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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE

Wednesday 2 February 2011

Session 3

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EDUCATION, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2011, Session 3

CONVENER

*Karen Whitefield (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP)
Claire Baker (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)
*Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab)
*Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP)
*Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
*Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Ted Brocklebank (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)
Hugh O'Donnell (Central Scotland) (LD)
Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)
Dave Thompson (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Kay Barnett (Educational Institute of Scotland)
Keir Bloomer
Greg Dempster (Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland)
Gordon Ford (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland)
Professor Richard Kerley
Don Ledingham (East Lothian Council)
Christina McAnea (Unison)
Dr Judith McClure
Professor Denis Mongon
Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities)
Eileen Prior (Scottish Parent Teacher Council)
Colin Sutherland (School Leaders Scotland)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee

Wednesday 2 February 2011

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 10:00*]

The Future of Schools Management in Scotland

The Convener (Karen Whitefield): Good morning and welcome to the fourth meeting in 2011 of the Education, Lifelong Learning and Culture Committee. I remind all those present that mobile phones and electronic devices should be switched off for the duration of the meeting.

There are apologies from Claire Baker, who is unable to attend the meeting. Christina McKelvie hopes to join us, although the M8 is a bit of a car park at the moment. She is trying to get here as quickly as she can.

Agenda item 1 is a round-table discussion about the future of schools management in Scotland. Members will recall that, last February, we issued a call for written evidence and commissioned research from the Scottish Parliament information centre on the subject. We agreed that it would be useful to pursue some of the issues that were raised, especially in the written evidence, with a range of stakeholders from the school education sector. We will take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning at our meeting on 23 February and publish a report before dissolution.

The purpose of the committee's consideration on the issue is to explore some of its key aspects. With so little time available it would be unrealistic for us to try to set out recommendations for the Scottish Government or our successor committee. Rather, we hope that our report will inform the debate in the next parliamentary session.

I am pleased to welcome Keir Bloomer; Don Ledingham, executive director of education and children's services at East Lothian Council; Christina McAnea, national officer for education at Unison Scotland; Dr Judith McClure; Professor Denis Mongon; Robert Nicol, team leader of the children and young people team at the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities; Eileen Prior, executive director of the Scottish Parent Teacher Council; Colin Sutherland, president of School Leaders Scotland; Kay Barnett, who is representing the Educational Institute of Scotland; Greg Dempster, who is representing the Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland; and Gordon Ford, deputy chief executive of West Lothian Council, who is representing the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland. Professor Richard Kerley will join us in approximately 45 minutes.

Some of you have given evidence to the committee previously. For others, this will be an entirely new experience. The committee does not often use a round-table approach. We hope that it will be a discussion rather than a straightforward question-and-answer session and that there will be genuine dialogue. To help that dialogue, we will cover a number of themes that appeared in the written evidence, starting with the first theme—which was indicated to witnesses—which is the nature of the problem that exists or is perceived to exist. In particular, is now the time to change the structure of delivery of education, especially given that we are in the process of implementing the curriculum for excellence? Would it be easier to change Scotland's curriculum with different structures? Are our current structures inhibiting the implementation of the curriculum for excellence?

Elizabeth Smith (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I will kick off with a general question that will be helpful to our deliberations. Given that there has been a considerable input of resources into Scottish education over the past 10 or 11 years, what advice could the panel give us about how we could improve outcomes? The criticism, if there is one, is that we are not achieving as much as we should in terms of pupil attainment. It would be enormously helpful if you could say what you think are the reasons for that.

The Convener: I am sure that that issue will be covered in the discussion and that members of the panel are likely to have some views on that. There are people here today who have expressed views on that subject in the past.

Dr Judith McClure: What we need is a focus on teachers and headteachers, and on schools looking at individual pupils. We have a great tradition in Scotland and we know that we need to improve and that we need to do it together. Where we are going wrong is that we are not empowering the people on the ground who can do it. It is interesting that, among the 39 responses to the committee's call for evidence, not a single one was from a headteacher writing in his or her own right. Headteachers are the people who are serving their communities and serving the teachers in their schools. It is a server leadership that enables teachers to do their job. If you are improving education, you have to start by focusing on that.

We ought to look at how we can give headteachers more of a leadership role in taking change forward, not only as individuals in their own school but working in partnership across

communities and thereby trying to break down social divisions. We are not succeeding that way either. We have too many islands. I do not want to sound desperately critical, because there are wonderful things happening in Scottish education but, overall, we have too much bureaucracy and not enough empowerment of headteachers, who could really take things forward.

The Convener: I will be a little controversial here and ask whether that is your belief or whether the fact that so few headteachers responded to the call for evidence indicates that this is not the number 1 issue for headteachers in Scotland's schools? Academics and leading educationists are arguing about structures, but perhaps headteachers are not.

Kay Barnett (Educational Institute of Scotland): I will pick up on two points. Liz Smith mentioned the debate on input of resources and output, and Judith McClure talked about leadership. I want to link that to the position of the EIS on whether the time is right to consider changes.

There was a degree of misrepresentation during the Christmas holidays about where the EIS stands, as a trade union. We have traditionally supported local authority management of education and we have good working relationships there. I want to be clear that, in any consideration that we give, we would not advocate lightly any departure from the status quo. Similarly, we believe that there is a problem, which is linked partly to the relationship between Scottish Government and local authorities, and partly to resources. To cut it short, it is to do with the fact that education has suffered in some respects from the increased freedom that the concordat has given local authorities to make decisions about implementing national priorities. That is the angle that we are coming from.

Although, as you will know from our submission, we have rejected certain other models, we are here today because we want to listen as well as to have an input. We are not advocating a move to having 10 or 12 education boards. What we are saying is that, among all the variables and views that will come out across the themes under discussion, a move to 10 to 12 boards merits further discussion.

We share Judith McClure's core value in that the bottom line for us is that, however education is structured, managed and delivered, it has to work for the pupils, for the educational communities and for the teachers. We greatly appreciate the fact that we can come along and input like this because Scottish teachers want a voice in however this is played out.

I totally agree about the need for appropriate structures to allow headteachers to be teachers who manage and ensure that the managerial aspect is part of the overall leadership jigsaw. Headteachers want to have the scope and the space to be leaders of learning in their communities, and the debate should take cognisance of that and allow not only headteachers but all leaders in schools to flourish.

Professor Denis Mongon: As the English outsider and therefore as a guest who does not quite understand how your family works, I find myself contributing nervously to this discussion. According to all the international evidence, the structural question is a second-order question. What works is high-quality teaching with high-quality management; very clear outcomes that ensure that people know what they are expected to achieve; and the freedom to decide how, as high-quality teachers and managers, they will achieve those outcomes. That is what distinguishes high-attaining systems from other systems and the structure that is in place can make all of that easier or not.

Going back to the convener's first question about raising Scotland's game around the curriculum for excellence and additional support for learning, I suggest that national Government's first responsibility is to ensure a supply of high-quality teachers who can become high-quality leaders. The structure of governance and accountability that you put around that is profoundly symbolic of the kind of society and communities that you want to create. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that part of the English difficulty around all this at the moment is our confusion about the kind of society and communities that we want to be, which has led to a great deal of diversity in the system and certain elements that appear to face in opposite directions.

Given the parallel line of work on the curriculum for excellence and the quality of teaching, learning and management, you have an opportunity to reflect on these matters and—as you said, convener—create for the next session of Parliament the debate about the kind of society and community that reflects the relationship between schools and local people. In response to your question, though, I repeat that the structural question is a second-order one.

Eileen Prior (Scottish Parent Teacher Council): I absolutely agree, but I would add another layer: the relationship between schools and parents—of course, you would expect me to say that. Yes, high-quality teaching is critical, but so too is sound parental involvement in the process and, despite the fact Scotland has legislation on parental involvement, the picture is

still incredibly varied. That is partly a result of our geography; the cities and the smaller local authorities probably find it easier than the rural areas to engage proactively with parents.

In any case, the profile of parental engagement in Scotland is white, middle class and exclusive. That is simply not good enough. However, instead of simply criticising that profile, we should be finding out how we can widen the net and involve and engage the other parents. In truth, that comes down to the local level and to the strategy of the local authority or education authority, or whatever we call it. Part of where I am coming from is that, although I would not say that parents do not mind about structure, to an extent that is a second-level question. We are looking at how things work on a local level, and how local authorities—or whatever they are—and individual headteachers support parental involvement. At present, the picture is incredibly varied.

10:15

Christina McAnea (Unison): I am a bit like Professor Mongon, as I am not head of education for Unison in Scotland but head of education for Unison in the United Kingdom, so I have first-hand experience of dealing with the education system in England and Wales and Northern Ireland. From that experience of what happens in England, I echo the professor's point that there is no evidence that a focus purely on changing structures, particularly management structures, will in itself improve attainment or outcomes for children. In fact, it can often distract from issues of how to invest in services that make a difference to children and young people and their families.

I support what has been said about the emphasis being on teachers and headteachers but, as you might expect from my union, I would widen that to say that it should be on the school workforce. That is significant when we think about the support that is needed, particularly for children with additional needs. On devolving more management control to schools, when I talk to colleagues from headteacher organisations in England, one of the issues that come up strongly is that headteachers often feel that they do not have enough time to focus on the management of learning, which Kay Barnett mentioned. Therefore, if we are to devolve control, other structures must be in place in schools and other staff will be needed who can take on that range of activities to enable headteachers to focus on the management of learning.

Our strong plea is that any approach that involves changing education structures must be evidence based. There must be clear evidence that what is being done will make a difference to outcomes.

Keir Bloomer: The convener specifically directed us towards theme 1 in the discussion paper, which is, "What is the problem?" She asked whether the current structure makes it more or less difficult to take forward the curriculum for excellence. To me, there are important reasons why the present structure in fact inhibits our capacity to take things forward. It does so because, despite significant attempts to decentralise and involve people in decision making, the system is still set up to deliver a top-down change programme. The convener referred to the fact that there have been fewer than 40 responses to the committee's consultation, of which none, as Judith McClure pointed out, was from headteachers.

The reason for that is not, I think, content with present circumstances; it is scepticism about the value of contributing to such consultations. That is a pity because, over the past decade or so, there has been a clear willingness on the part of the Parliament and others to take a consultative approach. However, it is obvious that much more must be done to create confidence that it is a worthwhile activity in which to engage.

We need an understanding of how effective change takes place in complex organisations in the modern world. I believe that it happens by releasing the creativity of the people at the ground level—in other words, teachers, headteachers and others who participate directly in the process. Doing that creates a climate of innovation, which in turn promotes diversity of practice, and it is from diversity of practice that the whole system has the capacity to learn. It is for that reason that top-down approaches tend to be ineffective. We know that, but we have not yet tackled the institutional landscape that is in place because it is based on a different model of how to proceed, namely the top-down one.

I do not agree with Denis Mongan's view that structure is a second-order problem, although I agree with a lot of what he went on to say. It seems to me that structure is a fundamental problem. Through better teaching, you can do somewhat better what you already do. However, if you want to challenge what you do by promoting innovation, you need to have management and governance structures that do that. It seems to me that we do not have those at present. That is the core problem that we ought to address.

The Convener: This issue has generated a lot of debate. I will allow Mr Dempster in first, then Margaret Smith.

Greg Dempster (Association of Headteachers and Deputes in Scotland): It is right to say that the governance debate is not the number 1 priority of headteachers around the country. My organisation represents heads,

deputes and principal teachers, but the majority of members are heads. I think that their number 1 priority at the moment is the implementation of the curriculum for excellence. I do not think that anybody would argue with that. As a group, they have not been particularly engaged with the governance debate, although they are starting to get engaged now.

Following the committee's request for evidence, I asked my members a few questions about governance. To be fair, their responses were not quite what I expected. Nearly 80 per cent of the responses said that education should remain in local authority control, although about two thirds of those felt that we had too many local authorities, so it is a bit of a mixed message. However, what I take from that and from reading the detailed comments is that headteachers and other school leaders are looking for a coherent policy framework that allows them the freedom that Keir Bloomer talked about, but they are also looking for structures that provide them with the support and protection that they see coming from local authorities, because they value that contribution.

My members do not want power devolved on all issues. They want power devolved to them on issues where they can have an impact on learning and teaching, but they want to maintain the support from local authorities on legal issues, human resources, information and communication technology, buildings and so on.

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD): I have a question that picks up on comments by Christina McAnea from Unison. I would have thought that the motivating factor in all of this for all of us in Parliament is to ask what evidence there is that structural change would improve Scottish education—it might be a little narrow to talk about Scottish educational attainment. There is not much point in making structural change just for the hell of it and because a few folk seem to think that it is the flavour of the month. The first step to take is to try to find ways to empower headteachers to have greater freedom to do the things that they think they can do best and, at the same time, leave the local authorities to do the things that they do best.

Christina McAnea said that there is no evidence that structural change improves attainment and that, in fact, it can do the opposite because of disruption and so on. I throw that back out and ask whether there is anybody around the table who thinks that there is evidence that structural change improves attainment.

The Convener: Mr Dempster, I will let you back in and then I will let Ken Sutherland in.

Greg Dempster: That is only one part of the debate. In our current context, we have the budget situation to think about. Probably the biggest driver for this debate coming to the fore just now is that we face significant financial challenges. Clearly, as there are 32 of them, elements of what local authorities do will be duplicated. Do we need 32 different policies on this, that or the other? Probably not. Do we need 32 different delivery mechanisms for support services such as ICT, building support, and the kind of things that I talked about before? Thirty-two might not be the right number, but we probably do need a significant number of delivery agents. However, budget is probably the biggest driver for the debate on these issues at the moment.

The Convener: I apologise to Mr Sutherland for changing his Christian name earlier.

Colin Sutherland (School Leaders Scotland): Judith McClure spoke about headteachers not responding individually. I am perhaps a bit more relaxed about the issue than she is, because SLS—which represents leadership and management teams in secondary schools—consulted widely among its membership and we deliberately sent in an SLS response.

Our major concern relates to equity and entitlement for our youngsters; we worry that the current system produces huge inequities across the country. We have done a lot of research into schools using Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education comparators. In schools at present, the funding difference per child can be up to £2,000. When you consider the least-funded schools and the best-funded schools, and use a comparator group of 1,000 youngsters, that can equate to approximately 20 teachers.

I know that it is not all about inputs—of course it is not—but, by jingo, if you have more resource, you have more flexibility and therefore a far better chance of improving outputs. I would urge that whatever is done to improve the governance of schools should give more flexibility to the front line, where it really matters.

The Convener: Mr Nicol, you are here representing Scotland's local authorities, which deliver education services in Scotland. Are local authorities best placed to continue to do that, or should we be considering doing things differently?

Robert Nicol (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities): I am tempted just to say yes to the first part of your question.

I have found the debate very interesting. From a COSLA point of view, I agree with all those who have suggested that considering structures before considering anything else is not the way to go. Our organisation is fully committed to all forms of review of the public sector, if that is what we want to do as a country. However, we have to consider the right things first.

Theme 1 in the committee's paper is the key theme. We have to consider what it is that we want to improve. There is a risk that, if we leap straight into reviewing structures, we will simply perpetuate the same challenges that we are facing right now.

Reports that have been produced over the past few years—the one from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development is probably the key one—have shown a range of strengths in Scottish education but have also pointed out a number of challenges. One of those challenges is the inequality within the system. However, we do not regard that finding as being a failure of the schools; I hope that I am right in saying that, for the most part, our schools are of a high quality. However, the interactions between the schools and the wider community and society are an issue. In our efforts to tackle the problems that we know about, we should be careful not to focus only on what happens in schools. We have to consider the interactions between schools, the community, the wider public sector, the voluntary sector and all the services that help children and families.

Gordon Ford (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland): A devolved school management review is about to start, under the chairmanship of David Cameron, who is a former director of children's services in Stirling. It is a bit too simplistic to quote the price per pupil, because we have to consider public-private partnerships and the structure of the school estate.

I was a headteacher for 12 years, eight of them in a secondary school in Edinburgh. I well remember Lothian Regional Council and the support that we were given from a directorate that was fairly remote when 50-odd secondary schools covered the Lothians. When the single tier came around in 1996, secondary schools in West Lothian were the third poorest performing academically in Scotland. Over the past 14 or 15 years, because of the commitment from West Lothian Council, the schools have been outperforming their comparators; they are doing so in all except one category at present. The council is probably 15th or 16th now—as you know, there is a post-industrial community in the west of the region. The performance has been perhaps not excellent but very good.

10:30

The debate should not be about structures. It is not structures that will change, but the value system of the council or the organisation. I point the committee to the progress that is being made throughout the country in community planning partnerships. Headteachers play a significant role in the CPPs, certainly in my council. It is about joining up the services for children.

I think that it was Margaret Smith who said something about the more vulnerable children and how we have responded well in Scotland to closing that part of the gap. The criticism, however, is that the gap is not closing because attainment has progressed as well, and I agree that we still need to address that. The whole purpose of the curriculum for excellence is to make Scotland fit for purpose in competing in the 21st century. The question is whether we will deliver that on time, and whether we would have delivered it any more successfully if we had had any other form of structure. In my view, we would certainly not have done.

ADES is quite relaxed about anyone wishing to review the number of councils; nobody in education has selected 32 councils to represent Scotland. There is a lot of good shared services work going on throughout the country: my colleague can comment on the work that is going on in East Lothian and Midlothian, and we are working closely with Falkirk. That work is being replicated elsewhere, and it does not need particular direction.

Councils are not only responding to the budget issue but striving to continue to improve services. Education is one of the key services, if not the key service. The focus is there, and you do a disservice to a lot of very committed people in education if you start talking about structures.

Professor Mongon: I want to come back partly on my use of the phrase "second-order question", because I am closer to Eileen Prior and Keir Bloomer on that than I might have given the impression of being. When I say that structure is a second-order question, I am not saying that it is not a profound and important issue. I am relating to other people's comments about the importance of teaching and learning, and getting that right.

Through the curriculum for excellence and the additional support programmes that you have in Scotland, and given your concern about the gaps that exist in your system and the fact that there is some evidence that the system not only has gaps but is coasting in several places, a vision is emerging around which your service can unite. That is what we are going to deal with. I am not certain, however, that you are clear about what the system will look like when you have dealt with it. What type of outcome and result are you looking for at the end of the process? If people want to improve something, they have to know what the improvement would look like.

In my language, the first-order question concerns the quality of teaching and learning. The second-order question, which has a profound

influence on whether those people can do their job well, concerns governance. I am using the word "governance" to separate that point from the debate about structure. It is about governance and accountability. I do not know how you give school leaders increased freedom unless you increase accountability at the same time. It is about giving people the freedom not to do just what they like, but to deliver on that vision. As they do so, we want them to connect with communities and families, and we do not want that to be optional. It may be the case that many school leaders are engaging with community partnerships, but it should not be optional for them. How do we put in place a governance arrangement that is not just about whether a headteacher decides to join in, but which makes clear that that is what we as a community are paying them to do?

Ken Macintosh (Eastwood) (Lab): The initial part of the discussion is about finding out why we should change the structures, and what problems we are trying to fix. I will ask Don Ledingham about that, because I know that his local authority was one of the first to at least consider improving the model. Liz Smith suggested earlier that it is about improving attainment and outcome, but there does not seem to be any support for that around the table. Is the change driven by the need to save money? What provoked East Lothian's decision?

Don Ledingham (East Lothian Council): A number of complex factors present an imperative for change. We need to look at the nature of society and the challenge that we face. For example, as a result of benefits changes next year, the most vulnerable people in East Lothian will lose £9 million. The impact of the recession will present challenges to our most vulnerable families, which will require us to think differently. The traditional idea that the school will sort out everything is not sustainable. As Eileen Prior said, working in conjunction with partners and our communities is fundamental to the argument.

Denis Mongon captured the point recently when he spoke about the need for us to move from being school-centric—where everything is done for the school and within its boundaries—to seeing our communities as being school centred. We should use the iconic place of the school to build structures and a real community of practice around them. There is a really exciting opportunity. Some of the consultative work that we have done with a wide range of stakeholders suggests that there is no appetite for having operational responsibility for schools—parents do not want that. However, they are interested in being part of the improvement agenda—being involved in self-evaluation and in helping and supporting that. The wider community should also be involved.

The other challenge that we face is our tendency to see education in its various strata—early years, primary school, secondary school and further education. Within a community, there should be a much more coherent zero-to-18 approach that allows us to support one another. There are real opportunities in that area. One of the big criticisms of the OECD report by Richard Teese was that there is a real lack of connection between funding and the outcomes to which Denis Mongon referred. We could incentivise change by looking at things in a much more coherent manner and having primary and secondary schools work together. We already do that; however, as Denis Mongon pointed out, there is no way in which we incentivise that change or lever it into the system.

The consultative work that we have done has ruled out some options, one of which was the community trust. There is no essential appetite for parents and others to take responsibility, but there is a huge appetite for community engagement. If I may pick up on Greg Dempster's point, the status quo of retaining large central teams to maintain the system that we had previously will change, with the direction of resources to the front line. To grab that opportunity, we need to adapt, to change how we conduct ourselves and to move away from being micromanagers to establishing outcomes, relating them to funding and finding ways of supporting and developing the capacity of parents, the wider community, staff and headteachers, because the role of headteacher is changing and is very different from that of 30 years ago. The work that we have been doing demonstrates that the appetite is there. We need to focus on building capacity. Once we have done that, we can start to look at the structures around it.

The Convener: We have been joined by Professor Kerley.

Professor Richard Kerley: I apologise for my late arrival.

Keir Bloomer: I will make three related points. The first relates to the structure debate, which has focused largely on the question of how many local authorities there should be. That is reflected in the paper that has been produced for this morning's meeting. In my view, the question is almost totally irrelevant, for reasons that Richard Kerley—who may elaborate on this—exposed well in his article in yesterday's edition of *The Scotsman*. Changing the number of local authorities will have little impact on costs, a very marginal impact, if any, on equity, and no impact on how schools are run, which is a much more important question than how many intermediate bodies are involved in running them. We must largely dismiss as an irrelevance the issue of the number of local authorities.

Secondly, I agree totally with Denis Mongon that the argument is more about governance than about structure. Governance implies more than structure. That means that the focus must be not only on the intermediate tier of government at local authority level and whether it is contributing usefully, but on what the national tier of government is doing.

In that context, the shape of the new agency to replace Learning and Teaching Scotland and the inspectorate will be a fundamental matter, because as things stand it seems to me that the national agencies, for all the good that they do, are also part of the problem. The inspectorate in particular cannot avoid cultivating a culture of compliance and risk aversity that is contrary to the innovative and risk-taking education service that we now need. I hope that we will discuss that further later on.

The third point is that there seems to be general agreement—at least, nobody has said otherwise, so far—that an important part of the way forward is empowering schools and the people in them. In that connection, the present review of DSM is extremely important. To my mind, it raises what is one of the most fundamental questions at present, which is whether schools ought to be obliged to receive the majority of their support from compulsory monopoly local authority providers, which is the current position. We could question whether that is an issue of governance or not, but the provision of support ought to be a matter of choice at the level of the individual institution. For the most part, currently, it is not. Were it to become so as a result of the devolved school management review, many of the other structure and governance questions might begin to appear to be less significant.

Judith McClure: Keir Bloomer is absolutely right in that schools have to be inwardly strong communities in which every single person counts. To take what Don Ledingham said, they have to be outward facing, linking with the local community and working in partnership. As Gordon Ford said, partnerships are now happening and we really do have an opportunity.

I would add to what Keir Bloomer said about what is going on by saying that the Donaldson review is excellent. It is a wonderful account of the way in which the teaching profession—by which I mean not just teachers, but other people who are responsible for giving every single one of our young people a chance in life—can work effectively. It is important to link with universities. We do not use them effectively enough at present. By "we", I do not mean just schools and education. Universities should be involved in creating hub schools in communities that link with other schools across social boundaries. We have not talked a lot about social boundaries.

We have got to get the community engagement that Don Ledingham suggested. That means that schools have to work in partnership and that parents have to see that they are not just involved with their own child's school. The whole community should be involved. In Don's wonderful phrase, "It's all our bairns." We have got to find ways of doing that, and I believe that the Donaldson review is part of the magic mix. We should really work with that and establish hub schools that are linked with universities and the local community. We should get parents involved in strong governance structures, however that is managed, because governance is central to this work, as Denis Mongon said. Headteachers have to be accountable, but they also have to be creative and innovative. They have to be responsible for everything that is going on and for every child in their school while also relating outwards.

I think we have to pull this together. We have to pull the Donaldson review into the other things that are going on.

The Convener: We will move on to the next area, which is about variation versus consistency. Do people agree with Keir Bloomer's comment that LTS and HMIE sometimes stifle diversity and creativity? Is there a problem? Are our schools inhibited from doing things differently? Do they just conform? How can we drive up standards in schools and allow them to do things differently but ensure that parents can continue to expect that their children will be well-educated adults when they leave school?

10:45

Kay Barnett: There are a number of challenges embedded in the questions that you have posed. To go back to what Keir Bloomer was saying earlier about top-down models in respect of education—be that about the curriculum, assessment or the whole gamut of education issues—we must face two key challenges if we are to continue successfully to implement the curriculum for excellence and if we are to take on board the challenges that we share in using education as an appropriate vehicle for challenging the inequities in society and for creating a skilled and highly trained workforce that will allow our society to compete in a global market.

In other words, there are two things that teachers in Scotland, working in collaboration with their co-professionals, find challenging. The first of those is the change in culture within schools on the back of curriculum for excellence: what we

mean by collegiality at all levels, through empowering teachers and all levels of professional people within the educational community, allowing a real debate to take place and allowing people to have a say on the decision-making processes in schools. There has to be attitudinal change, although that is very difficult for people who are working in an environment where they are increasingly constrained by the budget situation or by things that were mentioned earlier, such as the expectations of HMIE and other pressures. There is that whole challenge of fostering collegiality within schools, which is an integral and necessary part of curriculum for excellence.

The second key challenge is in being able to move forward professionally at a time when resources are constrained. That is very much linked to the debate that we have had on the extent of structural change and the extent to which governance is involved. No matter what happens, and with the best will in the world, the political relationships surrounding whichever model, structure or variety of educational management is chosen within the acceptable boundaries will have an impact. I will not rehearse what I said earlier about the concordat and the different areas of education that we believe are under stress and strain because national priorities have not always been delivered.

The challenge of collegiality and the challenge of working with limited resources, while trying to do the best for every single young person in Scottish schools within a positive framework, form part of this debate.

Robert Nicol: There is another interesting question. In my job I deal not just with education in schools but with children's policy across the piece. One key theme has been coming up in a range of contexts. It is almost a knotty political question, about how local or how central we want to be as a country. Inevitably, there is a balance to be struck. Certain things will work better at local level and others might work better with collaboration between local bodies. Certain things might be better achieved nationally. It is hard to polarise the issue between local and national considerations. The correct balance needs to be struck. For a start, we need to consider what aspects of the current system could do with improvement.

There is invariably a close link with accountability, which we will get on to, because as soon as things are created and led locally, you need to think about how they are accountable to the people for whom they are designed. That has to be part of the debate. We have to think about this as a broad political issue about centralisation or localism in Scotland.

We should perhaps also look at comparator countries. I think that I am right in saying that, in a European context, Scotland is quite a centralised country; other countries do things in different ways. Perhaps there are lessons that we could learn from systems abroad.

Don Ledingham: The OECD report said that there is a real lack of diversity in Scottish education—that was a criticism. What are the alternatives? The phrase "postcode lottery" is used a lot. We need to think carefully about what we really mean when we say that we do not want a postcode lottery, because if you take that to its logical conclusion, everything would have to be identical in every school—the timetable and the subjects would all have to be the same. I do not think that that is what people really want; they want equality of opportunity and outcomes.

It comes back to us as commissioners of the education service saying, "Here are the outcomes that we want to achieve" and then giving flexibility to people such as Colin Sutherland to make the decisions on the ground, in conjunction with the community, about what their priorities are, and to deliver them for their community. There should be equity of outcomes—that is where our focus should be—as opposed to absolute uniformity. It is quite difficult to have a halfway house towards a postcode lottery. You either have to have something that is totally uniform or something that encourages flexibility and innovation but ensures that we are maintaining outcomes.

As someone who, in essence, manages Colin Sutherland, I have tremendous confidence in his ability as a headteacher to deliver those outcomes. I do not need to tell him how to do that. I do not need to tell him, "Here's what you must have." That confidence is shared by his staff and the wider community. That is based on trust. In Scottish education we need to move towards having trust in parents, the community and our colleagues in schools. We have to say, "Here are the outcomes. They are non-negotiable, but you have complete flexibility in how you try to achieve them." That would be a real shift for us.

Christina McAnea: There has to be a balance. We have to look at what we want to free up schools to do and in what context. We have to consider whether to set parameters nationally, at local authority level or whatever.

There is no causal link between diversity of provision and improved outcomes or innovation. Innovation does not happen only because there is diversity of provision; it happens as a result of a number of factors. Diversity of provision will not in itself automatically cause innovation suddenly to flourish in the schools structure.

We have to look at how we can give some flexibility and, in particular, how to allow headteachers the freedom to manage and deliver

within curriculum for excellence. At the same time, the framework in which they have to do that must be looked at, which will ensure not only equity of outcomes but equity of access for young people and their families.

I assume that Scotland will probably not go down the route of the academy structure that exists in England. The jury is still out on whether academies have made any difference. Lots of research has been done on outcomes. People might say that it is early days yet and that you have to give academies longer to bed in. However, there is nothing in the structures at the moment that prevents schools and headteachers from being freed up to give additional access and resources to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds—finance apart. The jury is still out. Academies themselves have not drastically improved outcomes for pupils—they have variable results, just like non-academy schools. You have to think about what the parameters are that you want to set and who will set them.

I will give an example involving diversity of provision, which people thought was not directly related to pupils' academic outcomes. About 20 years ago, Margaret Thatcher's Government decided to completely free up the provision of school meals and the standard of food that was served. At the time, many people in the education sector thought that that was fine as it was not directly related to education. However, over the years, it became evident that it had an impact on pupils' behaviour—teachers said that, if children had certain kinds of food for lunch, they could see a difference in their behaviour in the afternoon—and on childhood obesity. Now, people have gone back to thinking that the kind of school meals that you give children has an impact on what they do and what they achieve in school, and people are saying that, although school meals should be freed up, that should happen within certain parameters.

Gordon Ford: I think that we are in danger of getting a consensus of agreement, if we are not careful.

We have been concerned about the postcode lottery issues, particularly with regard to the senior phase and the curriculum for excellence. However, with regard to Judith McClure's comments about freeing up the headteachers to display leadership, that has happened in West Lothian Council. We were aware that some of the smaller schools would not be able to offer the same range of provisions as larger schools in the fifth and sixth years, so we are running a pilot scheme that will involve a common timetable across the senior phase in West Lothian schools in 2012-13. Budget cuts will mean that, for example, an advanced Spanish class could not run with three or four pupils in one school, but the headteachers will work together to ensure that it will run with a class of 15 or 16 pupils in one or two schools somewhere. That is the sort of leadership that we are talking about.

Partnership working is important. Parents still want their children to go to and identify with their local school as they know that the school provides more than just an education—it is the place where the football clubs, tennis clubs and so on meet and use facilities. However, they do not want their children to be disadvantaged. That kind of partnership, involving leadership from headteachers, is probably replicated in every authority across the country.

We encourage our headteachers to take risks. Don Ledingham can confirm that in the past seven or eight years, the relationship that the councils have through their education directors with HMIE and the Scottish Government has improved beyond all recognition. There is a close working relationship and partnership that did not exist a number of years ago, when there was genuine concern about the inspection process and headteachers were justifiably unhappy with some of the outcomes.

As Keir Bloomer said, our big concern is what the new organisation will look like and how it will work in partnership with its key partners, including the education directors. Basically, however, things have been working pretty well in the past few years.

Christina McKelvie (Central Scotland) (SNP): I apologise for my late arrival.

I might be just chucking my opinion out there, but while I was listening to this morning's discussion, it occurred to me that we might be looking at this issue the wrong way. Unison's submission and what Christina McAnea has said resonated with me in that regard. Should we be considering the issue from the point of view of what the child needs rather than focusing on structures, techniques and processes? Christina McAnea gave a pertinent example of how certain factors impact on children when she talked about how what a child has for their school meals can have an effect on their behaviour, engagement and attainment.

There are relevant underlying causes that really reduce attainment and which are not linked to structures, processes and procedures. Those include poverty, whether of finance or of opportunity; alcohol or drug misuse in households; and health issues, whether involving the child's health, the parent's health or the carer's health. Such things have a huge impact on a child's ability to attain anything in a classroom. We are looking at structures and grand things like that, but we are

not looking at what a child needs and where they need it. I would say that they need that input as early as possible, starting with nursery provision.

11:00

Someone asked how we create well-educated adults. We create them by investing in the very young kids who need that type of support. How do we break the continuous cycle of parents who have not had an excellent education experience then cascading that onto the child? How do we reduce offending behaviour when that happens in a household and the child picks it up as normal behaviour? I have just chucked a whole load of things into the middle that I think are much more important than structures and procedures. We will get the outcomes that we want if we first look at what the child needs in order to attain. That is not going to happen overnight—I understand that—but we are missing issues such as poverty, health and chaotic households. I hope that you are going to give us some wise words on where we can go on those.

Keir Bloomer: Most of the recent contributions have centred on the issue of equity. I will make two observations on equity. The first relates to the postcode lottery question that was first raised by Colin Sutherland when he talked about the resourcing of secondary schools in broadly different circumstances. I am sure that School Leaders Scotland chose its £2,000-a-year example wisely and that that probably stands at the outer edge of the differences that exist. Nevertheless, it poses an important question. Do we think that it is appropriate that there are significant disparities between the ways in which similar schools are resourced?

If we accept the notion that local authorities are democratically elected bodies with a responsibility for determining priorities for their areas, it follows logically that they must have the right to resource services to different extents if they see that as being appropriate in their local circumstances. Either we accept that or we do not. The points that SLS has made about that suggests that it does not accept it, which raises the question why it supports the continued management of schools by local authorities. I do not accept it either, but I take the logical route from there of saying that the intermediate politically accountable body is not playing a significant role in the overall management of the system. It is important to be clear and logical in the lessons that we draw from what we observe.

The second point is about Scotland's record in relation to equity. I have noticed that whenever change in any dimension of education, but especially in how it is governed, is raised, one of the automatic defences of the status quo is based on the notion that it is equitable. If there is one thing that 140 years of state education in Scotland has not delivered, it is equity. Don Ledingham has spoken once or twice about the OECD report. The report makes the point that, in Scotland, who a person is matters much more than what school they go to. They will get a reasonable quality of education whatever school they go to, but the background that they come from will determine the extent to which they are likely to succeed. We have a massive distance to go in relation to equity. The same report says that we probably have further to go than most other developed countries. So, to defend the status quo on the basis that it guarantees some sort of equity is, to my mind, ludicrous.

Christina McKelvie has made the point that all sorts of factors contribute massively to a child's degree of educational success and that those deserve our attention. We were brought here to talk about governance, which, I suppose, is why we are talking about it, but I am sure that we are happy to talk about those other issues. I agree with Christina McKelvie that they are of critical importance. Furthermore, they relate to the governance debate in so far as, despite the fact that almost every major policy shift that has taken place during the 40 years or so for which I have been professionally involved in Scottish education has been motivated by the desire to assist the disadvantaged, they have failed. That suggests that something in the way in which the system is run means that we do not deliver the outcomes to which we aspire.

As I said right at the beginning, it is probably much more important to base change upon the release of the creative energies of those involved than it is to seek to bring about change by centrally governed fiat. To that extent, it seems to me that the resolution of the crucial issues that Christina McKelvie raises relates importantly to the question of governance, and that suggests that one of the most important issues that faces us is how we empower people at the level of the classroom and the individual school.

The Convener: I think, Mr Ford, that for as long as Mr Bloomer is here there will not be too much consensus at the committee; he likes to stir things up and give us provocation for our lines of questioning.

Ken Macintosh: I will stay on the same theme as Christina McKelvie and Keir Bloomer. The OECD report said that Scottish schools were very equitable, but it did not say that the outcomes were equitable; it said that the system is equitable, and I do not think that that is the same thing. It is a bit unfair to pretend that it said otherwise.

The report concluded that, no matter how equitable and fair our system of schooling and

education, it cannot overcome the socioeconomic differences and deprivation that Scotland has as a nation. That is a difficult issue to address and I agree that a number of changes that have been made have failed to address it, but I return to the point of the discussion: how on earth will changing the structure of education and the way in which we manage education have any impact on the key problem, which is socioeconomic disadvantage? I have not yet heard one argument for that proposition.

Professor Mongon: That is the heart of the problem. It ill behoves anyone from England to give lessons in reducing social inequality, because the products of our system are exactly the same. After 100-odd years of a public education service, there is chronic inequity and a lack of social mobility. That was relieved slightly by some changes in the economic structure in the 1950s, but that had very little to do with the education service. However, we have—I am sure that Scotland has, too—pockets of examples of schools that buck that trend. You are in difficult territory if you say that there is a direct causal effect in all circumstances and for every child between poverty and their outcomes. That is the very piece of thinking that we need to challenge.

As a Parliament and as a society, you have to challenge that in a number of ways, socially and economically. Schools cannot be the solution to that problem, but in a number of communities and schools we see astonishing results from disadvantaged communities. Where we see those astonishing results, I think that we see astonishing teaching, learning and school leadership, which has been liberated from a hierarchical, managerial professional hegemony; people can therefore get on with doing what they think is right locally.

As Keir Bloomer said, as a result of that there will inevitably be postcode differentiation. We must move away from the language in the term "postcode lottery", because lottery is chance, and move towards postcode purposefulness. The fact that health authorities in north-east England spend more on dealing with lung disease in former mining communities than they do on some other health issues is not coincidence; it makes complete sense. That is not a postcode lottery; it is postcode purposefulness.

One would expect to have the same in education. It comes down to the question that Christina McAnea asked, about which outcomes and processes should be prescribed nationally. What outcomes and experiences is every child in Scotland entitled to expect? To pick a banal example, you might say that every 12-year-old is entitled to a residential experience. You would certainly say that every school should operate to the equal opportunities legislation of the national Government and the European conventions. You might say—I would, but many people disagree—that all publicly funded schools should subscribe to national pay agreements and national terms and conditions of service. All those processes could be added to the outcomes.

We cannot know what is best for a primary school or a primary school classroom in Cunninghame. Nobody in this building can prescribe what is right for such a school, unless the headteacher happens to be in the public gallery. As we cannot know what is best, we must liberate people to get on with that work. The accountability mechanism must not inhibit them.

I will give a quick anecdote. The point is made that people can do things already if they want to. That has two responses. One is that people should do some things not if they want to, but because they are required to. The other relates to innovation. In England, the secretary of state has the power in statute to set aside for a period in a given area any regulation that applies to schools, so that innovation can take place. If a school argues that a regulation is preventing it from doing something really powerful, the regulation can be set aside.

When Estelle Morris was the Secretary of State for Education and Skills, she set up in her department an innovation unit, with which I worked. The response to 95 per cent of the applications from schools to have regulations set aside was that no such regulation existed. Schools believed that they could not do something because they had read a piece of guidance that said that perhaps something should not be done, but guidance is not law. If a school had a powerful argument for operating differently, it was advised to go ahead and do that. It would be judged by the outcomes.

The problem is that the balance of risk in deviating from the guidance is placed on the school. Governance is important because we must get a culture going in which people are encouraged to innovate in disciplined ways. I do not want people to take risks—or wild risks—with my kids, but I do not want my grandchildren to have the same experience as my kids had, one of whom did the Vikings three times at primary school.

The Convener: Mr Sutherland was nodding while Denis Mongon spoke. Do the structures in Scotland inhibit headteachers from doing things differently?

Colin Sutherland: I am not convinced of that. A number of conventions apply, and many conventions are unwritten. One convention is that all youngsters should do eight subjects in fourth year—that is pretty uniform across Scotland. We

must ask questions about how appropriate that is for individuals.

Perverse incentives can operate. Results are reported for five or more awards at level such-and-such, which—shall we say—strongly encourages schools to ensure that youngsters sit five exams, whatever they do, because that will show in the statistics. We must be careful about incentives and perverse incentives. I hope that the reporting of achievement under curriculum for excellence will help greatly with that.

Christina McAnea: I will comment on something that Denis Mongon said. Pockets of excellence exist in England for schools in deprived areas that have become academies, opted out of local authority control and made a huge difference. Equally, some schools have worked closely with their local authorities. A fantastic school in Tower Hamlets—I do not remember its name—that is part of the local authority and receives loads of support from that authority has made a huge difference. It achieves fantastic outcomes for children from very disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is not the case that only one model will do and that freeing up schools somehow allows them to become schools that can make a significant difference. The headteacher and the leadership of the school in Tower Hamlets took an opportunity to work with staff, parents and the community to make a difference. It is not the structures themselves that allow these things to happen; we need parameters within which headteachers and school leaders can work to make a difference and which help them to identify and address any aspects of the system that are stopping them in that respect.

11:15

Professor Mongon: Would it be possible to make a comment, convener?

The Convener: If you can be brief.

Professor Mongon: I was head of school improvement in Tower Hamlets for a while. We managed, from a very low base, to be the fastest-improving local authority in England by behaving as if the structures were different and being very tight on outcomes and very loose on process. We were very supportive of headteachers but absolutely implacable with anyone in the margins and getting close to failure.

Alasdair Allan (Western Isles) (SNP): As I am sure that people around the table are keen not to have this debate in a vacuum, I want to ask about what is happening in other European countries. Robert Nicol said that Scotland was by European standards a fairly centralised country; indeed, our local authorities are probably four or five times the size of local authorities in Belgium or somewhere. I know that we are not meant to be focusing constantly on structures, but the question that arises is whether the local authorities in such countries run education and, if so, whether they run it to the same extent or in the same way; and whether schools have more or less autonomy over decisions about equity or the other issues that we have been discussing. I am quite keen to hear the views of the knowledgeable people around the table on the lessons that we can learn from Europe.

The Convener: Professor Kerley, I know that you have been keen to get in. You can have a stab at Alasdair Allan's question, if you like, but feel free to make any other points that you wanted to make.

Professor Kerley: I apologise again for my late arrival, convener; I was teaching a group of people who were somewhat older than you or the other committee members.

In answer to Alasdair Allan's question—or, rather, to evade Alasdair Allan's question—I must say that I am always sceptical about making comparisons across national boundaries outside of these islands. Culture, behaviour and practice in Belgium, France and—what is, for some, a popular example—Finland are not the same as they are here. There are different assumptions, expectations and sets of cultural values, all of which, as Christina McKelvie made clear in her question, influence the outcome for children.

Of course, if one looked, one would find variations in different settings. For example, there are some local authorities that run education. Given that we are discussing the management of schools, particularly structures—with, I hope, the intention that any changes to, or review of, the situation will impact favourably on the outcome for students and pupils—the one firm caution I would give the committee is to avoid having a single-purpose entity to organise education. The greatest experience of that can be found in the United States, which has school boards and school districts. Those who are interested in governance and equity of outcome are trying to roll back from that, arguing that the creation of a single-purpose entity charged only with running education will lead to a system that is even more confined than the present one. I will always argue for education services to be integrated with other services, whether they be children and families—where there is an intimate relationship—planning, housing or other activities.

I want to make two or three key points. First, education is one of the most homogeneously provided-for services within Scotland. The variation of expenditure and experience of those in the system is very narrow indeed, with the obvious

exceptions of the three island groups and Argyll and Bute—and, to a lesser extent, Highland and Aberdeenshire—where sparsity of population can make for very dramatic differences. Nevertheless, education is already very homogeneous.

Having worked closely with Don Ledingham and his colleagues in East Lothian, I am persuaded that the opportunity exists within the current system for headteachers as leaders within a given unit, working with their staff team, parents and the community, to make purposeful variation. I am with Denis Mongon, in that I would abolish the phrase "postcode lottery". As a phrase, it is technically incompetent; where there is variation, it should be to a purpose.

Denis Mongon's second intervention was the really important one. Innovation that has a purpose and a potentially beneficial outcome should be encouraged, but we need to be tight on poor practice that drifts away simply because of a headteacher's whimsical choice—often, it is a headteacher. I first worked in an education department some while ago—not quite as long ago as Keir Bloomer—and I visited a primary school in Edinburgh at which almost the entire capitation allowance, as it used to be called, had been spent on audio recording equipment because the teacher had a great enthusiasm for audio recording on what used to be called cassettes. I wonder how many people in this room remember those. I thought that that merited some intervention, but my senior colleagues did not agree with me; that is life.

We are talking about creating the greater shared autonomy, and shared sense of purpose, in schools that is achievable within our current organisational form of local authorities. If we push that even further, although I am not sure that many people are doing that, we are not addressing how those same schools would cope with adverse variation. If we recognise that we have a responsibility for educating all children, what do schools do with those children who, through either physical circumstance or behavioural outcome from their earlier lives, bring with them enormous challenges?

When I ask people who are involved in education, especially education committee members, what they think is the maximum cost for educating a child who has extreme low incidence disabilities, I am often surprised when they talk in terms of it being as much as £20,000 or £30,000 per year. When I say to them, "Do you want to try £250,000 or £300,000 per year?" they do not believe it. Some of you, as headteachers, will have seen coming through your schools children who require special provision, whether it be short term or long term and enduring, and you have to cope with that.

How do you cope with the member of staff who is performing so poorly that you have to do something about him or her? As an autonomous and independent entity, the headteacher is left to their own resources to deal with that man or woman. There is merit in having a back-up institution in the local authority, and if I was being cruel, I would say that some of the propositions for replacing the local authorities are weak in form. I am not persuaded by the idea of 10 or 12 institutions and 50 or so schools in some kind of organisation. We could talk about that, but we should talk about it in the context of other services.

Elizabeth Smith: This is an enormously helpful debate to have. There is a huge variety of opinion. I fully understand where people are coming from when they talk about the evidence still being out to the jury. Professor Kerley made some interesting comments about how much use we can make of international comparisons—perhaps the answer is not as much as some of us would like to think.

I would value your opinion enormously on an issue that concerns me. Sadly, despite more resources having been put in since 1999, attainment levels in Scottish education are not as good as we would like them to be. As Judith McClure pointed out, many good things are happening. There are excellent leadership and teaching standards in many schools, but the bottom line is that attainment levels are not as good as they should be. Parents and many headteachers acknowledge that.

Is that simply a problem with structures and a matter of freeing up headteachers to have more autonomy, whether we do that through the existing local authority structure or by having a mix as Christina McAnea suggested? Is it something completely different? The Donaldson review had a lot to say about where the teaching profession is going. It would help the committee to know whether you think that the debate about the structure and governance is really worth pursuing, or whether we could achieve better outcomes by ignoring that and moving on to something else. I accept that the jury is out on that question.

Eileen Prior: I wish that I had an answer to Elizabeth Smith's question, but I do not. I simply want to make a couple of points in picking up on things that have been said.

The reality is that there is excellence in pockets in Scottish schools, and there is frustration about that. Why is that excellence in pockets? Why are we so bad at sharing best practice? From a parental perspective, we are incredibly bad at doing so. We talk constantly about sharing best practice and we have all sorts of mechanisms in place to do so, but we do not do so effectively. That is incredibly frustrating. I do not have the answer to that problem, but I wonder whether part

of the reason for it is the hierarchical way in which we organise ourselves as a society. To pick up on what Richard Kerley said, I wonder whether it is a cultural thing and we have a bunch of fearties out there, although we also have some very brave souls. I think that it was said in the Donaldson review that one of the first things that leadership requires is courage. That is interesting. There is a lack of courage, partly because souls have been ground down by the hierarchical structure. That is not good enough, is it?

The Convener: Does Mr Nicol want to have a stab at following on from Eileen Prior?

Robert Nicol: Sadly, I have no answers to give either. Elizabeth Smith asked what the debate should focus on. The debate that we have had for the past 10 or 15 minutes is precisely the kind of debate that we need to have. Last week, there was a meeting of our leaders in which we discussed a range of matters relating to public sector reform, and we will submit evidence to the Christie commission. It is about tackling the big things. We know that we face poverty and inequality challenges in Scotland. I do not have any answers to give members about what the change might look like at the end, but if you are looking for a steer from COSLA on where the debate should focus, we think that it should focus on those challenges. The questions that have been asked and the discussion that we have had will be productive in going forward.

Kenneth Gibson (Cunninghame North) (SNP): Professor Kerley talked about how homogeneous Scottish education is. That makes it all the more disconcerting that attainment levels are so variable across Scottish education, even allowing for the socioeconomic differences that Ken Macintosh touched on. I do not believe that education cannot have an impact—obviously, it can—but it is clear that there are major issues to be addressed.

We have heard about best practice. It is astonishing that more has not been done to share best practice. Like Ken Macintosh, I do not see how structures would make the difference—I certainly do not see that from the discussion so far. It appears that the ethos in a school is always the most critical element. The dynamism and innovation in a school, its headteacher and its department heads are critical. We all know that, although teachers may go through the same training process, they are all individuals and that certain schools attract different types of teachers. Schools with very high attainment levels or a particular ethos will attract a specific type of teacher. As a result, the gaps may vary even more.

We have talked about equality of opportunity, but equality of outcome remains a major issue. I think that there is a poverty of expectation in some schools, which inevitably results in poorer outcomes. We must tackle that. We have all seen articles in newspapers about schools in Birmingham, Tower Hamlets or wherever that are performing incredibly well, but what happened in those schools to allow the delivery of such excellent results has persistently not been transferred. Sharing best practice is the key, rather than structural change.

11:30

Dr McClure: I agree with that, and I agree about the poverty of expectation. However, I think that we must liberate headteachers. Colin Sutherland and I wonder whether headteachers in all local authorities feel liberated. Richard Kerley talked about a headteacher having to face a poorly performing member of staff and wanting back-up to deal with that. I think that it is a headteacher's job to do that, and their colleagues must see that they are able to do it. They must see that the headteacher chooses the staff for the school and that they go out and work in partnership with other schools.

I became a headteacher in 1987 at a failing school in England. There was no guidance at all—I was on my own. I read a business book on leadership called "Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun". Attila talked to the Huns to find out what the Huns wanted. He found out what the tribal chieftains wanted, looked outside to see where other confederacies were working and went for it. That is the spirit that we need if we are to cope with poverty of expectation in whatever situation we find ourselves. When Denis Mongon talked about the structural question being a second-order question, I wanted to cheer but I thought that the convener might not like that. Structure sounds like a dull thing, but structure means a lot of money going into the back office; decision making being taken out of the hands of headteachers; compliance; and headteachers having to fill in a lot of forms that come in from outside. It also means headteachers not being empowered to do what they think is right for their pupils.

Kay Barnett: It is helpful and interesting to focus on the phrase "purposeful variation" when it is appropriate to do so, as opposed to the phrase "postcode lottery". We need to explore in greater depth what we mean by that in terms of the parameters or the boundaries. In looking at the national drivers, we need to ask some basic questions. What happens in a school or a learning community day on day? What kind of activities are taking place? Where is the balance of expectation between certain learning experiences and other learning experiences? It is absolutely still the case

that certain national policies or national drivers have some impact in a school on a daily basis.

I am a secondary teacher, so I will use the secondary sector as an example. Many people around the table today have used the word "attainment"—rightly, because raising the level of attainment is a key issue for us all. What we have not concentrated on, however, is achievement in the broadest sense. The national drivers, whether policies or the priorities that we—local authorities and all professionals in the structure—are charged with reaching, including the targets that are set in relation to educational policy, can have a driving effect on what happens on a daily basis in an educational community. There should be more discussion and debate about where we are in terms of the overall policy and about the relationship between policy and the way in which that policy is implemented. Where are the boundaries? Where are the parameters in terms of allowing purposeful variation in a meaningful way that would not obviously end up creating other variables that would lead to inequities?

I will give an example of that. Richard Kerley talked about staff who may not be meeting their professional standards; we know that they are a very small minority of teachers in Scotland. We already have a national framework and national policies and strategies that allow headteachers and other professionals to take action—supportive action and then other action, if necessary—to deal with that.

That is an example of one thing that would be important to the focus nationally if we are dealing with raising attainment and standards, and with raising teachers' professional standards rather than just maintaining them. It is about the relationship between the national focus and what is appropriate at all levels in terms of purposeful variation.

Gordon Ford: I cannot answer the question about why we are not getting similar levels of attainment across the country. We should remember, however, that although we have had 60-plus years of a welfare state, we still have poverty in large areas of our country. We address particular issues in one area, but then they appear somewhere else. That is because we still work in silos. There is a silo mentality in Scotland and the UK that will exist until we break down a lot of barriers. What I want is for Government to create policy and for local authorities, councils and schools to create the strategies to get the outcomes that we are looking for as a country.

We do have a framework in place. Christina McKelvie mentioned the early years, which, although we have not talked about them, are the key to all this. We will get families and people out of poverty by focusing first on the early years. The process is, however, longitudinal and—no disrespect to the politicians—it is sometimes difficult to fund such work because there will not be an outcome for 15 or 20 years. I think that councils across the country are now focused on the early years, but some of our colleagues in other services are still in their silos. We need to get them out of there. That would release an awful lot of money and we need that resource to make the difference.

We also have curriculum for excellence and 16+ learning choices: there is a framework. It is disappointing that we are talking about structures as if they will make the difference. As Judith McClure said earlier, leadership is key in all this: leadership in schools, in local authorities and in this Parliament. I am pretty confident that the framework that we need is there and that we will get positive outcomes from it.

Keir Bloomer: I agree with what Gordon Ford said about the early years. It seems to me that one of the areas in which public policy needs to be very active over the coming years is the very earliest period of life. We have one great national universal service—the national health service—which looks after you briefly around the period of birth. Then there is remarkably little intervention other than in cases of emergency until you reach the age of about three, when the other major universal service will begin to take an interest in you—that is, us.

We urgently need to invest in the first three years and create a child development service that is concerned with physical and emotional development as much as it is with cognitive development and that seeks to ensure that young people do not enter the system with the kind of cultural disadvantage that many do enter it with and which inhibits their learning from there on in. I suspect that, as people concerned with education, we must accept that one of the consequences of that may be a diversion of resources into resourcing those early years. That is an important point and it may go some way to addressing the concerns that Christina McKelvie raised half an hour or more ago.

I agree entirely with what Judith McClure said a few minutes ago about improving the quality of the outcomes that we achieve. The conclusion that she reached is that structures and governance are important, but not the only things that are important. I think that that justifies why we are here talking about that particular issue.

Denis Mongon said earlier that a number of schools in England are remarkably successful in overcoming the social circumstances in which they operate. I think that that is much truer of schools in England than it is of schools in Scotland. The homogeneity of our system operates against that

kind of exceptional performance. Considering the outcomes—at least, the easily measurable outcomes—of Scottish education, the extent to which they are correlated to socioeconomic circumstances is absolutely overwhelming. We must start giving serious attention to that.

We can do that by looking at new areas of activity in, for example, the very earliest years, which I have just mentioned, but we must also think about what we do with the system that we have at the moment. There is more progress to be made in the sharing of good practice. We do not go about that in a very scientific way, and I suspect that that is the case south of the border, too, where the sharing of examples of outstanding performance has not been done particularly successfully, either.

Incidentally, we must look at the demand side as opposed to the supply side for examples of good practice. We are good at putting examples of good practice on to websites, but we are very poor at generating a sophisticated audience for them and at ensuring that those who could benefit from them understand what is available and are helped to integrate it into their practice.

I want to comment on the issue of international comparisons, which Richard Kerley raised. From remarks that have been made around the table this morning, it would be easy to run away with the impression that Scottish education is underperforming or performing not much better than average in the context of a world situation in which some countries are performing exceptionally well. We must take into account the fact that the state of education globally is extraordinarily depressing. It is failing to keep pace with human needs as they are evolving in the contemporary context.

For example, to the best of my knowledge, no country is succeeding in upskilling its population as fast as the contemporary economy demands. That is one reason for the spread of global inequality. The laws of supply and demand dictate that if there is an inadequate supply of extremely well-qualified people, their value will rise. That has been happening steadily and inexorably over the past 40 years or so. Perhaps equally important, there is no system to ensure that public understanding of technological change and the social change that arises from it keeps pace with those changes. Whether we look at the economic dimension or the social dimension, there are many reasons to be concerned about the state of education outwith Scotland, but that does not absolve us from addressing the fact that we do not appear to be making progress as rapidly as some others, even within that somewhat downbeat context.

Where we do have an advantage is that in curriculum for excellence we are seeking—albeit somewhat incoherently—to do the right things. If we look at the great plethora of different kinds of development that are part of curriculum for excellence and seek to identify a common factor, we find that the common factor is deep learning. It is about understanding; it is about creating the capacity in young people not merely to know but to make constructive use of what they know. It is a pity that, to my mind, that central message has not, as yet, been communicated as effectively as it needs to be, but at least we have that in place. What we also need to have in place is the degree of liberation of talent at school level that is required to translate that into effective practice.

The Convener: A number of people want to contribute to the discussion, which I am conscious has been going on for almost an hour and 45 minutes. I intend to round things up at around 12 o'clock.

Margaret Smith: I have a brief observation on the sharing of best practice. Those of us around the table who are politicians probably all do what I do, which is to go into my local schools on a regular basis. When you are an education spokesperson, you make use of that to pick people's brains as well as to find out what is going on in your local schools.

This week, I went into one of my primary schools and happened to mention that today the committee would be talking about the structure of Scottish education. One of the senior teachers whom I spoke to said that she had been in Sweden last week and had been struck by how much of the good practice that she was told about and shown was already being done in her own primary school. I think that that surprised her. That comes back to the idea that, a lot of the time, we tend to focus on where we are failing.

11:45

We probably do not focus enough on telling people that they are doing a good job when that is the case. We do not do a good enough job to share people's best practice. The school to which I refer is a successful urban school; it is overcrowded partly because it is successful. Despite challenges—20 per cent of the school's pupils do not have English as a first language—the school manages, because of the important ethos that Kenny Gibson described, to be successful across the board in achievement and attainment.

We are probably still not good enough at empowering headteachers, assistant heads and teachers in such schools by telling them that what they are doing is as good as the practice that

someone might find if they got on to a plane and headed off to places such as Sweden and Finland. Our teaching profession may be ground down because of other circumstances, such as budgets, but there is also a confidence issue. Some of the points that were made by the Donaldson review are about that—saying to teachers that it is not good enough to be complacent and that, at the same time, it is not good enough for them not to stretch themselves. The challenge of the curriculum for excellence for our teachers is to ensure that they take advantage of the situation and demand the support that they need, if they do not have it.

Professor Mongon: What I am about to say is predicated on the idea that the system requires a strong middle tier—strong local authorities. The international evidence, including a recent McKinsey report with which you may be familiar, and my personal inclination indicate that that is required. A strong middle tier does not necessarily mean a managerial or controlling middle tier—it means a middle tier that is clear about what it expects from its services and how it will get that. That can be done in a wide variety of ways. I want everyone to hear that I said that, because I am about to be challenging to the point of offensive.

One of the contributors to your inquiry describes the current tier of local authorities as

"the glue that holds our schools together."

To the outsider, it appears that your system needs not glue but oil. It needs lubricating and to be faster on its feet—it does not need to be stuck in its present attitudes and approaches. If I may mix my metaphors, to the outsider—that is an important qualifying and humble phrase; you may rubbish me once I have left the building, or even before that—it looks incestuous. There are too many points at which the system invites collusion between people. Both vertically and horizontally, there are too many small clubs. The classic example is that the local authority is both the provider and the assessor of services, which is a big difficulty for you.

I would be prepared to bet—I do not know, as I have not done the research—that your biggest problem will turn out to be not the homogeneity of your secondary schools, which, interestingly, have dominated the conversation, but the diversity within your secondary schools. I would be prepared to bet that every one of your 300-odd secondary schools has one department, with the same children as every other department, that is performing at a level that would transform your system if every department in the school performed at it. You do not have in your structure the governance—that is why I keep trying to distinguish between structure and governance—and the capacity for accountability that gets down to that level. That is not unrelated to the point that was made about whether there is sufficient challenge to leaders and by leaders to their staff.

I think that you will find that within-school variation is a bigger issue than across-school variation. That is almost universally the case in the UK. I do not see, as an outsider, how your structure can deliver the breath of fresh air that will either evaporate the glue or stop people behaving incestuously unless you inject some particular points of different character into it. It appears to me that that will somehow come from parents and communities.

I promise that that will be my final comment, convener.

The Convener: I am afraid that it will have to be. Colin Sutherland indicated that he wanted to come in some time ago.

Colin Sutherland: I agree with much of what has been said about the importance of leadership. We must never underemphasise its importance. Associated with that is the idea of liberation, and we must not forget that resources are also important.

I disagree with what Professor Kerley said about the homogeneity of secondary provision across the country because our evidence is quite clear that that is not the case. However, I like the notion of purposeful variation, which is a nice thought and a powerful one. Of course there should be variation, but let us have variation with a purpose.

Christina McAnea: I want to make it clear that I am arguing for local authorities to be the tier that supports schools and is the provider between central Government and schools, because they are best placed to do that. If local authorities did not exist we would have to invent them, because they are best placed to provide an holistic approach and co-ordinate services for children to meet the needs that Christina McKelvie talked about. No other single organisation is better placed to provide that range of services and ensure that they are all in place.

That said, if our aim is to free up schools and headteachers, we have to ask what is preventing headteachers from doing things, because headteachers operate not in a vacuum but in a system. As Colin Sutherland said, they are expected to reach certain levels and to ensure that children attain certain qualifications. Comparisons are made with other local schools and people look at those.

When the Westminster Government talked about freeing up schools and brought in the legislation to do precisely that, it said that the idea was to allow headteachers to go out and bring in children who are disengaged from the system or

who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although some schools have made an excellent job of doing that, the exclusion rates of some academies are 30 per cent higher than those of neighbouring schools, so they have exported the problems to other schools, and in some cases the number of children who receive free school meals dropped after the school became an academy. There is no evidence that headteachers were in any way prevented from going out and engaging with, if you like, the disadvantaged, difficult pupils. Again, it was very much about a perception.

We should not change things just for the sake of it. What we are saying is that, provided that headteachers are freed up to make innovative changes and provide strong leadership and management in their schools, there also needs to be a system that manages the headteachers, including those who are not doing the things that the Government has set as objectives. In those cases, we need a mechanism that allows us to go in and ask how we can make those schools perform at the same level as the school down the road that has a similar intake.

Don Ledingham: Returning to Ken Macintosh's question about what difference structural changes can make, I will give a concrete example of something that is happening in East Lothian. In the past few weeks, I have been privileged to be conducting meetings with parent councils to consult them about the community partnership schools initiative that we are promoting. At the beginning of those sessions, we have been looking at our equally well support from the start strategy, which is about the early years, and asking why there should be a 25-year difference in people's lifespan depending on where in East Lothian they are born. We are challenging that notion and engaging in a conversation with parents about support from the start, the early years agenda and the pre-school agenda. It is exciting that a group of parent council representatives is saying that they would like taking that work forward to be a priority.

In East Lothian, we have cross-party permission to take forward the notion of identifying a proportion of every school's funding and putting it in a pot in the middle for a cluster, with a decision being taken collectively about how that money can best be spent. The notion is that we use funding as a lever for change, and give interested parties an opportunity to influence that. We are considering a proportion of between 2 and 5 per cent of funding; it is not huge. We are exploring the possibility that schools can withdraw their funding from that pot, but they must engage in negotiation and discussion, and parents and other stakeholders must be part of that process too.

That type of discussion does not currently have such leverage. The potential benefits, particularly for the early years agenda, are certainly worth exploring, judging by the level of dialogue with and interest from parents. Those parents often have children who are not necessarily going to face those challenges, and the notion of collective responsibility in our community is really exciting. I do not know whether Eileen Prior has any comments to make on that.

Eileen Prior: I agree: in general, parents in the state system in Scotland have that sense of the common good and will strive for other kids. There is not a sense that they are interested only in their own. That is what gets them involved at first, of course, because that is why they are there: their child is at the school. However, parents very quickly gain a vision of what could be achieved in their community.

Don Ledingham is absolutely right, and that is fabulous—although I do not want to sing his praises too much—but it does not happen elsewhere. The variation throughout Scotland is enormous, and that is unacceptable.

We should free up headteachers, and there should be more community and parental engagement, but it is what is in the middle of the sandwich between national strategy and what happens at school that is causing the issues.

Professor Kerley: I will try to be brief, so I will summarise things at the risk of offending some people, as Denis Mongon did. I echo what Keir Bloomer said about the variations in national outcomes in terms of the learning in which young people engage, although I was talking rather more about structure.

I mentioned the group of students that I was teaching earlier this morning, which included Norwegians, a Korean, a Chinese person, a Spaniard and a Catalan. I see in those young people very different qualities—some better and some worse—from those that young Scots people possess. We should not focus simply on the fact that Koreans can do maths better than Scots can; there are positives and negatives.

At the risk of generalising from a particular experience, I argue that dissemination of good practice is a challenge in every profession under the sun. In my observation it is rarely confined by hierarchical pressure, but more often by peer culture. My university likes the fact that I write in *The Scotsman* in an attempt to disseminate good practice, but other academics elsewhere in the city would sniff at that. It is about how we share across boundaries, from Sweden to the west of Edinburgh, and from the west to the east of Edinburgh and into East Lothian, which is a problematic process.

That relates to Judith McClure's point about the position of universities in the education system. Without exception, all the monotechnical colleges of education throughout Scotland, and pretty much throughout England too, have now been absorbed—or taken over, to be blunt about it—by universities. They have not been well taken over, in the sense of integrating discipline with pedagogy—or andragogy, if you prefer me to talk more broadly.

The committee might, if it has time, consider the comparative position of teaching hospitals vis-à-vis medical schools, and universities vis-à-vis educating primary, secondary and nursery teachers. There is a gap in practice and status, and in the relationship between those.

12:00

I point out to Kay Barnett that if we have a good framework system for dealing with underperforming teachers, it should stand measure against how other tightly regulated professions deal with underperformance. If the system was measured against those other professions, we would find that it did not produce believable outcomes in addressing underperformance—and I mean that quite literally, in terms of absolute numbers.

As a final point, I say to Judith McClure that Attila the Hun is not quite of our time. As a very contemporary model for disseminating good practice in leading and observing, I recommend that you all watch "Michel Roux's Service", which is on BBC 2 tonight at 8 o'clock. Michel Roux manages to lead, challenge and encourage—and discipline—a group of young people who are pretty much of the order that we are talking about, in a way that is polite and effective, and not demonstratively Alan Sugar-like or Attila-like in its unpleasantness.

Greg Dempster: I have taken from the discussion that there is a lot of agreement around the suggestion that we need to free up and empower schools and school leaders, but in the context of clear expectations. The glue and oil analogy is a good one. We have heard about, and from, local authorities that are perhaps more the oil in the system than the glue, and there are most definitely authorities out there that are the glue.

I also found helpful the distinction that has been made between governance and structures. I will finish on the point about whether we need, and can afford, the structures that we have. Glue and oil is a governance question, but structure is a budget question.

The Convener: That is a good place for us to end this morning's consideration. I am sure that the issue of money and how we spend it will exercise the committee until dissolution, and the successor committee too. I thank you all for your attendance this morning.

12:02

Meeting continued in private until 12:20.

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