Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

Literacy and Numeracy Task Force

11 January 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Daithí McKay

Witnesses:

Mrs Maire McGinn	)	Literacy and Numeracy Task Force
Mr Andy McMorran	)	
Sir Robert Salisbury	)	
Mrs Maureen Smyth	)	

The Chairperson:

I welcome the retired Mr Andy McMorran, Maire, Sir Robert and Maureen. It is good to see you again. Thank you for coming. It is a joy to have you back again, and I thank you for the work that you have done. Your report will form the basis of other work that needs to be done. It is clear from your report that this is not the end; far from it. A huge amount needs to be done, and there are interwoven issues that need to be addressed. However, I think that the report is a good basis for the system to build upon and work from. I will hand over to you, Sir Robert, and ask you to make your comments. Members will then undoubtedly have some questions.

Sir Robert Salisbury (Literacy and Numeracy Task Force):

Good morning, and thank you for your invitation to meet here again.

On my right are Maureen, Andy and Maire, who all have a proven track record in mathematics in post-primary and primary schools. They are three very valued members of the task force.

I put together a very brief paper for you, which I hope you received. It is a quick skip through the past four years' work. I do not want to dwell on the first bit, which asks, "Why a Task Force?" I think that you are all familiar with those sorts of issues and with why the force was put together in the first place.

You may not be familiar with the last comment on that list: "Liverpool, Hull and NI". It does not appear anywhere in the task force report. I popped that on only because it struck me very forcefully that a recent survey in England said that the skills base means that economic recovery is likely to be slowest in Hull, Liverpool and Northern Ireland. That is another piece of evidence about underachievement and the things that we have to do.

The task force was formed in 2008 with seven volunteers, and it met seven times a year. It was supported by Department of Education (DE) staff, and we were given an open agenda to make recommendations about what we saw as the way forward.

I want to comment on the underlying principles that members of the task force had in mind at all times. The first was that we all believed that the young people in Northern Ireland are a talented group. I think that we said that they are superb youngsters. However, some of them are not being given a good deal. There are a lot of excellent students and a lot of good teachers, although some are not quite so good. There are good leaders of schools and supportive people from DE, and there are people with ideas and innovative approaches and a belief in Northern Ireland that education still matters. That might seem obvious, but it has not been the case in all parts of the UK that I have been associated with.

So, there are four principles: a belief in education; excellent young people; a lot of very good teachers; and supportive people in DE who want to make things change.

The second underlying principle that I want to bring to the Committee's attention is a matter that I do not think we have talked about enough in any area of Northern Ireland, which is the skills that should underpin all our schooling in Northern Ireland. What are the things that will make our young people marketable in the world in the next 15 years, not in the past 30? It seems to me that the rate of change will increase, not decrease, and it is unpredictable as to where it will go. So, it seems to me that we should be talking in more detail and at length about the things that will make our young people marketable as individuals, whatever the world throws at them.

We came up with that very short list of things in the submission that we ought to be talking and thinking about. It is not a definitive list, but it is an important one. However, there should be more discussion about what we should be asking and hoping for from our educational systems. Obviously, there is literacy and numeracy, but there is also flexibility and adaptability. Are we teaching that in our schools? I do not think so. Do we have a proper global outlook, and is it wide enough beyond Northern Ireland?

If you were to look at any school website at few years down the line, you would see that youngsters are all over the place. They leave school after three years, and then they are in all quarters of the world. Are we really teaching that?

Just as an aside, the school that I ran, which was a long time ago now, had every sign in five languages. It was a simple thing, but it started to get people to think about the world outside. The notice on my door had the words "head teacher" written in five languages, and the bottom one was in Arabic. Every time an Arabic-speaking family went past, they would look at the door and smile. It is only since I left the school that I wondered whether the notice really said "head teacher".

There are ICT and technology skills to consider. However, we must also think about innovative, entrepreneurial skills, and if we need any skills in the whole of Ireland, it is those. I suspect that a lot of our schools are still teaching in a prescribed way that the future will be easy to understand and not flexible.

Lastly, there is the skill of communication to consider. That is a crucial skill that our young people need if they are going to meet new circumstances with confidence. Yet, a year ago, I did a pupil pursuit exercise in quite a prestigious school here in Ireland. That exercise involves

following one pupil for the whole day, including over lunchtimes and break times, to see the impact of education on that youngster. The youngster that I followed was 13 or 14 years old. She did not speak once, except at break time. She was not asked a question, she did not ask a question and she did not have any opportunity to practise her communication skills. So, that is another good example of what our education system should be about and how it will equip people for the next 15 years rather than the past 30. I have to say that too many of our schools are still being steered through their rear-view mirrors, and that is one key question that we have to look at.

The second underlying principle was the idea that we have less money and that any of our recommendations should be made with the view that funding for schools is going to get tighter and tighter. So, if you look through our recommendations, you will see that almost all of them are cost-effective. They will not cost vast amounts of new finance, because we did not believe that that would be forthcoming.

I make no apologies for putting a little diagram into the submission. I drew it up 10 years ago, but it seems to me to still be relevant, in that the expectations of those of us who are in schools go up every day. In the school that I ran, we put a board up in one corner, and every time a Minister or politician came along with a new issue to consider, such as healthy eating, obesity or whatever, we put a little note on the board. I have to tell you that the board was pretty full by the time that I left.

We were even blamed for the decline of English cricket. I have not heard one Minister since then say that the reason that England is now the top cricketing nation is the work that is done in schools. To be honest, the real reason is that we have two good South African players and one guy from Dublin. That is why it is better.

I am being flippant, but the actual costs of running our schools are going up, taxpayers' willingness to pay any more for it is staying the same and Government funding is going down. So, it seems to me that the gap between what we need in our schools and what we will get is getting wider.

Our recommendations are based on some of those principles. The first is that we have superb youngsters and teachers here. The second is that we should be looking at what skills underpin all our teaching for the next 15 years, and the third is that money is going to get scarce.

I will list some key recommendations. The first five, which you have heard us talk about before, concern just the systematic collection of data. How we do that is crucial, whether it is a value-added collection or pairing similar schools so that they compare data or just standardising the transfer of data. It seems to be incredibly difficult for a small primary school in a rural area to know just how well it is doing. It can feel that it is doing OK, but what is OK? We ought to have a much more systematic sharing and use of data to assist our schools in knowing just exactly what they are doing.

It is very important to get a learning plan for every single youngster in every single class. For example, where are they, what do the data show, what are we going to do about it and can we do that as early as possible? We were very clear that early intervention is vital. A massive area is the intervention and use of parents. Some schools are superb at that, and in some it is almost non-existent. How can we develop greater liaison and co-operation with parents in working on that, and how can we use governors more effectively to make sure that they are monitoring and checking what is happening in the schools?

We need to blur the edges — I use that phrase a lot — between where traditional schools stop and life outside begins. So, how do we use all the community resources to do the work that this task force hopes will come about?

The last five recommendations are about initial teaching training. Maire is going to say something in a moment about maths training, which is important. We wondered about the distribution of teacher expertise, particularly in small schools. In schools with two or three teachers, are there people there who are mathematically trained? If not, who is going to lead that numeracy campaign with vigour?

There should be sharing of good practice. I have seen some super teachers over the past four years, but their expertise is not being used nearly enough. How can we use the methods, skills and repertoire that those great practitioners have?

What about underperforming teachers? One of the things that alarmed us was that the chief inspector's last three reports said that a quarter of all primary school leaders are underperforming, as are nearly a third of all post-primary leaders. I do not know what the evidence for that was. It

seems to this task force that it is no good whatsoever to write that but to do nothing about it. There has to be an urgency about having a look at what needs to be done if schools are underperforming. That is because all the recommendations are interwoven. You suggest one thing, and that leads to another. It is like a layered approach, almost like dominoes falling down, as Andy put it. It is very difficult. Raising standards is complex. It is not straightforward. If it were, it would have been done already.

We felt that the professional qualification for headship (PQH), which is basically a good course that goes through the practice of running schools, should be mandatory. That is fairly straightforward.

The last bit of the submission deals with general issues. We would like it to be possible to go into schools and see a teacher teaching a group, to see that lesson plan and how literacy and numeracy is identified in it. That could then be compared it with the school development plan and then with Department policy so that we could see both a lineage running right through it and that we are all working in the same way.

I am not going to talk about transfer tests and the rationalisation of schools. There is clearly massive work to be done on those two issues. There are some good outcomes and policies from DE, which I listed in the submission. There has been a change in perceptions of the quality of education in Northern Ireland. Many of the key issues for us are now being addressed. We felt, as a task force, that we have excellent teachers, excellent youngsters, a will to do something about it and support from DE. What is needed now on the recommendations is courage to get on and do it. Moves are afoot, but some of the recommendations will need energy, courage and impetus to make them happen. I cannot put it any better than the Italian racing driver Mario Andretti, who I think said that if you are comfortable in your seat, you are just not driving fast enough.

Mrs Maire McGinn (Literacy and Numeracy Task Force):

I want to draw attention to a point that we made on page 13 of the report:

> "Teacher quality is central to pupil attainment."

That comes as no surprise. The report goes on to state:

> "We must attract, and support the development of, highly effective teachers. It must become a priority to ensure that trainee teachers have a more than satisfactory grasp of numeracy and literacy skills."

I feel that, at the moment, the bar is too low for the entrance requirements at GCSE level. The quality of education that children receive depends on the effectiveness of their teaching, and

factors contributing to that are the teachers' subject knowledge, their confidence and competence and their own attitude to maths and to the teaching of maths. Obviously, anything that I am saying applies to literacy as well.

At the moment there are very wide differences in the entry standards of our trainee teachers in GCSE maths and English. I know that, over the past number of years, the teacher training colleges have raised the bar considerably in A-level grades. In some instances, they have not accepted trainee teachers to certain subjects without three As. However, those trainee teachers have possibly scraped Cs in GCSE English and maths. As a post-primary teacher, I am implementing a variety of strategies to try to motivate pupils right across the ability range, from the high-fliers to those who are in the special needs group. I am trying to get pupils in that special needs group, one or two of whom are a borderline D/C, to scrape their C. That same C is being asked for from teacher trainees. Is it not time to raise that bar? It is one thing having a grade C to go on to further and higher education or to get on to the employment ladder. However, it is another if those people, three or four years down the line, are going into the primary schools and the two main areas that they are teaching are literacy and numeracy. Is a C at GCSE level really sufficient, even with four years' professional training? Is it not time that, as in many other countries, the bar should be raised to a grade B or at least that prospectuses state minimum requirements and that preference will be given to candidates who have a higher than satisfactory grasp of literacy and numeracy?

Whenever jobs are advertised and there are perhaps 50 or 60 applicants for one job in a primary school, could the criteria not be enhanced again at that stage by detailing desirable criteria, including that preference will be given to teachers who can demonstrate a higher than average ability in literacy and numeracy? I feel strongly about that. People's knowledge can be worked on so that they will cover what they have to teach in the curriculum, but what will be the attitude of someone who is going to teach in a primary school but who has just Cs? Is it a case of their saying, "I have to teach it, even though I am not really competent at it."? Could we not attract better candidates from that point of view? The grounding for literacy and numeracy definitely happens in primary schools and before.

Mrs Maureen Smyth (Literacy and Numeracy Task Force):

As a primary-school teacher, I feel very strongly about early intervention. In 2009, we talked with Katrina Godfrey about the need to deal with this matter. That early intervention — the

investment in those early years — can be seen in years to come. Such firm foundations are so very necessary for teaching.

We have a lot of very short-lived initiatives; it is one initiative after another. Those have been proven to have good effect. One of them was Reading Recovery, which was phased out in 2005 or 2006. I am trained in Reading Recovery, and we use its strategies. More recently, as a spin-off, we have had reading partnerships, where classroom assistants have been trained and are using some of those strategies. I have been using the data, and I recently discussed it with a member of the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). The results are fabulous: in a six-week programme, the children can improve from anywhere from eight months to two years just by having that input in reading. For each child, it takes 20 minutes three days a week. That makes a huge impact.

Other very positive programmes have been running, but again, they have run out of steam or money. Musical Pathways, which was part of the 'Achieving Derry — Bright Futures' programme, was fabulous. We have an increasing number of pupils coming into the system with language development delay. That proved really helpful in getting their ears attuned to listening and to sounds. It was fabulous for the development of language. Again, there is no more money for that, and it is now being done at a cost to the budget. It has gone into primary 2 and primary 3. We are a fairly small rural school, and our parents, teachers and friends association (PTFA) is funding that programme because I value the importance of it, but there is no money available.

We have also had raising achievement programmes in numeracy and literacy. That is the main thrust of this task force, and so it goes on.

If we look to the Finnish model, we will see that they have had sustained programmes. I feel that we dip in and out of programmes and have pockets of improvement that are really good. We have undergone so much change and reform in education, and I think that we have the makings of a fabulous education system. Two years ago, it was really exciting. The rationale underpinning the recently revised curriculum is fabulous, but I think that we need the human resources to make it work. I get quite disheartened at times, because I feel as though we are going back to the Dark Ages with reduced budgets and staffing cuts. I am facing the prospect of perhaps having to go back into class, so I am not in leadership mode any more. I am going back to managing and keeping things ticking over, and that is a step backwards. This is something that I feel very

passionate about. I think we should have some continuity and sustained programmes of improvement rather than have short-lived initiatives that make an impact but then end again.

Mr Andy McMorran (Literacy and Numeracy Task Force):

It was refreshing that, the very start four years ago, we decided that we were going to try very hard not to discuss finance. As Bob said earlier, we felt that we have come up with certain ideas that could be taken on board. There were varied initiatives all over Northern Ireland; we were in different schools, talking to different people, and the amount of good practice was great to see. It was good practice that was not necessarily being driven by high finance. However, when we started to pick it out, the thread missing was the dissemination of good practice. When you come to something like this, people will say that they need more money. We are not saying that. Most of the things that we are doing are not based on money; they are based on rationalisation and, in many ways, joined-up thinking.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much. There is so much information here. To follow on from Andy's comment about the dissemination of good practice, one thing that worries me about the Department's approach is that the attitude that we have seen in departmental papers over the past few months is that it is up to the school and the individual teachers. The cynic in me says, and the departmental officials who are here will have heard me say this before, that, as soon as the Department pushes things out of the doors at Rathgael House into the great beyond, it is almost as though it hopes and prays that they will be sorted out so they do not have to answer continual questions as to why this or that is not being achieved. The Department then answers that it is up to the individuals. However, to try to give some fair comment, and to not put all the blame on the Department, there are individual schools that really struggle to get to a place where they have that breadth of ability. Maire talked about those schools in the system that are not capable of stepping up to that mark and that will therefore not be able to disseminate good practice. That has been identified and highlighted in your report. Those schools cannot disseminate good practice because they are not in a place to implement it. What is the answer to that? I am continually saddened by report after report referring to problems in our primary schools.

Maureen, you said that there is good practice, and there is, but we still have the figures that show that one in five pupils leaving primary school have underachieved in English and maths. Why is that repeatedly still the case, given all that we are seeing in leadership and training? Is it

because we have just not put the right mechanisms in place to deal with it? We know the problems, but we have not put the right mechanism in place.

Mrs Smyth:

I think that it goes back to early intervention. That has to be tapped early. Those changes really have to be made in those formative years, because if you wait until a child leaves primary school and transfers, their attitudes differ. Their morale is low, and it is so much more difficult to get them on track. I think that class sizes have a big bearing on this as well, as do the human resource structures that are in place to support children.

The Chairperson:

I have had this at different times with different schools, and I am not trying to say that there is an age differential on this attitude. Any time I have had discussions with you, I have felt that the love that you have for what you are doing has been infectious. You have a passion for what you are doing. When talking to more mature teachers, I am sometimes told that the revised curriculum is a deviation from traditional values. To younger teachers, it is seen as more of a release for their ability, enthusiasm, and so on. I have now come to a place — maybe I have been reformed a bit — where I think it is not a case of either/or but a combination of both.

Mrs Smyth:

It is. I think that it is the best of both worlds, Mervyn. You cannot throw the baby out with the bath-water. I have had arguments about and feel strongly about reading, the place reading should have and formal reading. That takes place in our school under the revised curriculum. Children enjoy it. If it is a fun activity —

The Chairperson:

There is no fear of an inspector coming in and saying, "Hold on, you are doing something here that is not ticking the box"?

Mrs Smyth:

Children will read at their individual rate when they are ready to do so. It is a whole-story approach, and they enjoy it and are capable of it. The problem arises when they are pushed to read beyond their ability. However, I do think that we have the best of both worlds because we have a really exciting and innovative education programme available to us. We have the

autonomy to be creative, which I think is very important for teachers. We are not automatons; we are a creative bunch. Children also enjoy that method; they need it — they are like sponges. There is a structure and there are programmes. It is about getting the best of traditional teaching alongside that new creativity and an innovative approach.

The Chairperson:

Andy, this is a totally unfair question, and I apologise before I even ask it.

Mr McMorran:

Can you show me where the side door is?

The Chairperson:

Sir Robert gave us the list, which is not exhaustive. I have no doubt that there are other issues. You are an experienced post-primary principal who receives young children into your school. The report is now in front of us, and we know all the work that has been done. I know that there is no single issue that you could identify, but if you were in a position to be able to do something, or if you were Minister for 15 minutes or less — I know that it is very unfair —

Mr McMorran:

No, it is not.

Mrs Smyth:

This will be good.

The Chairperson:

OK. What would you love to be able to do that you believe would make it easier to achieve the outcomes mentioned in the report?

Mr McMorran:

It would be a simple exercise, but I have to put it in context. To put anything to do with education in Northern Ireland in context, unfortunately, you have to open the transfer box. I was one of the only high-school principals who was pro academic selection. I think there is a place for grammar schools, and I think there is a place for very good high schools. I know that the document was called 'Every School a Good School', and I do not think that there is such a thing

as a bad school. I think that there are schools that need support.

I took over a school that was considered to be failing. The principal before me had worked really hard and did great work to start it off. I was there for 19 years, and there must have been somewhere in the region of 70 to 80 visits from the Department's inspectorate. That could be stressful, but the Department's inspectorate has now become user-friendly. It brings in ideas, help, etc. Statistics show whether a school is successful, oversubscribed, etc. My question to the inspectorate had to be: what are you doing here? Why are you coming in to look at me or going in to look at some of the very good schools — we had a strong link with St Patrick's College on the Antrim Road, for example — such as the good grammar schools, etc? My question was about whether the inspectorate really needed to be there simply for accountability. If we have that expertise and we know what a good education system is, why is it not looking at the schools that need support? My view is that we need to rationalise our resources. I am not talking about money but about people, time and expertise in the areas that really need it.

The Chairperson:

It really is an issue of utilising the resource that exists in the inspectorate and about it being focused on the schools that have problems. I know of a school that has not had an inspection for 11 years. Maybe it does not need one.

Mrs McGinn:

A wee while ago, you mentioned the words "fear of the inspector". If our schools got to the stage where the teachers had the knowledge, confidence and whatever in relation to their teaching, that would link to self-evaluation. There should not be a fear of the inspector, if you are doing everything that is expected of you. If you feel that your teaching and learning is up to scratch or is very, very good, there should not be such a fear. You should say, "Let them come in and see what I am doing, and, yes, I am willing to take on some of their advice, if they have some to offer." However, there should not be a fear of the inspector. You do not necessarily want the letter, the knock on the door or whatever, but if you have a teacher, department or school that is fearful of an inspector, they have something to worry about.

Mr McMorran:

I need to go back to the whole area of accountability, because it has to be accountable. You have so many children, 700 pupils, coming into a school for what you deliver throughout the day. The

principal has to be flexible and change his or her view. When I started teaching in an all-boys school, there was no way that females could teach in an all-boys school. That is why I took over that principal's job. I was convinced that females could not teach in an all-boys school. I spent four years looking at a learning policy for the school and what did I discover? I discovered that the 5 ft 4 in blonde girl who took over the hardest form 5 class was a better teacher than I ever was. Therefore, I had to change my opinions on what was coming next.

I will give you one example. I was brought up in an environment in which, when you walked into the classroom, everyone else sat down and you stood at the front and controlled the class. I always told the teachers in classrooms around the corner from my office to teach with the door open. We had carpeted corridors, so you could not hear people walking past, but the idea was to have an open-door policy. I heard this noise going on. A young teacher was taking an RE class. I thought, "Right, I am going to sort this out." I walked round and found the class in absolute mayhem. I was about to interrupt when I stopped and realised what the teacher was doing. He had someone acting the role of Jesus at the front, with disciples around the table, and it was an outstanding lesson. Was it noisy? Yes, it was. Was there learning? Of course there was. At the end of it all, we must have a learning process going on. I have an opinion — and I hope that these three people do not jump on me — that anyone can teach but not everyone can generate learning.

Sir Robert Salisbury:

Chairman, if you gave me my 15 minutes as Minister, I would point to all the research from all the countries in Europe that says that, if you want sustainable improvement in schools, concentrate on what happens in the classroom. It is about having better teachers. Most teachers do their very best, but there are some who are not so good. In my view, you need a much sharper inspection service to challenge, support or retrain teachers who are underperforming. That inspection should not happen after a period of three years, because three years is a long time in the life of a young person at school. It should be much more immediate and hard-hitting in order to help those teachers who are underperforming. The lesson to us all is that what happens in sustainable improvement happens in the classroom. That is where it should be at.

Mrs Dobson:

Thank you for your presentation. I found every one of you very interesting to listen to. It was very enjoyable. I notice that you say in your report that other countries have successfully

implemented the home-to-school intervention model. However, I know that the current process is weak here, and urgent work needs to be done. Why do you think that initiatives have not worked so far in Northern Ireland? Do you feel that the Department is doing enough to promote and encourage the links between school and home?

Sir Robert Salisbury:

I think it is a mindset. We need a culture change, but small behaviours need to change first. It seems to be fairly pointless to have projects that simply say we should pay for home-school liaison, because the minute the money dries up, the liaison stops. For years, I have been an advocate of the view that, if you work in partnership, it is vital to blur the edges between home and school. It is about a culture change. Some schools are doing that admirably in Northern Ireland. If you talk to the parents of children who attend those schools, they will tell you that they are welcome in and are part of the learning process. Seminars are run to teach parents about new teaching approaches, and so on. There is a clear interaction between home and school. In other schools, that is not the case. You will see signs saying, "No parents beyond this point" or "Do not knock on this door". It is as if people want to keep them at bay. There is usually a motto on the wall that says, "We are a community school", but the real-life messages are not like that.

We need a culture change, but it is really a question of thinking big and acting small and getting many schools to do smaller things to change that culture. It seems that it is often seen that some teachers and school leaders do not see that as an important part of the learning process.

Mr McMorran:

We discovered from some parenting groups and others that we spoke to that some of the parents who are not positive about the education system had a bad experience at school. We are trying to give parenting skills to the present cohort coming through because they are the parents of the future. That is why the learning for life and work initiative has been a fabulous success in Northern Ireland schools; it covers employability, personal and social health education, and citizenship. Do we not all take a lesson from being good citizens? Part of being a good citizen is about getting involved in the education of your children and the value that that has.

Mrs Dobson:

I do like your phrase "blur the edges", Sir Robert. That is quite good. What measures do you think the Department should put in place?

Sir Robert Salisbury:

I certainly think that it should interest and include educational charities, industry, anybody with an interest in the future of Northern Ireland and the future of schools and anybody who wants to interact with schools. A report from this morning said that the teaching of computer science and ICT is just not good enough. It is an English report, but I suspect that its findings are replicated here. The Government are asking why we do not bring in some of the high-flying young folk working in computing to work alongside schools. It seems to me that there is an obligation on the whole community to be a part of that.

I often hear that we cannot get the parents involved, that it is a tough area and that they do not want to come into schools. That seems to be almost the last refuge of scoundrels. Of course they do not want to come in if they had a poor experience of school themselves in the first place. So you have to work at a different approach.

To give you an example; the school I ran was the seventh worst in the country at the time I took it over. Obviously, parents did not want to come in and help. So our starting point was to run for the dads a coaching course on how to teach soccer better. That was all. When they then came over the threshold, we got them to take a referees' course and, finally, we got them talking about education and their young people. Do you see what I am getting at? It is no use just saying, "We have put this letter out in the community and they are not interested". I have never yet found a parent who is not interested.

Mrs Dobson:

You need to find an inroad.

Sir Robert Salisbury:

You need an inroad to do it.

Mr McMorran:

You mentioned a report from England. No offence, Sir Bob, but I am sometimes a bit sceptical about reports that come from England. It talked about IT teaching, not IT in schools. One of the reasons that I retired in August was probably that I am an IT moron. However, the idea was that everybody has to be IT-literate. So the use of IT can have a very positive effect in a school. The

problem is that, if you talk to any parent above a certain age, they will say, "I do not use the computer" or "My child is always texting", etc. They will mention the problems with that.

Mrs Dobson:

Just before Christmas, we had a presentation from Dawn Purvis on underachieving among Protestant boys. I am sure that you are aware of that report. Have you looked at its findings?

Mr McMorran:

I sat on the working party involved in that report, so I brought the findings to the Committee. I think that I might still be sitting on it, because there is a meeting coming up.

Mrs Dobson:

It is an excellent report.

Mr McMorran:

I brought that to the table as well.

Mrs Dobson:

OK, that is great.

Sir Robert Salisbury:

The school that I worked in was in a mining area in Nottinghamshire. As you know, Maggie Thatcher shut down all the mines overnight, so the whole basis for the economy in north Nottinghamshire was gone. Education performance there was low because education was not needed. You went into the mines and earned a good wage in what was a job for life. I suspect that that was replicated in the shipyards of Belfast.

Mr McMorran:

I thought that it was Meryl Streep. *[Laughter.]*

Sir Robert Salisbury:

You could be right.

Mrs McGinn:

Chair, can I just make one comment about parents? Parents' attitudes to numeracy can destroy a child's development. There is still a huge stigma associated with the study of numeracy as opposed to literacy. It is perceived as being difficult. People ask, "Why do you like maths?" Just before Christmas, I was listening to a certain radio station on the way to school, and it had one of those competitions in which children ring in to discuss something. The broadcaster asked the child what school they went to and what their favourite subject was. The child told him that it was maths, and the broadcaster immediately asked him why. I felt like stopping the car, ringing in and telling him why. You hear that all the time.

We tell parents that, regardless of their own background in numeracy, they should try to encourage it in their children from a very young age through wee things about the home and when they go shopping, and so on. If they have had negative experiences of numeracy, we tell them that, whatever they do, they must not communicate that to their children. You hear it all the time at parent-teacher meetings. The parents will come to a parent-teacher meeting, they will go down the list, and they will say, "Mrs McGinn, what have you got my daughter for? Oh, maths. I could never do maths at school". That is what is being communicated either directly or indirectly to the child at home. We want to try to avoid those negative experiences, and it is very important that we communicate that to parents.

Mr McMorran:

We discovered quite a few initiatives in maths that were very positive. We used things such as mathematical superstars and a fantasy football league that used average transfer fees in databases and spreadsheets. Pupils were going to a maths class, but they did not feel that they were and they were not saying, "Oh no, maths again." We discovered that with many of the initiatives that we looked at.

The Chairperson:

It is a bit like a job that I had in a previous life. Stocktaking was done on a Friday evening, and my boss was always keen to ensure that the stocktake was accurate. Sometimes some of my colleagues would say, "I am not that good at counting". I remember, years ago, my boss saying to me, "Tell me this, do they play darts?" Every one of them played darts at lunchtime. He then said to me, "Mervyn, go out and get it done; they are just lazy and want to get home early on a Friday". He was right; they could work out the darts scores mathematically. Darts players are

very good mathematicians. That is why I was never good at darts.

Mrs McGinn:

Judging by the amount of coverage that it is getting, darts seems to have really taken off. We could maybe tie a few things in there.

The Chairperson:

It has. There is an opportunity there.

Mr McNarry:

You are very welcome. I think that the trick here is knowing whether you are getting good advice and what you are going to do with it. I was taken by your report; it is one of those reports that I feel compelled not to let go of. I now have comparisons, which are beneficial. As it would never enter my head to be arrogant, I appreciate the arrogance in your report. I can quote you without getting the blame. *[Laughter.]*

I am a great Formula 1 and racing follower. Do not forget that Mario Andretti crashed a few times, and severely on one occasion.

In September, we were told that the Minister had affirmed his policies as being the right ones — it was black and white — and that no new policies would be introduced. The focus was on stepping up the pace of implementation and the delivery of existing policies. A window then seemed to be created in the Programme for Government (PFG), and we are now told that the Minister will shortly bring forward proposals on a public education strategy to promote the value of education and the contribution of the community. We always have to cut around Civil Service speak. If any of you can help us with that, that help would be very welcome. Do you think that what we had in September in those policies — I expect that you know what we had — was good enough?

Sir Robert Salisbury:

Do you mean the policies that we have outlined here?

Mr McNarry:

What you say is, I think, good advice on how things can be put right, but what I have in political

terms is that we were right last September and that no new policies will be introduced. I am saying, "Hang on a second, there are some good things in this report that I would like to come to." What I am effectively saying is, because it is such a good report, I do not want it to be rubbished or put on the shelf. What usually happens in these cases is that good people like you do these reports; you are the task force and that is your job.

Mr McMorran:

We did not do it in isolation from the Department.

Mr McNarry:

I appreciate that.

Mr McMorran:

We met the Minister a couple of times, and, obviously, the departmental officials were present at each meeting. It is fairly obvious that we did not all agree; even among the four of us, there were disagreements. What you are asking may be a political question, and I do not know whether we can answer it. We looked at the facts, and the facts are there for all to see.

Mr McNarry:

Mr McMorran, you are right that I am asking you a political question. The public purse has paid for this, so I am entitled to drill down into the politics of it; that is my job. The advice is good. The trick is knowing how to use it and what we are comparing it with. I am grateful to you because I now have something that will enable me to say, "This was said about this matter after September; where is it now?" We will maybe park that one, because that is what I need to do. In other words, do not let me down if I come after you later and say, "Hang on a second; that is not what happened."

I am slightly disturbed by the bit in the report on teacher quality. The news last week was the potential for 1,000 to 3,000 teacher redundancies. That is a massive number of redundancies, to the extent that the response could be strike action, which is also politics. I am disturbed by that. Let me put it in this context, as I have done for others before. Having been through this whole darn thing as a parent and with a different generation of children, I am now in the strange position of talking as a grandfather. My own children are coming to me with the experiences that they are having with their children. As a parent and grandparent, when I see something that is highly

critical of teachers, I think, "Do not go there, because your child will suffer if you criticise the teacher." It is a natural fear that people have. On the one hand, we have two training colleges, but, on the other, we will potentially have 3,000 redundancies. Why on earth are we training teachers?

Mrs McGinn:

That is another of the worries. We are trying to attract the most able newly qualified teachers, but they are constantly being bombarded by statistics about redundancies. Will those most highly qualified candidates go off down other avenues?

Mr McNarry:

I understand that, but I need you to expand on it. I have a great appreciation for teachers. Most people had a teacher who was pretty good. I was quite fortunate that I had two, although I probably let them down in the end; nevertheless, the experience was good. *[Interruption.]* They look down at me now.

Mrs McGinn:

As I did at a previous Education Committee meeting, I ask you to reflect on why you remember those two teachers. What was it about them? Why did they inspire you? What did they instil in you that other teachers could not?

Mr McNarry:

One looked like Jane Russell and the other looked like Marilyn Monroe. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McMorran:

I am old enough to remember Jane Russell.

Mr McNarry:

We will not go into my life story, because, after the last session, I will be doing 'Strictly Come Dancing'. You are saying that we must attract and support the development of highly effective teachers. That says to me that we have actually been producing ineffective teachers.

Mrs McGinn:

No, it does not.

Mr McNarry:

Then you need to qualify that in your report, because my next question is: if it is not so, why put it in? However, I think you are saying something that would help me, if you were to quantify it or had a percentage.

Mr McMorran:

It is in context; we talked about leadership and then we talked about good teaching. Having dealt with teachers as the principal of a school, I know that you are talking about 42 egos. You are talking about 42 people who are in total control every day. When they are asked to come out of the classroom and you speak to them, if you feel that one of them is not performing properly, it is vital that you create a situation where those people go into that classroom and produce properly. In every meeting we have been to, we mentioned the effect of leadership from the person who is in charge. There are a whole lot of different ways to skin a cat.

Mr McNarry:

We are producing professionals. So, does the problem lie with the teacher training that produces the professional? Is it not producing the professional to the standard that you say that we should have? You do not, all of a sudden, become a bad teacher; I would not imagine so, anyhow.

Mrs McGinn:

We are not settling for second best. We want to have such high expectations of our trainee teachers. We stated that we must attract and support the development of highly effective teachers. The report goes on to talk about their numeracy and literacy skills. Teachers are responsible for imparting their knowledge to children in primary school. We want to ensure that we are getting the highest calibre of trainee teacher. Once they have finished their professional development at college, they should have high-quality induction training and continue to have high-quality professional training throughout their teaching careers. So, we want the highest standards and do not want to settle for second best. I feel very strongly about that.

Look at some of the top-performing countries, such as Finland, which was mentioned earlier. There, teachers, and especially primary-school teachers, have to have continued mathematics, and obviously English as well, until the age of 18, whereas here they do not. We talk about the minimum requirement here; it is minimum in more than one sense of the word. We should not be

settling, at this stage, for a minimum requirement like that. There are many, many excellent teachers coming out of teacher-training colleges at the moment, and we know it. I talk to them often, and my worry is that they have a lack of confidence and almost a kind of fear. Their standard of maths is not what they would like it to be. As much as the universities help them with that, if the bar were raised —

Mr McNarry:

I appreciate that, and I think that it would be very valuable to raise the bar in what we are doing. I appreciate what you are saying about such and such not being right. I am interested in how you put it right. Where do we put it right? The difficulty with something like this is that the context could be picked up wrong and, all of a sudden, there could be some sound bite that teachers are useless, which would brand them all the same. Are you saying that we need to improve this at the training facility and that you need to constantly keep a watch on it?

Mrs McGinn:

I will not name the institution, but one 2012 prospectus states that the average points of students entering courses currently stands at 320, well above those of equivalent colleges in England and above the Northern Ireland average. That is taking it right up to top A levels. Someone may enter teacher training with three As in their A levels. Is that what makes an excellent teacher? What if they have two Cs, one in English and one in maths? Those are the two focus subjects that they will be teaching in primary school. That is what I am talking about. The problem in Northern Ireland is the literacy and numeracy standards of school leavers, and that starts back at primary school.

Mr McNarry:

Let me put it another way. What are the chances of what you are proposing being implemented so that the performance and the production of teachers — if I can put it that way — comes up to the levels that you want? Do you want people with higher attainment levels?

Mrs McGinn:

To be perfectly honest, I would love to communicate with the teacher-training colleges and ask why that requirement is still sitting at two Cs. It is one of the lowest requirements. A survey was done not so long ago by a guy called Burghes in England, and it analysed the maths trainee-teaching in a variety of schools throughout England, the Republic of Ireland and 10 other

countries — the Czech Republic, Finland, China, and so on — and, actually, England —

Mr McNarry:

The reason it is very interesting is that politics evolves here. It could be that, as a result of some political manoeuvring yesterday, the teacher-training colleges could be coming to this Committee for discussion. That is why I am particularly interested. If we are still on this Committee, we will need to —

Mrs McGinn:

Some 15 or 20 years' ago, C grades got you into teacher training. That has changed to A grades, yet the GCSE requirement has not changed.

Mr McNarry:

If you have not asked the colleges — and I take it that you have not — it may be helpful if we ask them.

Mrs McGinn:

We did put it to them. It was put to them before. I know that Stranmillis University College now provides extra help for its first-year students. They are given a test and a questionnaire about their attitudes to the study of numeracy, etc, and they are given help to bring them up to an appropriate standard.

Mr McMorran:

Professor Moran was on our committee and was involved in this. Maureen mentioned early intervention. Sir Bob then said that 25% of our primary-school principals are underachieving, so the question has to be: what are you going to do about it?

Mr McNarry:

That is hellish.

Mr McMorran:

Exactly. The output of that is the literacy and numeracy standards that we have.

The Chairperson:

We have the Department's response. When it comes to teacher qualifications, it states that:

"Whilst the current minimum qualifications for entry to ITE courses (as set out in DE Circular 2010/03 and agreed by DEL)" —

here we go with the circulars; they are great things —

"are (in terms of English and Maths) GCSE Grade C or equivalent" —

here is the Department's rationale in trying to get around this one —

"the ITE providers invariably take higher grades due to the number of high quality and well qualified applicants they receive."

Maire, if I am picking you up right, you are saying that you could have A levels in whatever, but you may not be competent in numeracy and literacy. There is a deficiency. What you mean by raising the bar is requiring students to have a higher grade in those specific subjects if they want to be a teacher.

Mrs McGinn:

I think that the minimum requirement should definitely be higher. As I said, I have had special needs children who have scraped that C. I will tell you better than that; I am obviously out of the school today, but I have one particular post-16 pupil who is doing her GCSE maths today for the fourth time, and she is applying to do teacher training. That is just one example. She might eventually get her C. She is doing literary subjects, which she is excellent at, and she will get her three As. She will get her C in maths. If she does not get it now, she will get it by June. How does she start to teach numeracy to any class? What teaching and learning would go on in a classroom in that case, compared with the teaching provided by someone who is very confident in that area?

Mr McNarry:

I think you have made the point. You certainly made me sit up and take notice when you mentioned the figure of 25%. You can put it whatever way you want; it is just not good enough. By nature, I am a salesman. If I were running a company that had that sort of performance, I would be bust. Andy, you have put the issue back to us and asked what we are going to do about it. Leave it with us and let us sort that out. Have you any idea what the officials in the Department are going to do about it, now that you have told them?

Sir Robert Salisbury:

Under the remit of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), there is an area in which it should be looking at and taking on underperforming schools. Our objection was to the timescale for that,

in that three years is a long time to turn a school around.

To add one final point in answer to your earlier question, it is not just a matter of entry qualifications. We were unsure about whether there is a clear teaching of literacy and numeracy to all future teachers, irrespective of their subject bases. That seems to us to be crucial.

Secondly, no teacher is a finished product when he or she comes out of college and starts in a school. Therefore, you need careful induction, further training and inspection of that teacher. Some teachers will fail because, in the end, they have no real affinity with children. Some will fail because they are not interested enough or not energetic enough. You say that you never forget a good teacher, and you are absolutely right, but it takes you a long time to get over a poor one.

Mr McNarry:

I have not recovered from that. *[Laughter.]*

Sir Robert Salisbury:

Neither have I in some senses. There is an obligation on the Department and on the politicians who control the Department to ensure that the inspection service has some teeth and can address the issue of teachers who are not performing well. It sounds harsh to say that.

Mr McNarry:

Credit should be given where it is due. We in politics in Northern Ireland are only getting back around the table, but, for some time, the tone has been that something is wrong. We are extremely grateful that someone like you has come along and pointed out to us what is wrong. It would be unforgivable if the advice you have given is accepted but nothing is done about it.

The report states that it is very difficult for any school to raise standards of literacy and numeracy and that:

"In order to move things forward we need to introduce strategies which 'blur the edges' where traditional schools stop" — I do not understand that —

"and where outside communities begin and to promote greater engagement and involvement of parents in their child's education."

I understand that bit. I need to hear what you are talking about, although I have a sense of it. Can you elaborate on that strategy and how that would be formulated and percolated through? It is

nearly a policy. So what do you mean, and how do we do it?

Sir Robert Salisbury:

Perhaps the word "stop" is a bit abrupt, but it seems to me, and it seemed to the task force at the time, that some schools were very much engaged almost as oases or islands in their communities. They were teaching in the traditional way, with very little link-up with the community outside. In the best performance across Europe, there is always a blurring of the edges between what the community is doing and what the school is doing. For instance, why do so many schools in Northern Ireland have their gates closed at 3.30 pm? There are resources that can be used widely by the community. The minute the community comes into the school —

Mr McNarry:

Sorry to interrupt you, but the Department was asked that question three years ago, and we still have no answer.

Sir Robert Salisbury:

It is down to the governors and the leaders of schools to say that this is an important and different concept and a different culture. Some leaders of schools will say that it is not their business to liaise or work with communities, and there are others who see that as a vital element of learning. That is what I meant by "blurring the edges". It is about opening up the schools.

Mr McNarry:

What do you mean by traditional schools?

Sir Robert Salisbury:

The traditional school saw itself as a separate entity from its community and taught the normal lessons in the normal way and did not have much liaison with the community, except for parents' evenings. We ought to be working with industry. I can give some practical examples of what I mean to clear the matter up for you. In one of the schools that I worked in, we had someone from industry in every week to work with the curriculum to do something to show the world of work outside. There were 28 companies working with the school on fostering education. Parents were in the schools all the time, and they joined the sixth-form classes. I remember a dad and a lad studying A-level mathematics together. That is what I mean by blurring the edges to give the notion that we are all part of the education system. I believe that, once we start that in Northern

Ireland, we will be pushing at an open door, for the reasons that I gave earlier. I really feel that, if we can have some urgency in the implementation of the recommendations, we will have an education system that is the envy of Europe. That is not a pipe dream; we can do that pretty quickly.

Mr McMorran:

The extended schools initiative has made inroads. That was a plus.

Mrs Smyth:

Yes, but the extended schools initiative stopped short of some schools. My point is that every school has needy children. If they are in the minority, why are they being disadvantaged?

Mr McNarry:

You go on and disagree, Maureen. That is just what we like to hear. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Smyth:

The extended schools initiative is good for the schools that avail themselves of it, but every school has needy children.

Mr McNarry:

This has been useful. Thank you.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. Undoubtedly, we could spend a long time discussing this issue, and we will come back to it again. The Committee will receive a presentation from the Department later on the review of teacher training. Maire, we will come back to many of the points. They will not be dropped. Your report will form the basis of how we pursue those issues. Sir Robert, Andy, Maire and Maureen, thank you. No doubt we will see you in the future.