



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Literacy and Numeracy: DE Briefing

30 May 2012

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

Literacy and Numeracy: DE Briefing

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mr Phil Flanagan  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Daithí McKay  
Mr Sean Rogers

**Witnesses:**

Mr Adrian Arbuthnot	Department of Education
Dr Chris Hughes	Department of Education

**The Chairperson:** I welcome to this morning's Committee meeting Mr Adrian Arbuthnot, director of curriculum, qualifications and standards in the Department of Education (DE), and Dr Chris Hughes, head of the Department's standards and improvement team. Adrian, you can begin with your presentation. Following the presentation, I will open it up for Committee members' questions.

**Mr Adrian Arbuthnot (Department of Education):** Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee on literacy and numeracy issues. As you are probably aware, it is a particularly good time to do this briefing, because, earlier this month, we received the annual statistical release relating to examination performance in our schools.

In the first instance, I will refer back to the Programme for Government (PFG). Two key targets were set for examination performance in it. The first related to the achievement by pupils of grades A\* to C in five or more GCSEs, including English and maths. The target is to raise achievement levels to 66% by 2014-15. The latest figure, for 2010-11, shows achievement standing at 59.5%.

The second PFG target relates to pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds achieving five or more GCSEs, including English and maths. The target is to raise standards to 49% by 2014-15. The latest figure, for 2010-11, shows achievement standing at 31.7%.

Trends over the past six years show improvement from year to year, but the latest figures against both PFG targets show a slowing in the rate of progress. The percentage of school leavers achieving five GCSEs or more, including English and maths, rose by 0.5% to the current figure of 59.5%. Beneath that headline figure, we see that the performance of girls stands at 64.3% and the performance of boys stands at 55%, although the rate of increase in performance has been faster for boys than it has

been for girls. Very noticeably, grammar schools achieve at 90% or more, whereas non-grammar schools achieved at just over 36% in 2011.

The overall figure for 2010-11 for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, as measured by the free school meal entitlement (FSME), stands at 31.7%. However, beneath that total, Protestant male school leavers achieving five or more GCSEs, including English and maths, fell by 1.7% to 18.6%, and the percentage of Catholic girls achieving the same fell by 0.7%. Against those dips in performance, Protestant girls increased their performance by 1.3% and Catholic boys increased theirs by 3.1%. FSME pupils who attend grammar schools perform in line with the overall performance of the school, but those who attend non-grammar schools achieve well below acceptable levels.

That fairly brief synopsis of the statistics demonstrates that there is no room whatsoever for complacency. The figures tell us that it is now more important than ever to apply our policies effectively and make gains in performance. Raising standards of literacy and numeracy and closing the achievement gap remain key priorities for the Minister. The Count, Read: Succeed strategy, which addresses literacy and numeracy, has been in place for a year and recognises that schools are best placed to bring about their own improvement. The strategy draws on a range of evidence that emphasises the central role of the class teacher, supported by parents and school leaders, in working to raise standards.

The Count, Read: Succeed strategy applies to all schools and aligns with key strands that have a particular focus on improving literacy and numeracy. Those key strands are the revised curriculum; revised assessment arrangements; the central role of teachers; early intervention; engagement with parents and communities; and sharing best practice.

Looking forward, the creation of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will renew the focus on the interface with schools and school development. Moreover, the review of the common funding formula will be an opportunity to reconsider the financial support for schools, which underpins the delivery of our objectives. Of course, area-based planning will also be a step forward in helping to make our schools sustainable and capable of supporting and developing all our pupils.

There is a lot to be discussed in the statistics and in the response to them, but I will not take up any more of the Committee's time. I invite you to ask questions or seek clarifications that you think appropriate.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you, Adrian, and thanks for coming, Dr Hughes.

We get into a situation where it depends on how the statistics are interpreted. I do not know how you avoid or get around that, because you have to have some measurements in place. However, paragraph 6 of your briefing paper expresses "concern" at what you called in your presentation a:

*"slowing in the rate of progress".*

Therefore, there is a slowdown in the improvement, yet Every School a Good School was launched in April 2009 and Count, Read: Succeed in March 2009. That suggests that the Department's policies have contributed to that slowdown, because the figures are better prior to the introduction of those policies. Paragraph 8 of your paper relates to 2010 and 2011 figures and shows a decline in achievement by Protestant males. From those figures, it would seem that, rather than improving the situation, the policies introduced have created a slowdown. How do you account for that?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** There has been a constant increase in performance, although I agree that there has been a slowdown. The policies that we are introducing have been proven and shown by international standards to be the most effective policies in raising literacy and numeracy standards. It is important for us to keep emphasising that real change will come about through the quality of our teaching and the leadership that is provided in our schools, as well as through links to the local community and parents. The policies are internationally recognised, and I think that they are the right course by which to gain continuing improvement and to hit the PFG targets.

**The Chairperson:** How do you ensure that the measurement process that we have is understood by the system? Are we in a place where the system itself is generating data for the sake of it? How much can we depend on the reliability of the information that is generated or collated by the Department?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** I am not sure what you mean

**Dr Chris Hughes (Department of Education):** These are national statistics, so the entire quality-assurance mechanism is in place. The statistics are based on performance in external exams — GCSEs — so I would say that the information is incredibly robust.

**The Chairperson:** Yes, so it is robust. There is the potential for error in any statistics, but these are clearly and objectively defined on the basis of the outcomes of the assessments that are made.

The Committee has always had concerns about added value. How do you measure added value? You, or the two individuals who wrote the reply to my question for written answer about added value, should know. I was disappointed, because the school improvement policy stated that there would be development of a robust added-value framework. That was clearly in the policy in a small note at the bottom of a page. The Department said that it would do that, but the answer that I received to my question on contextual value added (CVA) stated:

*"Whilst CVA appears attractive in promising to show the difference schools can make, in reality such measures are very complex and can be difficult to interpret."*

What specific action has the Department taken to put in place a process to assess and quantify added value?

**Dr Hughes:** The response set out what we are doing, which is that, from September 2012, levels of progression will be introduced. As a measure of the value added by a school, we have set out in Count Read: Succeed the expectation that every pupil will progress at least one level during a Key Stage. That means that if a school has an intake that is below the expected level, it still has an opportunity to demonstrate that it has added value by progressing the pupils at least one level, rather than having, for example, a pupil who has made progress but, on entry, has been below the expected level and, at the next stage, is below the expected level. That allows the school to demonstrate that it has taken a certain percentage of children up a level and show how many are at the expected stage.

Internationally, nobody has cracked CVA. In our system, when the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) inspects a school, it takes full account of the context in which the school operates, and that provides a measure of contextual value added. England could not get it to work, and there is a particular danger with contextual value added, in that it has the potential to embed low expectations and provide an excuse for underperformance. Nobody has cracked that, so it is not just a problem for the Department. We have been keeping an eye on what we can do to allow schools to demonstrate the value that they add.

**The Chairperson:** The Dawn Purvis report refers to case studies in Ashfield Boys' High School. Has the Department ever followed up any of those case studies? When I asked the Minister some time ago about what the Department is doing to implement any of the recommendations from the Purvis report, that is one that, from memory, was not being picked up. You refer, Chris, to CVA not working in England, but there seem to be examples locally, not too far away from this Building, of case studies being carried out on how to measure and evaluate added value. However, it seems that those have not really been taken on board.

**Dr Hughes:** My understanding is that those case studies are looking at the progress that pupils make. Therefore, they are designed to raise standards. They are trying to enhance pupil performance. Rather than measure the value of a school and take that into summing up, teachers, as professionals, are drawing on a wide range of information and assessing what the pupil in front of them is capable of. The school is perfectly entitled to use that information and a professional judgement to make an assessment.

I am not aware of Ashfield having a measure of the contextual value added of the school, but it is good practice for schools to set challenging and stretching targets for pupils. When that happens, the high expectations, which we know are very important, deliver better outcomes for the pupils. That is an interaction for delivering outcomes for individual pupils, if I understand you correctly.

**The Chairperson:** We may need to find a bit more out about what was going on with that case study. That might be useful.

In paragraph 2, you state:

*"The Department's main measures of progress in literacy and numeracy are Key Stage 2 results at the end of primary school, and how many school leavers achieve 5+ GCSEs".*

We still have the problem that one in four pupils leaves primary school without having reached, according to the previous figures, adequate levels of numeracy and literacy.

**Dr Hughes:** It is fewer than that. The figure has been reduced to 17% from 25%.

**The Chairperson:** It is now 17%, as opposed to 25%? Of course, Committees will always ask what you are doing about the 17%. What would you say has been the main driver in reducing it from 25% to 17%?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** I think that that is very much due to the quality of teaching in classrooms. The whole school improvement programme is premised on quality teachers making professional judgements about what individual pupils need by way of an educational pathway through the school. I think that good-quality teaching, supported by school leadership, is the single most effective means of improving performance in children. Having high expectations of the children is also important.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you. You have covered some of the points that I was going to raise. Please bear with me for a second, while I tell a little story that illustrates a point. My concern is that we are looking at the wrong figures. When I was at university, someone told me a story about a visit by Winston Churchill to a Spitfire factory. The young, keen director told him that every Spitfire that came back was inspected. All the holes were looked at, and the aircraft was strengthened in those places. Winston Churchill replied that they were making one mistake, which was that they were looking at the ones that came back.

There is an element of the same thing here. Yes, we look at how many people move to the top of the system, but we do not look at the ones who do not. Therefore, it comes back to improvement and added value. We need to find accurate ways in which to assess how we move people up. You will reach a natural plateau of those who are easy to move up into the top system, but that will not happen for the difficult ones at the bottom. Those are the ones whom we have to concentrate on, because of all the other associated problems.

I suppose what I am asking is whether we can look outside the box. I know that that is a cliché, but can we look at the different methods that other places use to assess added value or improvement? That is where we should concentrate our efforts. There is a hint of that in the free school meal entitlement, although I do not have complete faith in how that system works. I have been to a number of the schools and have been told that many pupils, particularly Protestants, will not sign up for free school meals. We need to find mechanisms to judge. Can we look outside? Are there other things to look at?

Finally, is there a link between the issue and absenteeism and truancy? There must be. Has anyone looked at the correlation? Those three things all build into one. We have to find new ways of looking at it.

**Dr Hughes:** There is a lot in there, but I am happy to make a start. There is a differential uptake of free school meals among the Protestant community, but there is not a differential uptake in the establishment of entitlement to free school meals. We measure the establishment of entitlement and not whether a pupil takes a free school meal. We triangulated the free school meal data with other data sources and found that the establishment of entitlement to free school meals reflected exactly the community split of those who are entitled. It is worth quite a lot of money to schools, and they put a lot of effort into it. Therefore, there was absolutely no evidence of that. In fact, it was quite the opposite. There is robust evidence that shows that the establishment of entitlement to free school meals exactly reflects the community proportions of those who are entitled to them.

**Mr Kinahan:** Did you ask schools whether they feel that there is any variance in the figure that you feel is accurate? I have heard a contrary view.

**Dr Hughes:** We heard that, and that is why we proactively looked at it. The evidence is very clear that the establishment of entitlement is reflected.

The Minister has two overarching aims for the Department. The first is to raise standards and the second is to close the gap. Those aims reflect exactly his concern about what you set out at the outset. We have talked a lot about raising standards and the importance of that, and the system responds to the leadership of the Minister and the Department. When we started to focus on five good GCSEs, including English and maths, schools responded to that. That is probably where you start to get your early wins, because people are more disposed to coming on board and the problems are therefore less intractable. If you had asked me at the outset whether I expected things to go up for those who were more advantaged and more slowly for those who were less advantaged, I would have agreed. We are conscious that we have to work very hard to ensure that we close the gap.

As to the solution, international evidence shows that our system is average. The Chief Inspector's report identifies that, in Northern Ireland, a quarter of the leadership and a quarter of the lessons need to improve in our primary and post-primary schools. That is where you get your improvement from — improving those lessons. What we know from all the international evidence is that it is about supporting the quality of the teaching in well-led schools and having high expectations for all. One of the issues that can arise, particularly for those entitled to free school meals, is that the expectations that the children have, that their parents have of them and, sometimes, that the school has of them are not sufficiently high. We have very strong evidence internationally that we have the right suite of policies. What we need to do is ensure that they are applied in every single educational setting. We support the teachers to do the best job possible and raise the standards for the pupils.

**Mrs Dobson:** We all know — the argument is well rehearsed — that literacy and numeracy standards are closely tied to the future skills of our workforce, and employers are telling us how important it is to raise standards. You have a PFG target. What yardstick would you use to measure literacy and numeracy levels, and at what point would the Department feel that standards have been successfully or unsuccessfully met? Why do you not set a specific target, perhaps in percentage terms, for increasing literacy and numeracy levels?

**Dr Hughes:** Count, Read: Succeed is where those targets are set. We have a range of targets set in Count, Read: Succeed.

**Mrs Dobson:** In percentage terms?

**Dr Hughes:** Absolutely. We have targets for free school meal entitlement pupils, for boys and for girls. The target is to get the percentage of pupils achieving five good GCSEs, including in English and maths, to 70% or above by 2020.

**Mrs Dobson:** What specific steps in the classroom are you taking to address the problems of literacy and numeracy? It just seems to be policy initiative after policy initiative, but in the classroom there are no concrete steps being taken.

**Dr Hughes:** When dealing with teachers, you are dealing with highly qualified professionals who have been highly trained. I am always conscious that, when you are talking to a room full of teachers, there are more degrees in the room than there are people. It is a group of self-developing professionals. We rely absolutely on the professional judgement and integrity of teachers to address the problems in front of them.

It has become clear that there is no silver bullet for improving standards in literacy and numeracy. What teachers need is the support and leadership of a school that says that it trusts their professional judgement and makes training available to them in a range of pedagogical approaches. We know that it is about the interaction between teachers and the pupils in front of them. Count, Read: Succeed sets that out very clearly: if you try something and it does not work, we support your professional judgement in identifying, with structured support from within the school in the first instance, and from outside the school if that does not work, whatever action you feel is best to address the needs of the pupil in front of you.

**Mrs Dobson:** I notice that the conclusion in your briefing paper states:

*"the policies put in place have been working",*

but from reading through the details, that is clearly not the case in all groups. You say that you want to keep raising the standards. You have mentioned the teachers, but what plans does the Department have in place to change or dump those policies if they are not working? Is there a plan?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** Yes, the Minister has set out a range of policies that he wants to put in place — they are still being put in place — that will raise the overall attainment levels in schools. The policies include the revised curriculum, new assessment arrangements, the entitlement framework and the sustainable schools policy. All of those are interlocking policies that, when taken together, will raise the ability of schools to deliver the sorts of results that we all expect from the pupils. Over the past number of years, there has been a range of policy initiatives. They are all interlocked and are being put in place with a view to school improvement. I do not think that it is right to say that we do not have the policies in place. The policies that we have put in place are demonstrably those that good education systems elsewhere in the world have in place. By following that example in Northern Ireland, I think that we will achieve the sort of improvement in standards that everybody wants.

**Mrs Dobson:** But those policies are clearly not working in certain areas.

**Mr Arbuthnot:** I am not sure that —

**Dr Hughes:** I do not accept that. Demonstrable improvements are seen in seven of the eight demographics that we look at. The one in which there has not been the progress that we absolutely want is for Protestant boys entitled to free school meals.

**Mrs Dobson:** Yes. The Chairperson referred to that earlier, and it is worrying that that has fallen by 2%.

**Dr Hughes:** Essentially, it has bumped along. It has not improved. There was a slight percentage increase in 2006.

**Mrs Dobson:** It has not got any better.

**Dr Hughes:** It has not got any better, but we know that the solution is the same as it has been for the other seven demographics. The eighth is perhaps the toughest one to crack, but the solution has worked for Catholic boys entitled to free school meals and it has worked for Protestant girls entitled to free school meals. It is about supporting the quality of the teaching in sustainable, well-led schools.

**Mrs Dobson:** Do you recognise that improving the standards in primary and secondary schools would relieve the pressure on further education colleges and allow them to concentrate on the higher education training that our employers so desperately need for their workforce?

**Dr Hughes:** The knock-on benefits of raising educational standards cut across a whole range of aspects of society. We know that those who do not achieve academically are much more likely to end up in contact with the criminal justice system and much more likely to have poor health outcomes. We are well aware of how absolutely central raising educational standards for everybody is to Northern Ireland society.

**Mr Arbuthnot:** The standards feature in the Northern Ireland economic strategy as well.

**The Chairperson:** Chris, to come back to something that you said earlier, if I were a hospital patient and the Department were responsible for the medical policies, I would not go to hospital. That is because the policy would be to allow doctors to exercise their professional judgement, but if that does not work, the Department would tell them to try something else.

I appreciate giving teachers latitude and freedom in the classroom, but I despair of this attitude of, "Try that and if it works, well done. If it doesn't, rub it out and start all over again." That leads me to the continually vexing question of the qualifications of those who teach numeracy in schools — numeracy co-ordinators. We received a letter from the Department on 7 March, which stated:

*"The Department has currently no plans to review the qualification requirements for teachers teaching literacy and numeracy in primary or post-primary schools."*

However, the previous paragraph states:

*"As referred to in our letter of 14 February, training and support is available to Literacy and Numeracy co-ordinators through the ELBs CASS".*

The curriculum advisory and support service (CASS) is decimated in education and library boards (ELBs). CASS could hardly sharpen a pencil for you now. There is no support for our schools. I know that the Minister and the Department will say, "Oh well, if we had ESA, it would become the saviour of all those things."

I make a prediction here and now, and it will be in the Hansard report, that if and when ESA is introduced, the first thing that it will have to do is re-employ people. Since 2006, vacancy control has meant that staff numbers have continued to go down and down, so the first thing that ESA would have to do is re-employ people.

In a sense, we cannot have it both ways. On the one hand, we are saying that we will give the system enough support through ELBs and CASS to train teachers. That is not there, so we will not have that at the same level as existed in the past. On the other hand, the Department is saying that there is no way that it will look at redefining or reviewing the qualification requirements for teachers in literacy and numeracy. However, we are saying that we will use free school meals as an indicator, because if it works for Catholic and Protestant girls, it should work for Protestant boys. There is something wrong.

I go back to the issue on which the Minister and I disagree, which is the Achieving Belfast initiative. I still cannot get my head around why or where he is going with that. It had 10 teachers in schools, it was proactive, it was achieving outcomes, but the decision was taken to scrap it, throw it out, put it in the bin, and get another new one that we will call something else. We keep going around and around. Why is that? Why does that happen in the system?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** The Minister does not see that the way forward is through localised initiatives in different areas. He wants to have a suite of policies that creates improvement across all schools. As far as the CASS service is concerned, the Minister is keen to look at a new regional service under the control of the ESA. So he recognises that there is a role for a school development service, and that is another building block that is being put into place.

**Dr Hughes:** In addition, the whole thrust of the 'Every School a Good School' policy is that schools and teachers are best placed to identify their own. I would like to read to you from the General Teaching Council's 'Code of Values for Professional Practice for Northern Ireland':

*"Teachers will: in keeping with the concept of professional integrity assume responsibility for their ongoing professional development as an essential expression of their professionalism."*

Training is not done unto doctors or engineers. We recognise that teachers need support in it, but they are best placed to identify their own professional development needs in the school and with the support of the leadership and management.

You also mentioned the role of literacy and numeracy co-ordinators. As we set out, what we do not want to do is constrain the ability of a school leadership to meet the needs of its particular school. In some schools, the role of the literacy and numeracy co-ordinator is largely about organising other teachers; in some, it is about providing pedagogical support to others. We say that it is entirely within the keeping of the local management of schools policy to do that. Particularly at primary school, every teacher is a teacher of literacy and numeracy; that is the core of their business. In that regard, we say that is for the school to organise the support around that.

You were talking about the difference between a medical intervention and teaching intervention. Medical interventions are done on the basis of evidence of what works, because you are combating a disease or something like that. We know that children have different learning styles. We say to the teachers: "We support you in addressing that." It is that different thing. It is about a teacher making the emotional and pedagogical connection with the child in front of him. That is something that cannot be prescribed for. However, we also say: "You have the freedom to take a range of pedagogical support; we know that you will be developing that within your own professional integrity; we will provide support for you when you are unable to crack the more difficult problems, but, equally, we hold you to account for the outcomes." That is the very important. We do not say: "Do what you like and

we will walk away and take no interest in it." We are absolutely focusing on ensuring that outcomes for children improve.

**The Chairperson:** Just clarify one point for me. Are we now measuring outcomes on five GCSEs or seven GCSEs?

**Dr Hughes:** The PFG targets are set on five GCSEs, including English and maths.

**The Chairperson:** So we have gone through an audit process of schools, upon which crisis broke out across the country. You know my gripe on this; your own paper says that we are now going to use five GCSEs, but the Department went out on a process to audit schools and they took one cohort of 63 schools — it just so happened that it was the grammar schools — and said that their standard was to be seven, and to the rest of the schools that their standard was to be five. You bring us papers today and everything is five. It is no wonder that people get suspicious and wonder what is going on.

That is a very simple thing. I am not the brightest bulb in the box, but that is a very simple thing about how you standardise. You either use five or seven, but the Department used two different standards — I believe — to get two different outcomes. Now that that process is over and all the damage is done in terms of people judging how poor or good the schools were, you are now saying that you are going to use five GCSEs as the benchmark.

Are we definite that we are not going to get a change at some other stage? Is it five now for every school in Northern Ireland, whether selective or non-selective?

**Dr Hughes:** The five-GCSE standard relates to the achievement of pupils. That is why we focused in on that.

**The Chairperson:** It is not a judgement of a school as an institution; it is an assessment of the individual pupil.

**Dr Hughes:** The exercise that you are talking about is the area planning exercise. The education and library boards identified seven as the measure that they were seeking to use. It was a matter for them. If you use a measure of five GCSEs including English and maths, as we set out to the Committee earlier, 90% or more of pupils, no matter what way you break it down, achieve that level. You are not able to differentiate or discriminate which schools are doing the better job, given the challenges that they face and those that are not doing such a good job. Again, it is a matter for the education and library boards. They chose that measure. For us, it is five GCSEs; that is what is in the Programme for Government. We use that, because we know that that is what unlocks the ability for a pupil, when they leave school, to go into further education or training. The life chances of the pupil are at the centre of our decision-making.

**Mr Lunn:** I do not mind whether it is five or seven. If it is five, that is fair enough. You are using A\* to C. I remember, in the previous Assembly, asking what would happen if grade D were included, because there are a lot of academics and headmasters, particularly in some of the deprived areas that are such a matter of concern, who say that a D is a considerable achievement for a lot of pupils and, perhaps, a better achievement than a B in some other situations. We got statistics including Ds on request the last time. If I remember rightly, Chairman, the difference was quite stark when Ds were included. A grade D is generally acknowledged now as still, in old terms, a pass. It indicates to a future employer that the person is not illiterate and that they can read and write adequately. They may not become brain surgeons, but they have suitable skills for the workforce and a lot of situations. Is it possible to get some figures that include Ds to see where we are?

**Dr Hughes:** We could do, yes. I am very familiar with the issues about the D. We use C and above because C and above is a level 2 qualification. Grade D and below is a level 1 qualification. We recognise fully that a D is an excellent achievement for some pupils, and that is why we do not set the targets at 100%. We set them at 70% to recognise that you are not going to get all pupils over the line. A grade D, in particular, provides a platform for some pupils to go on with further study and work to achieve a C, which is the level 2. With regard to the economic development of the country, a C is the most desirable outcome. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognises that, and there is a target for us to increase the proportion of our workforce who are qualified to level 2 and above. A D is a great achievement for some pupils, and they may well go on and build on that, but the C is a cut-off point between the level 1 and the level 2 qualification.

**Mr Lunn:** I have a sense of déjà vu. We have been through this before, but it would be nice to see it updated.

I am struck by the difference in the figures between grammar and non-grammar. We have our own views about this. Is there evidence from anywhere else in the world to indicate what would happen if a particular country moved away from a selective system? I am not sure what systems operate in other countries, but I fancy that, somewhere in Europe, there is a country that is 10 or 20 years ahead of us — I fancy that most of them are, actually — and which has moved away from selection. I would love to know their experiences of the effects of moving away from selective into a non-selective system. Is there such a thing?

**Dr Hughes:** I do not have that to hand. I have a sense that there are issues, but I know that a lot of the systems that outperform us are non-selective. We know that from the programme for international student assessment (PISA) study. The PISA and OECD evidence says that systems that perform well are those that have a belief that every single child can achieve. They work towards ensuring that that is the case.

**Mr Lunn:** I am glad you said that; it saves me the trouble.

Lastly, this is not directly related to what you have been talking to us about, but there is a debate ongoing about the benefits of the statutory nursery sector versus the voluntary or private nursery sector and the effect that that has on a child's development. It seems to me that the first time you manage to measure is at Key Stage 2, when the child is 11. I asked before if any research had ever been done to give a contrast between the ongoing achievement of pupils at, perhaps, age seven or eight, because it is generally recognised now that if a child is not going to achieve in its later years, the damage is done long before the end of Key Stage 2. It is probably too late then to retrieve the situation. That is generally accepted. In fact, we just had a presentation from a couple of Americans. They were very interesting and said that this all starts in the womb.

We asked the Department for some statistics, and they said that a small amount of work had been done back in 1998, but there was nothing very definitive to indicate whether there was a difference in achievement between those who attended statutory nursery and those who attended some other form of preschool. However, I was told on Friday by a nursery headmistress that actually a considerable amount of work has been done across the water. Major studies have been ongoing for quite a number of years which would shed some light on that argument. It is a longer-term thing as to whether it is desirable to turn our whole nursery system into statutory, staffed by properly qualified teachers, or whether there is so little difference that it would not be worth the monumental amount of money involved. I keep asking you for research. Is it possible to have a look to see whether there is a major study in England? I have a link to it on my phone here, and I can give it to you.

**Dr Hughes:** That is in respect of preschool provision. Is it the one by Ted Melhuish?

**Mr Lunn:** I really do not know.

**Dr Hughes:** Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) is a study that it looks specifically at the outcomes for preschool pupils in Northern Ireland. It was led by Professor Ted Melhuish, who led the study in England. My memory from a previous life in the Department is that the study shows that if a child has a high-quality preschool experience, it has beneficial outcomes that are measurable throughout that. It was a longitudinal study. That high-quality experience can occur in either a statutory, voluntary or private setting. The chief inspector's report finds that the free-standing nursery schools tend to get higher results — very good and outstanding. However, it is the quality of the experience that the child has that has the impact, and that can take place in any setting.

**Mr Lunn:** I have not seen the study.

**The Chairperson:** We can make it available to you, because we have it.

**Mr Lunn:** That would be interesting. Basically, you are saying that it does not so much depend on the nature of the setting; it is more about the quality of the setting. Therefore, a very good voluntary playschool could perform just as well as a statutory.

**Dr Hughes:** The formal intervention process tells us that we have schools of every type that are in formal intervention, and that includes grammar schools and statutory nursery provision. It is about the quality of the experience, and a very good voluntary setting will provide a very beneficial and long-lasting boost to a pupil's future performance.

**The Chairperson:** Yes. However, it is fair to say that, in proportion to the overall number of schools, you are talking, thankfully, about a very small number.

**Dr Hughes:** Thankfully, yes.

**The Chairperson:** You made a sweeping statement. There is one sixth-form grammar school in intervention, out of 63 schools in Northern Ireland, and it is not the school in its entirety. I am not defending —

**Mr Lunn:** How did you get on to that?

**The Chairperson:** Well, because Chris made reference to intervention. We have to set things in context.

**Dr Hughes:** Absolutely. Thankfully, I am glad to say that the number of schools in formal intervention is small.

**Mr Rogers:** I have a few points. To go back to the figure that went down from 24% to 17% — I am talking about the end of primary school — it means that there are still five children in a class of 30 who are not reaching that level. OK, it is better than seven— there are two children in. Trevor has touched on this to some extent, but have any studies been done to see whether those five children attended preschool, nursery school or anything before school?

You say that a quarter of the leadership is not up to scratch — a quarter of the teaching is not up to scratch. However, if you take a class of 30 children, 25 children are achieving and five are not. Other factors need to be considered. I know that it is a difficult one. Basically, only 20% of children's education takes place in the classroom. The home environment — a word that has not been mentioned by either of you — has a big impact. Has any research has been done on those children who are failing at that stage?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** I am not aware of any research on that. I will certainly make enquiries.

**Dr Hughes:** We are fully aware of the importance of the link. The raising standards policy, Every School a Good School, has four characteristics, one of which is that the school is connected to its community, recognising absolutely the importance of the role that parents have as first educators of the pupils, getting them ready for school, supporting them through their schooling, sitting them down with their homework and providing access to a quiet place for them to undertake study. We are fully aware of that, but it has not come up so far.

**Mr Arbuthnot:** In his statement to the Assembly last September, the Minister talked about his intention to increase the awareness of the value of education among local communities and families in particular, and placed an emphasis on why children should attend school and be encouraged to achieve and have high aspirations.

**Dr Hughes:** On the issue of children's potential to achieve at the expected level, when we were setting the targets for 'Count, Read: Succeed', we looked at other systems around the world to see what outcomes they had. We looked specifically at those systems that had some form of a barrier to go from lower secondary to upper secondary education, which is the equivalent of our five GCSEs including English and maths.

Because it is compulsory for pupils here to attend school until the age of 16, some schools will set a barrier over which they want pupils to get five GCSEs or whatever. We looked at other systems around the world to see how many of their pupils who were subject to a similar measure were able to achieve at that level. Typically, the measure that was used was that pupils had to achieve in English and maths and a couple of other subjects, which is quite similar to our approach. We found that, typically, other systems were able to get 90% of their pupils over that level. When we were setting the targets for English on its own and maths on its own, 90%, which is the target that is set in 'Count,

Read: Succeed', seemed to us to be the absolute minimum. Therefore, it is 90% plus, but we are less concerned about why the children are failing and more concerned about making sure that they do not fail.

**Mr Rogers:** I believe in early intervention, at Key Stage 1, if children are not engaging with education, and we can see a history of that, whether it is in the inner city or even in rural areas. Schools need more help in engaging, to make sure that the parents of those five children, or whatever, are given every support. If the teacher takes a class of 30, there is not much more that he or she can do.

**Dr Hughes:** I would say that we have to have high expectations for all our teachers, all our pupils and all our outcomes. Internationally, we are seeing that our outcomes are average, so we have to have high expectations that things can be better. The solutions to that are likely to become more complex as we reduce the number of pupils that we are looking at. I agree fully about the need to involve parents.

**Mr Rogers:** That is a good decision. The other point is about value added. We heard previously that you want to advance by A level. How can we see the move from the end of Key Stage 3 to GCSE when we are on to a totally different system?

**Dr Hughes:** The value added measure that we suggested does not go from Key Stage 3, because it is looking at the levels of progression. The ability of a post-primary school to demonstrate the value added would depend on how many levels of progression are achieved by pupils from the time that they arrive in year 8 until they finish Key Stage 3. For the Key Stage 4 outcomes, we have the five-plus GCSEs, including English and maths. We have two different measures for the outcomes, one being a measure of progression and the other being a measure of outcome.

**Mr Rogers:** If you really want to measure the value added, you have to know accurately when the children come in at 11, but you still have to know what to put it up to when they are 16, when they do their GCSEs. Let us take, for example, a grammar school, which takes in the As or whatever at the minute. If we are only going to predict GCSEs in terms of five As to Cs, if that school is coming in with straight-A pupils at 11, but there are really good secondary schools that are knocking their guts out, it is a difficult one.

My other point is about the accuracy of the free school meals index and how we are using that as a measure of deprivation. I come from a rural area where unemployment has increased eightfold or ninefold over the past three or four years. Particularly in rural areas, many people are reluctant to go for free school meals, whether that is about pride or they just cannot accept the situation. The accuracy of the levels of deprivation may be the best you can have, but I do not believe that it is that accurate.

**Dr Hughes:** You are describing people feeling embarrassed about taking the meal. What we know is that there is a difference. People will establish their entitlement, and schools work very hard to ensure that happens because it is worth so much additional funding to them. However, there is then a fall-off in the number of people who take the meals. We are not looking at the meals; we are looking at those who establish their entitlement. You do not ever need to take a meal.

**Mr Rogers:** I declare an interest as chair of the board of governors of a rural primary school. Yes, the free school meals index has significantly increased, but not compared to the level of deprivation and unemployment in the area. There is still a reluctance.

**Mr McKay:** There are so many statistics in front of us that we could look through this all day, and I can certainly request more. There is a disparity between different board areas, not only in terms of the schools in board areas but also in terms of pupil residence. For example, the figures for five good GCSEs including English and maths is 64.5% in the Belfast Board compared to 55.9% in the South Eastern Board. However, on the basis of pupil residence, that is reversed, and the South Eastern Board has 63.1% compared to 52.3% in the Belfast Board. What about geographical differentials? The previous discussion was about the achievement of Protestant FSME males. Is that the same in Fermanagh as it is in Belfast, or do you find huge disparities in particular areas that are leading to that overall picture?

**Dr Hughes:** The reason why the two tables are published separately is because you have a lot of grammar schools in the Belfast Board area which draw in pupils from the north Down area, and that

distorts the figures. Belfast also has the highest levels of deprivation and so, when you look at the pupils by residence, you are focusing in on those pupils who are more deprived. The ones who go to the grammar schools are less deprived than the Belfast average, and that is why that effect takes place. On your wider question, there is underperformance everywhere and good practice everywhere. It varies on a school-by-school basis, but that is the effect in Belfast.

**Mr McKay:** The achievement at GCSE level of school leavers with special educational needs is 24.4%. Has that improved on previous years?

**Dr Hughes:** This is the first year that that information has been published. However, I know from work in the Department that there is an improving trend, but we need to get it into the public domain to make sure that it becomes a focus for improvement. Having a special educational need does not mean that we do not expect you to fulfil your potential.

**Mr McKay:** I will come back to the first question. There are figures for specific district council areas, and Belfast has the second lowest achievement at GCSE level. That reflects what you are saying about those who live in the council area. Can we get a breakdown for those council areas of the earlier statistics on the percentage of school leavers achieving five GCSEs, including English and maths, by FSME and religion? That would provide a clear picture overall, and that would be useful to us.

**Dr Hughes:** Yes. However, those are not district councils but education and library boards.

**Mr McKay:** In table 6?

**Dr Hughes:** Oh, you are on table 6; I was on table 12. Sorry.

**Mr Flanagan:** The last question that Daithí asked was also one of mine. Can you also add gender and school type to that information? So, it will be gender, religion, free school meals and school type broken down by council area. Is it also possible to get the council area of schools and residents? That would be two separate tables again. Is that information freely available in the Department?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** I think that it is. I will need to check with our statisticians, but I am sure that something could be done.

**Mr Flanagan:** Was it the Department of Education or the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) that published the report?

**Dr Hughes:** I think that it is on the Department of Education's website. There is a slight oddity in that the Department's statisticians work in the Department but are seconded from DFP. I would need to ask about that.

**Mr Flanagan:** So it is an official Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) publication and not published by DE?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** It is a national statistic that NISRA publishes.

**Mr Flanagan:** That is fine. Daithí made the point that there are enough statistics in the report to keep you going all day, and he is right. A number of the questions that I had have already been answered, but I want to focus on the destination of school leavers. Look at the figures for school leavers and go straight into unemployment. The figure for those on free school meals is 6.6 % and for those that are not it is 3.3%. It is twice as high. In terms of those going into higher education, for those who are entitled to free school meals you have a figure of 18.3%. For those that are not the figure is 46.4%. Those two statistics clearly identify the impact that deprivation has on the destination of school leavers.

Is there any evidence that the measures put in place by the Department, such as extended schools, have had a positive impact? Figures have improved over the past number of years, but is there any way that the Department can pinpoint which of the policies that have been introduced resulted in that? Is there a link at all, or did a broad range of policies make the difference?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** It was a broad range of policies.

**Mr Flanagan:** Can you quantify that?

**Mr Arbuthnot:** I am not aware that we would be able to take each individual policy in its own right and make any sort of judgement as to what the impact was. Taken as a whole, the policies have made an impact.

**Dr Hughes:** They are based on international evidence. It is really about meeting the needs of pupils in a classroom by a skilled-up, well-supported teacher in a well-led, viable school.

**The Chairperson:** As there are no other questions, Chris and Adrian, I thank you for your time and the information that you provided. No doubt we will continue to take an interest in this issue. We are particularly interested in the various regulations that are out for consultation, including the provision of performance and the other information about pupils, and we will, undoubtedly, come back to that at some stage. In the meantime, thank you very much for your time.