



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Joint meeting of the Committee for
Employment and Learning and the
Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Teacher Education Review

29 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jim Allister
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Phil Flanagan
Ms Michelle Gildernew
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr David McIlveen
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Mervyn Storey

The meeting was chaired jointly by Mr Storey and Mr B McCrea.

Mr Storey: Thank you for coming. I trust that this meeting will be informative and helpful. The Education Committee wrote to the Employment and Learning Committee on 22 March to request a joint formal meeting to discuss the review of teacher education currently being conducted by the Department of Education (DE) in consultation with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). I thank the staff for organising this meeting and the members for giving their time to discuss these issues.

The concerns surrounding the review of teacher education date back to December 2009. Some of us may think that they even predate that. In 2009, the Department of Education briefed the previous Committee on this issue. That departmental briefing is provided for members. With your indulgence, I will try to give a brief overview of the concerns raised by both our Committees to date. The current Education Committee was briefed on the review in March 2012, and several concerns were raised at the meeting. They included the role of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI); the high levels of protection that teachers have; possible conflicts of interest for teachers sitting on boards of governors; concern about trying to address the gender imbalance of employees, because

teachers should be in their job due to their skill rather than their gender; the role of the General Teaching Council; and several other issues. The Hansard transcript of that meeting has been provided in today's papers.

The Committee for Employment and Learning was briefed by its Department on 25 April 2012, and the Hansard transcript is in today's pack. Several concerns were raised at that meeting. They included concerns about the length of time the review had taken to date; the future-proofing and planning of the intake and training of student teachers; implications of split responsibility and division of responsibility of Departments in teacher training; the evidence base for the criticism levelled at current training; and a guaranteed year of teaching experience for newly qualified teachers.

The purpose of today's meeting is to give members of both Committees a chance to discuss the many issues surrounding the review of teacher education, to inform a joint response to the Departments. Members should indicate if they wish to comment. Basil, as Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning, do you want to make any comment?

Mr B McCrea: I will be brief. As is highlighted in the Hansard report of our meeting, I and many of my colleagues were unhappy that DEL seemed to be saying that this is all to do with DE and that it was passing the buck. Since DEL had responsibility for NEETs, in particular, and people were talking about the quality of teacher training, which seems to be an issue, I think it is important to get together and get the matter thrashed out. There is a general problem in our schools, and if it is to do with the standard of our teacher-training provision, we need to do something about it. That is why it is useful that we are meeting.

Mr Storey: One concerning aspect is where the unions sit on all of this. I know that the unions want to ensure that they have the support of politicians when it comes to pay and other related issues, but, on this issue, there is a reluctance on the part of the unions to get involved, to the extent that they are prepared to allow their members to be put under scrutiny and some degree of consideration. Members of the previous Education Committee will remember that we visited to Drumragh Integrated College. The principal of that school was very exercised about ensuring that, in the process of appointing staff to the school, the board of governors and he, as the principal, should be able to assess the ability of the candidates in a teaching role in a school and classroom context. Unions have walked away from that. They have said that that is not right and that it should not be allowed to happen.

If there is an issue with the outcomes from our primary schools or in some of our post-primary schools, not all of it is down to the system. In some cases, it certainly has to do with the training and the resources that have been put in place for our teachers. I think that it is about trying to have a holistic approach, rather than trying to identify one particular problem at the expense of others. We need to try to get that broad overview. We need buy-in from the teachers, from the boards of governors and from the training establishments to ensure that we get the best possible outcome.

Mrs Dobson: I have a question for Basil. From my experience in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I know that two Departments getting together can often look great on paper but that the reality can be very different. Are you concerned that that will be the case with teacher training?

Mr B McCrea: Mervyn raised a key issue that I happen to know about because I was on the Committee with him at the time. The point that Mervyn raised is that the head teacher was telling us that he was not allowed to observe one of his teachers teaching — I think it was without prior agreement, or maybe he was only allowed to do it once a term.

Mr Storey: I think he was allowed to do it once a term.

Mr B McCrea: You, therefore, get a situation where the person who is charged with the professional development of teachers is not able to see what they are doing.

People lambaste us about the tail of underachievement in the Northern Ireland education system. Everyone says that the real factors involved are the quality of the teacher and of the leadership. Those are areas that seem to have been an issue, as Mervyn said, even before 2009. I read the Hansard report of your meetings, and if you read the Hansard report of our Committee meetings, you will see that we got very irate with the Department and tried to convey to it that enough is enough and that we have to get the issue dealt with.

To answer your question, Jo-Anne, I am supportive of the points that Mervyn has put, and I am quite sure that he will support the points that I make because we have worked on this in the past. It is really about getting to the Department, or whoever is responsible, and saying, "Enough is enough. We need our teacher training improved and we need it done quickly." If the unions are holding it back, they need to be talked to, in an appropriate way, to bring them back in.

Mrs Dobson: My next question is about literacy and numeracy. We all know that improving the standards of English and maths should be a priority from an early stage. As we know from our recent visit to Bombardier, companies are telling us about the importance of STEM subjects, so that should be emphasised in primary education as well. Do either of you, Basil or Mervyn, think that DE and DEL are up to the challenge of improving the uptake of STEM subjects? We should start with teacher training in the subjects that our companies need for economic growth. I would like to hear your thoughts.

Mr Storey: Later this week, I am to meet the vice chancellors of Queens University Belfast and of the University of Ulster. In correspondence and in conversation, they have expressed worries about the standard of graduates that they are beginning to see coming through universities. At a recent event that was held in Queens, regrettably the only contribution that the permanent secretary of the Department of Education could make to the discussions on how we ensure that young people are prepared for the world of work was to state that the Department of Education is dealing with the issue of rationalisation and raising standards. If that is the sum and substance of what the Department of Education is doing to prepare young people for the world of work, variety and the change that needs to take place, it is a very poor reflection on it.

The issue is: is it down to this that we are discussing this matter, is it the revised curriculum, or is it a combination of both? What are the key components that have created this situation? Tomorrow we will discuss that on the basis of figures from the Department. It raises serious concerns. The issue for us is how, in this review and as far as our two Committees are concerned, we have a joined-up approach, even though there may not be a joined-up approach in the two Departments.

The other element is that we do not know what will happen in regard to the dissolution of one of the Departments, which is key to deciding where all this will go. We might have issues with the review plus whatever will come out of the dissolution of one of the Departments — DEL — whenever that takes place. I am on record saying in the Education Committee that we need to ensure that that is done correctly and not on the basis of some political decision. It should be decided on the basis of educational advantage, outcome and benefit for young people.

Mr B McCrea: Let me say briefly that our concern, in dealing with science and technology, is that the decisions that pupils make come almost too late. We are exercised that the careers service must get to people earlier. The real age of wonderment is at the end of primary school and the first two or three years of secondary school. There is an issue that, in P7, maths is the most popular subject, yet by the age of 13 it has become the least popular subject. If you cannot get people interested in sciences at that stage, by the time you get to 15 or 16, it is too late. There needs to be a greater focus on that if you are serious about it. We have all been to the meetings where it has been said that there is a shortage of people with an interest in science and technology. There is also a shortage, Jo-Anne, of young women who are interested in science and technology.

Mrs Dobson: Bombardier mentioned that.

Mr B McCrea: I am sure that Jonathan will agree that we need talent in that area. Our focus is on that. At the moment, we have the two teacher-training colleges and everybody is so keen to tell them that they are doing a wonderful job, because we do not want to offend anybody. However, the review says that whatever they are producing is not what we require and that there are issues with continuing professional development (CPD), because teachers need to get up to speed with the needs of the 21st century. Mervyn has made some quite strong statements, and mine is that teachers and the teacher-training provision need to get up to speed with what is required out there.

Mrs Dobson: It should reflect what is needed.

Mr Storey: Another issue seems to be building a head of steam, but you sometimes wonder what a head of steam looks like in the Department of Education. In 2011, the Department produced a paper for us — we can make it available — that identified a number of key matters, one of which was the

cost of introducing a guaranteed year similar to the one introduced in Scotland following the McCrone agreement. At that stage, the Department said that a guarantee to students graduating after June 2011 could cost £12 million in year 1 and £20 million in subsequent years. It went on to say that the McCrone agreement is under review and, when that review is complete, it will provide a useful insight into the potential merits of a guaranteed induction year. That review has concluded, and it said that they will keep what they have in Scotland. The Department is now saying that it might consider looking at something. We have written back to ask exactly what it is looking at. Remember that the issue should not solely be about cost; it should be about the benefit that could come from it.

Roisin has put in my hand a letter from the Department, which says:

"The draft strategy is currently being finalised for submission to both the DE and DEL Ministers for consideration. It is our intention to publish the strategy and accompanying implementation plan".

It goes on to say:

"The Department will be happy to provide more detail on the NQT scheme once it has been developed."

Again, we have not seen any of the detail, and we do not what the scheme is like or what it entails. However, we have been told that the Department has a scheme. The letter says:

"As previously indicated, work associated with the Framework will include development of a scheme whereby newly qualified teachers ... will be able to continue with the development of their teaching competences in order to complete the induction."

Again, it is mist and fog and there is no clarity.

Mr Rogers: I am relatively new to this Committee. I had a quick look over this stuff, and I have some concerns, particularly about the term "poorly prepared Initial Teacher Education". I find that very hard to come to terms with, given that, on the other hand, ETI inspected the quality of teaching in our colleges and found that it ranges from good to very good to outstanding.

I am also concerned about the comment made earlier, which was that teachers need to get up to speed. I spent over 30 years working with teachers, and the large percentage of teachers are very well trained. We talked about numeracy and literacy, and no matter how good our teachers are, the social background of children has a big impact. If a mother or father never sits down to read with their child, teachers cannot be blamed. Yes, a certain amount of teachers are ineffective, but teachers cannot be blamed totally for the low standards at GCSE and so on. That is my big concern.

Mr B McCrea: Sean, let me come back on that. If you look at the Hansard report of the Committee for Education's meeting on 21 March 2012, you can see where Mervyn is responding to issues. He says:

"The document talks about ETI monitoring, providing advice, reviewing ... but never, in any way, putting in place a reprimand".

There seems to have been a failure. We can get the exact numbers, but I think that the ETI reports show that one third of our primary schools were below standard — that is, they were failing — as were 10% of our secondary schools. There is a challenge there about leadership and about the quality of teaching. Although I accept fully that the school environment is only a modest percentage of the overall learning environment, the quality of teaching in our schools is the area over which we have control. This is a review of the teacher education review, if you like, and it is taking a long time to get anywhere. Either there is a problem or there is not. Let us focus on the problem in a positive way and say that, if we are not doing it right, we need to change it. What is not right is to not have done anything since 2009.

Mr Rogers: I agree with you. I am not saying that there is not a problem, but I have concerns about the evidential base. I see that there are roughly 1,200 schools but there were only 48 responses to this. Where there is a problem we need to deal with it, but I am just not sure that we have the right evidence base on which to move forward.

Mr Storey: You have heard me say before that one of the problems is getting a system that can be inspected independently of the Department. I have serious concerns about the process. All sorts of people expressed all sorts of concerns about the police and how they should not be allowed to inspect themselves. The police have a variety of organisations looking into their business every day of the week, yet, in education, we have a process where the chief inspector sits on the education management team.

My view is that the inspectorate should be completely and absolutely outside the Department and it should have the power to be able to do what is necessary — whether in relation to the staff, the board or the Department — to criticise and to make recommendations in a way that is for the benefit of the young people, not for the benefit of the system, although that might be an unintended consequence. Surely schools are there to ensure that they deliver a quality education for our young people. If there is something wrong — whether it is in training, management or leadership; wherever it is — it must be identified and dealt with appropriately. That is another element that has not been addressed in the review.

Mr Allister: I have just a few miscellaneous thoughts. I agree quite strongly with some of the things that Sean said. Education is a whole-life experience; it happens in the home as well as in the school building. When you have children you do not say that their health is just the concern of their doctor. If there is something wrong with them, you medicate at home and you do things to help. Likewise, when you send your kids to school, you cannot just shut your door and say that it is up to the school to educate them. There is also an onus on parents to make sure that they sit down and read with their children, help them and work with them. That is a big contributor to the poor outflows in some circumstances.

I am not totally convinced that we can lay all the blame for these problems, or, indeed, a great proportion of them, at the feet of lazy or bad teachers. We all come with our own experiences. I have been the chair of the board of governors of a primary school for many years and I must say that I never cease to be amazed by the dedication of the staff. Perhaps each school develops its own ethos, but certainly, in that school, I see no slothfulness; I see teachers who are always trying to improve their professional development. They go to courses, try to keep up with things and succeed. Perhaps that comes from the principal's leadership, which is important in a school, as well as the high level of expectations set. Others may have had experiences of very poor teaching, and that may well be a problem. Fundamentally, if there is a problem with the outcome, there could be a teacher contribution involved, but we have to look more rigorously. Is there a curriculum problem? Have we dumbed down the curriculum to the point at which we are not prioritising the fundamentals that we are looking for on exit from the scheme; that people are able to read and write and have the basics? We have all had experiences of talking to employers who are appalled at the level of capacity of kids who come to them, and who blame that on the education system. I am not so sure that I would apportion it to the school or staff in the manner that some would. I would apportion it more to the curriculum in the balance of things. I think that is where we want to look.

Mr B McCrea: There is general agreement that the environment and the parents and all of that are important, but if you are going to take remedial action, where are you going to fix it? Every year that goes by, these children are going out with no maths and no English. We would like to say that, if someone can pick up at P7 that children are still not able to read and write, somebody has to step in. The question is this: who has got that capacity?

Mr Allister: I think it is tied in with the fluffy curriculum criticism that sometimes prevails. Are more radical solutions required? You do not want to reward failure, and at the bottom end, we have a lot of young teachers who are perturbed that they cannot get into teaching. They come with great enthusiasm; all the enthusiasm of youth. At the top end, there may be teachers who are tired of it all, who cannot face another curriculum change, another this or that, and who are just counting down the days. Are we doing our kids or our education system any favours by holding on to those teachers, or should we have an exit strategy for teachers that allows them to go and the young enthusiasts to get in there? When we had that, we had a better product.

Mr Storey: We concur with many of those comments. The main issue is about getting the balance right in all of these things. I do not think it is about apportioning blame; it is about recognising that there are problems. That is why I said earlier that it may be, and I think it is, a combination of the curriculum and what the system has delivered to date. With the changes there have been over the past years, I am surprised that we have any teachers left in the profession, given all that has been thrown at them and the circulars that come out to them on a daily basis.

There was a discussion in the Education Committee some time ago, and you will note that I referred in my opening comments to the issue of the governors. Again, I declare an interest as a governor of two schools; Ballymoney Model and Ballymoney High. It is always a challenge for the chairperson and the principal to ensure that they are aware of all the issues in the school, but, in a way that they are independent, in that one is not leading the other. That is because, sometimes, as has happened in the past, the working relationship of the chair and the principal — who is also the secretary to the board of governors — may be seen in a particular way, or through rose-tinted glasses. When there are particular issues, and again, it is unfortunate to come down to the issue of staff, but it could be a variety of things. Is the system structured in a way that is able to deal effectively with particular problems? It is nearly impossible to get a change in the system, and that is from teachers as well as from boards of governors and so on. Do you think that there needs to be a look at that, or is the model that we have generally able to cope with the process?

Mr Allister: I think, in large measure, it depends on the personalities of the people who hold those roles. In a successful school, there will be a healthy tension between the chairperson and the principal, not in the sense of always being at loggerheads, but of not being behind the door in questioning and challenging. The impression I get of some boards of governors is that, really, the secretary, or principal, runs them. That may be understandable for all sorts of reasons, but, at the end of the day, it is not desirable. I think you need the chairperson and the membership to have that constructive tension with the staff but not in any derogatory or difficult sense. It is a managing role, and a challenging role sometimes. Nine times out of 10, there will be no manifestation of any disagreement, nor should there be, but there may be issues on occasions when that is necessary. How do you instil that? I have no idea, but I think it is down to the individuals. I was recently at a training session for a board of governors and I was interested that the Department was stressing, particularly to the chairman, the burden that was on them to be challenging. I think that is right. Get that balance right and you can probably improve things. I certainly do not think you should put teachers off boards of governors. I think they give an insight. A teachers' representative needs to be there, but, on the other extreme, you cannot allow the teachers to run the board of governors. It is not easy.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you. I have some thoughts about my brief time when I have been looking at various things. We have been talking about how good our teachers are. I want to focus on the other end. One complaint I have is that when a teacher is not good enough, it takes too long to remove them, and that then clogs up the whole system. That may be a very rare case. I will move on to something else, which is back to the training. What are we training our teachers for? I asked a similar question yesterday on the back of Jonathan Bell's speech. We are not looking at the UK, Europe and globally, we just seem to be training for Northern Ireland, yet we owe teachers a really good teaching that will take them anywhere in the world so that we get them back with even more knowledge if they go somewhere else. I feel that that is missing from everything that we are looking at.

I am amused to see that only one teacher said that there was too much political dogma in what was going on. I think that that is not just aimed at one party. I think that politicians are too involved in much of this. We ought to be trying to free things up and get it down to the teachers.

My last point is about governors. In my brief time as a governor, I was shocked at how very few people there had the skills that were needed. You needed to have two or three other people, maybe selected by the head or by somebody, so that they can get the skills into the governorship and not rely on politicians, churches and others. We need to review it and try to find a way that takes schools forward and allows them to have the right skills there, particularly if we are throwing more and more responsibility at the governors.

Ms Gildernew: I am glad to be here at this discussion. It is not an area of work in which I have had much involvement. I may be coming at it from a glass-full perspective, because our local primary school has achieved an outstanding rating in the past 12 months. It has a very dedicated principal and board of governors, fabulous staff, and the educational experience has been fantastic.

For me, access to education locally has been fairly good, but I do not disagree with a lot of what has been said this morning by Jim, Sean and others. The point that Sean made about parents reading to their children was very well made and can be extended further. We often hear about problems when a teacher tries to take a certain course of action in a school around either discipline or encouraging children to focus on learning. We also know of families where homework is consistently not done, and when the teacher tries to engage with the parents, he might get short shrift. Society must support the

work that teachers are doing. I know that they get a lot of stick about holidays, etc, but it takes a special person to be an educationalist, and a lot of us could not hack it at all. The people who try on a daily basis to improve the educational attainments of our children sometimes do not get the support that they need from us as parents and families. That is not necessarily something that we can fix in a Committee, but it is a message that we want to get out: we support the people who are trying to educate our children.

We must try to find ways to support families to avail of educational opportunities. We have talked about early intervention and support for families. In the Health Committee, we talk frequently about Home-Start and Sure Start and the kind of support mechanisms that help families to make the right choices. Bookstart, for example, should be in every area and every town should have access to it because parents often do not get the messages. Home support is crucial and, no matter how good the teachers are, if the home environment is not conducive to a successful educational outcome, it is very tough for teachers to get the right balance as well.

Mr B McCrea: Mervyn, can I ask about the challenge that comes in here? In the Hansard report of 21 March, La'Verne Montgomery of the Department of Education stated:

"Concern was also expressed about the lack of cohesion between the content and nature of initial teacher education and the reality of the classroom. The current low and underachieving performance of a significant proportion of our pupils, particularly in key areas of literacy and numeracy, together with the inspectorate's evidence of instances of poor lessons given by teachers, would suggest that we need to review the current provision of teacher development to ensure that it meets the demands of the 21st century."

Do you agree? This is the DE saying that there is a problem and that this is the cause and effect.

Ms Gildernew: Yes, but often when we talk about the problems, they are generalised. The Chairperson of the Education Committee made a comment earlier about generalising issues. Teachers often feel that they get a lot of stick. There should be some ability to assess poor teachers. I know that we frequently have training days when children are off school and when teachers are developing and keeping on top of their training. That is vital. Equally, if teachers are underperforming, there needs to be the ability to assess them, which is where the leadership of the board of governors is important.

If a teacher is not performing consistently, the board of governors is in a position to do something about that teacher. I do not think that anyone who is on the board of governors of a school that consistently returns very poor results can allow that to continue. People should not be in a position where it is allowed to continue year after year. If the board of governors will not deal with the problem in the school, there must be a change in the board of governors. The problem in the school must be addressed before it is too late.

In the Employment and Learning Committee, we see that it is too late for a lot of young people. We know that there are young people in care or who are carers. There are different reasons why children underachieve, but there are far too many children who do not have such circumstances in their lives who are underachieving as well. For that situation to last for any length of time is unacceptable.

Mr Storey: Another issue involves what is thrown at teachers on a daily or weekly basis as regards changes in the system. Take for example the whole process that they are going through now with respect to the Interactive Computerised Assessment System (InCAS). The contract came to an end. The Department then did not get one organisation to deliver diagnostic testing, but two. It now has to spend a fortune in retraining, with all the upheaval that that will involve. Yet, teachers are still being asked to improve standards and outcomes and keep pushing the barriers for their pupils. The Hansard report of La'Verne Montgomery's evidence to the Education Committee on 21 March is well worth a read. You sometimes wonder where the Department is coming from on these matters. Page 4 of the Hansard report, for example, relates how we discovered on that day that the Department was looking at creating a single school development service. How long have we been saying that we need to rationalise the organisations that deliver programmes and training for teachers through the boards, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, and other providers? When we asked the Department whether it would be better to rationalise those and get some coherence, the response was, "Aw, well". Then, all of a sudden, it told us a few months ago that it is looking at a single school development service.

There is another teacher training issue that we have not dealt with. The Department sent us correspondence last year, which stated:

"Whilst Northern Ireland needs a smaller number of teachers, it does not necessarily mean they can be trained in a single institution."

Who are they trying to protect? We have five providers: Queen's; the University of Ulster; St Mary's; Stranmillis, and the Open University. The whole issue of teacher training numbers and who goes to which college needs to be looked at, because the Department of Education, and I can speak only in relation to how it views this issue, tells us on the one hand that we cannot have five boards because we need to rationalise but that we can have five teacher training institutions for fewer than 800 students.

There really is an issue around where we go with that. People are protecting institutions and, on some occasions, they are using the same arguments to attack others that they use to justify themselves in trying to protect institutions. That issue has not been resolved satisfactorily. Why, in the allocations that were given last week —

Mr B McCrea: If we could do this formally —

Mr Storey: Yes, go ahead, Basil.

Mr B McCrea: We were not able to get information, even though it is a DEL responsibility.

Mr Storey: I got information about the allocations, and I can share it with members. The numbers are down for Queen's and for the University of Ulster but they are static or increased for St Mary's and Stranmillis. What is going on there? That is one reason why I want to meet the two universities to get their perspective. The issue will be raised at the Education Committee tomorrow for clarity.

Mr McElduff: It may be a case of swings and roundabouts. It is my understanding that two or three years ago the figures for the universities were up and those for the university colleges were down. So, it may not be that big a deal. A mountain could be being made out of a molehill in that area.

Mr Storey: Yes, but the issue is how you determine the criteria? I have struggled to find the criteria for capital decisions in the Department of Education since I was elected to this House. It changes more often than some people change their socks, and I hope that is pretty regularly. *[Laughter.]* You cannot get definitive criteria because the Department keeps moving the goalposts.

Take the politics out of this. For example, a school in your area needs a newbuild, whatever the school. How can it access the capital programme. How does it know if it is fit for purpose? The Department keeps moving the goalposts. What are the criteria for the admissions policy with regard to determining numbers? Is it NISRA, demographics or applications? What is it? We do not know.

An element of what you are saying about the numbers problem in previous years is right. However, if the Department is trying to redress an imbalance, what is that based on? What element of the criteria was not applied correctly in the first place that created the imbalance? You start to ask those questions and you would think that you were asking for £1 million. The answer just does not come.

Mr B McCrea: That is why, Mervyn, I would like this joint Committee to write to the Departments on that very point. Can they explain why the allocations were made in such a way and what criteria were used to make that decision? If necessary, can they explain the historical bit as well, just for an understanding? That is a formal proposal, if members are in agreement.

Mr Storey: Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

Mr McElduff: Will you build into that the part about historical figures?

Mr Storey: We want to know the history of this issue in the past number of years, what criteria has been used and how the Department has come to its recent decision on the allocations that it made.

Ms Gildernew: In the first week after Christmas, we had quite a heated discussion with the Minister for Employment and Learning about numbers for the colleges. There was a line of questioning around the 700 places that he was able to allocate to the universities and the regional colleges. For years, Magee had been campaigning and lobbying for increased numbers, and it had made a couple of business cases for that. Magee got an increase in its numbers, but Queen's got nearly as many without needing to make the same case for it.

Perhaps the decision has been based on the fact that the universities have many courses to offer students and the university colleges are much more limited in what they are able to provide. I do not necessarily see the numbers as a bad thing.

One reason why the goalposts may have had to move on capital allocation is that, in the previous mandate, there were many times when the Education Minister was hoping and expecting to get a capital allocation and did not. It is much more difficult to build new schools when you do not have the money to do so. We have to take into consideration the context in which we are living and the fact that budgets are being squeezed. If the money on which you based your planning is not there, you will have to change your criteria for allocating money.

Mr D McIlveen: Following on from that point, I believe that there is a systemic problem with the oversupply of teachers. Whether we choose to admit it or not, DEL has a bizarre role in teacher training where it is merely a paymaster for education. The analogy with doctors has been used already, and I will use it in a different context. We do not have an oversupply of doctors. The one thing that we can see, from a government point of view, that is different from the oversupply of teachers, is that the Department that sets the jobs and the criteria for doctors is also responsible for training. I believe that the problem with teachers would not be as critical if the same Department that delivers the training sets the numbers. That is why, when discussions are taking place about the dissolution of DEL, I think that teacher training sits naturally in the Department of Education. A bit more joined-up government in that approach would be advantageous. It is a bizarre system that something as critical as teacher training is dealt with in a different Department to the one that has the function to deliver the jobs.

Michelle mentioned the role of the board of governors, and I agree completely. While we have the ear of the Education Committee, I will say that there was some encouragement around ESA that the position of the board of governors would be cemented rather than diminished. Whether it is rumour or whether there is some substance to it, it is being mooted that there may be concerns about whether this will happen in legislation.

I encourage the Committee, where possible, to ensure that the part of ESA that gives the board of governors a very strong position of authority, particularly on choosing head teachers and how to organise staff management in a school, is maintained. That is really important, and, if there are any indications that the Department is becoming woolly on the issue, I encourage the Committee to make sure that it takes on the Department in that matter.

Mr Storey: On that issue, the caveat is that that could be done provided the boards of governors do not become the scapegoats and the people who bear the blame. My fundamental worry has always been that the creation of a single authority will put the responsibility and blame on others and allow the Department to sit with its hands relatively clean. You can create an organisation, but that organisation, in legislation, will be able to say, "It is not my responsibility; it is the responsibility of the board of governors." We have to be extremely careful with this area, and we must try to have the balance between accountability and not creating a legislative framework that is only a blame culture whereby responsibility lies with the board of governors in a way that makes it feel more isolated and more vulnerable. That is the worst possible place that we could ever get to.

Mr D McIlveen: I agree. That is not the point that I am making. It is important that the board of governors has teeth, and there are concerns at the minute that, as things sit, that might be under threat.

Mr Craig: I have listened with interest to what is being said about boards of governors, and I declare an interest as a member of three boards of governors. I have shared my concerns with the Education Committee a number of times that boards of governors are being given more and more responsibility but are not being given more and more training to deal with that responsibility. This will become an increasing difficulty especially with what is being proposed with ESA.

As some of our colleagues stated today, there is an issue with how expertise is recruited to boards of governors, and both Committees should maybe look at how to get more expertise into those boards.

There is a bigger issue, which was hinted at by the Deputy Chairman of the Education Committee. I was looking through the Hansard report and noted that I had raised it before: how do you deal with the underachievement of a teacher or senior manager in a school? That Hansard report is quite interesting. If you are lucky, it will take almost two years to ultimately deal with an underachieving or poorly performing teacher. If you are extremely lucky, it will take you an absolute minimum of three years to deal with an underachieving senior manager. I ask both Committees to have a good, long, hard think about that. If you have a problem in a school, it will take a minimum of two years to deal with it, or, if it is a problem with management, it will be a minimum of three years. In that time, a lot of damage could be done to the reputation of the school and, more importantly, to the education of children in the school. Both Departments need to have a good, long, hard look at how to deal with the issue more quickly.

That leads to another question: why are there issues of underachievement, especially with senior management of schools? Is it to do with how senior management is recruited or, more importantly, is it to do with how people are trained to become senior managers? In the past two years, I have sat on recruitment panels for new headmasters of two schools and I found the whole process fascinating. It is a long, drawn-out process, and the firm conclusion that I have come to is that it is not perfect. Unfortunately, the other conclusion that I have come to is that there is not a wealth of good senior management out there in the system. Therefore, there is an issue about how we train people for senior management, and there is an issue about how we recruit people for senior management positions. My experience is that, unfortunately, it is quite a haphazard process.

Mr Storey: In the Hansard report of our meeting in March, there was a very telling presentation by La'Verne Montgomery. In that report, she repeats the phrase "we are considering"; if that phrase was not in the English language, the Department of Education would be speechless. Everything is being considered and everything is being reviewed. However, she also states:

"Our current mechanisms for supporting teachers experiencing professional difficulties are cumbersome, slow and ineffective."

Those are the words of the official who came from the Department to talk about the review. La'Verne admitted that the mechanisms for dealing with teachers who are experiencing professional difficulties are cumbersome, slow and ineffective. However, lo and behold, they are not being addressed in this review; they are being addressed in the Teachers' Negotiating Committee. We have asked if we can see what work that committee is doing, because there have been issues in the past few weeks about unions not getting involved, or one union not being allowed to be at the table, and all sorts of things have been going on. Therefore, those mechanisms are being reviewed by the Teachers' Negotiating Committee to ensure that they sufficiently reflect the teachers' competency framework and that the emphasis is on early identification. The last line of that paragraph states:

"We are also considering a review of the performance review and staff development process in conjunction with key stakeholders."

How can you follow all that? It is a muddle. It is not coherent; it just adds to the confusion.

In trying to draw some conclusions jointly, my aim is that the two Committees should bring together a report that is not about having a go at the Departments because, politically, we think that is what we need to be doing. It is about trying to get a collective view as to how issues should be addressed. If the Departments cannot do it, we ought to be able to prove that, collectively, we can bring together a number of recommendations and raise a number of concerns.

In fairness to the Minister and the Department, if they take this issue in the same way as they took special educational needs, we could have a better outcome. Special educational needs was heading for a train wreck, but, last week, the content of the paper that was presented, the way in which it was presented and the way that the issues were addressed was an indication that at least somebody in the Department is prepared to genuinely listen to concerns that are expressed, and changes have been made as a result. I hope that the same consideration will be given when our concerns are raised as a result of this report. Does anyone else wish to comment?

Mr Douglas: You talked about the five institutions having responsibility for teacher training. We had a hot and heavy debate about Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College, and there is no doubt that there is no political appetite for a merger between the two colleges. We have said that before. Stranmillis met us and we visited St Mary's, and one of the things that struck me was the diversification that they are involved in. Is that something that we can encourage?

You were at the launch of CREDIT, "Classrooms Re-imagined: Education in Diversity and Inclusion for Teachers". That is a good scheme with co-operation between two colleges and with external money from the International Fund for Ireland. When we went to St Mary's, we saw that the college is not about just teacher training; it is very much part of the community. It is an economic driver and is about confidence-building and local jobs. Can we encourage that sort of initiative to support those types of colleges?

Has the 2003 review outlived its usefulness? There were 48 responses, including from individuals, which is a very small minority of those who were invited to respond. That review looks tired and out of date. We need a bit more energy, and maybe that is what you are calling for as well. Can we look at ways to encourage the colleges to diversify and bring in outside finances and resources? They have shown that that is already happening.

There is the notion of more collaboration; having spoken to staff at Stranmillis and St Mary's, I know that there is no doubt about that. There was a real sense of, "Let's try to work together". They do work together but they are willing to work together a bit more.

Mr Storey: CREDIT is an example of what can be done collaboratively. The issue is duplication and the cost of duplication. Is doing one subject at five locations the best way to spend public money?

Mr McElduff: We should note Sammy's point about the willingness of the university colleges to co-operate absolutely in this matter.

Mr Storey: Yes, but they are willing to collaborate because they are always afraid that they will be isolated and, therefore, vulnerable if they do not. When looking at the issue of the number of training institutions or schools, it is nearly impossible to prevent institutions from trying to protect themselves, and it goes right across the piece and across all sectors and interest groups. It is a question of being objective and as impartial as possible and asking whether, realistically, we require five providers for the number of teachers we train. In another sphere, with the five education and library boards, which deliver millions of pounds to educational services, you can make a judgement that you do not need five; you can bring them down to one. It is a matter of the consistency of the argument. That is an issue that we need to raise as a concern. How we do that is an issue. We will draw up a report and work on that over the next few weeks.

Mr B McCrea: Although what we have talked about has been wide-ranging, the real focus was on the teacher-training review. Regardless of who is at fault in the system, at least three issues were raised with us over and over again. The first is that industry tells us that it cannot get enough people with the right skills, particularly in science and technology. We are not producing what is required. There is a problem there, whoever's fault that is.

Secondly, there is a problem about underachievement. We have been going on about the long tail of underachievement in Northern Ireland for many years now and we are not seeing that much change in it. There has to be somebody who tackles those people who come from backgrounds that are not supported in an educational way. We have to do something about it.

The final thing is that we have this issue about the numbers of teachers that we are producing. Jonathan brought it up in the House. If only 10% of new teachers get a job, it does not matter how good the training is in St Mary's, Stranmillis or wherever; by the time the rest of them eventually get a job, they have probably forgotten what they were taught and the training may have moved forward. Regardless of where the fault lies, those are faults in the system.

We then move on to some of the things that have been raised by the Committee that might bear further investigation. Jim raised an interesting point about burnout. Teachers who have been in post for a long period may experience that. Really, they have to move on to make way for other people. The problem with that is that it is hugely expensive. When the UK had the early retirement scheme, it cost about £70 million, a really large sum of money. Maybe that comes down to the terms and conditions that we work out with teachers about how long we expect them to work. If it is the case — I

hear this anecdotally — that many head teachers are struggling under the pressures, we must find some way of managing the situation so that they get more support or, if they have done their time, they move on. We must get the young teachers in.

I also think that we have not picked up this thing about CPD. It seems to me that our teacher training is focused on initial teacher training and we have no way of showing teachers the new developments and saying, "Here is how we need to do things in science", or whatever. We need to deal with that.

In support of whatever Mervyn will suggest, I conclude that we need to do something in a timely fashion. It is critical for the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to pick up. I make a critical comment: they have taken too long to deliver too little and it is a shame what they are doing to our young people. They have the responsibility, and we have to do something a little bit like we did with special needs. We need to put a fire under this; we need it sorted out. We need to stop the navel-gazing and get it away from the academic discourse of, "We might do this", "We might consider the other", "We are thinking about that". We need action. If our Committees can do something jointly to put a fire under this, that is what we should do. So, Mervyn, in any report or joint action, we want to focus on timescales. We need to state when we want things delivered, and we will hold people to account so that they will come back in at the appropriate time.

Mr Storey: If there are no other comments, I propose that a joint draft response be put in front of our respective Committees.

Mr Rogers: Just a quick point. I agree with what you said, but this has to be joint action based on empirical evidence, not on what I see in some cases as anecdotal evidence. You made a comment earlier, Basil, about the reality in the classroom. You talked about the evidence of poor lessons given by teachers. Is that 1% of all lessons, 10% or 30%? That is the only caveat that I would add: let action be based on empirical evidence. I make the same point as Sammy; there were 48 responses, but many more people have not responded.

Mr Storey: I think what Basil quoted was from La'Verne Montgomery's evidence to the Committee on 21 March, when she said:

"The current low and underachieving performance of a significant proportion of our pupils, particularly in the key areas of literacy and numeracy, together with the inspectorate's evidence of incidences of poor lessons given by teachers, would suggest that we need to review".

Sean, tomorrow we will deal with that issue. We will write to the inspectorate, asking it to give us what it has statistically. That will base it in fact. Let the inspectorate and the Department explain that statement. Are you happy enough for us to do that?

Mr Rogers: Yes, I am happy enough.

Mr Storey: If members have other issues that they want to feed in before the draft is put to us, those should be sent to either the Clerk of the Committee for Employment and Learning or the Clerk of the Education Committee. That can all be brought together, and we will start the process of drafting the report. It will take us a week or two, in that we have a draft that we will probably want to amend or change. My intention and Basil's is to get a joint, agreed response that means something and has buy-in from everyone. Hopefully, it will have timescales and be something that is of substance, not merely aspiration.

Mr Lyttle: Can the ETI evidence be forwarded to the Committee for Employment and Learning?

Mr Storey: Certainly, Chris, when we get it. Members, thank you for your attendance, and I thank the members who had to leave us. The meeting has been well attended. Hopefully, this will not be the last time that we do this. I thank the Committee Clerks and the staff. We will see you later in the House to support the Causeway Hospital.