parents at the start about what we can do and why, the better chance we have of parents accepting something that they would not have accepted in the past.

The Deputy Convener: I presume that we all agree that there is a limit on free choice. For parents, it is about the extent to which the young person balances choices with what is of interest to them.

I welcome Tavish Scott to the meeting, and I invite Iain Gray to ask his questions.

10:15

Iain Gray: We have spoken a lot about course choice and the options. We could argue, although it is bit of an oversimplification, that the core of our work in the report has been subject choice at S4 and the number of certificated courses that pupils can choose. In the evidence, it is interesting that there seems to be a difference not only between schools but between authorities. For example, in East Renfrewshire, most S4 pupils study eight subjects, whereas the evidence from some other authorities seems to be that six subjects are studied in most schools. Why have authorities come to different positions?

Gerry Lyons: Glasgow certainly did not take a local authority position; it was done school by school. In the schools where I was headteacher, I told parents what the available options were in the senior phase and that we do eight subjects, and I asked whether that was the right number. In St Andrew's, 86 per cent of parents said that eight was the wrong number because, of the eight, the child was very good at six, or because the child really liked six and did the other two only because they had to. Parents felt that five was the wrong number because the range was too narrow, so we decided on doing six and seven.

The number of subjects is not driven by our saying, "Here's what we're going to do"; it is about engagement with the community to see what will

best serve the needs of our young people across the three years of the senior phase, in which fourth year sits.

The Deputy Convener: We will work our way through authorities again, starting with Aberdeenshire.

Vincent Docherty: In 2013, Aberdeenshire Council decided to consult schools and said that we would, in the main, reduce the column structure from eight to six subjects. In Aberdeenshire, most youngsters in fourth year have the option to do six subjects and then do additional subjects. It is important to remember that eight subjects at standard grade were delivered over two years, but national 5 subjects are delivered over one year. It has a lot to do with the timing as well as the make-up of courses.

Mark Ratter: East Renfrewshire Council looked at moving away from what was, broadly, eight subjects in fourth year. A group of headteachers looked, with the senior team at the centre, at alternative timetable models to see what we could do. As a group, we had worked through a series of criteria that had originally been introduced by HM Inspectorate of Education in 2005. After listening to parents, pupils and staff, the group felt that the case was not made and so wanted to protect the structure that it had. It came to the view that eight columns was in the best interests of pupils, so we stuck, broadly, with eight.

The approach is flexible; some youngsters do a ninth subject and can pick up physical education, and some do fewer, if eight is not appropriate. I spoke to a headteacher yesterday in advance of this meeting, who spoke about a couple of youngsters in his school's fourth year who compete at a very senior level in athletics and football, and who have bespoke timetables to meet their needs. People are not forced through a particular model, although overall it was felt that eight subjects meets the needs of our learners.

Tony McDaid: In South Lanarkshire Council schools predominantly do six or seven subjects, although a couple of schools will look at doing eight. The conversation was about what was happening in the context of the broad general education and the S3 transition year, and about the quality of the curriculum areas that were covered.

There was an additional discussion about the subjects being taken in S4. I understand the conversation that has focused on S4, but the question for us was whether young people could look to S5 and S6 to pick up highers or national qualifications.

It is important that the conversation was also about considering other forms of qualification, so that we were not slaves to one particular model. It was important that schools were not looking at the S4 experience in isolation but were looking at the young person's journey as they moved into fifth year and, indeed, sixth year. Another crucial point is the quality of the experience for those who will be fourth-year leavers.

Pauline Stephen: In Angus, there are usually six subjects taken in S4. That came about after "Building the Curriculum 3: A framework for learning and teaching", when we were translating national policy into what we were going to do locally. We engaged eight secondary headteachers at the time, who agreed that they wanted to work together on a model and that six subjects would best meet needs in our context. We have had some recent discussions with our parent council chairs on whether that still meets our young people's needs. The general feedback from that discussion was that it does. However, we will continue to review and explore that, over time.

Iain Gray: I will paraphrase the panel's responses by saying that most of you spoke to parents to see what they wanted. In Angus, you thought that you were implementing national policy and decided on six subjects. In East Renfrewshire, after speaking to parents, you ended up with eight subjects. Everywhere else decided on six subjects. Perhaps you can understand why the committee finds that hard to understand: it is difficult to understand why parents in East Renfrewshire feel so much more strongly about the matter than parents in, for example, Aberdeenshire.

The other element to consider is surely the relationship of S4 to S3 rather than just its relationship to S5 and S6. Mark Ratter said earlier that students choose a number of courses in S3 and then take some of them on through S4. Are you not, in effect, using a two-plus-two-plus-two model? That is why your pupils can take eight subjects, is not it?

Mark Ratter: Headteachers in our schools certainly try to ensure that there is an appropriate learning gradient right the way through from the age of three to the age of 18. All seven of our secondary schools plan very closely with their primary and early years cluster colleagues to ensure curricular continuity. For example, 90 per cent of learners will have achieved the second level in reading by the time they start S1. It is about ensuring that they build on that and have progressive learning experiences.

It is crucial that S3 is still based on the principles that we expect for a broad general education. We undertook a review a couple of years ago in which we spoke to a large number of pupils—we had 700 responses to questionnaires. We had staff involved to ensure that the third year experience was distinct from the fourth year experience and

that it was not a case of focusing on examinations in S3 but of allowing learners to lead their learning, and to take forward digital learning and what is involved in the developing the young workforce programme. We ensure, however, that the learning that takes place in S3 is part of the continuum that enables them to achieve success in S4.

Iain Gray: This is not a criticism, because East Renfrewshire's results are, as you have said, very good. However, you are, in essence, delivering across S3 and S4 certificated courses for which pupils sit exams in S4. The S3 learning is at S3 level, but you are, in fact, delivering the courses over two years, which is why your pupils can do eight subjects.

Mark Ratter: The Education Scotland paper that was produced in 2016 has been alluded to. It looked at what that progression from broad general education into the senior phase should look like. We ensure that we take on board such learning and that it is part of the progressive learning experience.

Iain Gray: Vincent Docherty described something similar. You said that the learning in S3 must be of a quality that allows it to be banked in order to contribute to further learning in a topic later on. Why can your pupils not use that to do national 4 and national 5 courses across two years and complete eight subjects in S4, as East Renfrewshire does?

Vincent Docherty: That is because our attainment pattern is showing that the core of attainment is continuing to improve. You mentioned earlier that the situation is becoming more complex—the world is much more complex than it was and the future will be even more complex. To prepare youngsters for an uncertain world, they will inevitably need increasingly complex mixtures of experiences, skills and qualifications, which are best delivered through the model that curriculum for excellence has identified.

We are all talking about entitlement in broad general education: the model that was identified makes sure that that entitlement is strongly delivered, which is the key. I have been talking about entitlement from S1 to S3, but it goes well beyond that. If the youngster has between 10 and 12 subjects that cover all the areas that have to be covered, their progression in those subjects can go on not only to S4 but can be picked up again in the later stages of the senior phase.

Youngsters continue to get national progression awards, foundation apprenticeships and other such qualifications. As we have found in Aberdeenshire, youngsters such as the pupils in Banchory and Aboyne whom I mentioned continue to get five highers and go to university. The model in curriculum for excellence serves a wider range of the population in a much more equitable way.

Iain Gray: The world is no more complicated in East Renfrewshire than it is in Aberdeenshire. Are you suggesting that in East Renfrewshire the approach that has been taken is less equitable? Why can the pupils there successfully complete eight subjects in S4 but in Aberdeenshire that is not appropriate?

Vincent Docherty: It is about attainment profiles, which you mentioned, and about being contextually specific for youngsters. Youngsters will move into schools in East Renfrewshire for that reason. The attainment profile and the educational experience must fit their aspirations and the aspirations of their parents. The situation would be similar in areas in Aberdeenshire, such as Banchory and Aboyne, however in Aberdeenshire, there is a larger totality to be—

Iain Gray: The logic of that is that pupils in Banchory should be able to follow a similar model, but they do not.

Vincent Docherty: You will find pupils in Banchory and Aboyne in Aberdeenshire who do more qualifications in S4—which is perfectly correct; so they should—and who may be more suited to the approach that Mark Ratter explained, so there is that variety. My point is that that variety and flexibility can be better catered for in the senior phase and with the broad general education set-up that is set out in curriculum for excellence.

Iain Gray: Thank you.

Tony McDaid: We should be looking at the journey of the young person through fourth and fifth years and into sixth year. We have not really cracked the issue of a pupil bypassing the national 5 qualification, which has been part of the committee's conversations, but there can be merit in doing so. At the moment, parents are understandably reluctant about it and we have not convinced them that taking away that assessment burden would be in pupils' best interests. Therefore, we have to be quite robust in how we monitor and track the situation. For some young people, if we double the amount of time, we would halve their pace of learning, so there are pros and cons. For some pupils, we need to have the flexibility of the one-year activity, but for other young people it would be completely appropriate to take away the national 5 assessment, because we can see that they are higher candidates. We need to be as flexible as possible, but we have probably not cracked that yet.

Gerry Lyons: It is about the pupil's journey to the highest possible level, rather than the different stages along the way, whether that involves eight subjects in fourth year and whatever number in fifth year. We have not really explored—although it

would be interesting to do so—the extent to which young people can be presented for a higher at the end of fourth year, in subjects in which they are particularly able. Music is an obvious example—young people are playing music at a very high level and could pass higher music at a young age, but they wait until the end of fifth year to do so. It would be interesting to explore such flexibilities, including two-year higher programmes for young people who are not doing eight national 5 qualifications but take eight subjects, some of which are at higher level in fourth year if they have the ability. However, it is important that parents are engaged and that there is robust tracking and monitoring to make sure that the progress is right and that the pace of learning is at the highest possible level.

10:30

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): We heard in previous evidence sessions about the mixed economy of influences on the curriculum's structure in different parts of the country. The SQA has had a role in shaping the senior phase, and we have heard from Education Scotland and others. What is your take on the mixture of influences on the curriculum? Is there a case for more or less intervention?

Tony McDaid: We have a collective responsibility. We cannot ignore the wishes of a community or a school, and we must work closely with schools. As a local authority, our role is to provide good support and direction for schools.

Schools are conscious of their responsibilities to young people, which is probably why they are taking one step at a time, but we as the local authority can provide support and direction. We also work closely with the national agencies to ensure that they are on board and that they give us the national picture and direction from an international perspective. We all have a collective responsibility to look at that.

Gerry Lyons: I share that view. As an education community, we must meet young people's needs. The most important driver is where young people will go when they leave school—what their destination will be—and how we will get them to the highest possible level. We must all work together to find ways to meet that. The influence comes from what young people and parents tell us and what the destinations tell us; we should drive everything towards that. Tony McDaid is right that all the agencies and people must work together, while keeping young people at the heart of the approach. The influences are what they are but, if we do that, we will focus on the right thing.

Pauline Stephen: I agree with my colleagues that the curriculum is a collective responsibility. Our conversations need to include the quality of the learning experience, as well as a focus on what is in the curriculum. It would help to have debates such as this one about how children and young people learn and what kind of learning will support them to have the critical thinking, creativity and other skills that they will require in a changing world. Together, all the agencies that are involved could bring something to that conversation.

Dr Allan: My next question perhaps relates to that and certainly relates to Gerry Lyons's point about the on-going job of work to explain to parents the choices that exist. Can more be said about what might be done practically to improve or assist with such conversations? On the points that were made about flexibility over choices, do parents understand that there is not only variation between schools but flexibility in schools?

Tony McDaid: Practical examples of the learner journey offer good opportunities. Schools have engaged with local businesses, universities and colleges to show that there can be complete flexibility in how a young person ends up in the first year of a university course. A young person might have embarked on national 4 qualifications, had wider achievement and built a profile as they moved along from school. Colleges can make contextual offers; I am thinking of the University of Strathclyde's engineering academy and the University of Glasgow's widening participation programme.

The issue is convincing our parent body that it is okay to do something different and giving practical examples of what that looks like. Some young people might take the traditional subject route, go straight to university and move on to their pathway, but the journey is very different for others. Universities, colleges and employers are doing better, although there is still a bit to go. Giving practical examples of different journeys is important.

Gerry Lyons: One of the best pieces of work that I have seen emerge on the subject describes young people's learner journeys. Some schools in Glasgow and other local authorities have taken a young person and said, "This was their destination, and this was the route they took in our school to get there." They get young people along to parent information evenings to say, "This was my learner journey." In St Andrew's secondary school, we had a great experience where we brought a young person in from each of our three pathways to tell the story of their journey through the senior phase. It was great to hear parents coming out saying, "That boy who spoke was like my boy, and I now know what my boy needs." Young people can tell the story for us really well.

Individual learner journey stories are the way to do it.

A few years ago, Education Scotland did some work on notional stories. Now we can tell real stories and, as Tony McDaid said, say, "There is a young person who came through our school and got to their destination in this way. A different young person got to the same destination but went a completely different way." We can pull that information together in all kinds of ways to tell individual learner journey stories. Parents get that. That would be a very positive thing for us to pull together and make widely available.

Mark Ratter: I echo that. There is a responsibility on all of us in the system. One of the things that we have found effective is for the partnership with Skills Development Scotland and its careers advisers and coaches to start as early as possible. The discussions should start in S1, looking at and bringing together learner pathways and future planning for what young people would like to do post-school. Those discussions should ensure that young people and parents have the information that they need at the various milestones. That would work well, complemented by the information about individual pupils' journeys.

Dr Allan: Those conversations between schools, parents and young people do not take place in a vacuum but in an environment that is partially informed by what is in the public domain and the media. Yesterday, the committee received evidence from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities spokesperson on children and young people Stephen McCabe. He said that young people could be at the centre of a debate that was overly focused on political considerations, rather than building on the many strengths of the system that we have. Discuss! [*Laughter*.]

The Deputy Convener: Not at great length—on one side of A4.

Tony McDaid: That debate is challenging. When we speak to our schools, they see tangible improvement for some young people. Some of our S4 leavers who were potentially heading into negative destinations now have a training provider. Their journey has changed because of the flexibility within the curriculum offered to them. There has been a lot of conversation about that. All our young people are important to us, but those young people are particularly important, because we know that they will leave at the earliest point, and some of their traditional destinations have been poor.

The conversation is challenging, and the feeling of uncertainty that it creates across the system can sometimes have a negative impact on our schools. It would be helpful to build in and recognise some of the strengths that are there now, so that we are not always negative. Of course, we need to look at improving, but we also need to recognise what is going well and try to capitalise on that.

Gerry Lyons: One of the things I found frustrating, both as a headteacher and now in a local authority, is the negativity that there is at times in the press about the education system. I am not sure who generates that. There is fantastic work going on in our schools, and fantastic things are happening for young people. We need to get that story out.

I agree with Tony McDaid that there are things that we can do better. The committee has picked up on some of that, and it is really important. The backdrop to the discussion about how we do things better should be all the things that we are doing well. The committee is part of that community too, as we are, so let us tell the positive story together, using it as a springboard for what we need to improve, so that we could do even better for our young people and our country.

Tavish Scott (Shetland Islands) (LD): I apologise for my lateness. It is not every day that a primary school from Shetland comes down to the Parliament, so I was showing the children around. They had a lot of questions that they would ask you guys, but I will resist saying what they were, because Alasdair Allan might accuse me of being political.

I want to ask about the definition of the senior phase. Last week, in evidence, Larry Flanagan of the EIS said that he could not put his finger on what the senior phase was for, and that worried him as leader of the biggest teaching union in Scotland. If he cannot do that, I am not sure who can. You are all senior practitioners in this game. Can you define the senior phase and what you are trying to do in it?

Tony McDaid: Yes. It is part of a progressive curriculum from three to 18. The senior phase is meant to build on the benefits of the broad general education and allow young people to specialise and pick up some qualifications. It is to build on the skills, talents and abilities that they have developed from three to 15 and make sure that they are focused on the destination that they need to focus on.

Gerry Lyons: For me, there is a clearly stated entitlement: the senior phase should be the phase of education in which young people gain qualifications and continue to develop the four capacities. My understanding is that that entitlement, which is in all the curriculum for excellence documentation, was a driver of the senior phase. The second driver of the senior phase was that young people should have the

right to be supported into a positive and sustained destination. Allowing the developing the young workforce agenda to become part of the discussion, the senior phase is about having pathways that are as flexible as possible for young people so that they can gain qualifications, develop the four capacities and reach those positive destinations. For me, that is what the senior phase is about.

Vincent Docherty: For me, the two key words are "specialisation" and "choice". In the senior phase, youngsters reach a sufficiently mature stage at which they have entitlement to specialisation and choice—it is where accreditation and gaining qualifications come in. That is quite clear.

Mark Ratter: I agree with my colleagues. For us, it is about continuing the opportunity to develop the four capacities, which Gerry Lyons mentioned, particularly in fifth and sixth year. In terms of leadership, that gives youngsters opportunities to build their skills and confidence, make further achievements and develop the portfolio of qualifications that will allow them to progress to a positive leaver destination.

Pauline Stephen: I will not repeat anything that has been said. In the same way that S1 should feel different from primary school, the senior phase should feel different from the broad general education, for all the reasons that my colleagues described.

Tavish Scott: Thank you for that, but you have kind of made my point: you all gave a range of different answers. You are all raising your hands now, but you have just given your answers.

Gerry Lyons: Teachers raise their hands—

Tavish Scott: I will try asking the questions. I am the teacher here, so hold on a minute.

The Deputy Convener: There is another teacher here, Tavish.

Jenny Gilruth: You are surrounded.

Tavish Scott: No kidding.

What Larry Flanagan said relates to Alasdair Allan's question about the agencies. The clarity that we would all expect from the system is not there from Education Scotland, the senior advisor to the Government. That is the part that I am interested in. You have all set out compelling arguments about what the senior phase is trying to do. Can you show me where that is set out in a coherent form for the whole Scottish education system, so that 32 directors of education in 32 local authorities know exactly what is expected of them? Do you think that it exists? Larry Flanagan did not.

Gerry Lyons: I found all my guidance in the "Building the Curriculum" documents.

Tavish Scott: As a committee, we found that to be one of the most difficult exercises. I do not know whether any of you sat on the implementing the curriculum group, but when we looked at it we found that it was not covered in success. There were nine years of it going around in circles.

Gerry Lyons: I do not think that we do ourselves any favours by denying that some things were not as clear as they could have been. Where we sit now, you are hearing five colleagues from different local authorities telling you, in slightly different terms and with slightly different nuances, that we are all fundamentally trying to do the same thing in the senior phase. Our understanding of that continues to grow and evolve. As I think Tony McDaid said, it is up to the education community to work together in order for that to become clearer for everyone, including the committee. The understanding of the senior phase is pretty clear.

I understand what Larry Flanagan said but, for me, I think that there is a clarity about what we are trying to do, and it has grown through practice, discussion and working together.

Tavish Scott: Would it be fair to say that that has taken place at local authority level?

Gerry Lyons: It has happened in a range of ways: through people working across local authorities, through schools working across local authorities and through local authorities working together.

In the journey that I have been on, Education Scotland has played an important part in growing my understanding through discussions that I have had with it.

10:45

The Deputy Convener: I want to ask about equity and justice. I understand that certain schools do not have many young people who are going to get five highers and that, as you said yourself, those who are going to get five highers are going to get them anyway. Surely, part of the exercise must be about understanding why young people in a disadvantaged community are not able to achieve their full potential. You have already said that you are shifting resource elsewhere.

Last week, Larry Flanagan said that there has been an "explosion" in multilevel teaching. What analysis have you done at local authority level on the scale of that? Has it increased? Where are those multilevel classes most likely to be?

Tony McDaid: In South Lanarkshire, there has always been some degree of multilevel teaching. Some subjects, such as some of the practical

subjects, where things are more straightforward, are designed in that way in terms of the outcomes. That might answer the last part of your question.

Inevitably, there are some practical compromises in some of our smaller schools. Things will be different in a school of 600 from how they are in a school of 1,200.

The Deputy Convener: Does that express itself in rural and urban terms, or is it within urban settings?

Tony McDaid: For us, the issue occurs in a rural setting.

The Deputy Convener: So, there is an understanding around that.

Tony McDaid: The issue occurs in a rural setting in South Lanarkshire. Our urban schools are larger than our rural schools.

The multilevel teaching approach and the associated methodology have always been there. I know from the evidence that some teachers find multilevel teaching more of a challenge than others. Sometimes, a multilevel approach can be adopted during the course of the year, not just at the start of the year. A young person who does not have a national 5 qualification and who is struggling with the higher course that they have embarked on will stay in the class and will potentially be presented for a national 5 examination. That is okay. It does not involve the class starting out as a group that involves people studying for N4, N5, higher and advanced higher. That could be much more challenging.

Some subjects lend themselves to that more than others. If a subject is very content driven or knowledge driven, that could be more challenging, especially if that content is different for the different courses. However, sometimes the quality of the group dynamic for the learning experiences of those young people can kick in. Many teachers want to solve those issues for young people. If two young people say that they want to go into an advanced higher class, the teacher and the school will try to be very practical.

Gerry Lyons: Can you clarify what you mean when you talk about multilevel teaching? Are you talking about different levels of courses—national 5 and higher, for example—being taught in the same room, or are you talking about young people in the fourth, fifth and sixth years being taught in the same room?

The Deputy Convener: We have been told that, in some circumstances, national 4, national 5, higher and advanced higher are being taught in the same class

Gerry Lyons: So, it is about levels.

The Deputy Convener: We have also been told that some classes have pupils of different ages.

Gerry Lyons: So, your concern is primarily about levels—

The Deputy Convener: What I am really trying to establish is whether the explosion in multilevel teaching that the EIS has told us about is something that is happening in rural schools, because of the particular difficulties there, or is something that has become the norm, with headteachers being given permission to do that in order to free up other bits of the curriculum.

The second thing that I am interested in is to do with whether multilevel teaching is being done disproportionately in disadvantaged schools, and how that can possibly sit with any notion of equity and fairness.

Gerry Lyons: The first thing that I would say is that bi-level teaching and multilevel teaching started with higher still. Once higher and intermediate 2 were in existence together, people started to think about whether they could be taught in the same classroom.

In Glasgow—I will talk about Glasgow primarily, because I have experience of teaching there—we do not look to do bi-level teaching, but it is something that we can do in order to extend people choice and give young people more opportunities.

Some courses lend themselves to it more than others. As we went into the senior phase course development, it was highlighted that some of the higher and intermediate 2 courses did not articulate well together. Therefore, we try to create courses that articulate well, so that, when necessary, bi-level teaching can take place without any disadvantage to the young people. That did not happen in all subjects, but it did happen in a lot of them. We should look to see which courses articulate, so that when we need to have bi-level classes, we can deliver them.

The Deputy Convener: I am talking about multilevel teaching, not just bi-level teaching.

Gerry Lyons: I would suggest that multilevel teaching is done through necessity rather than choice.

The Deputy Convener: Is the approach therefore timetable driven and resource driven?

Gerry Lyons: Yes, to some extent, but I do not think that any of us would look to have multilevel classes at all. Tony McDaid talked about rurality and small schools. In Glasgow, the issue is small schools, not deprived schools.

The Deputy Convener: Some of those small schools are small because of what they offer.

Gerry Lyons: No, they are small schools because of the communities that they serve. Govan high school would be an obvious example.

The Deputy Convener: It is a chicken-and-egg situation. Castlemilk high school and St Margaret Mary's secondary school are relatively small schools. One might have argued in the past that young people have moved from those schools because there are more options for them in other schools.

Gerry Lyons: The recent inspection of Castlemilk high school would suggest that that is not the case. It had a very positive inspection in which the range of opportunities that are offered to young people in the school was highly rated. If we could possibly avoid bi-level teaching, we would prefer to do so, but, when courses work well together, bi-level teaching can also work well. If the courses do not articulate, we have to look at either the courses or how we organise classes, so that young people are not disadvantaged.

The Deputy Convener: If your local authority did an equality impact assessment that established that there is a disproportionate number of multilevel classes in disadvantaged schools, would you direct resources to those schools?

Gerry Lyons: Yes.

The Deputy Convener: It was suggested by the EIS at the previous meeting that we could look at a model that is similar to the old model of areas of priority treatment, although we would not necessarily use that term. I absolutely recognise that fantastic, serious work is going on in schools such as Castlemilk high school. I am not denigrating that work, but, with regard to what classes look like, I wonder whether those schools deserve more support to create a level playing field for young people who are in the senior phase.

Gerry Lyons: Looking across Glasgow, the issue is the size of school and what it can offer. Bi-level and multilevel teaching are ways to increase what is on offer, but the issue is about size of school, not deprivation.

I am not being flippant, but if you are offering more support by way of more staff and resource, I will have it, thank you very much.

The Deputy Convener: Sadly, that is not in my gift. It was a serious question.

Gerry Lyons: It was a serious answer.

The Deputy Convener: If the curriculum is managing disadvantage but there is a danger of amplifying it, there is an equality argument that—even with the resource that you have—you should direct more resource into those schools.

Gerry Lyons: Outcomes in Glasgow have improved significantly at all levels across the city in the curriculum for excellence era. To me, that is the measure of what we are doing, and it tells me that we are improving things for young people, including young people in poverty, which was recently confirmed in our inspection around the Scottish attainment challenge. Therefore, we are having a very positive effect on the lives of young people and their outcomes, regardless of the way that we are doing so.

The Deputy Convener: Would more resource be of assistance?

Gerry Lyons: I do not think that any education professional would sit in front of you and say that more resource would not be of assistance.

Vincent Docherty: From an Aberdeen perspective, we have not detected any explosion in bi-level or tri-level teaching. In relation to what we were discussing before, multilevel teaching is potentially the price of creating flexibility in the timetable.

I would say that the most difficult places for us to do that are the schools with the highest levels of deprivation. It would not be part of the design to plan bi-level and tri-level classes there. However, although there has been an inevitable increase in multilevel teaching, there has been no discernible downturn in the attainment of the young people in those classes.

The Deputy Convener: Yes, but we want the attainment in disadvantaged communities to go up the way. Professor Scott gave compelling evidence that the most disadvantaged are more disadvantaged still, and we want to interrogate that issue.

What work has been done to monitor the offer across different schools? Maybe you can get back to us on that. I hear people say that the approach is not certificate driven, but if a school is already disadvantaged in terms of the number of qualifications that its pupils achieve, performance on qualifications matters from the point of view of closing the attainment gap.

Gerry Lyons: Speaking on behalf of Glasgow City Council, the evidence on the performance of schools in Glasgow totally contradicts what Professor Scott said. That is how I measure the effectiveness of what we are doing with the curriculum and, in fact, all aspects of the work of our schools.

Pauline Stephen: I think that the idea of an equality impact assessment would be really useful for any policy change. It is an important lens through which to consider change. It would be helpful to look in that way at what certificated courses are on offer, but it would also be good to

include other types of courses that are available. In some schools where there are fewer highers on offer than there were previously, there are other qualifications that are on offer through partnerships with colleges or universities, and it would be useful to explore all of those in the round.

Mark Ratter: I agree with what has been said about the need for the focus to be on equity. All the local authorities have a focus on excellence and equity. In East Renfrewshire, we talk about raising the bar for all and closing the gap. The situation that Professor Scott described in his evidence is not one that I recognise in East Renfrewshire. If we look at a range of measures—whether in relation to the broad general education, CFE attainment, teachers' professional judgments or leaver attainment—in key equity groups, we have strong evidence that the gap is being closed.

Gordon MacDonald (Edinburgh Pentlands) (SNP): Most of the issues that I had been going to ask about have been touched on. There has been a lot of discussion of the senior phase. Now that a number of cohorts of young people have been through the senior phase in its current format, is there anything that you would change in it so that we can better serve our young people?

Tony McDaid: I want to mention the notion of expanding the offer of young people not necessarily sitting a full range of qualifications in fourth year when their ability allows them to do that. I think that that approach was partly about reducing the assessment burden for those young people, whether in fourth, fifth or sixth year. There was a desire to give them a wider experience and to allow them to develop those skills that are crucial as they move into the workplace or university. We should look at those models that are working so that we can give schools the confidence of knowing that they can do that. That would also give our school communities reassurance, because it creates uncertainty for a family if a young person starts out in fourth year thinking, "I'm going to miss out a national 5 qualification." That is a bit of a false conversation when the young person has the capability to do that. That is one of the aspects that I would look at.

Gerry Lyons: I echo what Tony McDaid said. We need to have flexibility with regard to when young people can be presented for qualifications. That needs to happen at a time when they are most ready and able and at the time that is best for them.

In addition, I would love to take the phrase "alternative pathways" out of the debate. Let us just talk about learner journeys for young peopl rather than "alternative pathways", which suggests that the young people who are on those pathways were not able to go on the proper pathway. We should also remove the term "extracurricular", because nothing is extracurricular. Let us celebrate learning, but not just the learning that is done in classrooms.

All kinds of fantastic work is going on in schools, and I would certainly want to make that part of the picture, to ensure that the achievements of young people in the round are recognised.

11:00

Mark Ratter: As was said earlier, we need to continue to be ambitious, to look back at what has been done and to think about how we might change things. Last year, our secondary heads engaged with the paper written by Gerry Lyons about his curriculum in St Andrew's secondary school, and we invited one of the headteachers from Glasgow who had completely changed the curricular model to come and speak to us. It is all about continuing to look at what the evidence is telling us, what our results are showing, whether we are making a difference with regard to equity and what we can learn from the other schools that, as has been said, are further along in the senior phase journey. We would not necessarily be seeking to change anything; it is just that we are constantly reviewing the situation and seeing where there might still be headroom for improvement.

Gordon MacDonald: Gerry Lyons mentioned alternative pathways. Obviously, I will try to avoid using that phrase, but the fact is that, these days, schools have lots of partnerships with colleges for vocational courses, foundation apprenticeships and so on. What is the take-up in your area of such courses and apprenticeships, and how do we get across to parents and employers the message that those qualifications are equally as important as nat 4, nat 5 and nat 6?

Gerry Lyons: The uptake of what is provided by the partnership between schools and colleges in Glasgow is high and growing. As part of our employability strategy, we are working with colleges to find out how we can extend the offer and give more opportunities in different ways, and foundation apprenticeships are part of that approach.

Again, the picture is a growing one, and we are, for example, trying to understand better how we can offer foundation apprenticeships. Tony McDaid talked about in-school offers. One thing that I did not think about—in the way that you sometimes do not think about things—is that parents would hear the term "foundation" in foundation apprenticeships and think that they were like foundation standard grade courses.

There is a communication issue that needs to be addressed.

As I have said, it is a growing picture. More and more, we are recognising that this is a positive approach, and we want to explore the headroom. The point that you have picked up is a really good one, and it has come out of the evidence that you have received, suggesting that we need to tell the story to parents in a better and stronger way and get out the message that these offers are not something your young people do if they cannot do other things, but something that is best for them and which will lead to a positive destination. Case law is not the right term here, but we have more and more examples and precedents to draw on, and we need to use them in discussions with parents to ensure that they understand what all the models are, that they are all important and that one is not an alternative for people who cannot do anything else. We just need to pull all of that together.

Pauline Stephen: A school will offer a really good and effective senior phase not on its own but in partnership with lots of people, and a very important partner in that respect is the college. In Angus, we will, after the summer, be hosting a foundation apprenticeship in each of our eight secondary schools, and it will be delivered by staff from Dundee and Angus College. That has come about as a result of good relationships, good partnership working and a shared view of improving outcomes for youngsters. I think that all partners can get something really meaningful out of that kind of approach, and it will become part of our core delivery. In fact, our course booklets already contain information about foundation apprenticeships, which really helps families to consider such alternatives at home.

However, we have on-going work to do with regard to communication. I often speak to young people about where they are going and what they are leaving school to do; one young man had decided that he was going to join an accountancy firm to get his qualifications, and the hardest people to convince that that was the right thing to do were his parents. In that case, the school supported him by setting out the pros and cons of different routes so that he could have that conversation at home. However, there is still work that needs to be done in that respect.

Vincent Docherty: Going back to your earlier question whether there is anything that we would do differently, I certainly think, as has been echoed in my colleagues' responses, that what we need to do is not sell these approaches but explain to parents what they mean for young people. In Aberdeenshire, we have moved on with foundation apprenticeships—and for all the right reasons, because they will definitely be the most appropriate option for a much bigger number of young people in future—but the biggest barrier that we have encountered is how we explain that to parents. They say, "Am I taking a gamble with my son or daughter's education here? I am just unsure about it—can you tell me more?" We need to ensure that, at the earliest possible stage, explanations are given so that parents have a clear understanding, with no holds barred with regard to preferences. That is what I would have done differently with that proposition at the senior phase.

Tony McDaid: Some of the best examples can be found in work-based learning activity, of which foundation apprenticeships are indeed an example. As a result of them, young people are, if it is appropriate, moving into real employment opportunities and real jobs that pay. It is therefore not some kind of esoteric activity—it actually translates into something.

Early learning and childcare is an example of that. If a young person is doing a foundation apprenticeship in a subject in which they are really interested, they can have some tremendous opportunities, such as moving to a modern apprenticeship that can allow them to become, say, an early years worker. That sort of thing convinces people that this is not something that a young person does just because it is good to do; indeed, some young people might decide that this is not the pathway for them and might develop general skills instead. In any case, we need to continue to have a sharp focus on the fact that young people can go into employment as a result of these courses.

The Deputy Convener: We have come to the end of our session, and I thank our witnesses very much for their attendance. If you wish to follow up anything that you have said this morning or if you have any other evidence that you think will be useful, we will be delighted to hear from you.

That concludes the public part of our meeting. At next week's meeting, we will take evidence from the SQA on this inquiry and consider subordinate legislation on early years and childcare.

11:06

Meeting continued in private until 11:21.

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