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Committee for Education

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Inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate and School Improvement Process: University of Ulster

11 December 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:
Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Trevor Lunn
Ms Maeve McLaughlin
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Robin Newton
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Pat Sheehan

Witnesses:

Professor Vani Borooah	University of Ulster
Professor Colin Knox	University of Ulster

The Chairperson: We welcome to the Committee Professor Vani Borooah, professor of applied economics, and Professor Colin Knox, professor of comparative public policy, both from the University of Ulster. Gentlemen, you are very welcome. Thank you for your submission not only as it relates to the inquiry but to other elements of the Committee's work. The time that you have taken and the content that you have provided for us are appreciated. Your submission is timely. I was saying just before you came in that, given the document that was published yesterday by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), our inquiry is also timely. There is much for us to mull over. I am sure that all members will read the OECD report and the inquiry documentation over the Christmas period. I am sure that they will desist from slacking off. Colin and Vani, I will hand over to you to speak on your paper, after which members will have questions.

Professor Colin Knox (University of Ulster): Thank you very much indeed, Chair, for inviting us along and for the opportunity to engage a little further with you. Our opening remarks will be brief. I will open by looking at some of the context for the work. Then, I will hand over to Vani, who will discuss some of the substance. I will then finish off.

We started by asking this question: "What are we trying to improve in the education system here in Northern Ireland?" The focus of our paper is mainly the post-primary sector, but we have done quite a bit of work on the primary sector as well. The obvious starting point is to look at the traditional measures of achievement performance; the typical five GCSEs including English and maths. Table 1 of the paper shows the performance across each of the management-type schools. It will come as no surprise that there are quite significant differences between the education outcomes of grammar

schools and non-grammar schools. The fact is that the average non-grammar school here has only around 36% of its pupils achieving five GCSEs including English and maths at grades A to C. I will not go into those statistics in a lot of detail; you can look at them yourselves. There are, clearly, significant differences between the performance of Catholic maintained non-grammar schools and controlled non-grammar schools in the order of around 41% to 30% respectively with regard to GCSEs at grades A to C including maths and English. That is a very quick overview of the focus of our paper. It is really on those education outcomes.

We started off by asking what the current system and policies are that look at school improvement here and how good they are in tackling those significant differences between sectors. Again, you will know that a lot of the Department's efforts are focused on the policy document 'Every School a Good School — A Policy for School Improvement'. Central to that whole policy is the notion of self-evaluation and self-improvement. We will challenge that notion in the course of our work. Part of the way in which the Department rolls out or puts into operation Every School a Good School is that it gathers lots of information at the level of pupils, classes, year groups, key stages and the entire school. From that data, it asks schools themselves to set targets for improvement. Those targets then become part of the school development plans. In setting those targets for year-on-year improvements, schools are supposed to look at trends in performance, the prior attainment of each year group in the school, the context in which the school operates, and priorities that have been set in the school development plan itself. An important part of that is to benchmark each school in particular categories and, essentially, to disaggregate that data into two categories. One is whether the school is a grammar school or non-grammar school and, then, what percentage of pupils in that school is eligible for free school meals. Out of that whole process of setting targets and benchmarking against comparable schools, the notion is that, by their own efforts, those schools will move towards improvement. That is the first strategy for school improvement.

The second one is another policy document that you will be familiar with called 'Count, Read: Succeed — A Strategy for Improving Outcomes'. Again, that is about self-improvement, particularly around literacy and numeracy. More recently, there has been OFMDFM's Delivering Social Change strategy around improving literacy and numeracy — the so-called signature project. Again, you will be very familiar with the fact that extra graduates have been employed to help schools to improve those basic education outcomes.

The final part of the existing policy is the setting up of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). I do not need to give you any details about that. ESA, in part, is about improving education standards, promoting equality and enabling more resources to be directed to schools. We are not here to talk about ESA. However, a passing observation is that the whole process of setting up ESA, and the body itself, is about institutional change, which, in itself, is not necessarily causally linked to improving education outcomes. So, although that is part of the strategy, if you will, along with those that I have just mentioned, towards improving education outcomes, in and of itself, institutional change will not improve outcomes. I suppose that the parallel example I would use is the review of public administration. That includes a whole series of structural reforms, which, in and of themselves, will not necessarily improve the quality of our public services.

Just to finish my input, one thing that I think is very stark is the recent chief inspector's report, in which she said that only around 32% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds will leave school with five or more GCSEs including English and maths. That is a major indictment of our education system. I will hand over to Vani, who will talk us through some of the detail.

Professor Vani Borooah (University of Ulster): Thank you again, Chairman, for this privilege and honour. It is with great pleasure and, also, in a sense, with humility that we offer our views to the Committee. Forgive me for the nasal tone in my voice. I am afraid that it is a seasonal hazard in this country at this time of the year. Please overlook it. *[Laughter.]* I want to talk about three issues that have emerged from the type of research that Professor Knox and I have done on education in Northern Ireland. The first is inequality in Northern Ireland's education system. The second is performance. The third is funding, and how that might reduce inequality and enhance performance.

I will start with inequality. We think that there are two types of inequality in Northern Ireland. One is access inequality, which is to say that there is a top tier of schools to which children on free school meals do not get adequate access. They are underrepresented in those schools. The whole issue is why and whether we should do something about it. If we should do something about it, what can we do?

There is also the issue of performance inequality between schools, primarily between grammar schools and secondary schools. However, within even the secondary school sector there are serious inequalities in school performance between schools. There are some very good schools that perform close to grammar school levels and some that are abysmally bad. The question is whether we can reduce inequality between schools and what sort of policy we should follow.

To take an analogy from athletics, can we raise the personal best of each school? Can we convert a school that has 70% GCSE passes into one that has 75%? Can we take a school at the bottom of the scale and lift it from 15% to 20%? We want a tide that raises all boats. That is the kind of thing that we are looking at.

All of that begs the question of what determines school performance. I will start with the negative. One thing we found that does not determine school performance is school size. There are small schools that do very well and large schools that do very badly. Therefore, what determines school performance? One thing that determines performance is what happens within a school. If you take attendance as an indicator of school discipline, you find that school performance is significantly affected by attendance rates. Regardless of whether it is a large or small school, good school discipline, as encapsulated in school attendance, means good results, and bad school discipline means bad results. We should be focusing on what happens in schools.

Some sectors outperform others. Why do maintained secondary schools do better than controlled secondary schools? We need to think about what we can learn across that divide. That is another important issue that we need to talk about.

We know that the presence of children with entitlement to free school meals pulls down school performance. We need to talk about what we can do to ensure that those children do better. That is a third thing that we need to talk about in the context of school policy. In the context of school discipline, what can one type of school learn from another, and what can we do about deprivation of pupils in terms of school performance in the context of that trinity of factors?

The issue of school size is a red herring. We do not save money by closing schools that are below an approved size because we do not take into account the cost of travel or the cost to a community of having a school wrenched out of its heart. If we did take those costs into account, you would find that closing schools is a completely counterproductive policy in that it loses more money than it saves.

More importantly, large schools do not equal better schools. That is our central message. If you want better schools, you have to focus on what happens within schools.

Let me go back to the point that the presence of children with entitlement to free school meals pulls down school performance. One reaction of the Salisbury committee to that was that schools that had a large number of those children should get more money. Although that may have the right motivations, it is ill conceived. It basically throws money at a problem without understanding the mechanism that leads children with entitlement to free school meals to cause their schools to underperform. We suggest an alternative. We know what we can expect of a school, given its circumstances. Some schools perform better than expectations; we call those overperforming schools. Some schools underperform; they are underperforming schools. We have drawn up a list of all schools in Northern Ireland that over-perform and a list of schools that underperform. We think that school funding should take school performance into account. So, rather than simply throwing money at a school, regardless of performance, we should take performance into account and reward schools that are performing well and, perhaps, penalise schools that are not performing well. We are prepared to share methodology and our results with the Department of Education.

Without taxing your patience further, Chairman, let me come to access inequality. The issue is that children with entitlement to free school meals do not get the kind of access to grammar schools that their position in the population deserves. We feel that one of the reasons for that is that grammar schools adopt a purely passive relationship with those children. They make no attempt at outreach; they make no attempt at mentoring; they make no attempt at support policies etc. Let me make a personal observation. My son went to a grammar school in Belfast. His school had complete indifference towards children with entitlement to free school meals. He then went to Oxford. His Oxford college bent over backwards to get state school pupils into the institution. It had outreach and mentoring policies, and it organised visits for state school children to visit Oxford to have a look at the place and to see what it was like.

In order to reduce access inequality, we have to reduce inequality in opportunity. We are not against selection tests per se, but we are against selection tests as they are presently constituted, because they are without any regard for the kind of opportunities that pupils have to do well or badly. We think that grammar schools in this country must take on a much greater sense of social responsibility. They should realise that they severely under-represent a very important part of Northern Ireland's population, and they should do something about that in outreach, mentoring and support. Access inequality is a very important issue to address.

Lastly, there is the issue of why there is performance inequality between schools. Why do some schools do well and others badly, even though they have the same government-funded ethos? Why do some schools do badly and why do some do well? More to the point, how can we reduce that inequality? I think the issue is one of strategic partnerships — aligning schools with each other and what they can learn from each other. Professor Knox will speak about those partnerships that we recommend.

Professor Knox: I will finish, fairly briefly, Chair, with the point that Vani referred to. One of the ways in which we think you can address some of those inequalities in our current system is through collaborative or peer learning. Quite a bit of emerging research in the rest of the UK is about stronger-weaker school links. Those words are pejorative, but they are the words that the research uses. There are lots of educational benefits associated with the kind of collaborative or peer learning that there is where you have schools that are fairly close together geographically and schools that are fairly close together educationally — educationally proximate. I think that the additional overlay in Northern Ireland is that the geographical proximity often means that those are schools from different sectors, so they are schools from the controlled or maintained sector. Where we have the opportunity to achieve education benefits through peer learning, Northern Ireland affords us the opportunity also to accrue reconciliation benefits. Some of the principles of the shared education programme, for example, where schools collaborate on the basis of improving education performance, would align with that kind of collaborative learning.

To conclude, the Minister announced a number of measures, including educational improvement; a new teacher education strategy, which is about trying to get the right people into teaching; providing leadership programmes for principals; rewarding principals on the basis of improving underperforming schools; stimulating mobility in the profession; and enhancing the professional standing of teachers. We are very supportive of those measures, but we do not think that they go far enough.

To tie in with Vani's presentation, there are a number of specific suggestions that we make in the paper. One is that, in order to tackle the issue of access equality, grammar schools should be set quotas for selecting kids with entitlement to free school meals and pupils with special educational needs. We think that, when it comes to performance inequalities, we should create more opportunities for peer learning. The ministerial advisory group report talked about a shared education premium. The word is, perhaps, a bit emotive, but we should incentivise schools to engage in peer learning. We think that the system that Vani outlined is about providing added value to the system rather than self-improvement, through which the current system operates. Finally and perhaps somewhat controversially, we think that the education selection debate has become toxic and that the problem should be reframed. The reframing of that problem, as we see it, is that it is not about having an elite group of schools and a less elite group of schools, but about putting in place a system that raises the education standards of all schools.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Colin and Vani. There is a huge amount there, as there is in any report. The difficulty — it is the same for any Committee — is that you have your report and we have this discussion, but a wide range of issues come out of it and we could take any one of those elements and drill down into them. If I have learned anything in the years I have been in this post — some people may think that I have not learned very much — it is that there no single issue or silver bullet in education that would transform everything. It is a fallacy to suggest that the answer lies with ESA or a policy, or whatever. There needs to be a holistic approach to these things.

I am trying to stay focused on our inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate. Vani's comments on many of the issues were very useful and helpful, but where do you see the role of the inspectorate in all of that? Is it to assist self-evaluation, complement the quality and assure the methodology of schools and recognise the value added in schools? In all this, generalisations can, unfortunately, exclude areas of good practice and where things are happening that are to be commended. I know that the inspectorate listens keenly to what is going on in this inquiry. It is a wee bit nervous about being inquired into, which is a bit ironic. However, it has said that it does not recognise the fear factor. I was in a school just this week that has had an inspection, and the staff will

tell you that it was a very testing and trying time for them. Is the inspectorate the mechanism that could be used to assist in peer learning, added value or on the issue of comparability between schools? Rather than being seen as the draconian enforcing officer of a very rigid set of policies against which you are judged, it could be there as a mechanism for assisting and helping to improve. It could be the tide that raises all boats.

Professor Borooah: Mr Chairman, thank you for that. First, structural and institutional answers to the restructuring of the education system may be important, but they are of a secondary order of importance in raising educational outcomes. One of the latest observations that the latest 'The Economist' magazine makes is that, in the UK, we have three different systems in Northern Ireland, Scotland and England but that the performance levels of those three different systems is virtually uniform. The conclusion that one draws from that is that it is not so much structures and institutions that drive educational performance, but what is actually happening in the schools. So, coming to your point, Chairman, I think that school inspectors can play an enormous role is raising school performance, not in an adversarial context but in a cooperative context. That is to say it can tell schools how they could perform better and how someone else down the road is doing something better that they could emulate. To be told by a third party that someone else is performing better is slightly different from finding out for yourself. I might tell you that school x down the road is doing something better, but you would learn much better by actually talking to school x. That is exactly the point that we are trying to make. As you say, there is no single solution to the problems of education. Yes, school inspectors adopting a particular role are a part of the solution, but only a part. Another part of the solution is schools talking to one another, and, overlaying all of this is, of course, the appropriate institutional and organisational structures that would support this.

Professor Knox: To add to that, Chair, your suggestion around the role that the inspectorate could play is hugely important in the context of some of the things we have outlined. For instance, I think that it could take a very hands-on approach to the implementation of a value-added approach rather than the self-improvement approach. I think that it could be responsible for monitoring access performance and performance inequalities. It could play a role in monitoring how that is operating. Finally, I think that it could play a very active role in looking at peer learning. It could take a kind of helicopter view of pockets of learning that could provide exemplars for other parts of Northern Ireland. The Education and Training Inspectorate has a very valuable and supportive role to play in the component parts of our thesis.

The Chairperson: I think that all of this is helpful, following on from yesterday's publication of the OECD report, because a huge part of that report — an entire chapter almost — is on the issue of assessment. That is a very useful element of the report. Over the past number of weeks and months, the Committee has had many discussions about levels of progression, the failed computer-based assessment process, and all of that. Some of that is down to the incompetence of the Department in not being able to procure a process properly and implement it, but it has done damage, in a sense, to the product, which is the issue of assessment. Alongside that has come the debate around self-evaluation and self-assessment. Am I picking up from you a concern about the validity of that self-evaluation and self-assessment, as opposed to the process of how we assess pupils in schools? Can you give us some sort of delineation of those two areas? That is a key area, and I have been interested in this issue for some time. The debate is around assessment as opposed to selection. It is about ability as opposed to a range of socioeconomic indicators, although those can play a part.

Professor Borooah: As you said, Chairman, there is no one single solution. We do not deny that self-assessment has an important role to play, but it is not an end in itself. Alongside self-assessment of schools, there can also be an objective assessment of schools. You can have two schools that are in virtually similar circumstances and yet one is doing much better than the other in respect of an objective assessment, even though the self-assessment of each school might be that they are both doing well. Sometimes an objective assessment can point out the kind of contradictions and inconsistency that can exist between self-assessment and objective assessment. So, I do not think that we can say that self-assessment is bad per se. However, I do think that we can say that it is not enough in itself and that it needs to be complemented by a more objective form of assessment. That is one of the things that we have been working on. We have established an objective assessment of schools in Northern Ireland. Perhaps it would be useful to marry schools' self-assessment with that kind of objective assessment.

Professor Knox: Yes. Part of what we are trying to get at here is to be slightly more scientific about how we expect schools to perform given the range of circumstances in which they find themselves. We have developed a methodology. It is in the paper, and we would be happy to share it with the

Department. Essentially, what we attempt to do in that model is to look at what we predict in respect of school performance against actual school performance. If schools are over-performing, we will want to know how they are doing that and whether could we incentivise them as a result of that over-performance. If schools are underperforming — and this is the value-added bit — we will look at how we can support, help and assist them. Again, that will be done with the thesis of trying to improve the overall performance of all schools rather than seeing grammar schools as something —

The Chairperson: I will conclude with this point. Another individual carried out some work in relation to super-output areas. It was almost predictable how a school would perform on the basis of super-output areas, although there will always be exceptions to the rule. Does that marry in with over-performance and underperformance on the basis of the methodology that you have used?

Professor Knox: Yes. One aspect of that is deprivation. It struck us in the development of this methodology that we do not see much attention being given to the key factor of absenteeism. That comes out in our work as being very important to school performance. Absenteeism may be the surrogate for a number of other things, such as lack of parental and community support and children being involved in childcare duties. We have attempted to be slightly more empirical around what factors cause, or are associated with, school performance and how we can seek to address them.

The second strand is learning from the schools that, in relatively poor socioeconomic circumstances — against the odds, in a sense — actually perform well. What is happening in those schools that perform well against the odds versus those schools that become almost stereotypical socially deprived, super-output-area-type schools?

The Chairperson: OK. There are a couple of other things that I want to come back to, but we will do that later.

Mr Kinahan: The humility should be on our side. Thank you very much for coming to us and sharing your thoughts. The whole time that I have been on this Committee, I have been really unhappy with the fact that we have this constant divide, which is always being made bigger by the debates we have. It is fantastic to see a really well thought out, considered view. However, it raises certain questions. I have various questions.

On funding, you talk about a shared education premium. However, when I speak to some school principals, they tell me that they need a little bit more funding to give them the flexibility to individualise — if I can put it that way — how they help pupils. There is another factor needed there. Will you comment on that?

Another issue is the maternal and community influence. There are a whole lot of other influences outside the school that you have not really touched on.

You commented on bilateral schools. There are some good ideas out there in different ways. Strabane has a bilateral school, although I have not yet had the chance to visit it. The Priory and Sullivan need to share the good examples that you have talked about.

You mentioned quotas. Do you have an idea of how you find the best quota? Are we talking about a 35% or 40% quota? Is there a calculation?

My last query is on rewarding principals. What sort of thing do you have in mind other than pay and a good pat on the back? Are there any other ideas there, please? It is a fascinating report.

Professor Knox: I will take a couple of your questions, and Vani can take the more difficult ones. *[Laughter.]* You referred to the premium. The starting point is that all schools respond to incentives. If there are financial incentives, those will change schools' behaviour. One of the things we had in mind on the peer learning approach was that providing slightly stronger schools with an incentive in the common funding formula to work with slightly weaker schools would encourage that type of behaviour.

One of the obvious questions to ask is this: what does the stronger school get out of it? Three schools in Derry/Londonderry — St Cecilia's, St Mary's and Lisneal — have done work under the shared education programme. Lisneal was in formal intervention at one point. St Mary's and St Cecilia's worked with Lisneal, and it is now out of formal intervention. The two maintained schools benefited significantly from the counselling services that happened in Lisneal, so there was reciprocal learning. There are ways of doing it. With the whole review of the common funding formula, there is

an opportunity to incentivise these kinds of productive relationships, which, ultimately, will have both educational and reconciliation benefits.

The second point I would make is that we accept absolutely that there are things that we have not touched on in this paper. Importantly, one of those is what is happening in the communities surrounding schools. You cannot just look at schools in isolation. They are not an oasis of peace or isolation. All of those kinds of contextual factors, such as what parents do, are hugely important. We have not addressed them, but we do not devalue their importance.

We have not gone into the detail of the quota-reward system. We simply throw it out as an idea. If the Department were interested in it, we would want to engage with it on the detail. It would provide an opportunity for grammar schools to show, as Vani described it, that kind of social responsibility. There is no reason why it could not operate in practice.

You mentioned rewarding principals. We are very much for the process of incentivisation. We like, very much, the Minister's idea of rewarding principals to take over schools that, in the pejorative sense, are failing schools, rather than seeing the prime jobs as being the jobs in high-performing schools. It is really about bringing leadership to those schools.

Professor Borooah: Let me take your point about quotas. My starting point is that Britain is unimpressed by the fact that 50% of the intake of Oxford and Cambridge is from independent schools even though only 8% of school leavers in Britain are from independent schools. There is that gross inequality. There is a larger perception in Britain and in the UK that this is unequal. More to the point, there is a perception within Oxford and Cambridge that it is unequal and that they must do something about it.

When we speak of a quota, we do not mean an absolute quota that has to be imposed. However, schools and institutions should have a notional target that they should aspire to in terms of addressing social inequalities. In so doing, they have to be much more flexible in their selection procedures. It is no longer four As at A level going into Oxford and Cambridge but an assessment of a person's ability, what that person has to offer or may gain. Grammar schools here are too content to rely on that mechanistic early A level-plus exam regardless of the kind of opportunities that pupils had to do well or badly in that exam.

There has to be a sense of obligation on the part of grammar schools before change can come. However one does it, that sense of obligation to society has to be there.

In terms of deprivation, a lot of educationalists observe that school performance is determined 50% by the school and 50% by home. Those who come from supportive homes have an enormous advantage in school over people who do not come from such supportive homes. When schools have a large proportion of children from free-school-meal backgrounds, they are, in some sense, obliged to act as in loco parentis for those children. They have to perform a function that goes beyond classroom instruction and lies in building expectations, self-belief, self-regard and aspiration in those students.

That is the question before us. It is not just classroom teaching but how to instil a sense of self-belief and aspiration in pupils who may not have had those familial advantages where they get those aspirations at home.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much.

Mr Craig: I noted with interest your comments on quotas around free school meals. You have a complex formula as well and I have no idea what it all means. Another aspect that I think schools find not difficult but challenging are special educational needs children. Is there the same percentage spread across all schools with that or is that based largely on a particular school base?

Professor Borooah: I think that there is the same access inequality for special educational needs children as exists for free-school-meals children. When we speak about access inequality, we should also have said access inequality of pupils from free-school-meal and special educational needs backgrounds.

We found in primary schools that special educational needs and free-school-meals pupils underperform. When special educational needs children go to post-primary school they pick up but the free-school-meals children slightly regress. We need to see what happens to the maturing

process, as children become adolescents, and why some close the gap and for others it increases. I do not know whether that answers your question but special educational needs children need to be put into the category of access inequality along with free-school-meals children.

Mr Craig: I just think that, from school point of view, you are right: there are two big challenges. How do you deal with the children who come from families with a deprived background and have not had the same advantages as others? That is a very challenging situation. However, it is equally challenging, and in some cases a lot more so, to deal with children with special educational needs. Some financial help and assistance is given when those children are statemented etc, but, by and large, that does not cater for their entire needs and there are challenges there. I find it interesting that we concentrate solely on the social issue but do not look at the special educational needs issue as well. Both skew the system. What is your logic with regard to that problem?

Professor Borooah: The logic is that we should have put children with special educational needs along with children eligible for free school meals in speaking about access inequality. However, I would say that, if there is one comfort, it is that the gap between special educational needs children and others diminishes as they grow older. However, for children who are eligible for free school meals, the gap widens. I do not know whether there is any comfort in that.

The Chairperson: Vani, on that point, you can have anomalies — and I am thinking of one particular school, which I will not name, where you have what you could describe as a moderate intake of children who are eligible for free school meals but which has an exceptionally high element of children on EMA, in fact almost 70%. What I worry about — and we have seen this played out in the common funding formula debacle — is that we pick one indicator and use only that and it distorts. Despite all the denials, it has been repeatedly set as bluntly as that. Probably, EMA, on its own, is a blunt indicator and you can get a raft. Could EMA also be included in some quota to determine deprivation? That is an indication of another element of need. A set of criteria must be met to enable access to EMA.

Professor Borooah: We could debate what constitutes deprivation and we could ask whether this or that is the right measure. I am sure that there is profit to be made from making those distinctions. However, I submit that that is of a secondary order of importance, because, however we do it, there is bound to be an enormous overlap between the measures. By focusing on the differences, I think that we are focusing on matters that are of a secondary order of importance. The first order of importance is to identify deprivation, however we define it. We know that there are different measures of deprivation, and we might get differences in detail, but we will get a lot of overlap. We should ask: why does deprivation, however we define it, impact on school performance? Then we can turn our minds to asking whether we have the right measure of deprivation and fine-tune our policy.

Professor Knox: I think that the same is true for EMA. You will find that there is quite a bit of overlap with respect to background deprivation measures associated with it.

Mr Rogers: It is a very interesting report, and thank you for it. One of the first things that jump out at me is that there is a line in the report which says, interestingly, that school improvement policies are failing to realise their objective and meet the need. I prefer the term "self-evaluation" to "self-assessment". Why is self-evaluation not well embedded in our schools at this stage? It has been on the go for 10 years. That is my first question.

Professor Knox: In the paper, we do not argue that self-evaluation is not a useful tool. However, clearly, it has not made the kind of difference that one would have expected it to make. There has been a marginal improvement in the performance gap between grammar schools and non-grammar schools. So, if we have a self-improvement/self-evaluation system in place, why are we failing to make that kind of shift in performance? If these policies are about trying to get schools to consider their own practices and, by a process of comparison with other schools in the same circumstances, improve, we are not really making a significant impression on that. That is where we need to look at measures other than what we are doing currently. We are not suggesting that that is not a good thing to do, but simply that, over a period of time, it has not made the kind of difference that was expected.

Mr Rogers: To really embed self-evaluation in schools, we are talking about two or three cycles of a school development plan. Do you think that among the contributory factors is the lack of high-quality continuous professional development for teachers? Do you think that that particular theme should be developed? Do you think that that is a contributing factor?

Professor Knox: The quality of teaching is hugely important in all this and so is supporting teachers through continuous professional development. No matter what system we use in trying to measure that, the focus needs to be on education outcomes. Looking at education outcomes over that period of time, we can see that what we are doing currently has not worked sufficiently well. The Chair started by saying that this is not a magic bullet. Some measures that the Minister outlined will be helpful with respect to what you are suggesting — continuous professional development and leadership in schools — but they are part of a plethora of things. Depending on schools to pull themselves up by their own boot strings, just by comparison with other schools, does not appear to have worked thus far.

Mr Rogers: Related to that, when we talk about school performance, that means measuring how many pupils they have with five A to C grades including English and maths. You mention the phrase "value-added" very often. To see the real value-added learning in schools, do we not need a mechanism for measuring value-added learning other than counting how many pupils get five A to C grades? I have said this over and over again: if a child starts post-primary school with, let us say, a reading age of nine and gets five A to C grades at the end of fifth year, and another child enters post-primary school with a reading age of 13, there can be no comparison. Do you not believe that we need a better mechanism for measuring value-added learning?

Professor Borooah: In some ways, however imperfect, we try to provide that kind of measure. We look at a school's circumstances in the broad and ask, given those circumstances, what we can expect from that school. The circumstances of any two schools will be different. So, if your school has better circumstances, we will expect more from your school than from mine. Then we will compare your performance to mine and against what we would expect. Our measure of value-added learning is this: what you deliver relative to what we expected you to deliver. However, what we expected you to deliver was conditional upon your circumstances. If your circumstances were bad, our expectations were low and, if you delivered more than that, we were pleasantly surprised and you will have over-performed. So we certainly take that into account.

Let me make a second point. We have also looked at why parents choose schools. What determines their first preferences? The most important thing that parents use for that is school performance. Sometimes, bad performance can be cumulative. So, you can have a school that does badly and parents know of it, so they shift to another school, and the school goes into a downward spiral. Sometimes, it is very important to arrest those downward spirals before they take place. Once they have taken place, it is very difficult to build the reputation of the school again. So, parents are sensitive to school performance and that is what our results show.

Mr Rogers: Thank you. You make a very interesting point about ESA, and we have taken our eye off the ball there. The original idea behind ESA was to raise standards in schools. I was a school principal at that stage and I was really looking forward to ESA getting more money to the classroom. Part of our problem is how money is allocated to education in Northern Ireland. Take a look across the water: 85%-plus of the money goes to the schools there, yet barely 60% of it goes to schools here. Does the way our education budget is organised limit the ability to plan education strategically? Do you think that that is a major problem for us?

Professor Borooah: The major element in the education system is the age-weighted pupil unit. That is precisely why closing schools does not make any sense; the money simply follows the pupil and one can only tinker at the margins. Giving money to school principals and allowing them to use their initiative, provided it is used properly, makes much more sense than having central control of funds.

Professor Knox: I will add one minor point to that, which is our fear that the area planning process will result in large, single-identity schools. There is no evidence, as we have said, that large schools perform better. It is certainly not good for reconciliation in Northern Ireland to have large single-identity schools. That drift in the area planning process could be entirely counterproductive.

Mr Rogers: Closing small schools is not the solution. In the case of our primary schools, their intake has to be below a certain number. Obviously, the figure of 105 is way out in relation to rural schools. Where do you believe that figure should lie for rural primary schools?

Professor Borooah: We are not saying that schools should never be closed. Occasionally, there may well be a strong case for schools to be closed, but they should not be closed heedless of the consequences for pupils and for communities. That is very important. It is a qualitative judgement, but that qualitative judgement is missing when we apply a purely mechanistic formula.

Mr Lunn: Thank you very much for your presentation and your report, gentlemen. It is fair to say that it has given everyone something, because there are different views here. I am sure that we will refer to it a lot in the coming weeks and months.

Professor Borooah, you gave us an interesting statistic about the 50:50 ratio between home and school in the learning experience . We have been force-fed a diet of 20% school:80% home for as long as I have been on this Committee, and it is a figure that I have always struggled with; I just cannot see it at all. Is there a scientific measurement, or have you some basis for the 50:50 ratio?

Professor Borooah: I am quoting a lady called Alison Wolf, who is a professor of education at King's College in London. The point is that it is not about whether it is 50:50 or 80:20; the point is more qualitative. Home has an important and significant influence on a pupil's outcome. We can debate how much of an influence it is, but it is undeniable that it exists. The point is, when students are disadvantaged by not having that kind of a parental background, what should the school do about it? Should it simply ignore it and see that pupil as simply another occupant of a desk, or should it act, as I said, in loco parentis to try to fill that gap? That is the basic issue.

Mr Lunn: OK. You are probably agreeing with me that the 20% figure that we have been given so often is completely unrealistic, and that a school would have to provide more than 20% of the learning experience of any child.

Professor Borooah: I am quoting a particular economist, and some other economists always disagree. Two economists will have three opinions, as we all know. We might say that it is 50% or 20%. The point is that it is significant. Home has an important role to play.

Mr Lunn: Yes, but if we were arguing between 20% and 25% we would say that that is a difference between experts, but this margin is quite significant. Anyway, I was delighted to hear you make that comment.

You talk about peer learning as being very important in various contexts, particularly in the shared education process. I agree with you, and I see that your report refers to:

"significant, measurable educational and reconciliation benefits."

I would not disagree with that at all, although I think that the primary benefit is meant to be educational and the reconciliation comes along as a bonus product. Where do you think that the integrated model fits in that?

Professor Knox: That is probably a leading question from you. To re-emphasise the point that Vani made earlier: we did some analysis of how parents choose their school, and a key influence in that is the educational performance of the school. There will be parents who will choose their school simply because there are significant reconciliation benefits, but I suggest that they are in the minority. If you can get educational benefits and reconciliation benefits, that becomes a significant contribution to raising educational standards and to addressing some of the reconciliation needs in Northern Ireland.

If you look at the table where we look at school performance, you will see that integrated schools are somewhere between maintained non-grammars and controlled non-grammars. That has got to be an influence in parental choice. We are not here in any shape or form to devalue the role that integrated education plays in Northern Ireland but simply to try to interpret how parents select their schools and the reasons why they send their children to particular schools.

Mr Lunn: I was not asking you to advocate for or against integrated schools. That is not the point, but the report states:

"extending curriculum choices for pupils on a cross-community basis".

That is the effect of a shared education model. The extension of that would quite naturally be an integrated model. Are you saying that it is at least possible that having pupils learning together on a cross-community basis and on a full-time basis rather than the odd class during the week might have a long-term benefit?

Professor Knox: I have to disagree with you about the "odd class" bit.

Mr Lunn: That was an unfortunate phrase.

Professor Knox: It is not a criticism. It is important in the sense that shared education is about sustained contact. That is where you get the education and reconciliation benefits. According to our data, the choice is based primarily on education outcomes, but that is not in any way to devalue the important societal benefits from shared integrated education.

Mr Lunn: OK. Our next investigation will be to compare shared and integrated education.

I want to briefly go back to the question about school size. The former chief inspector, Mr Goudie, expressed his opinion one day that class size does not matter. Big classes do not lead to a fall in performance, achievement or quality of teaching. That is another statistic that I found amazing. Have you got a view about that?

Professor Borooah: The evidence is mixed in the sense that we do not deny that there are good large schools, but equally, it is undeniable that there are good small schools, and equally, it is undeniable that there are large bad schools. So, simply to focus on size as the most significant factor misses the point. The point is that there are certain things that cut right across schools that affect school performance, such as school attendance and discipline. What happens in the school is much more important than the size of the school. Maybe the size of the school sometimes acts as a proxy for these things, but one should focus on the essentials.

Mr Lunn: I was asking you about class size. Most of us tend to think that 30 pupils is about the optimum figure, but when Stanley Goudie was here, he indicated that having 36 up to 40 was not going to be a problem. The corollary of that is that a class of 15 is not in any way beneficial.

Professor Borooah: One of the things that we show is that the number of teachers in a school is also very important. You could have a large class size, but you could have specialist teaching from a large pool of teachers. So, we find that schools that have a sixth form, for example, do better in GCSEs than schools that do not. Why is that? It is the case in the same way that universities that have postgraduate courses have better undergraduate performance than universities that do not. The reason is this: you get a more specialist kind of teacher teaching you, albeit at a lower level. I do not deny that class size may not make a difference, but, certainly, the kind of teacher body that you have does make a difference.

Mr Lunn: So, you tend to agree with the chief inspector that, provided that the quality of the teaching is right, a bigger class than 30 should not make a difference.

Professor Borooah: Yes, what we are saying is that large schools, per se, abstracting from everything else, are not a significant determinant of school performance. Size per se does not make a difference. Size has to be taken in conjunction with a number of other factors. When those other factors are taken into account, size recedes into the background, and those other factors come to the fore. That is what we are saying.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for your presentation, gentlemen. I have a couple of short questions. At the outset, you said that maintained secondary schools perform better than controlled. What is the reason for that?

Professor Borooah: I would not like to speculate.

Professor Knox: I think that that is a hugely important question, put in a very pithy way. I do not think that we have the answer to that. If you ask people in the maintained sector, they will talk about the Catholic ethos and say that it has an important role to play in that. That is perhaps one of the factors that go beyond the school. Perhaps the aspirations of children from that sector, or the family support for children from that sector, play an important part. It is a question that needs more investigation. Why do schools, probably with similar demographics, from the maintained and controlled sectors do better or worse? Research has been done on this. There was the Dawn Purvis stuff about the lower aspirations of children from Protestant working-class backgrounds. It would be interesting to look at the small number of cases in which schools from that area do better than they are expected to. What is different about those schools that make them perform better?

Mr Sheehan: Aspirations among the children is one thing, but is there any evidence of a lowering of aspirations among the teaching staff? They do not expect the kids to perform well or to go on to third-level education, and so on and so forth, so they lower their expectations.

Professor Borooah: One of the questions that you asked was a fundamental question. However, I think that it takes us beyond what is happening in schools to what is happening in society and to the lost generation, sense of hope, lack of aspiration and feeling of emptiness regarding the future on the part of one section of society, but hope and regeneration on the part of another. I think that that is going beyond the school debate to a comment on society.

Teachers have a very important role to play in aspirations. You see this in England. What is institutional racism? Institutional racism is this: if an Indian child comes to a teacher and says, "I would like to be a doctor", the teacher says, "Yes, good, that is what you should be". If a West Indian child comes to a teacher and says, "I'd like to be doctor", the teacher says, "Why don't you try athletics? That is more your line". It is exactly that. The aspirations of children are killed or nourished and nurtured by the attitude of the teacher. Teachers go with stereotypes when they approach children. They can play an important role in stunting a child or allowing that child to grow.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that. Vani, you said that directing funding based on free school meals and using that as an indicator is ill-conceived. If that funding is linked to evidence-based interventions, is it still ill-conceived?

Professor Borooah: No. It is ill-conceived in the sense that, if I require surgery, the surgeon takes an axe rather than a scalpel. It is not the operation that is ill-conceived; it is the instrument that is being used that is ill-conceived.

Giving money to schools based on the number of children who get free school meals as a policy and operation is not ill-conceived, but it is too blunt an instrument as it is proposed at present. You need a scalpel here rather than an axe, and you need to tease out those schools that, notwithstanding having a large number of children on free school meals, are putting in a good performance. It is about asking why and rewarding those aspects of behaviour that are leading to good results but not giving a blanket coverage of money to all schools that have children on free school meals. At the moment, it is much more of a shotgun approach. What we need is much more of a sniper's bullet or bullets.

Mr Sheehan: A good analogy. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Maybe for some parties but not for all.

Mr Sheehan: The Committee has been talking over the past few weeks about peer learning and peer tutoring. I do not know a lot about it. It sounds like an interesting concept. I am not sure how much research there is on it. What is the evidence of the improvements that it may make in schools, and how does it work?

Professor Borooah: Colin can answer that, but let me make just one observation. If you look at the UK, you will find that London has the best-performing schools compared with any other part of the UK. That was not always so. There were a lot of what were pejoratively called sink comprehensives. Many of those are now not sink comprehensives. A lot of imagination was brought to London schools to improve performance. One example of that was the London Challenge, which was when schools with one level of performance learned from schools with another level of performance. They were role models. There is no single solution, but many solutions have been brought to improve school performance in London, one of which was peer performance.

Professor Knox: Most of the evidence on peer learning is based on schools in England. There is emerging evidence around the significance of education improving as a consequence. The best example in practice in Northern Ireland is the shared education programme, where schools collaborate around an extension of curriculum and shared learning in core areas of the curriculum. The Minister acknowledged the fact that that kind of approach has education and reconciliation benefits based on evidence from schools that were involved in those programmes.

We would condition that by saying that you need to get schools that are fairly close so that there is not a lot of travelling between them and children do not spend a lot of time on buses. You also need to get schools that are performing relatively close to one another, with one being slightly stronger. Those

circumstances create opportunities where that peer learning will evolve. If you overlay that with some financial incentive for schools to do that, we think that that is the cocktail for peer learning to become embedded. Colleagues from Queen's said that schools become interdependent. That gives them access to a wider range of resources and different kinds of teaching specialisms. The beneficiaries of that are children who are part of that network of schools.

Professor Borooah: I will give you two examples off the top of my head. We have drawn up a long list of schools that might collaborate. St Mary's Grammar and Methodist College might collaborate. They are both good schools, but Methodist College is slightly better in maths and so has something to offer. Collaboration is possible between Aquinas on the Ravenhill Road and Wellington College, which is half a mile up the road. Knockbreda is not too far away. What can one do about that? Those are all possible partnerships that are very feasible with regard to distance.

Mr Sheehan: In practical terms, what happens? Is it just that children from the two schools go into one class together?

Professor Borooah: Yes, and teachers.

Professor Knox: They share resources of teachers as well. It feeds into the whole entitlement framework. Schools, in and of themselves, might not be able to offer particular specialisms. If they collaborate for educational reasons, they widen the scope of the curriculum and also get that consistent regular contact, which breaks down all the cross-community barriers that we know exist. We think that the double hit, if you like, would be shown through the value for education and reconciliation.

Professor Borooah: One cannot micromanage those things and say, "This will happen in every partnership". It is important to establish the principle of sharing but to leave the details of sharing to the individual schools and their specialist needs.

Mr Sheehan: I will stay on the issue of collaboration between schools. Some of the research that I have seen suggests that schools that perform best are those that have pupils from a wide range of social backgrounds. Would you advocate that schools with pupils from different social backgrounds collaborate or that they should have the same social mix?

Professor Knox: I think that it can happen organically. I do not think that we would want to say that you must have schools from different socio-economic backgrounds in order for collaboration to be effective. I think that it is likely to be the case that you can have collaboration involving schools from socially deprived areas as long as they are educationally proximate. You will not put — for want of a better phrase — a top-performing grammar school with a lower-performing non-grammar school. It is about making sure that you get parental buy-in to that where those schools are educationally proximate and, as a consequence, both schools or the tripartite of schools benefit from the experience.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks very much.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you both for your presentation. It has certainly been very interesting to listen to it. Professor Borooah, I was interested when you referred earlier to Oxford and Cambridge and the students who go there. My son got into Cambridge through the excellent education that he received in our local grammar school. I am very proud of the quality of education in Northern Ireland.

Professor Borooah: As, indeed, did my son. We both have to thank Northern Ireland —

Mrs Dobson: We have something in common. Which college?

Professor Borooah: He went to Balliol College, Oxford.

Mrs Dobson: Right. My son is at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. I am very proud of the education that he received here from his grammar school, Banbridge Academy.

I want to touch on quotas again, if I may. I suppose that the flip side of quotas is often their unintended consequences. Are you concerned that, by introducing a quota, it could possibly

adversely disadvantage some students where the schools may decide to stick rigidly to quotas rather than allow more pupils in?

Professor Borooah: We misspoke when we talked about quotas. The quota that one has to have is an aspirational quota in one's mind.

Mrs Dobson: OK. So, it is not a rigid percentage?

Professor Borooah: No. There has to be a realisation in grammar schools, just as there is a realisation in Oxford and Cambridge, that they are not doing enough in societal terms and should do more. In order to do that, they should have some aspiration in their mind with regard to a quota, which might be perfectly flexible. Unless that realisation comes from within them, I think that it is impossible to impose something externally and say, "You must do this whether you like it or not".

Mrs Dobson: That is good because I would be concerned that, if there were a rigid quota, it would disadvantage pupils with special needs. I am particularly interested in supporting pupils with special needs. Would your proposed quota be based on your view that the current support for those students is possibly not adequate? What changes would you like to make to reflect that?

Professor Borooah: I would quote the equal opportunities legislation that you have. It is not positive discrimination. It is not adverse selection or whatever. It is outreach. You encourage and support people to apply, but, ultimately, you take the best. What we have to realise is that it is not so much about equality of outcome. We want equality of opportunity; we do not want equality of outcome. At present, we do not have equality of opportunity. A child who comes from your background or my background has an enormous advantage in getting into a grammar school or Oxbridge over children from more deprived backgrounds. We want to remove that disadvantage. Let them compete on an open playing field. Then, if my child gets in, great. If he does not get in, that is also fine. At the moment, the playing field is not level. That is what I am saying.

Mrs Dobson: I was concerned that they should earn their place through ability rather than being seen as meeting a quota.

Professor Borooah: Absolutely. They should earn their place through ability, but their ability should have the full opportunity to demonstrate itself.

Mrs Dobson: Of course.

Professor Borooah: At the moment, it does not.

Mrs Dobson: OK. I want to touch on something that Danny mentioned earlier about schools' popularity with parents and the reputation and standing of schools in the local community. Often, I feel that it can be a double-edged sword for schools. How do you overcome the fact that some schools are more popular than others and are oversubscribed? What role do you see for inspectors in helping to raise the public perception, particularly of schools that have traditionally been viewed as less favourable in a community but have come on leaps and bounds in recent years? Do you see inspectors having a role in that?

Professor Borooah: I think so. In Europe, you just go to the local school. All schools are the same. The fact that some schools underperform and some over-perform is not the norm; it is an aberration. In most European countries, the whole idea of not going to your local school would be bizarre. So, I think that we have to embrace the idea that all schools can lift their performance in such a way that they provide a decent education. One cannot ask for more than that. At the moment, when there is such disparity of performance between schools, that is unacceptable.

Mrs Dobson: Thank you very much.

The Chairperson: I think that Trevor wants in very quickly. We have run badly over time.

Mr Lunn: I will not take a moment. Pat raised the point about the difference between Catholic maintained, non-grammar and controlled, which is probably the most startling figure in all your statistics. It is stark. Your statistics show a 10% difference. It means that one third more Catholic

pupils succeed than those in controlled schools. The popular perception is that that is historical. It almost comes back to the question of how much learning comes from the home. The perception is that the fathers and grandfathers of the children in controlled schools expected to have a job in Shorts, Mackie's, the rope works or Harland and Wolff. Hopefully, that is fading into history now. There must be some reason for it. Can any work be done, or have you guys done any work, that would give some clue about why that is? There must be more to it than just a Catholic ethos. Although it is to be valued, I do not think that it could really account for that huge difference.

Professor Borooah: Let me give you a slightly different statistic. If you look at the top 10 performing grammar schools in Northern Ireland, you will see that eight of them are Catholic grammar schools. Schools such as Methodist College only start to kick in after the first 10. It is not something that is peculiar to the maintained secondary versus controlled secondary; grammar schools also have that characteristic.

The Chairperson: You run the risk of straying into another discussion and debate. The only thing that I will say is that there are other statistics. We need to be very careful, because we have seen NISRA's statistics for controlled non-selective secondary schools that outperform maintained non-selective schools. It all depends. The NISRA figures for last year clearly indicated that, in certain areas, non-selective secondary schools were outperforming others. You take a general brush —

Professor Borooah: It is the average.

The Chairperson: It is the average. We always have to have that caveat. It is a bit like the language that we use. Unfortunately, this morning, a senior bishop decided to use language that I think was very regrettable. He described the process a jungle and, out of that, you will always get beasts that win. That was very unfortunate. It was not language that should have been used. We always need to be careful.

Mr Lunn: I would tend to agree with you if the difference was not quite so stark. It is a huge variation. That is the only point I was making.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. Your paper is very valuable and useful. It will inform us in our deliberations on the inquiry. There is no doubt that we will come back to you, Colin and Vani, maybe with regard to the performance information that you referred to. We look forward to working with you in 2014. We wish both of you God's richest blessing this Christmas time.

Professor Borooah: Likewise, Chairman. It was a privilege and an honour. Thank you.