



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Teacher Education Review: Aspect Briefing

6 June 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers

Witnesses:

Mr John Chowcat	Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trust
Mr Sean Maguire	Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trust
Dr Peter McAlister	Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trust

The Chairperson: You are all very welcome. I apologise for the delay. As you can see, a variety of things have taxed our minds and attention this morning. I was keen to bring you along so that you could give us your organisation's perspective on the key points that need to be addressed in relation to the review of teacher education in Northern Ireland. I know that you have a national remit, but you have members in Northern Ireland who have a particular interest in the issue. Thank you for your ongoing work on this issue. I ask you to make your presentation, and members will ask questions accordingly.

Mr John Chowcat (Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trust): Thank you very much for the invitation to speak. We provided a short briefing paper. We would like to focus on some suggestions that we think are practical and affordable for taking forward teacher education in Northern Ireland in the current climate. We are very conscious of the fact that we are — like it or not — almost certainly in a lengthy period of economic constraint, and we have to allow for that in any proposals that are made. We also realise that, inside the classroom, at the same time as that external pressure is there, there are new challenges, insecure and vulnerable children, and resultant problems for teachers. We are trying to search for practical ways forward to raise the level of teacher professionalism.

We have highlighted five particular ideas in our paper. First, we think that there is a trend worldwide, which we see in parts of the UK and in international research evidence, towards raising the level of quality of teaching and learning and raising the level of teacher professionalism through encouraging more teamwork among teaching staff. In other words, moving away from something that you still find in many schools in the UK where the teacher is regarded as a sort of lone professional who goes through the training, obtains the qualification and becomes a teacher, but then goes into the

classroom and shuts the door, as it were, and takes his or her professionalism into the classroom on a single-person, single-professional-practitioner basis. In our view, what is needed is a more reflective practice among teachers faced with today's challenges. On the basis of evidence elsewhere, team work, where it is properly structured, seems to provide opportunities for teachers to look at what works and what does not work in the classroom, to exchange practical experiences and, as a result, to learn lessons and move forward together. Therefore, the school becomes a professional learning organisation for the teaching staff.

On that point, we know that it is easy to refer to that approach and it is not easy to construct. For example, a team needs a genuine culture of openness: a group of teachers have to feel that they can speak out. If the team has people at a more senior level in the school, some of them might be hesitant to talk about things that are not working. People sometimes try to use those structures to develop their own careers as opposed to the collective effort to raise standards. Those are the sort of problems that you get. Although it is not easy, we think this is the trend for the future, and we quote in our paper a couple of studies that suggest that. We think that there are examples of good teacher teamwork within individual schools in Northern Ireland and that a model should be developed that borrows from the best in Northern Ireland and beyond to try to take that concept forward.

We relate to that the issue of teacher peer review because, if an effective system of teacher peer review can be spread more widely across Northern Ireland, that is not only beneficial for the teachers being reviewed but helps the professional development of those who do the reviewing. So we ally that to the point on teamwork. That is the first point on our list.

The second point, which I think is broadly the consensus view now, is that teacher professional development should be systematic. We would like to see a clearer continuum between the different stages, from induction to early professional development to subsequent professional development, and an arrangement whereby teachers know that they can access good professional development throughout their career. At the moment, there are some very good examples of teacher development at ground level, but it is patchy and is not systematised. We think that we can raise the level of educational standards if we help to produce that type of system.

We relate that immediately to the issue of teacher performance management, because, again, research evidence, nationally and internationally, seems to suggest that effective performance management of teachers is often linked to the provision of relevant and high-quality professional development opportunities. For example, teachers who have identified weaknesses can move into support training and development in the areas that will allow them to overcome those weaknesses. We also believe — and I know that this is not the view of all organisations — that one way to assist that is to consider the evolution of a higher grade of advanced classroom teacher. We are conscious of the advanced skills teacher approach in England in recent times, and there are other models around the world. Again, I appreciate that there are different views on that, but our view is that not all teachers who wish to progress their careers should have to go into management and move away from the classroom. We think that they should be able to obtain promotion and develop their skills while remaining in the classroom and contributing to the teamwork that we talked about earlier.

Our third point is that external support and challenge for Northern Ireland schools should be closely integrated and co-ordinated across the different functions involved. We represent people who work in the Curriculum Advisory Support Services (CASS) in the education boards, as well as senior officers in the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and others, and we would like to see those who work with the leaders of schools and teachers, be it on generic school improvement work, curriculum development or teacher development, become very closely aligned, so that there is a coherent approach and we do not have different agencies pulling in different directions to some degree on those heavily interlinked issues. Chair, you may remember that we gave you a paper with our views on that a few weeks ago. I have additional copies if Committee members are interested. We have set out a position where we are arguing for an integrated approach across Northern Ireland.

Our fourth point is that we believe there is a need for higher education input into teacher training, not just initial teacher training but beyond. Our view is that we need that and the research evidence on which it is strongly based, as well as the practical classroom experience that teachers obviously require. Our view is that a small step forward could be to encourage both those contributions and their melding into a more effective system of teacher education in Northern Ireland. We believe that there should be an encouragement of partnerships and networks that regularly bring together people in higher education who are concerned with teacher training and the people who actually work in schools. We can point to examples, again from pretty hard research, some from over the water in England and some from Northern Ireland, of universities that have built those partnerships. The

results have been beneficial, because people in schools and in the HE institutions get to know more about each other, what they have to offer and how they can bring together their resources to help teacher development.

Our last point, which in a way is closely related to all the rest, is that we think there should be a somewhat more flexible approach to the individuals working in different parts of the education service who are concerned with these matters in order to take their skills, knowledge and expertise into different parts of the education system. In other words, there needs to be greater flexibility so that the people who work in the HE sector, in schools and in the boards today — it may be the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) tomorrow, depending on the legislative changes — and deal with school improvement can work more flexibly across the system. We realise that that may need some protections and some arrangements, but we are confident that that could be negotiated satisfactorily to make that flexibility acceptable.

Chair, those are our points in very brief terms. We believe that none of them are particularly expensive in this difficult economic climate, but we hope that, taken together, they represent the sort of steps that allow the debate on teacher education to move forward in ways that could have positive results for Northern Ireland schoolchildren.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. That is a useful input into the debate on the teacher education review. Your memorandum referred to the effect of school improvement services for Northern Ireland. The Department seems to have rationalisation as a key priority. CASS is a prime example of where, in the past, boards had 30-plus members of staff and now they are down to only 10 or 11. Drilling down even further to specific issues, for example STEM subjects, you begin to see more and more technicians being used as opposed to professional teachers. In that context, how do you ensure that the subject and the stated objective of the policy is still being met, given that the key driver in any policy in any school is a teacher?

Mr Chowcat: We understand that this is a very difficult period and that rationalisation is part of the scene that we are facing and will face for some time. However, we are concerned that the process be handled correctly. There may be severe economic pressures, but your last point is the central one. Raising the quality of teaching continuously has to be the continuing objective, and that requires resources. Across CASS in the five education and library boards, there have been reductions in numbers affecting our members in recent times. There has been a loss of expertise and a lowering of morale among those who remain. For some years, as the ESA project has been discussed and held out as a future prospect, our view has been that we need to clarify the future for the school improvement service as soon as possible. We realise that there will be elements of rationalisation; we can see that because of the economic climate. Once we know the shape of ESA and the resources that are available to it, we can see whether those are up to the job and sufficient. We can then try to ensure that the regional services that will be out there at the end will consist of, in themselves, properly professionally developed professionals and practitioners in this field. The skills of those who work from the outside with school leaders and teachers in schools are somewhat different from the skills of those who work directly in the schools.

My colleagues here can talk to you from considerable experience as CASS officials. When a CASS official goes to a school, they are not the line manager. They do not walk in with a briefcase full of sanctions. They go to negotiate and persuade and point to best practice and help the school to improve its capacity and raise its standards. There are modern, soft negotiating skills involved in that, and the knowledge that is required is that of how the system operates and of what is best practice on a very broad front. It is very different from those who have good experience and play a very important role in a single school in their careers, where they may be particularly accustomed to one model and to direct line management authority and hierarchy on how you make decisions and move forward. Therefore, we are anxious that a future service has sufficient resource and sufficient people who are properly trained and developed in those skills required to do the job to go out and work with the local schools across Northern Ireland. On a final point, Chairperson, we realise that the rationalisation of the schools estate is a major feature at the moment and that it is a very difficult process. In our opinion, it is likely to lead to an increased demand for school improvement support, because, as painful as the process of rationalising the estate and closing some schools is for local communities, it raises issues for the schools about how they will manage in the future, the courses that they offer and their provision, and it raises more demand for external support and challenge.

The Chairperson: Sean, do you want to comment?

Mr Sean Maguire (Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trust): On the point that you made, there has always been an argument between the balance of whole school generic support and school improvement and support at the curriculum level. Over the past number of years, I suppose that, to a certain extent, the pendulum has swung pretty violently sometimes, one way or the other. At the moment, there is a danger that, if we focus exclusively on the generic school improvement area, which we must do to a great extent, the baby will be thrown out with the bath water and that, when schools require specific support, the expertise will no longer be there to deliver it. If we are talking about Northern Ireland plc at such times as the upturn in the economy comes, it will be education that will deliver the goods.

Chairperson, you mentioned the STEM subjects. We need to make sure that the impetus is still there, that the expertise is still there and that the ability to support the schools in developing their STEM agendas is still there. Although STEM is one example of specific support, many other areas need to be considered.

The Chairperson: I want to keep the teacher at the centre of who is key to the delivery of any education in our schools. In my constituency, we are having a battle with the Department over teachers who have identified a course that they believe to be absolutely essential to them in advancing their knowledge of special educational needs provision. The board has said, "We are sorry, but we are not funding it. We did it in the past, and we are not doing it any more." You have two teachers in a school locked in a quandary. Somebody might say that they should go ahead and do it at a cost of almost £1,000 to themselves, but is that the type of system that we want to develop? The question that I am trying to get to is this: do teachers prefer to have a menu that they are able to pick from? Or do they prefer to have provided for them a menu of where to get that professional development and an account of how that all marries so that they as teachers feel comfortable with the provision that is being made to match the needs that they see in the classroom and for them as professionals?

Mr Chowcat: We think that the issue of individual teachers and what they see as their training needs, which may be around special educational needs, for instance, and the issue of the schools' overall priorities should be brought together. That is important to our vision. I mentioned very briefly in the paper that, for some time, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), through the General Teaching Council for Wales (GTCW), financed an individual teacher development programme, in which individual classroom teachers decided what they wanted to concentrate on and develop their skills in. They obtained funding and then found provision that would be relevant to that area. That programme is very unlikely to reappear, following the current WAG review of teacher education in Wales. In the current economic climate, combined with the overall desire to raise standards for all the children in the country, which must remain the overall objective, the emphasis is much more on the whole school's priorities. We say that we should try to marry the two. If, in that particular school, there are issues to do with special educational needs, educational technological change or whatever practical issues the school faces, the training that is available should certainly cover that and be of sufficient quality. We are very keen on quality assurance of all the external provision for teacher education, and we mention that in the paper as well.

Mrs Dobson: In your briefing, you say that training is:

"closely allied to existing good practice."

We all know that good practice already exists in the education system and that there are some fantastic teachers, and, by learning from their experience, we can improve the learning experience for pupils. What is your view on teachers becoming champions in schools?

Dr Peter McAlister (Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trust): That is a very good way to approach it. Recommendation 7 in the STEM review said that, as a matter of urgency, there needs to be a programme of professional development for teachers to enable them to work through the STEM agenda and implement it in schools. Last year, through CASS, as part of the STEM agenda, primary schools were asked to nominate teachers who might have an interest in promoting science in their school. We took those teachers and used in-service training (INSET) to show them how science in primary schools might be best implemented. We used best practice from the National Science Learning Centre in York and the Association for Science Education (ASE).

Those teachers were well briefed and well trained. With a very modest but very welcome grant from the Department of Education, they went into schools. Over a three-month period, we were able to

support 80 schools with a small group of five teachers. Those teachers went into schools, identified three teachers in each of them and promoted science in the school situation. They really made those teachers the champions of science in those schools so that, when that support was withdrawn, they then became advocates of science and encouraged their colleagues to continue with that programme. It is a very good model, and, through the service, we were able to promote that professional development.

The programme was very cost-effective, because the funding from the Department of Education allowed us to do it for three years. It was a small amount, set aside for professional development in primary schools. That was facilitated through the school improvement service. For the past couple of years, the focus has been on literacy and numeracy, particularly on the raising of standards and target-setting in primary schools, but that is done across the curriculum. It was a very good way of advocating it and making sure that it happened effectively in schools.

Mrs Dobson: The champions system has worked so well in the further education (FE) colleges.

Dr P McAlister: Absolutely. Those teachers are in the schools.

Mrs Dobson: The knowledge is there.

Dr P McAlister: Yes. The teachers who supported them were there for six or eight weeks, but they left that legacy in the school, and there was a knock-on effect.

Mr Rogers: Sean, I am mindful of what you said about not throwing the baby out with the bath water. Can our performance review and staff development (PRSD) system be modified to deliver many of the objectives?

Mr Maguire: The original intent of the PRSD in Northern Ireland was to be purely developmental, as opposed to the appraisal system that existed in England and Wales, and there have been many positive spin-offs from it. Not the least of those was the opportunity for the reviewers to get an insight into what was happening in a classroom and what the good practice was, and then to be able to discuss with individual teachers the good areas, areas for development, and so on. It was the first attempt to do away with the "secret garden", as it were, of the teacher in the classroom.

From my experience as an adviser in an education and library board and having worked with professional associations such as the Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trust (ASPECT), I have discovered that the more transparency we can get through teachers sharing their own expertise, their pedagogical skills, their specific subject skills and their classroom management skills, and through sharing them within and across schools, the bigger the impact on school improvement.

As well as that, external input is needed. Schools have sometimes done that very successfully internally, but, by and large, input stays within the schools unless there is a mechanism to share good practice further afield. I know that many of the area learning partnerships are attempting to do just that. However, the process needs to be seeded from the outside, and that is where an effective school improvement service comes into its own. The facilitation role that a school improvement service can provide is the process by which you can start to build capacity in schools. Research has shown that improvements come about when you have an intensive support mechanism for schools but that there is regression as soon as that support mechanism is withdrawn. To a certain extent, we are looking at how we can reduce the level of support without doing away with it altogether and at ensuring that schools maintain a positive improvement pathway. It is about getting that balance.

I agree wholeheartedly with you that the PRSD was one of the initiators in that process. However, it needs to be further expanded and developed into a true developmental mechanism for teachers.

Mr Lunn: I am not particularly familiar with your group. Your main thrust is school improvement and continuous development. It may not be fair to ask you, but what do you think of the system that we have of separate initial training for the two main sectors, and the desirability or otherwise of having two separate training colleges for different systems? You talked about flexibility between systems, and I think that you mentioned schools and further education colleges. Do you have any views on the difficulties of teachers transferring between the two sectors?

Mr Maguire: Again, ASPECT has no particular view of the number of teacher-training institutions. What we are more keen to ensure is that there is very good dialogue and interchange of ideas, strategies and aims and objectives so that every teacher who comes out of initial teacher training in Northern Ireland is trained to a very advanced level and so that there are no major differences in the academic and pedagogical skills that are developed. There may be differences of emphasis in one teacher-training institution or another, but the important thing to remember is that all the children in our schools deserve exactly the same opportunity of education. As long as the academic and pedagogical skills are there and all that information is shared across the higher education (HE) and teacher-training institutions, we will see progression.

The important aspect that we propose is a level of flexibility — I think that you alluded to this — in the movement of teachers across the sectors, or from higher education into schools and from schools into higher education. I would also include the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in that. There should be the capability of movement from schools into the inspectorate, and I know that a number of lay inspectors have been appointed. Unfortunately, that did not occur between the advisory services and the ETI, because that was seen to be a potential conflict of interest. However, the more flexibility that you have and the greater opportunity that there is for all those involved in all aspects of education to spend time in each of the different areas of education, to bring that experience back to their particular agency and to share the ideas of practice and workings, the better the opportunity that schools will have to improve.

Mr Lunn: I imagine that we are the only place in the UK that has separate initial teacher training. Are we behind the UK experience in having that flexibility between systems?

Mr Chowcat: The UK experience is still uneven. There may be a certain uniqueness here, which you referred to. However, we can point to some very good models in England of HE/school partnerships that are not just relationships between universities and their local schools but relationships between different local universities pulling together and local schools.

An example that has been highly praised is the University of York, which has a standing network that relates it to other HE institutions in the city — there are several in York — and to all the local schools and colleges. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) published an evaluation in 2010 of detailed research about the benefits of that partnership and of all those organisations regularly talking together, exchanging information and talking about the standards that they want to adhere to. The results were overwhelmingly positive. It would be interesting for the Committee to see the evaluation.

Dr P McAlister: That does happen here. We have facilitated that; for example, through CASS. We have good working relationships with, and run initiatives with, Queen's University, Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College. The Medics in Primary Schools programme, for example, is a collaboration between the institutions and local primary schools. That involves Queen's, St Mary's and Stranmillis students going to controlled, maintained or integrated schools and working closely with teachers. It also provides an extremely good role model for the children in those schools, because they see undergraduates going into their institutions, and they then visit Queen's or one of the two training colleges. That acts as a stimulus for those children to see that that is one future career developmental role that they might have.

The Chairperson: That is interesting. I would not be a huge fan of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and using all its data, because we end up not comparing like with like. Its recent report into the UK's shortage of mathematics and science teachers, which is not broken down into constituent parts of the UK, shows that almost 30% of schools identified a lack of qualified mathematics teachers. It was also around 30% for science teachers.

That gives a clear indication of not only the system but the teachers. It just asks whether teachers are overloaded or not content with the processes and structures. That will have a long-term impact on our being able to develop the core needs for our young people as far as fulfilling the Programme for Government's economic targets are concerned. Do you have a comment on that, Sean?

Mr Maguire: To a certain extent, the pressure on teachers of all types is very high, as is the pressure to produce results to improve literacy, numeracy and in the STEM subjects.

At the same time, the ability of the teaching force to do all the necessary research and development to achieve good-quality teaching and learning is likely to be limited. Therefore, the support mechanisms

that have been in place over the past number of years, which are now starting to come under threat as a result of the economic downturn, will disadvantage the teaching force as a whole. If ESA, or another school improvement service, is established in Northern Ireland, we need to be careful of how the future works out. The main ideas for a regional school improvement service is to have one that can operate locally but also have sufficient expertise to address specific issues across the whole of Northern Ireland. That is a model that ASPECT has been promoting for the past number of years.

Statistics from a number of years ago showed that, for engineers alone, Europe was probably short by between 100,000 and 200,000. The downturn in the number of science graduates, science teachers, mathematics teachers and teachers of STEM subjects in general is not only Europe-wide but global. That is likely to have a major impact on the economic development of Europe. Similarly, in the UK, and in Northern Ireland itself, the lack of sufficiently qualified engineers and research scientists will inhibit the economic upturn in Northern Ireland, should it come.

We can start to address the issues in education by ensuring that the structures and resources are in place to allow the development of a wide range of subjects in the STEM area and by making sure that teachers have the expertise with which to deliver the curriculum. I do not have the exact figures with me to back me up, but, at the moment, science teachers are quite often teaching outside their comfort zone. They may be physicists who are not qualified in biology or biologists who are not qualified in physics or chemistry. They are having to catch up with the curriculum, as it were. In the past, you might have had dedicated teachers of specific subjects, but, because of the reduction in the number of teachers in schools, you will now find that a number of teachers are teaching across a range of subjects. The evidence shows that, where you get really good school improvement and good improvement in pupils' achievement, teaching is delivered by teachers who have a high level of expertise in a specific subject.

Dr P McAlister: I want to speak about the point that you made about the balance of professional development. There are things that have to be done. For example, we have the school improvement service; CASS; post-inspection follow-up support; school development planning; development of literacy and numeracy; and support for beginning teachers. Those are statutory duties.

We also have the professional development of teachers. I spent the first years of my career encouraging teachers and training teachers to teach primary school science because it was then a new core subject. Where children do not have that experience at primary level, research shows that they will not have a great interest in it when they come to post-primary level, and there will be a dip in their interest at, say, 10 or 11 years of age. Therefore, the wider the experience that we can allow or afford the children at primary level, the greater the chance that those gaps will be filled and children can be encouraged into careers in which there might be a shortage of skills. That is part of continuing professional development, where you have a choice between subject support, if teachers require it or have an interest in it. It is important to realise that, yes, we have statutory obligations, but teachers might have a natural interest or ability in something, and it is very important that that ability and interest be developed. If they can have the opportunity to have that ability or interest developed through continuing professional development, it will do nothing but benefit the children in the classes, and hopefully it will have a knock-on effect on the employment opportunities of those children in those areas in which there are those skill shortages.

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you for your presentation. What are your views on performance-related pay (PRP), to reward good teaching practice, and pay-related incentives, perhaps to encourage the movement of teachers across the sectors?

Mr Chowcat: You will have gathered from our paper, and the remarks that we have made already, that we try to approach policy development as an organisation on the basis of hard research evidence as far as possible. As it happens, on teacher performance-related pay, there is a considerable body of evidence from the United States on the impact of different systems. We have been looking at that, because some Members of Parliament at Westminster are interested in going down that road with the teaching workforce in England.

I think that this is accurate on the basis of the research evidence from the US: in most of the states that have had long-standing Republican Administrations, systems of performance-related pay of one type or another have been introduced in recent years. The overall impact on the quality of teaching varies, but the general view is that there is no clear relationship between the introduction of those models and teacher performance — except in the minority of cases in which PRP was introduced for teachers alongside, and at the same time as, a very major investment in teacher professional

development. The one that comes to mind immediately is Nashville, Tennessee. I cannot remember the name of the project, but it ran for three years and was a very concerted attempt to see whether performance-related pay for teachers could help to motivate the teaching workforce further and achieve better results. It was abandoned after the three years.

We as an organisation are not surprised, because it seems to us that, although teachers are, like everybody else in the current economic climate, concerned about their incomes, with paying their mortgage and their family's financial position, their motivation is greatly conditioned by their commitment to the children. Our view is that the money that could be used on that approach to finance the design and introduction of a PRP system would probably be better utilised in teacher development, making more opportunities available for positive training and development in key areas. The US experience is extensive, but it does not seem to point to particularly useful results.

Miss M McIlveen: What about the concept of incentivising teachers to move between sectors?

Mr Chowcat: I am not sure that financial incentives are a major part of it, although you could look at that. Many people, including teachers whose careers have been confined to one or two institutions, would welcome opportunities to work more widely because of the professional development involved. They would see it as something that would help their skills development. That is true of our own members involved in school improvement. They regularly go into schools, but they would also welcome the opportunity to liaise with FE and HE institutions in the way that I talked about earlier, and a number of people in the education field in the universities would welcome that. As I said, some discussions about arrangements and protections would be needed, because there are issues with pay and pensions, and you would not want to create unnecessary tensions. However, we do not see those as insuperable problems. That issue could be addressed.

The Chairperson: John, Sean and Peter, thank you very much. You have been useful. We will keep you informed on how the teacher-training review continues. Your input and your paper are valuable. Thank you very much for your time.

Mr Chowcat: Thank you. We appreciate it.