

The Educational Institute of Scotland

Bi-Level and Multi-Level Classes

1. Introduction

1.1 The following Resolution was passed by the 2015 AGM:

"This AGM instructs Council to investigate the use of bi-level and multi-level classes in schools, with particular regard to issues of workload and stress, and to report back to members by December 2015 with their findings and recommendations."

2. Action

2.1 The Education Committee contacted Local Association Secretaries and Subject Specialist Group members, seeking relevant information.

2.2 The following are the definitions of applied within this paper :

Bi-Level: configuration of classes to maximise pupil/ teacher ratios in terms of timetable efficiency. Class groups are combined in spite of there being limited or no commonality of content in the courses being studied, and presentation ranges across two.

Multi-level: configuration of classes to maximise pupil/ teacher ratios in terms of timetable efficiency. Class groups are combined in spite of there being limited or no commonality of content in the courses being studied, and presentation ranges across two.

Multi-stage: configuration of classes to maximise pupil/ teacher ratios in terms of timetable efficiency. Class groups from a range (3 or more) of ages and stages are combined.

2.3 14 Local Associations and some Subject Specialist Group members responded to the request for information.

3. Findings

3.1 Occurrence

3.1.1 Local Associations and Subject Specialist were asked about the extent to which bi-level and multi-level classes were being taught in schools within their local authority. Every response indicated that this was at least a common occurrence across all subjects, with teaching of up to 4 levels taking place in single classes. In smaller schools particularly, it was said to be extremely common or the shape of class configuration in the majority of cases.

3.1.2 Responses also indicated that within the Secondary sector, there is incidence of S4, S5 and S6 students being taught in multi-level, multi-stage classes, undertaking courses from N4 to Advanced Higher. Such arrangements were said to apply within smaller schools; in some cases in the teaching of subjects for which there is lesser uptake; in other cases these arrangements occur within typically high-uptake subjects such as English and PE. The pattern of multi-stage teaching across and within local authority areas is therefore variable.

3.2 Impact on workload

3.2.1 Most respondents stated in response to questions relating to the impact of bi-level and multi-level teaching on members' workload that it was significant.

Factors creating additional workload included:

- at least double the planning and preparation;
- simultaneous assessment of students working across at least two different levels;
- the number and range of internal assessments;
- the demand that students meet all assessment standards in order to pass Unit Assessments;
- building in differentiated support for learners whose needs cover a wider range;
- teaching classes outwith timetabled hours to ensure that course content is covered.

A number of responses stated that teachers are exhausted after teaching bi and multi-level classes.

3.3 Impact on teachers' wellbeing

3.3.1 Responses indicate that the prevalence of bi-level and multi-level teaching is having a detrimental impact on teachers' wellbeing.

Increased levels of stress and greater incidence of stress-related absence were reported frequently within the responses received. Stress-related absence among Secondary teachers was reported to have increased significantly since the introduction of new qualifications and thus multi-level teaching, in a number of local authority areas.

Further negative consequences for the health of teachers were identified as:

- sleeplessness, exhaustion and fatigue;
- damage to mental health, including anxiety and depression and also affecting teachers in the early stages of their careers;

- feelings of guilt and futility regarding ability to do a good job in teaching such classes.

3.4 Impact on learning

- 3.4.1 All of the responses expressed the view that bi and multi-level classes have a deleterious impact on learning.
- 3.4.2 It was reported that such class configurations have a negative impact on pupils' motivation as a consequence of difficulties in pitching lessons in such a way as to engage all learners simultaneously. As a result of teachers having to teach at different levels, there is less time for one-to-one support for pupils, including those with additional support needs, thus limiting their progress. Learners, for large amounts of the time, are required to work independently while the teacher focuses on groups of learners working at other levels. The concentration levels of all groups of pupils can be affected. Potential distraction arises from the teacher continuing to work with other learners and/ or as those working independently of the teacher collaborate in order to make progress. Related to this, it was suggested, is indiscipline resultant from the needs of some learners not being met by the arrangements, then this disrupting the learning of others in the class. Frequently commented upon was the difficulty that pupils experience in terms of the pace of lessons either being too fast or slow, again as a consequence of different levels being taught at once.
- 3.4.3 Several responses highlighted teachers' perceptions of the negative impact of bi and multi-level teaching on pupil attainment, the teachers having made comparisons of results between the results of such classes and previous cohorts whose classes were not configured on that basis. Concern was expressed about this, particularly in relation to the aim of improving the attainment of the most disadvantaged learners.
- 3.4.4 A common perception conveyed within the responses is that learning is less enjoyable for students who are taught in bi and multi-level classes, and that morale and confidence are eroded among learners who are working at the lower/ lowest levels when divisions on the basis of ability are obvious.
- 3.4.5 Pupils were also said to be aware of teacher stress and frequently to desist from asking for help to avoid exacerbating this.

3.5 Other comments

- 3.5.1 With regards to multi-stage (and often also multi-level) teaching across different year groups, it was suggested that students do not always mix well within this context.
- 3.5.2 Responses also emphasised that course content at each of the different levels is often vastly different, therefore making it more accurate to say

that pupils undertaking different courses are being taught within the same classes rather than pupils working at different levels are being taught simultaneously.

- 3.5.3 Differences in assessment design were also cited as being significant, particularly for learners being presented at National 4 and below, and for whom there is no external exam, in contrast to arrangements for their counterparts sitting National 5 and Higher. In some cases, this was reported to cause disruption to exam preparation for pupils working at National 5 and demotivation among those who are not being presented for exams.
- 3.5.4 Concern was also expressed that bi and multi-level teaching does not allow the recommended number of hours per course, as stated in SQA guidelines, to be met.
- 3.5.5 Responses indicated that teachers and departments are put under pressure to run bi-level and multi-level classes to ensure that the subjects run, either on the grounds of viability or staffing availability.

4. Recommendations

The EIS should continue to campaign both nationally and locally for the structural changes necessary, for example in relation to education funding, workforce planning and teacher recruitment, to enable schools to make curriculum decisions based on sound educational principles, and not on staffing, budgetary or other constraints.

- 4.1 Decisions by senior management relating to curriculum architecture, learner pathways and the composition of classes should be based on sound educational rationale which should be shared with teaching staff. It is recognised that small schools in rural areas may face particular challenges.
- 4.2 The imposition of bi-level and multi-level classes as mechanisms for achieving savings should be resisted.

Care should also be taken to ensure that students are assigned to classes and presented at the course level that is appropriate for them from the beginning of the session in order that scenarios involving mid-session course level changes within what began as single-level classes can be avoided.

While the EIS acknowledges the pressure members are under in this matter, members are reminded that it is in their and the pupils' interests that they do not take on unreasonable or undeliverable workloads in order to try to deliver courses at a variety of levels. The resultant stress and damaging effect on their health and wellbeing, is likely to have a significantly more detrimental impact on pupil learning than a constrained subject choice is.

- 4.3 In such circumstances members are advised to raise the matter with their Head Teacher and the school EIS representative before the end of the preceding session in order that possible solutions can be explored.
- 4.4 Agreed solutions might include, where appropriate:
- the provision of additional staffing to enable the configuration of single-stage, single-level classes;
 - some students attending a class in another school or college;
 - suitable aspects of courses being offered through supported self-study; where staff are asked to provide support to students following this option, this to be fully acknowledged through provision of additional preparation and correction time, or other suitable timetable adjustments
 - the withdrawal of one or more level from the option choice matrix.
- 4.5 The detrimental impact of teaching bi-level and multi-level classes on the wellbeing of teachers should be highlighted and measures established to alleviate this. Possible solutions may include:
- additional time for preparation and correction allocated to teachers of bi-level and multi-level classes;
 - smaller class sizes.
- 4.6 No pressure should be put on teaching staff to provide a solution which they believe to be inappropriate or on students to take up an option for the purposes of timetable expediency.
- 4.7 Where members believe that they are being placed under inappropriate pressure to teach a bi or multi-level class, they should bring this to the attention of their school representative and the Head Teacher.
- 4.8 In the event that a resolution cannot be achieved the matter should be raised with the Local Association Secretary, who should raise the matter with the education authority.

5. Further action

- 5.1 The EIS should request that Education Scotland and SQA issue guidance, making explicitly clear where senior phase subjects at different levels are, in fact different courses.
- 5.2 Local Associations should seek to ensure through LNCTs that staffing levels are not predicated on the inappropriate use of bi-level and multi-level classes, with a view to reducing as far as possible the incidence of such classes.
- 5.3 At a national level, the EIS should ensure that the Government commits sufficient funds to education authorities to employ the appropriate number

of teachers as determined by schools and education authorities for the effective delivery of senior phase courses.

- 5.4 The EIS should continue to campaign for significant reduction of teacher workload incurred by senior phase course and assessment design and delivery, including that generated by the configuration of bi and multi-level classes.