Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Shared Education: Ministerial Advisory Group Briefing

15 May 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Education

Shared Education: Ministerial Advisory Group Briefing

15 May 2013

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Chris Hazzard
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Professor Paul Connolly	Ministerial Advisory Group
Mr P J O'Grady	Ministerial Advisory Group

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee Professor Paul Connolly, chairperson of the ministerial advisory group, and P J O'Grady, member of the ministerial advisory group and someone who has been involved in education for many years. We appreciate all that he does and the leadership that he gives in his school and his community. Paul, you will want to present to us, and we will then have questions from members.

Professor Paul Connolly (Ministerial Advisory Group): We very much appreciate this opportunity to brief you on our 'Advancing Shared Education' report. We need to pass on our apologies for Dawn Purvis, the other member of the group, who was not able to make it today because of other commitments.

What I would like to do in this presentation — I have tried to time it, and it is about 14 minutes long, so bear with me —

The Chairperson: Your time starts now. *[Laughter.]*

Professor Connolly: I would like to clarify very briefly the terms of reference that we were given, our methods of working and what we have done, and then to set out the vision for shared education and a summary of our recommendations. I will not go through each one individually.

You will see from the report, which has been circulated to members, that there are 20 core recommendations. We believe that they provide a challenging and ambitious road map for advancing shared education. We believe that the first 17 recommendations already have widespread support across the education sector and can be implemented now. We have made it very clear in our report that those 17 recommendations can be taken forward without a resolution on the issue of selection. I

would like to focus on those 17 recommendations today, because I do not want to lose the opportunity that we have now where there is broad agreement on the principles of shared education. I want to set out our core vision for shared education in our first 17 recommendations. The last three recommendations address selection. I will not skirt that issue. I will look at it at the end, in my closing comments.

Let me set the scene with the terms of reference. You will all be aware that we were appointed by the Minister, in June 2012, to advise him on how best to advance shared education. We were asked to take into account a number of things, including evidence from learners and parents and evidence on the effectiveness of different models of shared education locally, nationally and internationally. Our terms of reference asked us to look at adopting a definition of shared education that involved schools from different sectors working together to address divisions and to promote equality of opportunity so that every child has the best chance in life. It is very important to stress — I think that this was lost in some of the initial responses to us — that part of the terms of reference asked us to look not just at religious divisions but at all types of division, including socio-economic divisions, in society.

Our working methods, over the past seven months or so, have centred on extensive consultation across the education sector. We invited written submissions and received 111 of them from organisations and individuals. We met face to face and had in-depth conversations with 25 different organisations, and we visited a number of examples of shared education across the region. We have had direct consultation with children and young people, which was organised and undertaken by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, and we are very grateful to the Children's Commissioner for that support. We have had direct consultation with parents, which was helped and facilitated by Parenting Northern Ireland. All the written submissions and transcripts of the interviews and face-to-face discussions are available on our website. All the evidence we reviewed is included and summarised in the main report.

Our starting point for our overall vision for shared education is that we endorse the broader definition of shared education in the terms of reference. We see this as an opportunity to address all types of division and to take a broadly inclusive stance to shared education rather than just fixing it completely on religious differences. At the heart of our vision for change is school collaboration; collaborating at a depth that we have not seen before in Northern Ireland and in a sustained manner. Through collaboration and through the sharing of expertise, you will see the growth of not only educational outcomes and standards but the social outcomes and benefits from children learning together. As I said, the heart of this depends on collaboration to a level we have not seen before in shared education programmes across the sector, with schools from different sectors working together in a sustained manner. We are very clear that shared education needs to involve two elements: the teachers working together through professional development, the sharing of expertise and the planning and delivery of lessons; and children from across the sectors and schools learning together in a meaningful manner, not just coming together for one-off schemes.

I have touched on this, but we see shared education as a fundamental driver for change. It is not just another initiative; otherwise, it would just go onto the bonfire of initiatives of the past 30 or 40 years. We see shared education as being a fundamental driver for change that, through schools collaborating, improves standards and increases achievement for all pupils. It also develops the skills and knowledge of pupils when they learn together so that they can contribute to an open, diverse and inclusive society. There is clear evidence in our report to support that vision for change through shared education for schools collaboration. There is very clear evidence that when schools collaborate and when teachers share expertise and resources and plan together, improvements happen, standards rise in the schools and outcomes for pupils increase. It is not rocket science. We also know from an international body of evidence that when children learn together — crucially, when they learn together in meaningful and sustained ways — it increases positive attitudes to others, reduces negative stereotypes and encourages cross-community friendships. We do not just have a body of international evidence. Over the past few years, we have gained strong evidence locally, through Professor Joanne Hughes and colleagues at Queen's University Belfast, to show that shared education programmes in Northern Ireland, with the type of collaboration that we are talking about, have a positive impact on the attitudes and behaviour of children.

Our broad vision is shared education, schools collaboration in a detail and a depth that we have not seen before, driving up educational standards across the system and promoting social outcomes. How do we want to achieve that? Our first 17 recommendations set out a road map for that, and they can be organised into five core areas. I want to identify those areas so that people are aware of the depth of what we are setting out.

The first of the five areas is the need for the Department and the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) — when it comes to fruition — to play a proactive role in encouraging cross-sector collaboration. Maybe at the heart of that is our first recommendation that there should be a statutory duty on the Department and on ESA, through the Education Bill, to facilitate and encourage shared education.

Secondly, we set out a series of recommendations around mechanisms for supporting shared education in practice. That includes financial support, through what we are recommending as a shared education premium to be funded to schools through the common funding formula, and a range of different mechanisms for supporting schools and teachers in their professional development and practice on the ground.

Thirdly, we highlight the importance of looking at the curriculum, all the way through from preschool to the Youth Service, and at the opportunities that children and young people have to explore controversial issues. We ask that a fundamental review takes place that comes forward and looks at the effectiveness and appropriateness of the existing content, at the existing modes of delivery, and at the resources that teachers and schools need. We hear time and again that teachers are not afraid to address those issues but feel that they do not have the support and the tools to do so.

Fourthly, underpinning our vision of a diverse education system linked together through collaboration, we feel that it is imperative that we have a very strong commitment to equality. Our recommendations include making schools accountable to legally promote equality of opportunity and good relations. One of the ways that they can effectively promote good relations is through school collaboration.

Fifthly and finally, we feel that it is very important that parents, children and young people have a full voice and a participatory role in education. That is why you will see a recommendation that the Department ensures that every school establishes an effective and meaningful school council. School councils will provide, among other things, a mechanism for children and young people to have a voice and an input into how shared education develops at a local level. We also think that there is the need for a step change in how we engage with parents. We have set out some recommendations for supporting schools and resources for schools to do that.

We also place a very strong emphasis on parental choice in the system. In particular, we make a very clear call on the Department to play a much more proactive role in facilitating parental choice and meeting parental demand. We are asking the Department to take some risks where there is clear and sufficient demand for a particular type of school. Popular schools should be allowed to grow, within reason; where there are new schools and a demand for new schools, they should be allowed to develop; and where there is a demand for change in the status of an existing school, that should be allowed to happen. We understand that those things have to happen within the realm of other schools and taking into account the impact on other schools; it is not a completely blank slate. However, we feel that the Department has been conservative in its approach to this and needs to take more risks.

At the heart of our vision, we see the emergence of a diverse education system with a diverse range of schools. It will have, where there is demand, schools with a different faith-based ethos, integrated schools, secular schools, and schools that have a particular cultural or linguistic ethos, including Irish-speaking schools. It is worth pointing out briefly — I am sure that you will want to ask me questions about this shortly — that if these recommendations are taken on board and if there is demand for integrated schools, as has been expressed through opinion polls, and that demand translates into real decisions by parents to send their children to particular schools, our recommendations will allow and enable significant growth in the integrated sector, if that is what parents want.

In summary, we believe that our vision sets out a challenging and ambitious agenda for shared education. It is all about schools collaborating in a deep and meaningful way to drive up standards and to promote social outcomes and good relations between children. We believe that if we are truly about welcoming and celebrating diversity, we need to reflect that in the education system. The education system needs to be diverse as well, and there is nothing wrong with having a diverse range of schools with different forms of ethos. In fact, that should be a strength of our system and should demonstrate our maturity and confidence as a society that is diverse and inclusive. If we have diverse schools, there is an imperative on us to ensure that they are linked together through strong collaboration, that they are underpinned by a commitment to equality and that we have a curriculum that provides real opportunities for children and young people to explore and engage with controversial issues.

As I mentioned at the beginning, through our consultation exercises and the responses that we have had formally and informally to the launch of our report, we believe that there is broad political

agreement around our vision. Clearly, the detail needs to be thrashed out, but we believe that, as an overall road map vision, it has broad agreement in the sector and across most political parties. We believe that there is nothing to stop progress being made right now in taking forward these 17 recommendations. With that in mind, we want to take the opportunity today, in front of the Committee, to urge the Minister of Education, John O'Dowd, to establish an implementation group in the Department of Education to take forward the first 17 recommendations. The implementation group should look at each of the recommendations and develop specific plans, timescales, goals and targets as appropriate for each recommendation. We believe that, with the political will, this can be done within six months and certainly by the end of a year. We need to be time-limited and to make progress here. We also urge the Minister that, if he takes on board our suggestion to develop a group, that group needs to be inclusive. It needs to have mechanisms to engage properly and meaningfully with all political parties.

That is the vision on shared education; our first 17 recommendations. I said that I would also address the issue of academic selection, and I will do so now in the final few minutes. I do not know whether 14 minutes are gone already.

The Chairperson: You are over your time, but we do not mind. Given the subject matter, I probably should stop you there. No, I jest.

Mr P J O'Grady (Ministerial Advisory Group): We might talk about you, Mervyn.

The Chairperson: You talk about me anyway, P J. Yes, by all means, go ahead, Paul.

Professor Connolly: I will speak for a few more minutes. At the outset, I mentioned our terms of reference, and it is important to say this because there was some media response to say that we have somehow hijacked the agenda. It was said that this was about religion and religious divides and schools from the different sectors working together, and it was asked why we had even mentioned academic selection. As I said, our terms of reference told us to look at, among other things, socio-economic divisions. If we are told to look at that, we cannot but look at the issue of selection. If we had not looked at selection, there would have been uproar from other sections of the communities in Northern Ireland.

Before I say a few things about selection, let me be clear about two particular things. First, as a group, we are not against academic selection as such. We are against the current system of selection at the age of 11, which is clearly and evidentially discriminatory against those from poor socio-economic backgrounds. We argue simply that we need a better and more sophisticated approach to academic selection, and we believe that that can achieved through academic streaming done properly in schools with all-ability intakes. Secondly, alongside not being against academic selection, we are not against grammar schools. This is not an attack on grammar schools. We recognise the quality and excellence of many of our grammar schools and the rich history and traditions that they represent. Grammar schools should have nothing to fear from our final three recommendations. We are not about closing grammar schools down. We are arguing, very simply, that they should not be allowed to operate selection criteria that are discriminatory.

With those two points in mind, it is very telling that, of all the conversations that we have had and all the public reaction to our report from those who support the current system, not one response addressed our evidence. What we need to be addressing is the evidence, so let me very briefly give one statistic on access to grammar school places. The odds of a child getting to a grammar school among children who are eligible for free school meals are one to five. That means that for every one child who gets a place, five others from that background do not get a place at a grammar school. The odds for every other child are one to one — evens or 50:50. To put it another way: if you are eligible for free school meals, you are five times less likely to get a grammar school place. That surely is unacceptable. Moreover and not surprisingly, that has knock-on effects. It leads to widening socio-economic achievement gaps, which we can see if we compare our results with those in England. In England, children eligible for free school meals are three times less likely to achieve the basic standard of five or more GCSEs, including English and maths, at 16. In Northern Ireland, pupils eligible for free school meals are four times less likely to achieve that standard.

The relationship between academic selection in formal systems of selection and widening socio-economic achievement gaps is an international phenomena. You will find it from country to country. The more that countries have strong forms of selection, the more that they have widening achievement gaps. That is the evidence, and we need to address it. I am not prepared for us just to

swat that completely to one side. We need to be pragmatic and to recognise that there are strong political divisions on the issue and that, in the very short term, we are unlikely to reach political agreement on selection. That is why, at the time of our report — I do not believe that the media read the report — we said very clearly that the first 17 recommendations can be taken forward now and that, because we recognise that there is strong political disagreement on selection, the final three recommendations should not hold back progress on everything else. We can achieve so much based on the good practice that has happened already, without a solution to the issue of academic selection. However, as a group, we strongly believe that if we truly want to meet our vision of a shared education system that is fully inclusive, we need to address divisions along socio-economic background as part of that. Given the evidence that I outlined, we cannot duck the issue.

With that in mind — you will have to forgive me if I do not follow protocols; I am an academic, not a politician — I want, with the greatest respect, to call for some mechanism, whether that is through the Committee or more broadly, to take forward the debate about selection. We need some form of all-party mechanism that can look at the issue of selection in light of the evidence that we have presented. This is clearly a political issue. It has gone beyond the realm of just looking at the evidence. It is a political issue that needs a political response. Whatever the mechanism and whoever sets that up, we would say that there needs to be a focus on the evidence. Let us look at the evidence on the differential access to grammar schools and assess against the evidence any proposals that are brought forward. What is the chance and likelihood of their addressing differential access to education in order to narrow achievement gaps? It also needs to be time-limited. As you are all aware, we have had this debate for far too long, so we need some focus on it.

Thank you very much for this time. As I said, we appreciate the opportunity to set out our vision for shared education and to make those very final comments on selection.

The Chairperson: Thanks, Paul. P J, do you want to make any comments now or to wait until there are specific questions?

Mr O'Grady: Chairman, I will just mention a couple of touchstones.

The Chairperson: Yes; go ahead.

Mr O'Grady: I could go into depth, but I will try to avoid that. By putting some points in the ether, it might stimulate discussion at some other time.

Complementing what Paul very eloquently said, I share the privilege of being here today with the Committee. Having so many people here who are dedicated to education in Northern Ireland and seeing that in action, while everyone else is going about their normal business — people do not realise that this is happening — is very uplifting and encouraging for me.

I want to deal with the historical context of education in Northern Ireland. We did not do a historical analysis in our report, but if we read back to the time of the Lynn Committee, we see that the complex formation of the state and its link to education are two things that cannot be looked at in isolation. There was an awful lot of goodwill. As someone in the maintained sector, I would have said that right through the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, which I am old enough to remember, there was great generosity from the Chamber in this establishment, and what it was prior to the 1970s, towards the funding of faith-based schools, which in Northern Ireland mostly means Catholic schools. I would bear witness and pay tribute to that. Those of us in the Catholic maintained sector have great respect for the role of the transferors and the role of the Protestant Churches in endeavouring to ensure that Protestant children were not sold short when it came to education in their faith. I think that it is important to say a very brief word about that.

I, for one, made a point of being here to say that this is what Homo sapiens look like after 42 years in education. Pat Sheehan, I am including, as part of my time in education, my first seven years in the grammar sector. Sometimes, I say that I left the grammar sector in order to move into education, but I will not say that today, Mr Chairman —

The Chairperson: It is now in the Hansard report. It is too late.

Mr O'Grady: — in case the Hansard people are listening. *[Laughter.]* However, there is something there somewhere.

I want to convey the joy of having been there and, to be honest, sometimes to ask this question: "How much more joy could there be in education if some of what Paul has just said about what the vision might be could be fulfilled?" I feel so strongly about that. I know that lots of my colleagues, over a pint, will say, "P J, would they do things differently?" but then, maybe in other arenas, they are not done differently. By the way, I direct my comments at the state, through this honourable Chamber, and the Church. I have strong criticisms of the Catholic Church in regard to structures in education, and I have said so before. I make no apology for saying it again.

I am very interested in the fact that the First Minister talked, just a few days ago, about ideas for a shared future, and so on. He even talked about sports arenas. I was privileged to work in that cross-community sporting endeavour, across the city of Belfast and beyond, and it was a great honour. That is all I will say now; I could go into much more detail on that. If I ever write my book, the first line will be about arriving back with some primary weans from the Shankill and the Falls, who went to play shinty/hurley in Croke Park in Dublin, and a wee boy being picked up by his mum in Edenbrook drive and saying, "Mum, we beat the Dubs at hurley", in the middle of the Shankill. Those cross-community things, both ways, always gave me a bit of a lift.

I know that Danny Kinahan, whom I had met before, was at Stranmillis when Bob Salisbury spoke, not that long ago, at the Classrooms Re-imagined: Education in Diversity and Inclusion for Teachers (CREDIT) event, linking Stranmillis and St Mary's colleges. It was about the teaching of teachers, how we are going to deliver all that has been talked about, how they can be inoculated, who will inoculate them, who has the right to inoculate them, and all that. I will never forget that lovely story from Bob Salisbury about the wee boy, who wanted to be a vet, in the big comprehensive school across the water. He was nearly lost in the system, but the day he became a vet, he rang Bob Salisbury. That story brought the house down. It is amazing what can be sussed out of children, as though by a water diviner, by the great experts who are in all our schools. I feel, sometimes, that our grammar teachers are disenfranchised because they do not get the chance to meet the total spectrum of humanity in children and the wonderful children who are there.

I am here more as an exhibit than as a speaker, so I will shut up very shortly, Mervyn. *[Laughter.]* I want to say that, yes, the evidence is important, but there is more than just the evidence. To me, there was the evidence of the annual sadness, fear, disappointment, exhilaration in parents, and then the wee boy would end up coming to Bearnageeha. Then, maybe after two years, the parents would come in and say, "Mr O'Grady, we want to say something to you: we really appreciate what your school has done for our Paul." You knew that the next line was going to be this: "We are thinking about moving him to school x down the road", with the emphasis on the word "down"; that was my interpretation of it. That was part of the sadness. I believe that, for weans aged nine, 10 and 11, so much more is available to them — without going into great details now — that maybe we are missing. However, I will come away from this Chamber very hopeful that better times are ahead, right across the board, in education. Thank you for having me here.

The Chairperson: Thank you. As "an exhibit", you did reasonably well in giving that presentation. I will say again that we welcome the opportunity to have this discussion. Obviously, there are issues in the report that some of us have particular differences with. We could concentrate and focus on those, but I do not think that that would be very profitable for what we want to get out of this document on where we go from here. Elements of it are extremely useful and valuable in giving us some information on how we construct a new system for the future. Yesterday in the House, the First Minister made a comment that I thought went some way towards giving a broad overview. He said that there was a "poverty of ambition" in the document. I appreciate what you say, Paul, about the need to establish another group to take it forward. It would probably have been easier had more ambitious targets been set in the report. That would have made it more difficult for another group to be less enthusiastic if given the task of bringing it forward.

That brings me to another point, which is a concern. I think that it is better for us to be upfront and honest about it. It is the correlation between what you believe now needs to be established, which is inclusive, and the structure and make-up of the panel for this process, which, many will argue, was not inclusive. P J knows that it is the case, as does Dawn. If Dawn was here, I would say the same, as would you, Paul, because we have had this discussion. It is not a personal issue between individuals. However, the old saying is true: he who pays the piper calls the tune. If the panel wanted to be inclusive, it should have included people from across the sectors in the debate. The one thing that I have said repeatedly in my job, and I see it more and more, is that there is a lack of trust out there. Nobody trusts anybody. It goes right across all the sectors, so I will not name any. I spend a huge amount of my time speaking to all of them. The one thing that I hear repeatedly is, "We do not trust them." Sometimes, they start within their own ranks before they go outside the confines of their own

structure. I think that there was a missed opportunity. If the people who were selected — or appointed, as I should not use that word — had been broader in number and more representative — it did not have to be overly large — it might have been able to be more challenging. Every school in every sector has to be challenged on where it is and what it will do in the future. I do not think that any school or sector should be allowed to be in splendid isolation in either legislative or practical terms. That is part of the difficulty in the system. Certain elements in different places hold onto different parts of legislation and use them for different means, but primarily to protect their own interests, so that they do not have to go, unnecessarily, too far beyond where they are currently.

That having been said — it was a long preamble to get to a question — there are many things that I would like to pick out. However, another comment that I want to make is this, Paul: I think that you make an error to believe that the final three recommendations on selection are just political. They are educational. As I have said previously, I could go to your university and pick out very well respected colleagues of yours, who are academics at Queen's, who would argue absolutely, totally and completely the contrary of what is stated in the document. It is not just that we and the Shinners are having a ding-dong about academic selection, and because we cannot agree on the issue, it is not going to happen. There is an educational debate out there. I hear it in schools and various elements of academia. It is not just about getting the politicians: we get enough blame for the dysfunction in every other part of society. This is one area in which I am quite happy to say, yes, we have to play a role, but, educationally and academically, there is divergence of opinion and views on the whole issue of transfer at age 11. I have to say that not only does it happen at age 11; there are other transfer points. Is 16 the most appropriate age? P J talks about the fear and disappointment of pupils at age 11. The fear and disappointment of not passing your GCSEs is equally as traumatic and difficult. So, there is an issue around transitions. You talked about parental choice, Paul, and you mentioned the integrated sector. I am not going to get on to the issue of parental choice in grammar schools, but I do want to talk about parental choice in integrated schools. In the report, you state that it is a form of shared education, but the group does not agree that integrated schools should be viewed and actively promoted as the preferred option. I sound as though I am speaking on behalf of Trevor Lunn, who is not here, but I know that that is probably something that Trevor would raise. Irrespective of where the parental choice is being expressed, there needs to be a way in which that can be accommodated.

When specifically narrowing it down to integrated schools, you stated in the report:

> *"the Group does not agree that integrated schools should be viewed and actively promoted as the 'preferred option' in relation to plans to advance shared education."*

Will you expand on that, because it caused concern for the sector, which feels under threat at the minute as a result of the whole debate about shared education?

Professor Connolly: I really welcome the chance to speak to that. If you do not mind, I have noted about four questions to respond to, because they are important issues. I will be very brief with each one. You will appreciate that the membership of our group is beyond my control. It is down to the Minister who is appointed to the group. Therefore, it is an issue that you would need to raise with John O'Dowd. We recognise, however, the need for inclusivity. When we talk about having an implementation group in the Department, that is exactly why we have said that that needs to be inclusive. It needs to respect and be inclusive of all political parties, but the membership of the group is beyond my control, as I said.

You said that we lack ambition and targets. I disagree. I think that our proposals provide a route map that is very radical if taken on board: a statutory duty on the Department to actively encourage and promote shared education; a financial system of a premium for schools to ensure that that happens; and a legal duty on schools to actively promote equality of opportunity and good relations. Among many other recommendations, those are, to us, ambitious and challenging.

What you are saying is that there is a lack of targets, but I do not believe that it was appropriate for us to set targets. It was impossible for us to set targets, in the sense that we need to remember that none of us was employed to do this full-time. We are doing this in our spare time. I still have a school of education to run at Queen's, and Dawn and P J have other work as well. All that we have been asked to do is to set out a vision and provide a road map, and that is what we have done. We have given a very clear steer about the direction of travel, and I do not believe that it will take that long for people who are better placed than us, with the resources that we did not have, to set some targets and goals. Decisions become political when we start setting targets and goals like that, and so that should be done under a departmental structure, with all-party involvement.

You said that selection is an education issue, and I absolutely agree. I think that we make a distinction between two things. One is the evidence about academic selection and achievement gaps. There is no debate around that. If you look at our report and at the wealth of evidence internationally, there is clearly a relationship between strong systems of selection and widening achievement gaps based on socio-economic background. I disagree that there is any academic who can seriously argue against that. That does not mean that you could not accept that and still argue in favour of selection at 11 and the grammar school system that we have. That is a different issue. It is a political issue about what system should be put in place to address the evidence. The evidence is very clear that there is a problem. The challenge to Committee members is to ask yourselves whether you see it as a problem that kids from poor backgrounds have very little opportunity to get into grammar school. If you see it as a problem, let us accept that as an issue and look at it in the context of our current system and what needs to be done to address it. That is the political issue. It is for politicians to work out particular policies and processes informed by evidence. I am here as an academic to give evidence, but there is a policy arena now to take that forward.

Finally, I will discuss the issue of integrated education. The point in the report is very clear. It responds to the simplistic argument that all that we need is integrated education throughout Northern Ireland, that all schools should be changed to become integrated schools, and that that is the model for shared education. Our view is that it is not the model for shared education as we have defined it. We see shared education as being more than just about addressing religious divisions. It is about a fundamental driver of change in the education system. There is something very important to be gained from schools collaborating educationally. We know that if you look at, for example, federations of schools in England over a couple of years, you start to see standards increase when those schools work together. When schools with poor academic performance come together with strong schools, that has an impact on the low-achieving schools. It raises standards, and it has no bad effect on high-achieving schools. In fact, there is some evidence that the partnership improves them even further.

It is important to stress that the vision for shared education has those two elements. It is about schools and collaboration across sectors, in a deep and meaningful way that we have never seen before, that drives academic standards and creates opportunities for children to learn together and develop positive attitudes, behaviours and friendships.

With that definition, integrated education, in and of itself, is not a model of shared education, because it does not involve schools collaborating. That is not to say that integrated schools do not play a very important role in addressing issues of division and attitude between children from different backgrounds, but that alone will not drive up standards. It will not drive up the second part of our vision for shared education.

I am sure that there will be a question about grammar schools and parental choice, and I will come back to that if you want to ask me about it, but, fundamentally, we are not about social engineering when it comes to parental choice. We know that when you try to force things on people, it does not work. We need to respect parental choice and where the communities are at at the moment. As I said in the introduction, for those parents who have strong faith convictions and believe that their children can have their faith needs met in an integrated environment, that is absolutely fine. There are many such parents, and their needs should be fully met. There should not be a situation in which people want to send their children to an integrated school but that need is not being met. However, let us accept that there are other parents who want a faith-based system that is more immersive and of a particular type of faith base, whether that be Free Presbyterian, Catholic or something else. If there is sufficient demand, that should be met. Equally, however, a number of parents have come to me and said that they want secular schools. They do not want the Church involved at all. Again, if there is sufficient demand, that should be met.

We are talking about a fundamentally different system from that now. It is not just about Catholic and controlled. There should be a much more diverse system reflecting parental choice. If that is going to work, the key is that those schools be linked together very strongly.

The Chairperson: There is a list of members to ask questions, as this issue generates good interest and debate, and that is what we want to try to do this morning. Social mobility is not enhanced when you use very blunt social indicators as a means of determining whether a child has access to A, B or C. There are other issues that will remain in society if you have a different way of transferring pupils from primary to post-primary education. In fact, I find it interesting that there has been a whole issue in recent years in England around the fact that social mobility has not been enhanced by the use of social indicators, because people simply moved house, and the divide became wider. The big

problem that we have in Northern Ireland is that many people decided that they were not going to bother and so disengaged from the transfer test.

We need to find a way in which inclusion is available to every child if we are to maintain diversity. I concur with the point that you make that we currently have a diverse tapestry of education provision. If that is to remain, we need to find a way in which schools collectively work to raise the standards for, first and foremost, those young people who are educationally challenged and have difficulties and issues, and also across the piece.

That brings me to the point that you made about England. You said that there were benefits:

"when schools with different levels of academic performance work together."

We have seen that in the area learning communities, where a good range of work has been done. How has that been expanded on and reflected in the recommendations? There is not really much in the recommendations that says that if you do that, you will have a benefit. The other downside is that, when you looked at the process in Israel through the Hansson et al work on desegregated schools, it showed benefits to groups across racial boundaries and friendships, yet the educational outcomes results were more mixed and the long-term benefits were not proven. It is not always a perfect correlation between what goes on in Israel, England, Finland, Indo-China or wherever it is that we look at. As the old saying goes, "We're not Brazil; we're Northern Ireland."

Professor Connolly: There are some important points there. Let me be clear that selection is not the cause of socio-economic inequalities in education or anything else. We have done research for an organisation called Early Years in Northern Ireland. We did a large survey of two-year-olds and their cognitive, social and physical developmental positions, and we found that, already, socio-economic background impacts on a child's development. Going forward a few years, I did a major study and wrote a book looking at five- and six-year-old children from very different backgrounds in two controlled schools in Belfast, in which I looked at the day-to-day attitudes and habits of children and parents. There are already predispositions internalised by children by the age of five and six that affect their attitudes to education. That is even before they go through primary education and come to post-primary.

Therefore, socio-economic background is a huge issue. It is a fundamental division in society. What we are arguing is that selection is not the cause of it, but it does add to it. In its current form, selection exacerbates division, and the evidence is there to show that. As to how we should go forward, I certainly would not say that we should be emulating England. England has not got it right. It is not a model to emulate, and its performance overall is mediocre internationally. We have got a chance to do something world-class in Northern Ireland, and with the political will and the visions that we have set out, we can make a big difference.

Finally, Mervyn, it is important to say that we talked to a lot of people and took a lot of submissions from schools on the ground that have been involved in shared education across Northern Ireland. They were absolutely clear that one model does not fit all. There is not one solution to this, as there is not to anything here. What we were told again and again is that you need to leave schools to decide how best to take forward shared education in their locality, given the issues, the problems, the logistics and the political divisions that might exist. Let schools decide how best to collaborate. That is what is at the heart of our model. It is about being driven by schools so that they can decide how best to develop collaborative networks. We want to incentivise that at a local level and also provide a new professional development framework that has local schools working together at the heart of it. Schools need to define what professional developments they need and have the resources for buy-in, whether that be Masters courses or one-off training events. It is a system that is about moving away from a nanny state to parental choice and individual freedom of choice of school, but it is also about letting those in schools, as the people who know what is best for our children, decide how best to take things forward. That is why we have not got very strong targets or models about how exactly we should do it. There is a wealth of documented evidence out there for people to draw on when they are looking for inspiration to do it practically.

The Chairperson: There is an ongoing missed opportunity in the education debate at the minute, and I think that the report compounds it. We think that there are only two forms of post-primary provision: non-selective and grammar. I see what needs to be done in my constituency, and I am repeatedly asking for a 14 to 19 policy. We pour millions of pounds into the further education (FE) sector. We have created an entitlement framework and area learning communities, and the FE sector is involved

in those processes, but when it comes to area planning, it is only about schools. FE stays outside. The door is closed, and there is no discussion. If shared education is to be broader than what some us of thought it was, and if it is to have that broad sharing principle, we need a third way — a third option — that is about how we pull in FE to the grammar schools and the non-selective schools. Surely that would then give us a far better outcome for shared education. Taking the issue of the religious divide in FE, there are no Catholic certificates in shared education, and there are no maintained, controlled or grammar shared education. It is in further and higher education where that happens — whatever your class, colour or creed, that is where you go.

I get more and more exasperated when I look at the money that is poured into FE, when some of our pupils are accessing that provision only on a very limited basis because of timetable constraints, distance, location or whatever. We need to consider whether there is a third way — a third choice — that has to be looked at, whether that be an 11 to 19 provision or a 14 to 19 provision. On page 111 of the report, we have missed that by defining two particular pathways.

Professor Connolly: I totally agree with you about the FE sector. We visited a couple of colleges as part of our work and saw some absolutely terrific work. There were kids at the age of 14 who were having day release to the colleges to start getting a taste of different trades. Some of those kids will be lost to education in a year or two, yet you could see the spark in their eyes because they were doing something practical and meaningful with the potential for a trade at the end of it. The more that we can think imaginatively about shared education and collaboration across the system through the entitlement framework, the more that we can involve colleges for the better. We say that very clearly in our report. Furthermore, diversity of schools means not just diversity in faith-based ethos but should mean diversity in different types of schools and the emphasis that they have. You need to have a broad-based curriculum, but there is no reason why some schools could not emphasise engineering or liberal arts as a core area. There could and should be that ability for schools to specialise in different areas. Through collaboration, everyone can start to benefit from that.

Mr Kinahan: I start with a huge thank you to all of you for the very important work that you have done, and I really hope that all us of will now help to take it forward and have a better shared society.

Mervyn hit on every single question in almost the same order that I had questions written down.

The Chairperson: That is scary.

Mr Kinahan: It is very worrying.

The Chairperson: I will have to revisit my thinking.

Mr Kinahan: I wanted to start by asking who you think should be on the implementation group. I will leave that question, unless there is anything glaring that we should be looking at.

The second question was on parental choice. I wonder how we see that working. The report talks about student councils, but, from my brief time being involved in education, I know that there are very few ways of talking to parents. There are no parent councils. We need to set up some system to talk to parents so that we have parental choice. Of course, that then leads on to how you see the parameters being set so that parents can choose, without them all wanting to send their children to a certain school at the same time, which forces another one to close. There is a very fine line. We then moved on, and Mervyn talked about how we set targets. At the moment, if you take out integrated education, how many schools share in a meaningful way now through area planning? In my patch, I know of six or eight that have really a meaningful reference for sharing. If you extrapolate that to every board, it is not many. Therefore, how do we set targets, and what sorts of targets do we put in place?

We then moved to academic selection. I welcome your suggestion of an all-party group. We have to have some way that we can all discuss where we are going in the long term, and we need to start doing that now. I was pleased to hear your comments on grammar schools, and that it was not about getting rid of grammar schools but about them changing. That is certainly where we are coming from. We know that change is needed. When you talk about free school meals and the ratio of 1:5 and others being 1:1, I would be keen to see the figures looked at. Similarly, if you just took all children, would you end up with the same ratios? We need to change the ratio so that it gets better and better, whatever we end up with. I am keen to see other evidence, if that is possible. I have probably said enough on that.

We mentioned training for teachers. At the moment, there seems to be very, very little training for teachers anywhere, and yet it is at the absolute core. That gets you into the funding world and how you see funding coming in. If you get to a shared education premium, that will have a knock-on effect on all the other types of funding. Have you thought through how it would relate to the other types of funding? I have given you plenty of questions.

Professor Connolly: You have. I am enjoying this. There are five or six questions at a time. I have them all written down.

You raise very important issues. You mentioned the implementation group. We said that it needs to be inclusive and involve all parties meaningfully because there are still political decisions to be made. We should not leave it to officials to start setting targets in the Department about exactly what should be done. The detail has still to be thrashed out. However, that needs to be done through the involvement of all parties.

As I said at the beginning, I am an academic, not a politician. I have probably overstepped the mark already in urging the Minister to do this. However, it is obvious to me, and I would be absolutely frustrated if we did not grasp this opportunity. We need to start now on the detail. However, we cannot just leave it to officials, so parties need to be involved. Given the discussions of the past week and the comments from the Minister of Education and elsewhere, there is an opportunity now to start reaching out to and modelling shared education between politicians as well as between schools and the education sector.

There is a whole body of research evidence on how we can involve parents more meaningfully. We have recommended that we need to start pulling that together. We need to provide training and resources to ESA, and for ESA to have a role in providing training and resources to schools, again through collaborative education. There are pockets of extremely good practice already in individual schools. Let us learn from that, and let us have schools learning from each other.

Parents are crucial to this. To go back to the study that I mentioned earlier, I spent a year observing classroom practice in P2 classes in a very affluent, middle-class area and also in a very deprived working-class area where there was a history of conflict. The difference between the engagement of parents was astounding. In the middle-class school, the parents were just walking into the school daily. At that time, and this shows my age, they had Filofaxes, and so on. It was a professional talking to another professional, planning the education of the child. The teachers would respond in that way. There was a clear connection and connectivity. The children were doing at school exactly what they would do at home. They were like fish in water when they entered the school environment.

However, there was no connection at all in the working-class school. In fact, after P1 in that particular school, parents were told not to come into the school because of security issues, and so on. They were told to drop their kids off at the gate and pick them up at the gate. There was a real issue there. When you talked to the parents, you discovered that, overwhelmingly, they had had a bad education; they were intimidated by the education system and teachers; they did not know what was going on; and they were not getting the information that they needed. There is a huge issue there that needs to be addressed. The Department has started to recognise that clearly in its advertising campaign, and so on, but we really need to get it done fundamentally on the ground.

I will give one quick example. Booktime Northern Ireland is a book-gifting programme. Every P1 child gets a free book pack. It is run by Booktrust, which is a national charity. We evaluated it through a randomised controlled trial. We had 40 schools and, randomly, half the schools gave out the book packs and half withheld them for a time, giving them out a bit later so that no one lost out. The idea was that the book packs would stimulate parental interest and reading activity at home at P1 level and encourage parental involvement. We measured that and took a very rigorous approach to looking before and after at attitudes and behaviours at home. What we found was that the book packs had no effect at all in Northern Ireland. When we looked in more detail at why that was the case and monitored what the schools did, we found that very few schools did anything other than give out the books. Although there were examples given and resources for schools to use and have parent events, bringing parents into the school, most schools did not use them or do so.

To me, that is the issue. At the moment, it is not that schools are bad organisations but that they have so many competing demands that they do not have the support and training that they need to engage parents effectively . As long as they do not have that, they do not have the ability to make the step change that we want them to and engage with parents. Booktrust does a whole range of valuable

programmes of which this is just one. We are now working with Booktrust to look at how we can use it as more of a catalyst to engage parents. When we have opportunities such as that and they do not produce results, it shows that there is something more fundamental that is the problem with engaging parents. We absolutely need to address that.

Mr O'Grady: It is important in education we never lose sight of one parameter, and that is that the parent is the first educator. Most educators would agree with that. That was always my mantra as a head teacher and as an assistant teacher. In a way, that touches the whole question of parents making a decision about a school for their child. It is the most important thing that parents will do. Sometimes they do not realise that, and I am not sure that I realised it myself that much when I was doing it as a parent. It is so crucial, because you are letting go of the most important possession that you have.

That is why, in countries right across the Western World, there are faith-based schools and secular schools, and people will make their mind up, and fair play to them. Parents are handing over so much, and that is why a lot of them go for Church of England, Quaker or Catholic schools. They are assured that there is that trust that you talked about so rightly earlier. That touches the integrated/maintained school issue.

As well as that, and I include post-primary as well as primary schools in this, it highlights the importance of quality schools in areas, where a school caters for an area. I have seen plenty of action whereby parents take an initiative in coming to the school, and teachers summon parents to the school, in a nice way, if a child steps out of place at all. There is a place called the Waterworks near my school, for example, where dodgy people sell the big D word, and so on — all that consciousness. Where a good school is playing the organic role that it should, it comes back to some of the points that you made earlier, Danny, about the symbiotic relationship needing to be loud and clear. It does, then, transfer to the egalitarian argument about quality primary schooling, which tends to be non-selective — all the children go to their local primary school — and quality post-primary schooling, where there should be that entitlement and quality so that no youngster does less well than he or she would do no matter where he or she went. There should be that symbiotic relationship. It can be built. It is hard work, but it is the right work.

The Chairperson: The only thing that I would say on that, P J, is that we need to be careful that we do not fall into the trap of thinking that primary schools are non-selective. Primary schools now use criteria drawn up by their board of governors. We now have a situation, and it is becoming more and more of an issue, in which local parents cannot get their children into local primary schools, and that is partly because the system is driven by money. Money follows the child. I have concerns about that. There are some schools in your neck of the woods where issues have been raised with me about local children being unable to get in to local primary schools. When you start to narrow down the reasons for that, all sorts of dubious issues are raised: was the child technically what it said on the tin? People are social-engineering when it comes to who should get through the door. We need to be very careful in setting that baseline and saying that children just need to go to their local schools. If that is the case, the criteria should reflect how that will be achieved. It is the same in the post-primary sector. There is a wee bit of jiggery-pokery going on, and people are told that it is all about protecting a school. I cannot understand why, in some primary schools, children who live a stone's throw away from the school have been told that they cannot get in. That is an issue. I am pursuing a particular issue in the city because I believe that someone is clearly trying to protect their own provision. Do you take my point?

Mr O'Grady: I take your point. Equally, it shows the responsibility on schools to earn intrinsic trust right across the board because education, folks, is not the same as schooling. There is an awful lot of discussion about schooling, but I am talking about education.

The Chairperson: They are two different things.

Mr O'Grady: It is crucial to bear that in mind. You have touched on those very focal points.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you for your presentation, gentlemen. The concept of shared education sounds very good in theory. Paul, you said that it is not a one-size-fits-all model. Take, for example, from my experience in my constituency, a school such as Corpus Christi College, which is a non-grammar school. How would it co-operate and collaborate with other sectors, such as the controlled, grammar and integrated sectors? In practical terms, how would that work? What would it do? I know that you rule out activities such as having Christmas carol services together, and so on.

Professor Connolly: I am reluctant to give a specific example and say that that is the way that it should go. Examples are now documented. There is the shared education programme at Queen's; the sharing in education programme; and the Fermanagh Trust. There is now a wealth of examples of what could happen in practice. If we start from the idea that it is down to schools to work out how to do it, it will come out in different ways. You will find that, for some schools, it could be about what schools pupils will go to to study a subject that is not taught in their own school. That is one type of approach. Those pupils would join pupils in another school to study a certain subject.

In other areas, it is about co-planning and teachers coming together on a curriculum subject, be it science, maths or personal development and mutual understanding — whatever it is that they are looking at. For a term or so, teachers will work out and plan a range of activities and lessons for which the children will come together one morning a week. It could also be sporting events. There is a range of different models. That is simply independent schools working together. When there are different types of arrangements with perhaps more federal structures and an overarching governing body for two or three types of school, they work together collaboratively.

There is a wealth of different ways to do it. We are told, again and again, that the key issue is not to determine, before an event, how schools should do it. Every society is complex, and Northern Ireland is the same as everywhere else. Each area has its own needs, demands and problems. Let us give schools the space to do it.

As Mervyn said, what is also being said is that the current funding arrangements do not help the matter. When funding goes with a child, schools are in competition, which militates against the idea of collaboration. So, we need a funding process that incentivises schools. The more that schools are involved in shared education and the more that pupils are involved in a meaningful way over a longer period, the more funding a school should get to support that.

We also need the support of teachers on the ground, not only for curriculum areas but for the practicalities of sharing. The logistics of timetabling is an issue. How do you deal with diversity in the classroom when children are coming together for the first time? Should something negative happen or be said, how do you deal with that? Teachers also need those types of skills. One of our recommendations is about the skills sets that are needed even to start shared education, never mind the actual subjects that are covered.

Mr Sheehan: I suppose that what I am really asking is that, although the theory sounds good, in my narrow mind, it sounds as though it could turn out to be a logistical nightmare. I picked one school in particular for that reason. It is in a highly deprived area and has a high ratio of free school meals, special educational needs, and so on. It is surrounded by other non-selective schools and grammar schools. Just thinking of trying to sit down to work out timetables for children to go here and there — whether they will go to a grammar school today or whether some kids will go over to Methody, for example — I cannot get my head round the idea that it could work in practical terms.

Professor Connolly: The evidence is that it is working in practical terms. A few hundred schools are now involved in shared education, and thousands of kids have gone through it. However, you are absolutely right. One of our remits was to look at the views of parents, learners and children. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Parents, children and young people saw the benefits of being involved in shared education. For those who had experienced it, it was an overwhelmingly positive experience.

There are concerns, however. Parents were concerned about those exact logistical issues and their children's safety when travelling from one side to the other. The children were concerned about going into a different school and potentially being picked out or bullied and having a negative experience. I do not think that anybody is saying that this is easy. It requires resources and support. All that I would say is that there is enough of a track record now of schools actually doing it in practice. We have evidence that it works, and we have a range of models for how it is done in practice. We have also documented the problems, exactly like those that you mentioned, across the programmes and the ways in which people are trying to deal with them. So, our idea and vision is the simple argument that collaboration helps to drive up standards, helps children to learn together and addresses attitudes and behaviour.

A big part of our vision is that we need resources and support from the top, in the Department of Education, to prioritise that, to have a duty to support and encourage it and to do everything that it can

to set up support for teachers and financial arrangements. There is no doubt that it will be a difficult process. There will be challenges and struggles on the way. However, the goal that we want to achieve — to raise standards and encourage greater relationships between children from different backgrounds — is worth struggling for.

Mr O'Grady: It is important to highlight that, when the report talks about sharing, it also talks about what we share when children are together. Northern Ireland has a uniqueness. We are unique throughout the Western World, with our history and people. I say that with reference to all people in Northern Ireland, be they newcomers or whatever, because, somehow or other, we are all newcomers. We must not lose sight of the challenging areas that are difficult to handle — the things that we tend not to talk about in the drawing room. I mentioned the "what" of sharing with and the fact that it is clearly worthwhile bringing people together for history and cross-cultural education. Some people will say that they did not learn enough history. An awful lot of us feel ashamed about what we learn about our people during history lessons, and vice versa. It is good for the soul for all of us to have the bottle to experience that with our fellow man from other schools. So, the issues are the "what" and the "how".

We also talk about the structuring of schools being based on selection for education as opposed to selection in education, a point that Paul made very strongly. The economy of scale that would be consequent on some reorganisation of plant in Northern Ireland, whether in the controlled or non-controlled sector, would in itself be a lubricant or catalyst that would make it easier for cross-cultural, interactive work, with particular reference to those areas that are the jugular vein of why we are different here and how we can be better people together as a result.

Mr Hazzard: Thanks, Paul and P J, for that. It is very interesting. The report provides a lot of food for thought. I disagree entirely with the First Minister's remarks that the report is not ambitious. If it were to go forward with all the recommendations, our education system would be unrecognisable, so, to me, it sets out a very ambitious platform. The investment that we would need to go forward is definitely ambitious. From that point of view, you are to be congratulated. You pose many interesting points that we need to take recognition of. I definitely share your desire to push on with setting up a group. We should do that, and I will impress that on the Minister.

Do you have a rough idea of how much investment will be needed over the next five or 10 years? What sort of shift in resources or mindsets will be needed? Mervyn mentioned Israel. Are there historical international comparisons and models that we can think about or that should be avoided? Is this unique? Will we be trailblazers? If so, are the media underplaying how ambitious this is?

Lately, I have been interested in, and have done a bit of work on, parity of esteem and the existing divisions in our system on outstanding lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered (LGBT) issues and ethnic minorities. Where do those issues stand? I was horrified to learn that, in a school in Belfast, one in five pupils is self-harming and that the main reason is LGBT, minority stress, and so on. That is just crazy. A lot of people get fooled into thinking that it is about Catholics and Protestants, and I am delighted that your report states clearly that that is not even the start and that there is far more than that. I will be interested to hear more about that.

Without labouring the point, you said that you are not against academic selection but that you think that there are more appropriate or sophisticated ways, such as streaming and banding. I would love to hear a bit about that. What model should we aim for? As has been said, I agree that a good starting point would be a mechanism through an all-party group to deal with the evidence-based knowledge. It would be fantastic to hear your thoughts on any of that.

Professor Connolly: The bottom line on investment is that it depends how things pan out with area-based planning, and so on. Broadly, our view is that saving money should not be the driver for shared education. The driver should be our broader goals of improving standards and promoting good relations and respect for diversity. Savings will be made through the area-based planning processes, but reinvestments will be required for supporting schools and the shared education premium. At the very best, all we can say is that it may well be cost-neutral when one issue is balanced against another. We are not economists and do not have the ability and the expertise to come out with costing plans. It would be fruitless to try to do so, given that there are still disagreements and that the details need to be worked out.

There is, however, huge support beyond Northern Ireland. We should not make decisions on what we want to do based on what our external friends outside Northern Ireland say, but it was made very clear

to us by the Special EU Programmes Body and funds such as the International Fund for Ireland and Atlantic Philanthropies that, if we have a clear model for shared education, there will be significant resources to help us to kick-start any capital investment that is required. Overall, it could be cost-neutral, but we could tap into a range of benefits if we, as a region, start to show ambition in taking this forward.

I welcome your comments about the report being ambitious, which it certainly is. There are models of collaboration between schools, but there are no models of this type of collaboration in societies that, like ours, are emerging out of conflict. The centre for shared education at Queen's University is advising the Macedonian Government on how to take these issues forward. We have relationships with colleagues and policymakers in Israel/Palestine who are looking at different models. Queen's has a leading education professor over from Korea who is interested in the models that we are setting out.

I will reinforce the point: I think that we have a very ambitious model. The reaction from certain sections has underplayed the ambition and innovation. We have the ability not only to make our education system world-class but to be at the forefront in showing others internationally our way of doing things.

Your points about black and minority ethnic pupils, LGBT, and so on, are well made. In the media, some voices are heard louder than others, but the response to the report from the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities and the Rainbow Project was strongly positive. They thought that the report took their views seriously. We took evidence directly from both groups and had meetings with them, and they were delighted with the report as a whole. They were particularly delighted with our recommendation to put a legal duty on schools to promote equality of opportunity and good relations. They see that as the key way in which we need to move forward in protecting the rights of minority groups. That is not without its challenges. We were advised by some who gave evidence that that will overburden individual schools. Our view is that, at the very least, schools need to set out their plans, identify the needs of different groups in the pupil population and set targets and plans for how they intend to address those needs. To me, that sounds like an equality scheme. There are, perhaps, areas in equality schemes that it is not necessary for schools to follow, so our recommendations are twofold. If we are to apply an equality scheme to schools, we recommend that schools be designated as public bodies under section 75. Schools need support from the Department and the Equality Commission not only to do that but to do it in practice. Let us look at the procedures to find out whether a slimmer, equality-lite version is possible that has the same kick to ensure that schools promote equality but that takes away some of the burdens while recognising that schools are small institutions.

A section in the report sets out evidence on streaming and banding, and that evidence is mixed. We found that, in general, selective systems do not improve a country's overall performance. Whether a country has selection or not, its average performance stays roughly the same, but the more selection there is, the greater the range. Those at the top get a bit of a push and an extra premium. That can be seen if our results in Northern Ireland at A and A* are compared with results in England. Equally, however, at the bottom, there is slightly less achievement, so the gap increases. That is what happens with formal selection systems and academic streaming.

If there is a simple system of A, B and C streams, or a grammar stream, which some schools operate, where we put some children together for all subjects, that is one form of academic selection. I think that we should look at that, but we need to be aware that it will have an effect on those in the bottom stream who are more likely to become labelled and disenfranchised in the system, which we know happens. There are more sophisticated models in which we have settings and do not simply say whether a child is clever but recognise that children have different skills. They might be good at maths but no good at art and humanities, so they would be in the top stream for some subjects but not for others. That has logistical problems, but some schools manage it very well.

We have to balance the need to not lose support for those high-flyers. We are certainly not against the good parts of our system whereby the high-flyers are pushed to the limit to get the best out of our highest-achieving pupils. That needs to be protected, but we have to balance that with a need for a selective system that is sophisticated and flexible enough to provide opportunities for those who have skills in different areas. From my own children, I know that they develop at different rates. It is not just that children have different abilities in different areas but that they develop differently. I do not know whether it is to do with gender, but many boys tend to be late developers. It is not that they do not have the skill but that they simply do not have an interest in education until they are a bit older. Therefore, if we write them off at a certain age, we have a crude system that says, "Right, by this stage, that is it. You have now been labelled and that is where you are going". That is a lost

opportunity. When we ask for some type of all-party mechanism to look at this, let us have everything out on the table. Our only concern is that we recognise that we are all committed to addressing achievement gaps, addressing the needs of children from poor backgrounds and making sure that we do not have a discriminatory system. It could be delayed selection at the age of 14, or it could be different forms and types of selection in schools. Let us try to be more mature and have an all-party debate and discussion. At the same time, it is important that we never take our eye off the evidence.

Mr O'Grady: A great Scottish educator once said to parents at a prize-giving in my school, "Be careful. Education is complex; it is not simple". Education is very complex. I reckon that this Committee has a bigger task than any other Committee in the Building.

We tend to think about the pupil and the progress. However, there could be a poor teacher somewhere in the process, and the youngster is spot on. Those kids could be brilliant at subjects X, Y or Z, but the teacher may be the weak point. I will give you one quick example. I worked in a boys' grammar school in north Belfast and deliberately moved to a large girls' comprehensive under a very famous lady called Sister Genevieve, whom some of you might have read about in the history books. I taught A-level physics in the north Belfast arena, and then taught A-level physics beside the Bog Meadows. Some of the questions from those lassies — failures? — showed that they had a more complex knowledge of magnetic fields and gravitational diagrams than the boys in the leading academic school. It is complex, but the setting can be done.

Incidentally, the principal of a well-known grammar school at the time was heard to say at a prize-giving, "If your lad is not doing very well, get him a tutor". The head of a grammar school said that. All youngsters need a bit of a lift up. By the way, as a young teacher, I did a brave bit of tutoring in A-level physics, and never once did a grammar school head get up and say, "Could I just say a word of thanks to all those secondary-school teachers who are tutoring our A-level guys to get them into medicine or to get them an open scholarship to Oxford". That is just a wee story, so forget about it, Mr Hansard. Maybe, do not forget about it.

The Chairperson: It is now on record.

Mrs Dobson: How do you follow that?

Professor Connolly: I have had eight months of trying to follow that.

Mr O'Grady: Man City supporter.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you for your presentation. It will come as no surprise that I want to touch on the grammar school issue. The report states that academic selection, which was mentioned quite a few times, exacerbates socio-economic division and increases underachievement for certain groups. Did you look at the outworking of the success of the Dickson plan before coming to that conclusion? Are you aware of how successful selection at the age of 14 rather than at the age of 11 has been during the 42 years that it has served pupils in the catchment area of Craigavon?

Paul referred to streaming and said that kids from poor backgrounds had very little chance in grammar schools. I disagree with that. In my constituency, in Lurgan and Portadown, I know that many pupils from disadvantaged areas are doing very well in Lurgan College and Portadown College through the Dickson plan. Can you elaborate on that?

Yesterday in the Chamber, we all had the opportunity to debate the future of rural schools. The report defines shared education as being the delivery of education to meet the needs of all section 75 groups. What are your views on pupils who may be forced to be educated far from their home and, potentially, out of their rural community because of the closure of rural schools? Can you touch on the needs of disabled pupils? What is your view on their needs if those schools were to close?

You said that your advice to the Minister is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I am thinking about rural children again. What is the convention's view on the quality of attainment and participation of children in rural communities? Can you start with the Dickson plan, please?

Professor Connolly: We looked at selection at the age of 14 as an option, which has a lot of merits. People have said that they do not have a problem with not having selection and having all-ability comprehensive primary schools. Nobody seems to have a problem with selection at the age of 16 when we get to GCSEs and people start to think about A levels or other alternatives. It is about how

and where we undertake selection. If our suggestion of an all-party mechanism is taken forward, the 14-plus idea has a lot of merit. The evaluation of the operation of the Dickson plan locally has shown that not having selection at the age of 11 has certainly freed up the primary school curriculum. Attainment in Key Stage tests is higher among primary-school children in that area compared with regional results because they are not being taught with a test in mind with the emphasis being put on that. It is not a pure experiment from which we can learn because parents can make a choice for their children to go to a grammar school at the age of 11, and if they do not, they will get a second bite of the cherry at the age of 14. It is an open system; it is a bit more complicated.

Mrs Dobson: Have you studied the Dickson plan?

Professor Connolly: We did not study it directly, but we looked at reports and evaluations of the Dickson plan. Our view is that it should be part of the remit of any group looking at alternatives. One idea could be selection at the age of 14, and there is a lot of merit to that. It may involve strong academic selection at that age. Mervyn mentioned the FE sector. It is clear to some pupils that they are already moving in an academic stream; they have a clear sense of identity about what they like and what they want to do. Other pupils rule that out at that age, but they have a flair for other trades and skills. We need a system that starts to specialise progressively at about the age of 14. That may involve a formal system of selection or a more informal but complex system of facilitating people's choices at the age of 14. We need to look at all those issues.

When it comes to free school meals and grammar schools, there are always anecdotes. We know that some people from working-class backgrounds have gone to grammar schools and have done very well. Part of the argument is that some parents think that their kids going to a grammar school and doing well is their only opportunity to get out of a local area. The statistics, however, speak for themselves. Of the children who are eligible for free school meals, 16% go to grammar schools and 84% do not. Unless we think that children who are eligible for free school meals are innately less intelligent or are not born with the skills that other people have, there is something wrong with that. I have stressed that the problems that create that discrepancy are not the result of selection; they start from the age of dot. It even starts pre-birth: there is a lot of evidence that mothers' habits can have an impact on children before they are born, never mind their development beyond that. Some children from poor backgrounds go to grammar schools and do extremely well. We need to make sure that that is available to all children. There is definitely a grammar school effect. Appendix 2 of the report contains a data analysis. Mervyn is right that we do not have great data for a more sophisticated measure of socio-economic background and achievement across the board, not just in simple subjects; Danny also said that. It would be useful for me as an academic to have greater data and investment. This is a core education issue, yet when the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is funding projects, it is not funding those core issues to the extent that it should be. Research is required so that we can get better data. At present, we have free school meals. We analysed school attainment data for 2011-12. We looked at each school, the proportion of pupils who attained five or more GCSEs including English and maths, how many pupils took free school meals, how many had special educational needs, and we considered the size of the school. The problem is that, when you compare the raw scores, you see that 90-odd per cent of children who go to grammar schools get good marks. That statistic is weighted, partly because those children largely come from more affluent backgrounds and are less likely to have special educational needs, etc. However, when you control for intake, when you compare like with like, when you compare children on free school meals in one school with another school, you see that there is still a strong grammar school effect. Grammar schools are drawing more out of pupils in academic subjects. If a child from a poor background goes to a grammar school, they will get a boost, but the problem is that only one child in six gets into a grammar school. Therefore, the big question is how we put in place a more egalitarian selection system whereby all children have the ability to get into grammar schools.

I turn to the topic of rural schools. Shared education is important in that sector. I am reluctant to comment on any particular examples, and I do not have sufficient knowledge to talk in detail about specific area-based plans, but there is an opportunity, which I do not think has been explored sufficiently. The second recommendation in our report is that, right now, the Department should play a much more proactive role in looking at potential solutions, whether that is a shared campus, a shared building — whatever — to try to maintain schools in rural areas. Clearly, some schools are not economically viable on their own if they have small pupil numbers, but there is potential that they could be. Typical of our system is the problem that we have had two area-based plans going on: that of the boards in the controlled sector, and that of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) in the Catholic maintained sector. We are seeing some more movement now, but we need to see more. I think that there is the potential, at least in some cases, to maintain rural provision if there were more imaginative approaches.

I did not mention the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, because I had only 15 minutes, but, as a standard, my report starts with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is a universal convention that every country in the world has signed up to, and every country but two have ratified. The UK and Ireland have signed up, thus saying that those are the basic rights that all children should expect. One is the right to education and to equal access to education without discrimination. A big issue with the area plans in rural areas is the risk that children's fundamental rights to a good education locally are potentially being undermined. We need to take that very seriously.

Mrs Dobson: And the needs of disabled pupils?

Professor Connolly: Looking at that issue was very interesting. As Mervyn said, there are not only two sectors. There are also special schools and educational support units. I think a real opportunity is reflected in recommendation 14, which states that there should be a full review of how shared education could mean a step change in provision for pupils with special educational needs, behavioural difficulties, and so on. Broadly speaking, we want children to be educated in a mainstream environment, but we recognise that that is not always possible, and it is not always appropriate for some children. Some children need ongoing specialist support, and some need periods of respite and support.

There is a real opportunity now for shared education if the mix is not simply Catholic and Protestant. Going back to what Chris said, if you adopt a full, inclusive approach to children with special educational needs, we are looking at mainstream schools working together on a shared basis with special schools and educational support units. There is a real opportunity to support children more in mainstream environments with the specialist support that they need. Whether that means that they are located in special schools but with periods of learning together with pupils in other mainstream schools, or the other way around, or whether it is intense respite or periods of support from educational support units, there is something that can be done.

That is a recommendation on which we need to set out plans and targets. It is a whole area in itself. I ask for some sympathy, because we are a group of three people, working in our spare time. None of this should be rushed just to produce sound bite recommendations and targets. We have to learn from the wealth of experience in this area — international as well as local — and put in place a very well-considered plan. There is a route map for that in recommendation 14.

Mrs Dobson: Finally, Paul, will you agree to look at the Dickson plan model in greater detail? You said that you touched on it. I ask because it is such a successful model that has worked very well for 42 years, and I think it would be remiss of anyone not to study it in greater detail. It is possible that you may then revisit your statement about academic selection.

Professor Connolly: As I say, our work on the report is done. I have a school of education to run, and hundreds of e-mails have fallen by the wayside in the meantime. I cannot promise that we will look at that as a ministerial advisory group, but I endorse your view that we need to. That needs to be a clear element of any all-party mechanism that is looking at issues of selection and how it can be done in a much more inclusive way. I certainly endorse that.

Mrs Dobson: OK. Thank you.

Mr Rogers: You are very welcome. P J, you are the most passionate and proactive witness I have ever seen whether in Bearnageeha or here with us today.

Mr O'Grady: I should not mention that I saw a few dinosaurs on the way in. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Rogers: Like you, I have taught in both sectors. We have talked about the children and the parents, but we have to acknowledge teachers' hard work on behalf of our children, no matter what sector they work in.

I will go through a few points and then you can come back to me. First, I welcome the report. Just because there may be something in a report that we do not like, that is no reason to put it on a shelf somewhere. I do not want to see that happen. We need to move forward, we need the implementation group, and we need to grasp the nettle of selection. Educationalists sometimes say, "Those politicians up there can't agree on anything anyhow". You may then get a counterargument,

so we need educationalists and politicians to grasp the nettle together and move forward. Will you clarify the statistic of one in five that you talked about? Is it that one in five children on free school meals get a grammar school place, or is it that one in five of them try to get into a grammar school?

My second question concerns area-based planning, which you touched on. Do you feel that area-based planning has, to date, in some way stymied the development of shared education? On looking at the list of the schools that you visited, I was surprised not to see the likes of St Columbanus' College in Bangor, which has a religious and a social mix. I thought that I saw St Mary's in Limavady as part of an area-learning partnership. To my mind, Limavady's is one of the best learning partnerships because the geography there is good; there are four schools basically on the one road.

My last point is about the shared education premium. Do you see there being different levels of that? My old school in Kilkeel works with Kilkeel High, whereas other places have greater examples of shared education. Finally, we have to acknowledge and celebrate the good practice that there is out there, but we need to keep working at it.

Professor Connolly: Just the three questions there, then. On the one-in-five issue, there are two ways that you can do the statistics. The first is just the basic proportions, and that would be one in six — that is for all children who are on free school meals; it is not based on those applying to get into grammar schools. However, overall, the chances of a child eligible for free school meals going to a grammar school are one in six, or the odds are 1:5. When I say "odds", I mean that, for every one child that gets into grammar school, five do not. That is for all children.

Has area-based planning stymied shared education? I think that there is still an opportunity. We are still at the stage where plans at post-primary level are being looked at, and the plans for primary level are now out. Our consultation found that there was general disappointment at the lack of ambition in the area plans and shared education solutions. We need to see more things being considered such as the 10 shared campuses, which the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced, as well as the schools, boards and CCMS being supported to look at different and innovative solutions. There is still potential; area-based planning has not stymied it yet. However, there is disappointment so far in how area-based planning has gone.

The basic point is that shared education costs money and teachers' time. If teachers were not involved in shared education, they would not have to commit their time to it. Teachers involved in shared education have to do extra work that they would not normally do. They have to, for example, find time to meet their colleagues from another school, plan and timetable lessons, get involved in sharing expertise, address transport costs, and so on. Shared education and collaboration across schools cost money.

We have said that the shared education premium needs to be variable and weighted in respect of the number of pupils involved in shared education programmes — is just one class or is the whole school doing it? The level of involvement must also be considered. The whole school might be involved, but only in a sporting activity for two hours a week. That is different from another school in which an entire curriculum subject is being taught on a shared basis. There needs be sensitivity on cost.

The integrated sector has raised that issue. People in that sector have said, "We are already providing shared education. We need a bit of money to support what we are doing. What we are doing needs to be recognised". However, with the shared education premium, we are looking at the costs that are additional to what is being done already. If you want to get involved in shared education, what are the additional costs of doing that, compared with what the school is doing already? Unless integrated schools collaborate with other schools, which we think is very important, there are no additional costs, so there is no reason why an integrated school should get a shared education premium.

Mr Rogers: Thank you. The rest of my points have been addressed.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. There is certainly food for thought. Will you clarify one point in relation to rights? Is there not an article in the convention about the right of a child to be educated in accordance with the philosophical and religious views of the parent?

Professor Connolly: Yes.

The Chairperson: Do barriers to access on the basis not of setting a test but of a school having a particular religious ethos raise equality and human rights issues? There are not just barriers on the basis of a test; there may be barriers, which are not referred to in the report, in respect of shared teachers and the requirement for a certificate, which CCMS is trying to address. Those are also barriers to access.

Professor Connolly: The problem with the United Nations convention and other international standards is that they have to be broad enough to apply to every country in the world. Some countries do not have post-primary education and are struggling to provide primary education. Those are minimum standards. In the context of Northern Ireland, there is not a right for every parent to send their child to a school that has a particular religious ethos. If there were, the costs would go through the roof. In practice, the minimum standard is that parents have the right to send their child to a school that does not proselytise their children and try to convert them. The school must respect their faith-based needs. That often means withdrawing children from certain classes, and so on. What we are saying is that we should go beyond that minimum standard and, in the spirit of what you just mentioned, respect rights where we can. The Department should take more risks to meet the needs of parents.

The Chairperson: Another element that was missed, I think, is preschool and nursery provision. There is clearly huge potential in that sector. I can think of places in my constituency where there is cross-community preschool provision, but, come P1, the children go off to a maintained or controlled school, and never the twain shall meet until years later, when they may decide to go to a further or higher education college. There is a real issue around developing nursery and preschool provision, which is, by and large, deemed to be cross-community, although some schools now try to use it as a means of keeping their numbers up. We need to keep a focus on that, and try to build and sustain it.

Professor Connolly: I absolutely support what you say. Some of the best practice in engaging parents is at preschool level, so we need to see how those models can be taken through into the primary sector. Preschool education and early childhood generally is a sector that has not been impacted. It has often been working under the radar. Even at the height of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, there were really good examples in the preschool sector of working together across the divides. The Media Initiative for Children runs the Respecting Difference programme, which is now a preschool curriculum for three- and four-year-olds. There is a whole set of resources for parental engagement and the curriculum for children to encourage their social and emotional development and respect for diversity. We carried out an evaluation of that with a randomised trial involving 1,000 three- and four-year-olds, measuring factors before and after, and it is proven to have a positive effect. We can see that the divisions in Northern Ireland impact the attitudes of three-year-olds, but there is scope and evidence that programmes can have a positive effect. We are now looking at how that programme can be taken through into the first years of primary school. I think that, if we took an integrated approach from preschool level, we would make a huge step forward.

The Chairperson: Paul and P J, thank you very much. This has been useful and valuable. We have spent time exploring a variety of issues, and I thank you for your work. Thank you for coming.

Mr O'Grady: May I say one thing?

The Chairperson: Of course.

Mr O'Grady: It will take less than 20 seconds. I am not a Holy Joe, as you know, Mr Chairman. However, I feel that the Holy Spirit speaks to me occasionally. I have the 'The Newsletter' of 23 April, which was the day after our report —

The Chairperson: I am not sure about using 'The Newsletter' as an example of how the Holy Spirit moves you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Grady: It was 23 April: the day after our report was published. There was a full article about the report. I happened to flick through the paper, as I do quite often with 'The Newsletter'. On page 17, I saw a feature on a man named David Scott, who is the education officer of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, and who is a very good friend of the school that I used to work in. That gentleman used to come into our school quite often to talk to the boys about the Orange Order. I am talking about the soft focus of things. We tried to follow a mandate of steering away from the easy focus and going for the tough focus, and we developed great relationships. David Scott talks about diversity being a key

strength. There is a photograph of David receiving the Bearnageeha Award for Reconciliation, presented by Bertie Ahern, in that newspaper. The mug of this same exhibit, or dinosaur, appears on another page. I thought that it was a good example of the mandate for sharing, and that going for the tough option is sometimes not a bad thing. If you remember Gay Byrne, there is "one for everybody in the audience." Thank you. *[Laughter.]*

Professor Connolly: May I have 30 seconds?

The Chairperson: Of course.

Professor Connolly: It is worth our commenting on last week's announcement by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. We very much welcome that statement. We understand that political responses have been made. We are not politicians, but we recognise the important step forward that was taken last week in that statement. We particularly welcome the emphasis on shared education, the commitment to shared campuses and summer schemes organised on a shared basis. We recognise the pragmatism in that. Core issues — about flags, and so on — need to be dealt with, but they will not be dealt with without further work, so structures and mechanisms are needed to take those forward. However, there are things that can be done now, and those include the shared campuses and summer schemes. That is the pragmatism that we have now: there are things that we can do, right now, which we should take forward.

With regard to those two suggestions, our only concern is that we must not see that as ticking the box for shared education, as though that is the end of it. In the spirit of the announcement, we would certainly say that the infrastructure of shared education still remains to be developed. On shared education campuses, there is still a need for the structures to support the schools there to collaborate. Summer schemes will have a limited effect in and of themselves, as a one-week programme. However, if they are part of a broader move towards shared education, where schools are brought together, the summer schools will add value to what happens throughout the year, and there is real potential in that.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I look forward to similar discussions in the future.