EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 9 June 2004
(*Morning*)

Session 2

£5.00

Produced and published in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body by The Stationery Office Ltd.

Her Majesty's Stationery Office is independent of and separate from the company now trading as The Stationery Office Ltd, which is responsible for printing and publishing Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body publications.

CONTENTS

Wednesday 9 June 2004

	Col.
ITEM IN PRIVATE	1487
SCHOOL CURRICULUM	1488
SCHOOL CLOSURES	1520

EDUCATION COMMITTEE
16th Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

*Robert Brown (Glasgow) (LD)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab)
Rhona Brankin (Midlothian) (Lab)
Ms Rosemary Byrne (South of Scotland) (SSP)
*Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP)
*Mr Adam Ingram (South of Scotland) (SNP)
*Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Bill Aitken (Glasgow) (Con)
*Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab)
Rosie Kane (Glasgow) (SSP)
Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)
Mr Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Mike Baughan (Learning and Teaching Scotland)
Keir Bloomer (Learning and Teaching Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Martin Verity

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Mark Roberts

ASSISTANT CLERK

Ian Cowan

LOCATION

Committee Room 3

Scottish Parliament

Education Committee

Wednesday 9 June 2004

(*Morning*)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 09:49*]

Item in Private

The Convener (Robert Brown): I welcome members to this meeting of the Education Committee, remind them that we are in public session and ask them to switch off mobile telephones and pagers. Item 1 is to consider whether to take in private item 4, which is our draft stage 1 report on the School Education (Ministerial Powers and Independent Schools) (Scotland) Bill. Do members have views on that?

Fiona Hyslop (Lothians) (SNP): Generally, I prefer not to discuss reports in private.

Mr Kenneth Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): In this case it would be beneficial to discuss our report in private first, so that we can agree a unanimous report, rather than focusing on disagreement.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton (Lothians) (Con): Drafting should be done in private, but discussion of major policy issues should be taken in public.

Fiona Hyslop: I will wear you all down until you submit at some point.

The Convener: We are considering the whole issue of taking items in private. I have some difficulty with discussing our draft report in private, because we discussed our report on the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Bill in public and it looked all right. However, to some extent it is desirable to retain the practice of discussing reports in private. I sense that members agree that we should discuss our report in private. Is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

School Curriculum

09:50

The Convener: Item 2 is consideration of the school curriculum. We welcome Mike Baughan OBE. I am not sure how to pronounce that.

Mike Baughan (Learning and Teaching Scotland): It is pronounced “born”.

The Convener: Thank you. Mike is chief executive of Learning and Teaching Scotland. I also welcome Keir Bloomer, who is vice chair of Learning and Teaching Scotland and who is before us in a slightly different capacity from that in which we normally see him. Keir Bloomer is going to kick off by giving us some words of wisdom.

Keir Bloomer (Learning and Teaching Scotland): First, Learning and Teaching Scotland is grateful for the opportunity to present thoughts to you, which we hope will be of some use. I will cover briefly some of the ground that is implied by the questions that you have asked.

Throughout the developed world, and perhaps even more widely, there is a growing impression that education, especially secondary education, is on the cusp of fundamental change. The reason for that lies in the rapid and accelerating pace of economic change and change in our society and values, which leaves people uncertain that education, particularly at secondary level, is fit for purpose and is giving people the personal capacities and skills that they require to emerge into adult life in the early 21st century. We have seen everywhere a questioning of educational purposes. In Scotland, that began with the consultation paper on the Standards in Scotland’s Schools etc Bill right back at the beginning of the first session of Parliament and has continued through the national debate on the purposes of education, the consultation on education for excellence and the curriculum review.

It is worth touching briefly on the conclusions of the national debate. Obviously it is impossible to summarise briefly the findings of so many written submissions, but the general flavour was that people did not believe that the system was falling apart, but had a range of concerns for the medium to long term, which are reflected in the issues that you are considering. There was a feeling that education was excessively academic in a rather traditional and subject-centred way, that it was obsessed with assessment and internal examination, that it tended to neglect the promotion of skills and capabilities and, perhaps most important—this came over in the evidence that a group of young people gave your predecessor committee—that the educational

experience was not motivating and did not encourage people to become committed lifelong learners.

At the root of those concerns is an assumption about how secondary education goes about its business, which is that it concentrates on the transfer of subject content—not knowledge, but inert information—and assumes that the skills and capabilities will follow. There is little evidence that that is the case and the evidence that there is becomes weaker as the skills with which we are concerned become more demanding. The skills that people are looking for include critical thinking, creativity and so forth. It is open to question whether those skills can be left to take care of themselves in a curriculum that is extremely content focused.

I draw a few conclusions from that. First, we require to do more consciously to develop and promote skills and capabilities. Secondly, we have to acknowledge that that means that the curriculum has to become intellectually more demanding. That is an important point, because people's suspicion about education reform is that it is about dumbing down when in fact, in this instance, it is about precisely the opposite.

Thirdly, if we are going to do those things, we need to be robust in tackling the problems of assessment. We need to cease being seduced by assessing what is easy to measure and become more competent at assessing the things that we are anxious to promote, albeit that they are difficult to measure.

Fourthly, we need to learn a key lesson of lifelong learning. It is astonishing how quickly the idea of lifelong learning has embedded itself in people's consciousness. The idea that we need to keep on learning through life is well understood, but I do not think that the implication of that for the period of initial education is equally well understood. The implication is, I think, that school education is not a once-and-for-all chance; it does not require to be fully comprehensive and complete, but it does need to be motivating. If school education does not encourage young people to go on, it has failed; hence the importance of the young people's criticism to which I referred earlier. That means that we are increasingly looking to have deep, transformational learning during the early, compulsory stages of schooling.

Finally, I will say a word on subjects. The predominance of subjects in the curriculum is based on a particular view of the nature of knowledge, which is that knowledge progresses by increasing specialisation. Essentially, that is a reductionist view of knowledge. One must recognise that there are major strengths to that approach, which has been phenomenally successful in progressing science and technology over at least the past four hundred years; thus it lies at the heart of the prosperity of the contemporary world—or at least part of the contemporary world. However, that approach also has severe limitations. It is poor at skills of synthesis or joining up—or what is known as systems thinking. The approach is good for science, for example, but it is bad for the ethics of science, which is the kind of issue that is becoming important in the contemporary world.

Therefore, I think that we must recognise that the subject approach to curriculum planning is valid but partial. Unfortunately, we currently have a curriculum that relies on that approach almost entirely. We would not suggest that there is no place in the curriculum for subject learning, because self-evidently there is. However, there is also a place for different kinds of learning experiences, some of which, of course, have been to the fore in recent years—for example, initiatives to promote sports and arts, entrepreneurship skills, creativity and so on.

That is all that I wish to say by way of a general introduction.

The Convener: Thank you very much, indeed.

I wonder whether I can kick off. This is probably my being put off by acronyms or phrases such as Learning and Teaching Scotland, but can you perhaps give us a little bit of insight into what the role of the organisation is?

Mike Baughan: Yes. LT Scotland is a non-departmental public body, which was formed four years ago through a merger of the Scottish Council for Educational Technology and the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum. Both those bodies were in existence for approximately 25 years. The remit of the new body—Learning and Teaching Scotland—is threefold. Through its advisory council, it has a remit to offer independent advice to Scottish ministers and, obviously, to comment primarily on all matters relating to school education, but also on matters relating to information and communications technology, which goes beyond school education. LT Scotland also offers support to education authorities, schools and teachers.

The third part of the remit is the production and development of materials. One of the current key remits is to manage on behalf of the Executive the national grid for learning in Scotland and its development. Therefore, one of our activities is to manage the roll-out of the Scottish schools digital network, which is the Scottish schools ICT network. We hope that the SSDN will enable schools throughout Scotland to access high-quality ICT content.

We employ approximately 230 staff. Very importantly, between 30 and 40 of the staff are seconded from schools. We bring in such staff constantly to refresh the organisation. Therefore, within LT Scotland's work force is a group of people who are actively engaged in the business of teaching, unlike people such as me. I left a school in that capacity six or seven years ago.

The Convener: Does the organisation have a role in stimulating, commissioning or directing research in education—research into very practical questions such as what methods work best?

10:00

Mike Baughan: Yes it does, although not directly. It does not have pretensions to be a research body but it does commission research in a wide range of areas. The most notable recent example of that has been research into education in early years, which I venture to suggest has been one of the great success stories of Scottish education. Later, I may be able to develop the discussion of why early-years education is successful and why that success is not translated into secondary education.

The research that we commission is not only from Scotland; we consider international comparators as well. We consider what works, in a pragmatic way, as well as commissioning our own empirical research.

The Convener: A lot of time and money have gone into research on nursery schools and early-years education. Has that produced results? Has it led to changes in primary education or to advances in the general approach? Most children now have some element of nursery education, but has that made a difference?

Mike Baughan: I will have to give a cautious answer. As members know, the developments in pre-school education—such as the entitlement for all post-3s—are fairly recent. I do not want to be evasive, but the answer is that time will tell. However—and it is a very important however—all the evidence on the ground is that the initiative has been extremely fruitful. When youngsters move from pre-school education or nursery education to primary education, they are ready to learn and ready to engage. Considerable gains have been made. Many of those gains have been social gains. From its questions, I deduce that the committee is interested in the development of soft skills. The formation of soft skills and of the motivation to learn takes place at an early age. That is where the success story has been.

I am chief executive of LT Scotland for another two days; I retire on Friday. One of the joys of retiring on Friday is that I will spend more time with four grandchildren. The job has been educational for me. I came to it as a secondary school head teacher who had been involved in education for 30 years, and I now see at first hand how my grandchildren learn. They learn in ways that are remarkably different from the way that I learned—any grandparent will tell you that. They bring to their learning an excitement and curiosity about the world. They are willing to experiment. As a parent, a grandparent and an educator, I would like that motivation—to engage with all that is new—to be retained throughout the learning experiences all the way through to age 18 and beyond.

If we are talking seriously about lifelong learning, we have to accept that we will not inculcate in young people the desire to continue learning after school if the school experience has been thoroughly miserable—and it is miserable for a significant number of children. I could wax lyrical about the successes of Scottish education, but let us take those successes as read for a moment and consider the fact that we have failures in Scottish education as well. Youngsters say that they are disenchanted and demotivated and do not see the relevance of what they are doing.

There is perhaps a parallel with what was written at the beginning of the 20th century by Professor Whitehead. He wrote about the three phases of education. The romantic phase was when young people were curious and wanted to engage with the world. That motivated them towards a phase of discipline, when the hard graft of learning had to take place. Education is hard graft. Imagine, for example, learning a new language; for many that requires hard application. However, following that phase of graft comes the phase of liberation—the ability to use a language, the ability to be creative, and the ability to apply science and technology.

The parallel with the 21st century is this: what we see now in the early years of education is a readiness and willingness of young people to engage—and to make mistakes and to fail, and not to be set back by failure but to continue to engage. Through such engagement comes a determination to involve themselves in the discipline of acquiring new skills, of mastering understanding and so on. Only once that phase is concluded do children and young people move into the phase of liberation that we would associate with the upper stages of education—certainly with tertiary education and most certainly with adult life.

Mr Macintosh: Thank you for your opening remarks, which were thought provoking. I want to ask about examples of flexibility in the curriculum. There are already arrangements to allow schools, teachers and education directors to introduce flexibility. One area in which there is flexibility is

the age-and-stage regulations. What are your thoughts on the benefit of that? There is great support for comprehensive education, but there is a worry that we take a one-size-fits-all approach. Age-and-stage flexibility is one way of addressing that problem, but it might have an impact on our approach to mixed-ability teaching in the early years. What dangers must we watch out for if we loosen up the age-and-stage guidelines too much?

Keir Bloomer: I will make three points in relation to that. First, the flexibility circular is a significant and welcome sign of the improving intellectual climate in Scottish education. For 20-plus years, that climate has been extremely rigid, with a heavy emphasis on conformity. The permission-giving nature of the circular is extremely important, as systems have the capacity to learn and progress only in such a climate.

Secondly, it is slightly unfortunate that probably the best-publicised examples of the use of the circular relate to pupils studying to take exams earlier. If that were the sole outcome of granting schools more flexibility—it is not—the measure would achieve remarkably little. Once we have everyone sitting their highers in primary 4, what is left for them to do during their remaining eight or nine years at school? Unless we tackle the problem of assessment obsession to which I referred earlier, we will not get the full beneficial effects of the new concept of flexibility. Instead, we will get a drive towards acceleration, which is insufficient.

Last, we need to move from the particular view that I have mentioned of what the circular allows us to do to much more creative notions that are concerned as much with the content of the curriculum as with the way in which it is assessed.

Mike Baughan: I endorse those remarks. There is a great danger that there will be a relentless drive to move onwards and upwards and to have pupils sit formal examinations at an increasingly early age. That has an impact on the concept of flexibility. It is dangerous to confuse age-and-stage flexibility with curriculum flexibility. There is a close relationship between the two, but the age-and-stage regulations are about certification. Flexibility then means flexibility to have certification at an earlier stage or at a time that is appropriate to youngsters' needs.

Just over a week ago, there was a report in the press on the reductionist principle that primary 7 children may be presented for national qualification course credits. If we go down that road as a nation, in the misguided belief that early certification is a good thing, schools will respond, predictably, by concentrating on content and all that is required for pupils to be successful in examinations. There will be a danger of losing the soft skills part of the agenda that we consider to be so important. I welcome relaxation in the age-and-stage regulations, because that means treating the profession properly and trusting it to make informed judgments. However, there are inherent dangers in that agenda if it is confused too much with curriculum flexibility.

Mr Macintosh: The point that you make about exams is important and we will return to it later. I would like to deal with the mixed-ability issue first. Throughout the primary school years and the early years of secondary school, the emphasis is on mixed-ability teaching. People still shy away from the idea of streaming pupils into ability-based groups. When we start talking about relaxing age and stage, the issue of dividing pupils by ability is inevitably raised. Is that something that we should welcome or be worried about? How does that sit within our comprehensive approach?

Keir Bloomer: I agree with the implication behind all that you are saying. Curiously, later today, I will talk with the BBC about class sizes. The debate that you raise seems to me to be terribly old fashioned. We are now in circumstances in which we should be thinking much more about how we personalise the learning process. We have technology that would allow us to do that. We have the capability to deliver learning—not that I am keen on that phrase—at a distance and to deal with people in large groups, small groups and as individuals. In those circumstances, a continuing concern about how many people you put in an identically sized box for the next 40 minutes and whether they should all be drawn from the same age cohort, which is your point, has a somewhat antique flavour to it. There is no reason why we should consider that to be the only possible way of organising the learning process. I agree entirely that we can draw people together on the basis of their interest, level of attainment or some other factor, rather than simply on the basis of age. Further, we can do that in groups of an increasingly flexible size.

Mr Macintosh: Could that be done without undermining the comprehensive principle?

Keir Bloomer: The issue is to do with extending the comprehensive principle. The notion that the comprehensive principle works only if you treat people as identical members of identical units is profoundly retrograde. In all public services, it is critical to making progress that we should individualise what is on offer. If anything, that is more critical in education than it is in other areas. If we were able to do that with equity for all people, that would enhance, not undermine, the comprehensive principle.

Mr Macintosh: Clearly, the introduction of flexibility in the curriculum will have different effects on different subjects. There is a fear that certain subjects—those that require more

academic discipline and rely more on memory than intuitive learning or other skills—will suffer. I was interested in what you both said about pupils being demotivated and the need for subjects to be more intellectually demanding. There is a fear that, instead of motivating people, the introduction of flexibility will encourage pupils to take so-called easy subjects. Do you think that that is a possibility?

Mike Baughan: I will respond to that with what might sound like an unlikely example, but it is one that is attracting some public interest at the moment: the place of Latin and classics in the curriculum.

When I was a head teacher, the parents, youngsters and the general school community of Webster's high school decided to retain the teaching of Latin and classical studies. That was not particularly fashionable nationally at the time. The reason why we took that decision was because we had an outstanding teacher of classical studies, who motivated and attracted pupils to join her classes. Pupils opted in rather than being coerced. She was an inspirational teacher who used her subject to foster not only a love of language but a love of learning. In her class, pioneering use was made of information and communication technology. Youngsters left her course as confident and inquiring learners.

What I am laboriously trying to say by using that example is that perhaps it is not the subject that matters, but the way in which the subject is taught and the way in which it can contribute to the development of our so-called soft skills. Although youngsters who pursue courses in Latin and classical studies may have a certificate that says that they have a higher grade in Latin, I am not sure that that will necessarily be the passport to all the good things in life that they want. Their passport to life will be a rigorous, inquiring mind.

I saw children of all abilities opt for Latin. We do not need to fear the place of subjects that are considered, in popular stereotype, to be challenging. What we have to fear is inappropriate pedagogy and the inability of teachers to motivate children and engage them in the process of learning. I do not know whether that is a helpful example.

10:15

Mr Macintosh: It is an interesting point, although the problem is that Latin is on the decline and people are not taking it.

Mike Baughan: But it could apply to other subjects.

Mr Macintosh: Yes.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: I start by saying how much I have appreciated the wise counsel of Learning and Teaching Scotland over the years, to the great benefit of my constituents.

How would you approach the issue in other subjects that are potentially in decline, such as history, Gaelic and foreign languages? In general, should it be a matter of choice for pupils? Should demand be driven by pupils? How would you advise the Minister for Education and Young People and the Parliament to deal with an insufficiency of teachers where the inspirational teacher to whom you refer does not exist? At what stage would you say that the teaching of a certain subject is no longer viable? What would be your general approach?

The three subjects that I thought of are history, Gaelic and foreign languages. It may be that the approach on each will be different. For example, I went to Trinity Academy yesterday where they teach—extremely well—French, Spanish and Italian, but not German. How do you distinguish between subjects that should be encouraged to the maximum and those that may be in decline? What advice would you give us?

Keir Bloomer: I will start off, but I am sure that Mike Baughan will have more to say, as he probably has greater expertise.

I will touch on two subjects, only one of which—modern languages—was referred to by Lord James Douglas-Hamilton. Modern languages have been the focus of considerable political interest over quite a long period, with—if I may say so—fairly dismal results. The attempt to make modern languages compulsory for four years resulted in a decline of about 50 per cent in the number of young people going on to study the subject at higher. In effect, roughly 95 per cent of school pupils have dropped modern languages at the earliest opportunity—having achieved a standard indistinguishable from never having studied it.

That seems to me to be a sorry record, which has occurred because the approach was based on poor-quality thinking. It derived from crude notions such as that as we are bringing people into an increasingly globalised world and as they are citizens of the European Union, more of them must be proficient in modern languages. That is little better than a slogan.

One has to start from an understanding of the issues. One of the key issues is that the incentive for a young person brought up in an English-speaking country to learn any other language is minimal compared with the reverse situation. One can go further than that and say that the lack of any tradition of bilingualism within the UK, the lack of a close relationship between English and any other spoken language—so there is no mutual

intelligibility—and the lack of any terribly obvious choice of second language all create further barriers. French is our choice of second language, but largely for the kind of reason on which you touched: namely, that we have people who can teach it. There is no particularly sound reason for regarding French as the automatic choice of second language for Scottish youngsters at this point.

In the circumstances with which we are faced, the notion that we will improve standards and increase uptake by driving everybody through such subjects compulsorily is naive and has been demonstrated to be naive. We therefore have to consider alternative ways in which we might make progress and there may be lessons to be learned from the experience of the immersion approach in Gaelic. There may well also be lessons in what business tends to do when equipping people to go and work in an office in, for example, Warsaw or Tokyo: the executives are exposed to intensive courses, usually at an Irish country house, at which people shout at them in the chosen language from early in the morning until late at night.

There is a wide range of pedagogical possibilities—the second one might appeal to certain kinds of teachers, I suppose—that demand a degree of flexibility about the way in which we organise education that has not characterised education until now. None of the immersion options fits terribly well with the model of four hour-long periods a week; blocks of time must be set aside for immersion. I have no difficulty with doing that and no difficulty with the notion that it will be an appealing option to some young people and not to others, but all that demands a greater flexibility of approach than we have tended to employ until now. I have taken a while over that and I apologise.

The second subject that I will touch on briefly is science, which you did not mention, but it is in decline and that is a cause of considerable concern. The number of people now going from school into faculties of hard sciences in universities is extremely low and appears to be dropping. There are a couple of reasons for that, which we require to address. The first is analogous to the position of French as the second language of choice. Our notion of science in school is firmly focused on physics and chemistry, with biology as a kind of also-ran, but if we examine late-20th century science in the real world, we find that physics and chemistry are not the areas of science in which knowledge is conspicuously advancing. That reflects the phenomenon that the science curriculum, which should be exciting in its modernity, is entrenched in the history of science, if not the archaeology of science. There is an urgent need to think creatively about what we mean by that area of knowledge.

It is interesting to note that the fastest-growing subject in England at general certificate of secondary education level is religious studies. That is not the outcome of a rapid upsurge in faith, but it reflects the fact that it is a subject area in which young people can do what a great many of them want to do: talk about big questions and issues. Science offers that possibility as well, but we do not take that opportunity up.

The Convener: I will comment briefly on language learning before we leave that issue altogether. I have recently had the benefit of visiting the Gaelic primary school and secondary unit in Glasgow. Immersion is the method that is used there and it is started at primary 1. Is there anything about maturity of learning at different ages—age five or age 11, for example—that means that it is far better to expose children to language at an earlier stage of primary education? Should we consider a significant change in the way in which we teach languages and start teaching them at a much earlier age? The Gaelic experience seems to be not only that the children become bilingual in Gaelic and English but that they are better at learning other modern languages, such as French, when they are introduced to them later on.

Keir Bloomer: That is true. There are a couple of reasons for it. The first may appear relatively trivial, although it would not be trivial to someone who is 14 or 15, which is a self-conscious age. Making curious sounds in public is not something that appeals to the average adolescent.

The Convener: Some would quarrel with that.

Keir Bloomer: All right, I will revise that statement. Making curious sounds of someone else's choice is not appealing to them.

The second reason is more profound and is the point that you are touching on. The relationship between language and thought is an extremely intimate one. Acquiring the rudiments of a second language at the point when the child is still acquiring and digesting basic concepts is quite an enriching experience. It has several positive cognitive effects, not the least of which is an enhanced capability to learn languages later.

Mike Baughan: I would like to respond to Lord James Douglas-Hamilton's question—especially as he made such generous comments about LT Scotland. He talked about support for schools that may not be in a position to offer teaching in, for example, Gaelic and modern languages. There has been an encouraging growth in Gaelic-medium primary education and the expectations of parents have been raised. There is an expectation that that should be continued into the secondary

stages of education, where possible. However, we have a national difficulty in recruiting teachers of Gaelic who are qualified to teach secondary subjects in that language.

The minister announced just over a week ago that a Gaelic-medium secondary school is to be established in Glasgow. However, the second part of his announcement did not receive the breadth of press coverage that it deserved. In it, the minister gave encouragement to the consideration of using ICT to provide access for youngsters in areas where Gaelic-medium secondary education is unlikely to take place. Such access through the means of ICT would capitalise on a scarce resource in Scotland and make that resource available to a much wider group of young people.

I do not mean the use of ICT as a distance-learning medium for the teaching of Gaelic—that would be the use of new technology for an old pedagogy. I mean that ICT could provide access, through videoconferencing and local tutor support, for youngsters who want to study a social subject or business studies in Gaelic in an area where there is no Gaelic-medium social subjects teacher. Through ICT, they could access the expertise that exists in other parts of the country. It is a joined-up solution.

There have been some very interesting pilot schemes. I hate to go back to the example of Latin, but North Lanarkshire Council has offered distance learning, through videoconferencing, in classical studies and Latin to students throughout North Lanarkshire and in Argyll and Bute. It has been quite a success story. We are learning a lot about how to use technology to extend choice and flexibility.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton asked what advice we would give to ministers on modern languages. The action group on languages gave advice through the review "Citizens in a Multilingual World". That report opened up the concept of entitlement as opposed to compulsion, which takes us into interesting areas of choice. Rather than dragging recalcitrant teenagers kicking and screaming into modern languages classes, it would be much better to have modern language teaching available to them through choice. Through ensuring the teaching of modern languages in primary schools, we could ensure that, at an early stage, all youngsters had at least some experience of learning a modern language, perhaps to re-engage with it later.

The question about the reluctance to learn a modern language can be graphically illustrated by the experience that most of us have had of going abroad and hearing young people from all walks of life and so-called abilities speak fluent English. Nothing will convince me that there is something genetically innate in the Scottish psyche that makes it difficult for us to learn a modern language; what is there is a lack of motivation and rationale for learning modern languages.

If I may, I will return to the well-trodden path of motivation and of learning how to learn. I agree that we need business people in Scottish society who are prepared to talk the language of the country with which they wish to do business. What we need, however, are people who are motivated and equipped to learn a language rapidly, efficiently and competently when the need to do so arises.

10:30

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: Thank you for those full replies. Would you feel able to draft a very short paper for us to set out the principles that should guide us in these matters? I should explain by way of background why I am asking for such a paper. First, I am thinking of the principle of access and whether a case could be made for some schools going down the Open University route of using new technology in order to gain access to courses that would not be available to them otherwise. I am thinking also of schools in which subjects such as history and science are not being taught and yet there is a substantial demand for them. How should that demand be fulfilled? How can pupils be given the satisfaction of learning those subjects as well as of learning modern languages?

Mike Baughan: I would be pleased to draft a paper.

Keir Bloomer: Before Friday.

Mike Baughan: As the outgoing chief executive of LT Scotland, I would be delighted to draft the paper.

Dr Elaine Murray (Dumfries) (Lab): Thank you very much. There is an awful lot of interest in what you have said already—it has given us a lot of inspiration. I am interested in what you said about the reductionist model of education in secondary schools. Education in primary schools is more activities based, which means that several skills can be learned in one activity. Children could be indulging in sport, but they might also be doing measurement and observation, or they might be doing environmental studies but also walking and developing language skills.

However, when young people reach secondary school, they learn only in subject-based classes. The problem arises that, although many of those classes provide a challenge and a focus of interest for youngsters, they are not explicitly about transferable skills. That comment applies to all levels of education beyond secondary school in which education is subject specific. A young

person is learning a subject when what they ought to be learning is how to learn.

I am thinking about how the curriculum could be used to promote creativity, for example, and to enable young people to learn. If a youngster learns French at school, they are not learning French—given that they are going to forget it again anyway—but learning how to learn a language. As Mike Baughan said, when the business person has to go abroad, they know how to learn Italian, Spanish or German in order to be able to operate in their new business environment.

The example of science was also raised. Science is a subject that gives young people the opportunity to learn language skills by discussing what they are learning. We do not do that in this country. Does that happen elsewhere? Is there good practice anywhere else where transferable skills are made explicit in subject teaching?

Mike Baughan: Good practice exists in Scotland. If I may, I will give another analogy. Let us look at the curriculum at Hogwarts school in which the fictional character Harry Potter was engaged. The curriculum was subject based; he was taught subjects such as the defensive arts and potions and spells. The real development of Harry Potter came with the integration of the knowledge that he learned in those so-called diverse subjects and the sense of social responsibility that came to him as he grew up.

Given the pressures that are placed on subject teachers—particularly in secondary schools—to secure examination success for their pupils, the main focus for those teachers is the art of passing examinations. I do not decry for one moment the need for good, robust, high-quality qualifications, but I am suggesting that what we examine is not necessarily what you appear to suggest that we should value. That takes us into the whole area of how we accredit, recognise and demonstrate value in relation to the soft skills that the universities and employers tell us are so important to them. A member of our advisory council, who is a university admissions officer and vice-dean eloquently pointed out that the University of Glasgow looks for young people who have inquiring minds and know how to learn. The vice-dean went on to say that the evidence that the youngsters bring in the form of five or six highers is not necessarily sufficient to demonstrate those qualities. In a subject-based curriculum, teachers of science or any other subject in secondary school need and would appreciate the space to be able to spend time developing and stimulating youngsters' curiosity and providing opportunities for appropriate investigation. That happens in primary schools and in the early years.

Science was mentioned earlier. Ms Alexander launched Scotland's science strategy—I attended the launch—and set up an advisory group on science. The group published one of its first reports several months ago, which pointed out that Scotland needs a generation of young people who are scientifically literate when they emerge from school, but that such a generation is sadly lacking. By scientifically literate I mean able to engage as citizens of Scotland and the world and to ask the right questions about science and technology, such as the questions that appear in the banner headlines of the popular press about genetically modified foods, stem cell research and all the big, moral issues that have a scientific basis and demand an understanding of science and risk. To some extent, that has not been recognised in the school curriculum and the discrete sciences.

The way in which we teach science is clearly not very effective, given that only 10 or 11 per cent of youngsters want to study the discrete sciences at university. University chemistry departments are closing down throughout the United Kingdom at a time when we are trying to build a knowledge economy and add value. If the system is failing to some extent, we must ask why that is. I suggest that it is a matter of motivation and engagement with science. Simply to make the discrete sciences compulsory after secondary 2 would not take us much further forward. However, science is extremely popular in primary schools, where youngsters demonstrate great curiosity and interest in science, although paradoxically they are not in the main taught by science specialists. Where do we go wrong? The situation is complex but it has something to do with the cramming in of content and knowledge that must then be duly regurgitated for the purpose of examinations.

Dr Murray: As you say, that has been driven by decades in which success in education has been measured in terms of the numbers of people who get grade A at higher. It is ingrained in our understanding of education that the more highers someone gets and the higher the qualifications they achieve, the cleverer they are, which is not necessarily the case—they might just have a better memory. How do we change that fundamental misconception in society so that it is understood that teachers need to be given space to provide a good education, which might mean that people gain fewer qualifications better—if I may paraphrase what someone else said?

Mike Baughan: If we accept to a large extent the premise that in the eyes of pupils, parents and teachers that which is examined equates with that which is important, we must look at the examinations. The three-to-18 curriculum review group, of which I am the vice-chair—Keir Bloomer is a member of the group, as is Judith Gillespie, who is here today—will offer advice to the Executive on the purposes and principles that underpin the curriculum. There is an expectation

that the examinations system—that which we aim to certificate—should reflect those purposes and principles.

Therefore, without prejudging what the group has to say, if the purposes and principles refer to a need for curiosity, inquiring minds, the ability to learn and the ability to engage in further learning, questions will be asked about how we undertake examinations. It might well be that some of those skills are not amenable to the pencil and paper exam; they might have to be demonstrated in a range of other contexts.

That takes us all the way back, in a circular way, to curriculum flexibility and the opportunities that we want to offer youngsters to develop those types of skills, which will not just be developed in the classroom. They can be developed in part in the classroom, but they will be developed in the social setting that is a school. If we do not accept that premise, we have to ask what the school of the future should look like. Is it a television set or a computer terminal in somebody's bedroom? The purpose of schooling is to bring people together to engage with one another, to socialise them and to give them the joys and difficulties of learning together.

Dr Murray: Do you suggest that subject areas should be broader, so that people study not physics, chemistry and biology but a more general scientific course, that will allow them to learn more generic skills and to specialise within their areas of interest?

Keir Bloomer: I will address that and some of your original points. In my introduction I said that the notion of a curriculum that is wholly subject-organised is a mistake. We require to have a basis of subject organisation, but also the opportunity for other activities that are not organised in that way, some of which are concerned with the examination in depth of multidisciplinary issues. That is one of the key ways in which we can address your point.

On your original question about transferable skills and taking a more integrated approach, we require to engage young people in discussions on what they are doing and why—the phenomenon that is usually described as metacognition. If they do not know the purpose of the exercise, they will not be active partners in trying to realise it. The notion of being active partners is critical, because real knowledge and understanding is co-produced; it does not exist in the mind of the teacher and is then transferred ready-made to the mind of the learner. The real learning process takes place in the learner, if properly stimulated. They therefore have to actively co-operate in what you wish them to do.

Finally, on examinations and standards, the examination is a proxy for what you hope has been achieved. That works all right if it is a good proxy. If you begin to think that it is not a good proxy, you have considerable problems. I was interested in a recent leader by Thomas Friedman in *The New York Times* about why the next best thing will always come out of America, which I am sure went down well in New York. Rather to my surprise, one of the factors that he considered to be critical was the nature of the American education system. If you look at most of the comparisons of standards in school education that have been conducted—many of them in the past 15 years or so—throughout the world, you can see that the US education system always fares badly, yet it is almost inconceivable that the continuing vitality and success of American society and the American economy, generation after generation, owes nothing whatever to the American schooling system. One is therefore driven to conclude that there is a wrong proxy in there somewhere, and that the qualities that Friedman ascribed to the American schooling system of promoting free thinking and of laying greater emphasis on questioning than on conformity—which I am sure is true of the best of it, but I question whether is true of all of it; nevertheless, it has some validity—unquestionably are underpinning elements in the success of the United States. However, those are not elements that are properly measured by their education system, by ours or by anybody else's, therefore the proxy that emerges is an unsatisfactory one.

10:45

Ms Wendy Alexander (Paisley North) (Lab): Keir Bloomer has been as provocative as ever.

The brief that we have is to talk about the curriculum. Your opening remarks were about what the character of the classroom experience in early secondary years should be. You talked about skills and capabilities and how, if we are going to do assessments, we must assess what is important, not what is easy. You mentioned lifelong learning and the basis for motivation for future learning, and how subject learning should not be everything and that we should aim for personalised learning. That is fascinating stuff—if that is how we define the curriculum review.

I want to ask you a tough question, but I think that it is important. We are doing this because, a year past in October, the Executive set up a curriculum review. It is the classic group, made up of 16 people and it is trying to consider everything between the ages of three and 18, so it is not just considering whether we have got it right for pre-fives or primary, and it is not just focusing on the early secondary years; it is looking at the whole lot. That group is about to publish its conclusions. Has it risen to the challenge that you set of seeing

the curriculum as the character of the classroom experience? Alternatively, has the exercise been one that typifies what the Scottish Parliament information centre has given us, which is an obsession with the balance between subjects, and which has paragraphs about flexibility that say that although there is flexibility in the curriculum, it has not delivered? Which of those two models will the curriculum review group report be about when it comes out in August?

Keir Bloomer: That is a bit difficult.

Ms Alexander: I am aware of that, and I have a follow-up question, but this question goes to the heart of whether we are playing at this or whether we are serious. Will you put together the very best people in Scotland? Are they willing to talk about our failure to make progress away from conceiving of the curriculum as balanced between subjects, when the question is whether subject learning is the only way to think about the character of the classroom experience?

Keir Bloomer: All that we have been talking about this morning has been discussed quite extensively by the curriculum review group. It has been an exciting experience from that point of view; the right issues have been discussed. We are not finished yet and whether the right conclusions will be reached is, to some extent, still open to question.

At the moment, it looks to me as though the nature of the group's report is going to be different from any of its predecessors. We are familiar with a series of major curriculum papers that have been published over the years. I will give a couple of examples. There is the revised secondary curriculum guidelines for which Mike Baughan was largely responsible. There is also the Munn report, which is still influential in the curriculum. Both those documents laid out a philosophy, but also felt constrained to produce a model. A good number of pages of interesting discussion and worthwhile thought is crystallised out in a blueprint. There was a page in the Munn report that set out what the timetable looked like. Every teacher's copy of the report fell open at that page; in fact, they could have torn the page out, stuck it on the wall and thrown the rest of the report away. That is the problem with a traditional model. We start a discussion that appears to open things up and then produce a blueprint that closes the discussion down again.

What I hope is going to emerge from the current discussion is something that sets a sense of direction, but does not attempt to describe the destination in detail. Hopefully, it will produce some ideas about how we start on the journey and suggest a number of things that we could do now that will take us forward, but will not lay down an elaborate and detailed design. That would be dangerous because of the risk that people in the Parliament or the media would pick up the document and say, "Is that it? Is that the best you could do? Where is the bit that tells me what will happen next Monday morning?" I can put the question back to you: will an approach that is open-minded in that way get the reception that it needs if it is to be successful?

Ms Alexander: I have one follow-up question. For a brief spell in 1989, I was a research officer for the Labour party. At that point, I serviced a committee on education policy that was chaired by Rhona Brankin, who is not here today. We said that we wanted a personalised learning plan that would allow children to choose one of the five priority areas. All the parties have argued that we should not be too driven by accreditation. We have blindingly obvious evidence on the flexibility of the curriculum, but nobody has used the powers that they have on that. Your intention is to produce a document that sets a direction, but how do we have an honest debate about the impediments to change? I do not mean to belittle, but the members of the curriculum review group will not regard that direction as particularly new because it reflects what they might have thought five or 10 years ago. The important question for the governance of Scottish education that you—and the Parliament—must consider is why progress has been so slow. To advance the debate, we must understand the impediments to progress rather than simply lay the direction.

Keir Bloomer: We have always tended to put accountability before creativity, which has constrained the quality of debate and restricted the profession's enthusiasm for change. Teachers do not believe that the ideal future would be exactly the same as the present, but over the years, the models that we have adopted have changed and the models of compliance that we have used as follow-through have not engaged the profession's enthusiasm. Direction that comes from the top is often regarded with suspicion. The issue is another aspect of the co-production of progress: how do we engage teachers, young people and parents in changing the education system?

Learning and Teaching Scotland has been considering whether we can create a culture of innovation within the Scottish education community. At the most recent meeting of our advisory council, the idea was given a fair wind. In effect, we are considering whether we can build the sort of networks in Scottish education that are at the centre of progress in many other areas. Those networks would allow the joint production of good practice so that we can make progress. That seems to me to be the logical accompaniment to a policy paper that emphasises direction rather than destination.

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: What role do education authorities have at present in prescribing the degree of flexibility that individual schools can offer and what should that role be? You have given us a clear outline of your thinking on what is a large subject, but my question relates to the delivery of what you want to happen.

Mike Baughan: I will respond by making a bridge to Ms Alexander's point about the disappointment that flexibility is not being exploited to any great extent. I will then look to the role of the education authorities and the professionals in schools.

Flexibility has not been exploited to any great extent because an expectation was placed on schools to conform to a particular model. That model was based on a modal arrangement of the curriculum that prescribed the number of hours to be studied by each youngster at various stages of the curriculum. As Keir Bloomer mentioned, one of my tasks when I was seconded from my school was to draft the current secondary guidelines.

We produced for the first time a rationale for the secondary curriculum and most of the document was focused on the rationale—the concept of schools as learning communities. The little hooks and pegs for the relaxation of the age-and-stage model were inserted in that document, as was the concept of flexibility, but it was heartbreaking to see that when the document was received in schools, school curriculum managers used the appendices as a checklist to ensure that youngsters were receiving so many hours of this and of that. To some extent, that was driven by the inspection model that operated at the time.

We will not move overnight from that culture to a culture in which flexibility is not just encouraged, but is seen to be liberating, and in which teachers' professionalism is acknowledged. However, the important point is that extremely promising developments have taken place up and down the country. Many of those have been led by education authorities that are considering how the permissions that are outlined in circular 3/2001 can be applied at school level. A wealth of evidence, which can be accessed through the curriculum flexibility section of Learning and Teaching Scotland's website, shows how individual schools are using those opportunities.

I will give a couple of examples in response to your question. In Dumfries and Galloway, Kirkcudbright Academy plans a five-year programme of change to recognise diversity and promote flexibility. It will organise its S1 classes around interest groups. It is taking advantage of age-and-stage relaxation for second year pupils, who can begin a two-year standard grade or a national certificate course. The school is combining the timetables of S4 to S6, which takes us away from the age-and-stage cohort marching in step in a never-ending way to a more eclectic mix that is based on interest and is also extremely cost-effective to offer. The school is also developing links with business and further education.

South Ayrshire Council is working with the Prince's Trust and using curriculum flexibility to replace a standard grade course in seven schools with a project that is delivered by community education and teaching staff and focuses on the community, the development of citizenship, a work-related project, a residential experience, enterprise experience and the development of team and interpersonal skills. Links are being made with local colleges that begin with third-year taster courses in hospitality or tourism, and pre-apprenticeship courses start in fourth year.

Up and down Scotland, authorities are developing their own curriculum policies by using the freedoms that the circular has afforded them. However, it is important to note that the freedoms are accompanied by a set of responsibilities. Scottish education is naturally very cautious about what it does with its youngsters. A fear may have inhibited innovation or experimentation—even I choke on that word—because it has connotations of taking a risk with youngsters' futures.

Flexibility is not a free-for-all. Schools will be inspected against a set of criteria, the first criterion of which is whether the flexibility that is being deployed has been well thought through and whether pupils, parents, teachers and the broader community have been consulted. The second criterion is whether a school has clear evidence that the innovations that are being suggested are likely to result in a better deal for the youngsters who are involved, through educational gain, motivation, better attendance or a better disposition to learning. The third criterion is whether a school has an implementation plan or just a good idea for what the school should do next year that is sketched on the back of an envelope and has not been costed, and whose impact on resources has not been examined. The final criterion is whether a school has a method of evaluating the success or otherwise of the innovation that is being put in place.

We are making progress, Lord James. It is exciting to see schools taking the opportunity to exercise flexibility and to see authorities offering broad parameters within which schools can work. That is being done in a measured way, rather than in any uncontrolled sense. I guess that the secret is to get a balance. We do not look back and say that everything is rosy, which would be an excuse for doing nothing. At the same time, we do not just let rip and go back to the 1970s, when there was

no curriculum guidance at all for youngsters who were not going to be presented for certification.

11:00

It is a matter of getting the right balance, and the three-to-18 curriculum review will assist that process, Ms Alexander, first of all by giving that permission; by setting out the principles and purposes that should underpin the curriculum and by doing what we were trying to do years ago when we wrote rationales for guidelines for schools—which were by and large ignored and only the appendices looked at. This review group is not going to start off at the point of those appendices and recommend, for example, that schools have so many hours of history teaching. That is not going to feature at all.

To address the question directly, the test is going to come in the next phase. Following the publication of the three-to-18 curriculum report, further work will need to be done to answer questions such as, for example, what effect there will be on science teaching in Scotland. We will test out the principles behind the curriculum against what is done now for three to 18-year-olds and see how they square up. I suspect that some of what we are doing now does not square up to those principles. The principles can serve as touchstones or as permissions—as licence without irresponsibility.

If I may pursue a matter of self-indulgence, I came in at the advent of the comprehensive principle, along with a generation of young probationary teachers, many of whom, like me, went from industry into education. We were excited by the prospect of the comprehensive principle. I am now equally excited, as I leave the business of education and go into retirement, because I believe that education is genuinely on the cusp of making some quite radical—but not irresponsible—changes, which will address some of the big social and economic issues affecting our country.

Richard Baker (North East Scotland) (Lab): I am substituting for Rhona Brankin today, so I am fresh to this inquiry, although I have found the evidence engaging. It leads me to ask why schools are not using the scope that they already have for flexibility in the curriculum. I think that you largely answered that question in your last remarks, however. Instead, I will ask whether you think that there are any areas of resistance to curriculum flexibility that will be particularly challenging to overcome.

Keir Bloomer: The risk is that curriculum flexibility is seen purely in terms of flexibility within the constraints of the existing system. What we really require is the capacity to think beyond that. A good example is one that we spoke about earlier: does flexibility only confer the right to put children through exams earlier? That would be a fairly sterile use of the flexibility circular. The question is whether the circular can be used in order to introduce more significant vocational elements into the curriculum, or to develop the fairly transformational, multidisciplinary studies that I was touching on earlier.

Will a different concept of the school begin to emerge? The school has always seen itself as a sole provider. Someone attends a particular school and they get the menu that is on offer there. However, a notion is emerging of the school as a broker of learning experiences that are provided by others, as well as by it, which is quite a revolutionary concept. Can we use the flexibility circular to undertake more personalised approaches?

I would anticipate that, among the possible areas of resistance to change will be the kind of vested interests that will be encountered if the range of things that I have described is pursued. That includes traditional subject specialisms, which might see their particular places in the sun being diminished. If we are to overcome that kind of resistance, it is necessary to engage the enthusiasm of the profession. That brings us back to how we create within education the kind of networks and communities that will take us forward.

The Convener: I should have formally welcomed Richard Baker who is substituting for Rhona Brankin.

Fiona Hyslop: This has been a stimulating session. I can reassure you that the committee wants to consider curriculum flexibility precisely because we want to take a long-term, strategic view of things. We were concerned that the Executive's review might be short term, but what you have said implies that that will not be the case, so we are on parallel tracks.

I am taken by what we mean by curriculum flexibility. You emphasised that the challenge in curriculum flexibility has as much to do with teaching as with the content of learning. Given that one generation of teachers—of which you are obviously a part—is about to retire, how do we ensure that we create a culture change that allows the new teachers who are coming through, and those who are already in position, the time, space and confidence to be flexible? How do we manage that within a timeframe that requires the current cohort of pupils to have the basic skills that employers need?

I was taken by your point about science. In the Lothians, we have great potential for biotech development. However, the biggest barrier is that

people do not understand the challenges, so we could miss out on those huge opportunities. Whether we will at some point have the powers to legislate for that is also an issue, but people's understanding is one of the biggest barriers.

It sounds like we need a change in management culture, rather than in content. You said that the modernity of the subject—whether it is Latin or a different subject—does not matter because the important thing is how it is taught. How do we create that space when we have so many other impediments? It must be recognised that the qualifications framework is one of those impediments. Perhaps the issue is more about how the system of governance tackles that. Wendy Alexander asked why nothing has happened, but governance is about removing the barriers that are in place so that the professionals can lead on the content.

How do we create that space within the necessary timeframe so that we do not end up creating new systems of thinking and new suggested ways of doing things that have already missed the boat because the future skills that employers need have already passed us by? We need to plan now for 10, 15 or 20 years ahead rather than for tomorrow or the next day.

Is the Executive's review group considering those issues? Whether or not such issues have been considered, how do we create the space and time for that teaching flexibility rather than just learning flexibility?

Mike Baughan: I do not want to give the impression that advantage is not being taken of the opportunities for flexibility within the curriculum. The committee can find encouraging case studies and examples on our website that show how schools have exercised their professionalism and have taken full advantage of the permission to be flexible in their provision.

No teacher in Scotland wants to stand in front of a class of recalcitrant adolescents who are, or who are seen to be, unmotivated. No one believes that teachers want to do that this year, next year and the year after. That is a thoroughly miserable experience that drives people either to retire early or to leave teaching. On the contrary, most people come into teaching because they are highly motivated. They believe that developing young minds and engaging and interacting with young people is a worthwhile and enjoyable business.

One of the primary constraints is that there has been an undue focus on the need to achieve high standards in examinations. I choose my words carefully, because I by no means want to preach an anti-high standards agenda. I am suggesting simply that we are not necessarily examining that which is considered important, and that that is a constraint. A cluster of circumstances that encourage change have come together. The Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000, which was one of the first pieces of legislation passed by the Scottish Parliament, placed an obligation on education authorities to provide a curriculum that is appropriate for all young people. That took us away from the one-size-fits-all approach. It is no longer acceptable for a school simply to brandish a set of curriculum guidelines, to wave them in the face of a parent or a visitor from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and to say, "We are following national guidance". There is a blunt statement in the publication that we put out with HMIE in September last year and, to give the committee encouragement, I quote two sentences from it:

> "Circular 3/2001 and the move to using curriculum flexibility to meet pupils' needs more effectively also imply that schools should not sit back and passively accept the existing guidelines."

The paragraph concludes:

> "Passive, unquestioning acceptance of existing guidelines will not find favour in inspection."

There is a driver in the situation. At the same time, the changes apply both to new teachers who enter the profession and to those who are already in it. I know that no one on the committee would suggest that a teacher is not motivated to change just because they are in their 50s or 60s.

The matter is all about attitudes and individuals. To date, the press has characterised the McCrone settlement as something to do with pay and conditions of service. Importantly, it produced recognition and stability in the profession, but when people look back from the perspective of a decade ahead, they will judge the McCrone settlement in terms of the expectations that it places on teachers to engage in professional development and reflection on practice throughout their careers. It puts the teaching profession on a par with medicine and other professions. I would certainly not want to go along to see a general practitioner who had not engaged in professional development for the past 30 years or who had not had the opportunity to do so. Similarly, I do not want my grandchildren to be educated by teachers who have not had the opportunity to engage with the latest research on education, to consider what works and what does not, and to examine ways in which they can improve their practice. With the licence and the obligation to engage in the process of change for the good of the youngsters that is encouraged and expected by the McCrone settlement, we put another building block in place in schools.

Let us bring it all together: the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000; the focus on national priorities; high standards of attainment,

but also high standards of achievement across a much broader range of skills; an expectation of professional development; buildings that are now fit for purpose; the information and communications technology that is becoming embedded in good pedagogy; our increasing knowledge of how youngsters learn. Let us start to bring all those factors together. If we fail to improve the education system in the years ahead, that will be a sad indictment of what we are trying to do in Scotland, but I have no expectation of failure. I am not complacent, but I am hugely confident that the chemistry is right.

11:15

Keir Bloomer: I will make a couple of quick follow-up points. McCrone creates an opportunity but it does not do the job on its own. Unless McCrone is followed by sustained attempts to break down the atmosphere of distrust that has developed during the past two or three decades, it will not succeed. We must emerge from a climate of judgment and blame; a lot of the devices that have been set up under the banner of accountability have created such a climate.

There is an interesting contrast between the Scottish and English experiences of early learning. The Scottish Executive's version is tremendously impressive. It was empowering, there were very few rules, resource was available and 32 different schemes were produced. That gives us the capacity not only to make progress in the short term, but to do so in the medium to long term. We have a potential learning system and we can benefit from the diversity of experience. Some schemes may not be very good, but enough of them are to create the opportunity that I have described.

The English scheme, involving a literacy hour and a numeracy hour, was extremely centralist. It is extremely significant that under the scheme there was quite rapid progress, which quickly plateaued. That suggests to me that a programme of innovation based on the concept of flogging the horses harder has decided limitations. It is possible to kick-start progress in that way, but such progress will not be sustained for terribly long. The issue is how we manage to get a collaborative approach, which depends on the cultivation of trust.

We are talking about an issue that is the touchstone of whether current governance arrangements work. We have arrangements for the governance of Scottish education that, ultimately, are socially accountable. There is wide support for that. If we cannot reconcile social accountability with having arrangements that are also innovative and forward looking, the whole notion of how we govern education at the moment will be placed under severe strain.

The Convener: I want to follow up on some comments that were made earlier. The point that there should be entitlement rather than compulsion was interesting and echoed to a degree the philosophy of voluntary sector organisations. A point was also made about schools as brokers of educational services. In the concept of the school or the education process, is enough account being taken of the informal sector—after-school groups, breakfast clubs, youth groups and youth organisations such as scouts and guides? Lots of those organisations meet through more informal arrangements many of the objectives that you are trying to set centrally for the education system. Often there do not seem to be linkages between the school and other things that happen in the wider local education community.

Keir Bloomer: There is a close link between the points that you are making and the issue of personalising the education system, on which we touched a while ago. I do not know whether Judith Gillespie will give evidence to the committee, but if she does I am sure that she will talk to you about where the limits of the education system, as opposed to the rightful sphere of operation of the family, lie. It would be a mistake to see us as invading territory that is not necessarily part of the public realm. However, if we are examining the all-round developmental needs of individual children, the school as broker can suggest that a range of other opportunities are available, through the kind of organisations to which you referred, and that children would benefit from those. That is the appropriate approach.

Dr Murray: You are both part of the group that is reviewing the curriculum for three to 18-year-olds. From what you have said, it is clear that you are prepared to consider what you call radical but responsible change in assessment and the way in which we examine achievement in a broader range of skills. That would have implications for the higher education sector, in particular. People are admitted to higher education on the basis of whether they have achieved two Bs and a C, and a B in subject X. The system that you are proposing might be very different. How much discussion has there been with the higher education sector? If we want to have lifelong learning, we should look holistically across the experience of learning and make the right sort of discussions happen with the people who are responsible for it.

Discretionary fees are being introduced south of the border. If that happens here, we will have a hierarchical system of higher education based on what people pay, admission to which will be based

on how well they do in particular subjects. I am slightly concerned that, if a much more radical approach is taken in school education, there could be a clear-cut discontinuity between the way in which education is seen in the school setting and the way in which it is seen in the university setting. Are you aware of any attempt to engage the people who are involved in higher education in that type of radical change in the assessment of educational achievement?

Keir Bloomer: To answer your specific question, my view is that there is insufficient discussion. I personally regret the institutional division in the Executive between school education and further and higher education, as that division impedes dialogue. However, there are some encouraging signs. Two of the most significant responses to the national debate were from Universities Scotland and the Confederation of British Industry; their views were similar to each other's and they expressed many of the ideas that we have been discussing this morning. They were considering education as a creative and forward-looking process and they said that they were interested not in the inert transmission of facts but in the cultivation of critical inquiry and in a range of basic and higher-order skills.

The question that always comes into one's mind, though, is, "Do they mean it, and even if they do mean it, do they speak on behalf of the people whom they purport to represent?" I am not too sure about that, which is why I think that your initial point, about whether there is enough dialogue, is important. Simply getting encouraging noises periodically in response to the debate is one thing, but being confident that we are all on the same wavelength in the long term is quite another. I have to say that I do not think that there is sufficient discussion.

Mr Macintosh: I would like to pick up on some comments that were made earlier and on the point about entitlement and compulsion that the convener mentioned to Mr Baughan. Everyone has remarked on the stimulating and aspirational comments that you made about education. We all welcome those comments—that is why we asked you here today. I do not want to be seen as pouring cold water on things, but I would like to take a more pragmatic approach. People have different expectations of education; some may have a more practical expectation, if I may put it that way, of what the school system produces.

Mr Baughan, you gave the example that the number of pupils taking GCSE in religious education has been increasing south of the border while the number taking science has been declining. I have to say that that seems to illustrate the fear that the hard, difficult and challenging subjects will be rejected in favour of the so-called softer options. If we have an expectation that our school system will produce scientists and we introduce flexibility that involves choice, people could quite easily just opt out of science altogether. It is all very well saying that you are freeing up teachers to be inspirational and motivational, but that does not happen overnight. If people reject science and choose those soft options, how do we deal with that practically and day to day?

Mike Baughan: That is a dilemma that becomes apparent as soon as we start looking at some of the existing principles underpinning the curriculum. Balance and breadth are two of the five principles set out in current guidelines. Let us suppose that we were to add principles of choice and depth to the existing principles. There would then be a natural tension. How would we achieve the result that we would define as a well-educated young man or woman exiting the Scottish education system at the age of 16, 17 or 18, ready to enter further or higher education or to engage in lifelong learning? If that youngster had no understanding at all of scientific methodology, or no ability to read a popular newspaper and form a judgment on the leader in that newspaper, one would probably come to the conclusion that he or she was not a well-educated person.

The concept of a core curriculum therefore begins to emerge. What does society in general—parents, young people, schools, universities and the so-called end users—regard as the set of essential knowledge, understanding and skills that we expect youngsters, whatever their ability, to have when they exit the system? To take a ludicrous example, I do not envisage that parents would accept that the study of English, language or communication—whatever we want to label it—or mathematics, arithmetic or numeracy should stop at the age of 11 and that we should exercise choice and dispense with balance to such an extent that we say, "That youngster is not motivated by maths classes, so he may abandon all study of the subject." That would not be socially acceptable and it would not meet the criteria against which a school's use of flexibility would be assessed, which are outlined in the document "Flexibility in the Secondary School Curriculum: emerging practice". Parents and youngsters would not buy it and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education would certainly not buy it when it inspected the school. There are safeguards, so there would be no Gadarene rush from science education post-S2, for example.

However, what we are currently doing is not working. If I was considering the matter from the perspective of a Scottish university that had one of the few chemistry departments that is likely to survive in the UK, I would say, "Crikey! I won't be too critical of change in the curriculum if it means

that youngsters will be more likely to want to study chemistry at university." A classicist in a university would not expect a student to leave school with a higher grade pass in Latin before studying the subject at university.

Why must we get involved in this silliness of believing that progression must be linear and begin pre-school and continue right through to university? Why do not universities teach youngsters subjects from scratch? For goodness' sake, a pupil who wants to study medicine but does not have a pass in higher chemistry can never take up the course because they do not have the requisite qualifications. That seems ludicrous. Why should not universities say, "We are equipped to offer a well-motivated person who has the intellectual capacity to learn the opportunity to learn a subject from scratch"? We should get away from the mindset in which everything that a youngster is expected to know before they begin a university course must be crammed in at school. I studied philosophy at university, but I certainly did not study the subject at school and nobody raised an eyebrow at that. I could quote umpteen such examples.

I am not relaxed and complacent about flexibility, which is why I suggest that there should be a commonly accepted core curriculum. That might include, for example, a knowledge of Scotland and its place in a global context. Would we want a youngster to leave school with no knowledge of Scottish history? How acceptable is that to the community and to the nation? The core curriculum begins to define itself through a large measure of sheer common sense that is associated with utility.

Mr Macintosh: Your comments about the linear model of education pre-empt a question that I was going to ask about exams. The power of further and higher education to impose the exam agenda on schools has distorted education to a huge extent. The idea that a student should not have had to study chemistry before taking up the subject at university is fantastic, but would universities accept it? There might be a danger that people who lose the habit of learning a subject lose interest in that subject.

My next point concerns parents' and pupils' expectations, rather than society's expectations about producing scientists for the sake of our economy or whatever. The current discussion about curriculum flexibility seems to be driven by educationists—and by politicians, who share that interest—and perhaps, as you say, we are on the cusp of a change in our approach to learning. However, parents tend to have expectations that are based on their own experience of school, which by definition is out of date. They tend to have a conservative, exam and qualification-focused approach to school that is based on a certain type of learning. In the drive to change the curriculum, how do we take parents and pupils with us, if they are not pushing for it and do not support it? Perhaps your view is that they are supporting it and perhaps there is willingness, but I am concerned that there will be huge resistance to such a revolution. Perhaps we need to do some work on that.

11:30

The Convener: I do not want to open up our lines of inquiry too much. That was a wide-ranging question.

Keir Bloomer: Do we have another hour or so? It is possible to estimate wrongly the expectations and desires of parents and young people. It was clear from the young people who gave evidence to your predecessor committee's inquiry two years ago that young people have a strongly utilitarian view of education in some respects, but that is not the totality of their expectation. Almost 15 years back—I am not seeking to make a party-political point—the then Government believed that it would get a strong vote of parental approval for testing in primary schools, but it did not. The parental view was that education is about more than testing; parents wanted their children to enjoy being at school and to be motivated to go on, which a regimented testing approach would not allow.

I suspect that there are strands within the thinking of almost every individual that relate to the kind of issues that we have been discussing. I do not think that the debate is entirely for educationists or parliamentarians. It is a humane debate; it is about what kind of people we are trying to produce for what kind of society. In essence, education is one of the key ways in which we can influence the future. In the light of that, I do not think that there would be the level of parental or public concern that you might anticipate. However, I agree that a significant presentational task is involved; I do not deny that for a second.

Your penultimate point was about the expectations of universities and their control over, or at least strong influence on, examinations. I think that that influence is right, but I sometimes think that those of us who are involved in the school system are much too timid. On whose judgment will universities rely apart from the school system's? The choice is either ours or theirs. They can pursue the method of conducting their own entrance examinations and so forth if they wish, which in many ways I would welcome. However, we ought not to accept as diktats our perceptions of what they might think, particularly if, to go back to Elaine Murray's point, our dialogue with them is not strong enough for us to be terribly

confident about what they think in the first place. An aspect of that timidity is that we cling to instruments of assessment that have passed their sell-by date. Who uses 16-year-old certification nowadays? The answer is almost nobody, yet we maintain an enormous and expensive panoply of standard grade examination, as far as I can see for no purpose, because we are afraid of what the reaction would be if we appeared to be withdrawing from it.

Lastly, I reiterate something that I said at the beginning—it is important to keep on saying it because the perception could be extremely different. We are engaged in an intellectual upscaling of the curriculum, not a dumbing down of the curriculum. We do that through the use of increasing measures of choice as the young person progresses and the retention of some sort of framework that gives direction to that progression—we are not talking about unfettered freedom.

If you have not read it, I recommend that you read the first 20 or so pages of the best report on Scottish education that has ever been published: the 1947 report by the Scottish Advisory Council on the subject of secondary education. Its key message—written in prose that is infinitely superior to that which we manage today—is the notion of ordered freedom. It said, among other things, that one does not produce democratic citizens in schools that are not themselves democratic. That is an interesting idea. It also said that, as the young people—or "boys and girls", as it quaintly refers to them—grow up, they should do so in an atmosphere in which freedom increases and the constraint of the ordered framework reduces. That is the way in which we try to ensure that we do not duck the hard choices. We keep people involved in that but, at the same time, we are promoting people who are self-starters, critical thinkers and active citizens.

The Convener: On that forward-looking note from 1947, it might be appropriate to draw this discussion to an end. This is one of those areas in which we could go on for ever. A lot of interesting points have been made today and we are grateful for the participation of our witnesses. I wish Mike Baughan the best in his retirement.

11:37

Meeting suspended.

11:45

On resuming—

School Closures

The Convener: This agenda item is headed school closures, but the issue at hand is more specifically to do with rural school closures. The clerk has prepared a paper for us and we must decide whether we want to do anything further in relation to the issue, having heard the minister and had some argument about what is to happen. Does the committee want to ask that anything further be done on the rural schools issue?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The minister said that he would produce guidance in due course. It might be useful for the convener to request of the minister a draft copy of the guidance before it is issued so that the committee can comment. I am not certain that he will agree to that, but he might.

The Convener: The minister is usually quite amenable to that sort of request. We can certainly ask.

Dr Murray: Rhona Brankin—who is unable to be here today because she has a hospital appointment—was quite keen that there be further consultation. Obviously, she has a strong constituency interest in the matter; she asked specifically for evidence to be taken from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, Audit Scotland and either Ross Finnie or Allan Wilson on how they view education in the context of sustainable development, rural communities and so on. Her view was that we should take oral evidence. How do other committee members feel about that?

Fiona Hyslop: The issue was first raised four years ago and the only reason why the Scottish Executive has made progress after such a long time is that constituency issues have arisen in Midlothian, the Borders and so on. We have a responsibility to get an end result.

I was comforted by some of what the minister said about his intentions but, unlike Lord James, I do not think that the minister said that he was going to produce guidance; I think he said that he would communicate with local authorities. Indeed, paragraph 4 of the paper that the clerks have prepared says that the minister

"would revert to the Committee at a later date to indicate the status of the material that would be issued."

We should take a view as to what we think that status should be and we should reflect the view of our predecessor committee that the material should have the status of guidance.

Because there are current constituency issues in Midlothian and the Borders, we have a responsibility to ensure that we inform that situation and let the Scottish Executive know that we are interested in issues such as those which Rhona Brankin raised previously, such as sustainability and other cross-cutting policy issues. It would be useful to take up Elaine Murray's suggestion, although I accept that there might be issues of time.

Whether we do it now or after the submission of further evidence, we should take a view on the status of the material and ask to see a copy of it in its draft form.

The Convener: From what has been said so far, it seems that we agree that we should ask the minister to clarify the status of the material and to let us see it before it is published. Does the committee agree that we should do that?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Ms Alexander: We should take further evidence in September.

Mr Macintosh: I am sympathetic to Rhona Brankin's constituency interest and to the points that Fiona Hyslop has made about the need for action. The Executive is also clearly aware of the need for action, although the wording that is highlighted in the clerks' paper is vague. I am relaxed about that, because the minister clearly intends to take action. We are almost half way through June already and the material is coming out in September, so we can wait until after it has been produced and take a view.

Rather than pre-empt what the minister is going to do, which we do not have enough time to do anyway, perhaps the convener should write as he has suggested and ask what form the guidance will take. We can then at least consider that correspondence when we reconvene after the summer recess. We should wait until the minister has produced the material, then decide whether we wish to take further evidence. It may be that we take up Rhona Brankin's suggestion of taking further oral evidence. I am not against that, but there is no point in doing it at the moment.

The Convener: I am sympathetic to that. I am not especially in favour of our taking further evidence, but there might be merit in writing to HMIE and Audit Scotland to ask them to give us a feel for some of the points that we want to take forward, which concern how decisions are made and to what extent they are financially driven. If members agree, we can put the matter back on our agenda in September when we receive a reply from the minister—perhaps it will come sooner—and information from HMIE and Audit Scotland, when we can resume consideration and decide whether we want to do anything further. In itself, the issue is fairly narrow, and we should not let our work programme be dominated by it, important though it is in certain areas. I say that as a member for Glasgow region, which covers only about 20 farms.

Fiona Hyslop: The matter will come back, because the communication is meant to happen in the summer. If we do not take the view that we want a code of guidance, but decide that we are happy to allow the information to have whatever status the minister wants, we will—in effect—be rolling back from the position that the previous Education, Culture and Sport Committee took in 2000. We should not be prepared to do that, but should maintain the previous committee's position, which was to ask for a code of practice from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities or a code of guidance from the minister.

The Convener: I will clarify whether that is what committee members want. I meant to imply in what I said about the letter that, if it is the committee's view that we should have guidance, there is no reason why we cannot say that to the minister. However, it may be that other committee members do not hold that view. I am conscious that what Brian Wilson said has been quoted as the be-all and end-all on the issue, but it was a by-blow in a speech and I suspect that it was not well-known to certain local authorities.

Fiona Hyslop: Exactly. That is why we need guidance.

Mr Macintosh: I do not have a strong view about whether we need guidance or a code of practice. What matters to me is what works. The way in which the Education Department conducts its business and in which the Executive influences local authorities is interesting; they do that by guidance and letter, occasionally in speeches and sometimes through budgetary controls. I am not hung up on whether we need a circular or guidance as long as what we have is effective.

Ms Alexander: I have two issues. First, we are trying to establish what the evidence shows us. The second issue is what the best form is for that to be communicated to local authorities.

To be frank, as the Executive has waited four years to issue guidance or material, it is better that it be right rather than quick. I am not interested in our taking more evidence after the Executive has issued its circular, when we will have zero impact on its content, and I do not think that we should rush the Executive into issuing the circular today or tomorrow. The appropriate thing for us to do is to write to the minister saying that we intend to seek written or oral evidence from two or three specific interested parties to try to form a policy view of what the evidence shows us. That would give the minister the choice of waiting until that

evidence is in the public domain through people making written submissions to us or giving us further oral evidence. He would have the choice of waiting to be the beneficiary of that evidence or of pressing ahead.

On the second issue, it is for the minister to decide on the form through which he communicates the information to directly elected local authorities. Our job as a legislature is to provide the best evidence base that we can on the issue, and I do not think that we have completely exhausted that point. We should not get sidetracked into trying to tell the Executive the precise form in which it should communicate, but we should simply say to the minister that there are one or two evidence issues that should be in the public domain, and that he might want to wait and issue his circular until after that. He might want to press ahead, if it is urgent.

The Convener: I do not accept totally the proposition that it is not our business how the minister communicates. How that is done is important, especially if there are doubts about whether the previous format has worked.

Two strands to our approach appear to be emerging. First, we should write to HMIE and Audit Scotland. We have already had input from the Environment and Rural Affairs Department and there was not much to be had from that direction, to be frank. Those letters could be written in consultation with Rhona Brankin in particular, but other members can say what they want from that process.

Secondly, I will write to the minister, as we have pretty much agreed I should, to inquire about the status of the material. The only remaining issue is whether the committee has a decided view on the format in which that guidance or material should be issued. There is a division of views on that. Do members want to press those views?

Lord James Douglas-Hamilton: The minister should be given the opportunity to reply. He may be perfectly happy to send us draft guidance—he was quite clear that he intended to issue guidance—and if he is content to do that, I do not see why we should not have the benefit of it.

The Convener: The most important point is to that we have input from, and the continued interest of, the minister. Perhaps we should raise with him the question of whether the stronger form of guidance would be appropriate. Rather than say that the committee thinks that it would, we could say that it is an issue that the minister should consider. Does that meet with consensus in the committee?

Dr Murray: The issue is not so much the form in which the guidance or material is issued, but that the content should be explicit, because that is where difficulties arise with awareness of ministerial desires and directions. We would want the minister's intention to be clearly expressed.

Mr Macintosh: I echo that. I am conscious that the Executive will not be the body that decides to close schools. The point about guidance is that it will establish a set of principles that local authorities should follow, but I am concerned that guidance might not be the best way to do that. If it is, that is absolutely fine.

Fiona Hyslop: From experience—

The Convener: I do not want to go round in circles on the matter, because we are coming to an element of consensus on it. We will circulate a draft letter to committee members for their agreement. If we raise the issue of guidance without our being as pronounced about it as one or two committee members want, that will put it on the agenda, but everybody agrees that the content is the important thing. Is that fair?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that. We now move into private session for our last item, which is consideration of the draft stage 1 report on the School Education (Ministerial Powers and Independent Schools) (Scotland) Bill.

11:57

Meeting continued in private until 12:45.

Members who would like a printed copy of the *Official Report* to be forwarded to them should give notice at the Document Supply Centre.

No proofs of the *Official Report* can be supplied. Members who want to suggest corrections for the archive edition should mark them clearly in the daily edition, and send it to the Official Report, 375 High Street, Edinburgh EH99 1SP. Suggested corrections in any other form cannot be accepted.

The deadline for corrections to this edition is:

Friday 18 June 2004

Members who want reprints of their speeches (within one month of the date of publication) may obtain request forms and further details from the Central Distribution Office, the Document Supply Centre or the Official Report.

PRICES AND SUBSCRIPTION RATES

DAILY EDITIONS

Single copies: £5
Meetings of the Parliament annual subscriptions: £350.00

The archive edition of the *Official Report* of meetings of the Parliament, written answers and public meetings of committees will be published on CD-ROM.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT, compiled by the Scottish Parliament Information Centre, contains details of past and forthcoming business and of the work of committees and gives general information on legislation and other parliamentary activity.

Single copies: £3.75
Special issue price: £5
Annual subscriptions: £150.00

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS weekly compilation

Single copies: £3.75
Annual subscriptions: £150.00

Standing orders will be accepted at the Document Supply Centre.

Published in Edinburgh by The Stationery Office Limited and available from:

The Stationery Office Bookshop
71 Lothian Road
Edinburgh EH3 9AZ
0870 606 5566 Fax 0870 606 5588

The Stationery Office Bookshops at:
123 Kingsway, London WC2B 6PQ
Tel 020 7242 6393 Fax 020 7242 6394
68-69 Bull Street, Birmingham B4 6AD
Tel 0121 236 9696 Fax 0121 236 9699
33 Wine Street, Bristol BS1 2BQ
Tel 01179 264306 Fax 01179 294515
9-21 Princess Street, Manchester M60 8AS
Tel 0161 834 7201 Fax 0161 833 0634
16 Arthur Street, Belfast BT1 4GD
Tel 028 9023 8451 Fax 028 9023 5401
The Stationery Office Oriel Bookshop,
18-19 High Street, Cardiff CF12BZ
Tel 029 2039 5548 Fax 029 2038 4347

The Stationery Office Scottish Parliament Documentation Helpline may be able to assist with additional information on publications of or about the Scottish Parliament, their availability and cost:

Telephone orders and inquiries
0870 606 5566

Fax orders
0870 606 5588

The Scottish Parliament Shop
George IV Bridge
EH99 1SP
Telephone orders 0131 348 5412

RNID Typetalk calls welcome on
18001 0131 348 5412
Textphone 0845 270 0152

sp.info@scottish.parliament.uk

www.scottish.parliament.uk

Accredited Agents
(see Yellow Pages)

and through good booksellers

Printed in Scotland by The Stationery Office Limited

ISBN 0 338 000003 ISSN 1467-0178