Exploring the Challenges at the Broad General Education to Senior Phase Transition in Scotland's Curriculum

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Abstract

Since the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) many secondary schools have modified their curricular structure, influenced by the requirement to deliver pupil entitlements and offer a Broad General Education (BGE) to the end of S3. The autonomy afforded to head teachers (HTs) offers schools significant flexibility in designing their curriculum, which has resulted in a range of curricular structures across Scotland. However, many schools find it challenging to attain a balance between ensuring learners receive their entitlement to a BGE while also supporting progression to the Senior Phase (SP). This empirical research uses Glasgow secondary schools as a case study. It seeks to understand the underlying reasons giving rise to this challenge, and how this impacts on curricular structures. It concludes with recommendations for practice and policy to alleviate the challenge.

Keywords: Curriculum for Excellence, Broad General Education (BGE), Senior Phase (SP), transition, curricular structures
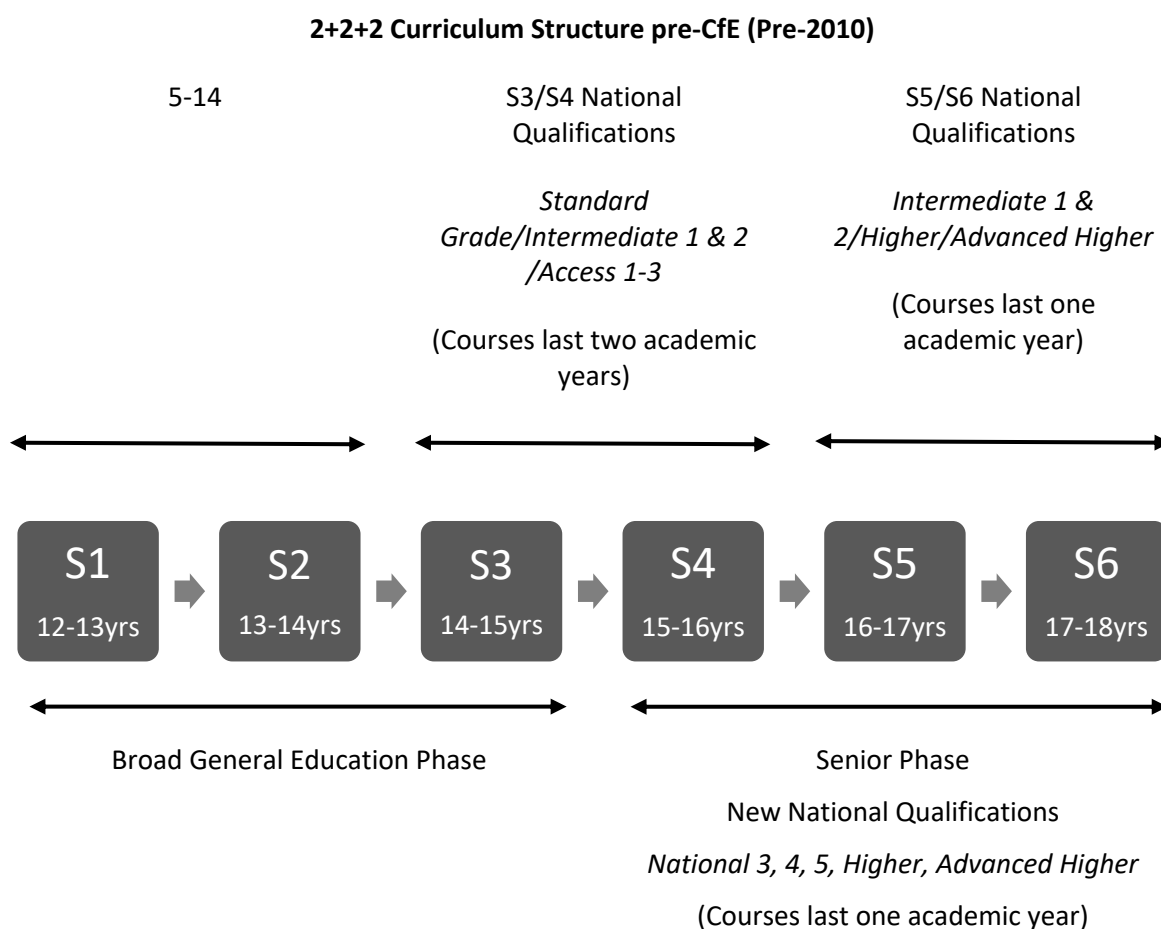
Introduction

Scottish education continues to experience an intense period of reform much of which, for over two decades, has been driven by Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (Humes, 2020). Introduced in 2010, CfE sought to ensure that all pupils were prepared for life in the 21st century through a coherent curriculum (Education Scotland, 2024) and was considered a ground-breaking change in education, both in its philosophy and in its practical implications for schools (Priestley & Humes, 2010). Between 2006 and 2011, a series of *Building the Curriculum* (BTC) documents was published detailing the requirements of CfE and providing guidance for its implementation. The third of these (BTC3) (Scottish Government, 2008) outlined that pupils had an entitlement to:

- A broad, general education (BGE) including all experiences and outcomes (Es&Os) to the third level, across all curricular areas (CA), through to S3;
- A senior phase (SP) from S4 with opportunities to attain qualifications.

BTC3 also indicated that there would be no centrally-mandated curricular structure imposed by the Scottish Government. Rather, schools would have the flexibility and autonomy to create a curricular structure that suited their context and best met the needs of their pupils.

Another significant change was the introduction of a period of BGE to the end of S3. Prior to CfE, secondary education in Scotland had traditionally run a period of general education until the end of S2, after which pupils would work towards qualifications at the appropriate level. This is often referred to as a 2+2+2 curricular structure. However, the implementation of CfE and the extended period of general education gave rise to a structure referred to as 3+3. The differences between the two structures are outlined in Figure 1. As a result of this extended period of general education, the purpose of S3 changed from the first of a 2-year mid-school phase during which pupils worked towards exams, to the last of a 3-year, non-examinable, lower-school phase.

Figure 1
The Organisation of Schooling Before 2010 (top), and Since 2010 (bottom)

2+2+2 Curriculum Structure pre-CfE (Pre-2010)

5-14	S3/S4 National Qualifications	S5/S6 National Qualifications
	Standard Grade/Intermediate 1 & 2 /Access 1-3	*Intermediate 1 & 2/Higher/Advanced Higher*
	(Courses last two academic years)	(Courses last one academic year)

| S1 12-13yrs | S2 13-14yrs | S3 14-15yrs | S4 15-16yrs | S5 16-17yrs | S6 17-18yrs |

Broad General Education Phase

Senior Phase

New National Qualifications

National 3, 4, 5, Higher, Advanced Higher

(Courses last one academic year)

3+3 Curriculum Structure under CfE (since 2010)

Note: Adapted from Shapira et al. (2023)

Several years after its launch, the implementation of CfE remains challenging (Priestley et al., 2021), with school leaders continuing to encounter a variety of difficulties. In 2020 Education Scotland reported that, in about 50% of Scotland's secondary schools, pupils were not receiving their full entitlement to a BGE, and that schools found it difficult to balance the requirement to provide learners with their entitlement to a BGE to the end of S3 with preparing them adequately for the SP (Education Scotland, 2020). This was reaffirmed in 2024 (Education Scotland, 2024). Little is known about *why* schools find it challenging to deliver all entitlements and achieve such a balance, and

Education Scotland does not provide any explanation or exploration. This study has sought to provide that exploration, and examines how the reported challenge impacts on the curriculum, particularly in S3. In doing so it seeks to partially fill the gap in available research on curricular structures in Scotland. It is guided by the following questions:

- What underlying factors have led to schools experiencing difficulty in achieving this balance?
- To what extent is the reported challenge being experienced in Glasgow secondary schools?
- What is the impact on curriculum design in Glasgow secondary schools?

These questions are of particular interest to the researcher, a HT of a secondary school in Glasgow, who has experienced the difficulties reported by Education Scotland.

Literature Review

From the outset, CfE was under-conceptualised, with little input from academics, few insights from research, and no theoretical or intellectual basis for the proposed changes (Ford, 2011; Priestley et al., 2021). Fourteen years after initial implementation, there remains a paucity of research or data on curriculum structures in Scotland, and what little scrutiny exists is focused on the SP (Shapira et al., 2023).

A small body of literature provides a picture of the BGE and S3 curricula nationally. While formally part of the BGE, one purpose of S3 is to offer a transition point, and to prepare pupils for the SP (Education Scotland, 2012). However, as Stobart (2021) highlights, changing the examinable phase of secondary school to begin at S4 posed challenges for schools and pupils, who require 160 hours of learning to complete qualifications, potentially leading to the creation of another 2-term dash in S4 (Scott, 2019a). Comparing Scotland to other jurisdictions, a three-year lower secondary school phase followed by a three-year, examinable, SP is not uncommon. However, it is uncommon for pupils to undertake high-stakes exams after one year in the SP (UNESCO, 2011), and to take exams in each of the three years of the SP as currently happens in Scotland (Stobart, 2021). Scott (2019a) argues that concern over the scarce time available to complete qualifications, coupled with insufficient detail in BTC3 (Scottish Government, 2008), has resulted in uncertainty as to how best to use S3 to prepare pupils for the SP (Scott, 2015). Similarly, research by Shapira et al. (2023) indicated that schools address the boundary between the BGE and SP in a range of ways, a consequence of the available autonomy. Very often a *back-wash* effect is observed, with S3 being deployed to help pupils work towards National Qualifications (NQs) (Stobart, 2021). This is supported by Shapira et al. (2023) who highlight that provision in the BGE often mirrors the requirements of Senior Phase qualifications.

Educators often favour the curricular status quo over proposed developments (Gouëdard et al., 2020), with resistance to change being stronger than the readiness to reform (OECD, 2020a). This has been witnessed to an extent in Scotland, where almost 20% of state-funded secondary schools continue to openly operate a traditional 2+2+2 curricular structure (Shapira et al. 2021). Furthermore, many supposed 3+3 structures look similar or identical to a pre-CfE model, and have been characterised as 2+2+2 structures in disguise (Scott, 2018). The retention of a near-traditional approach may be viewed as curriculum-makers exhibiting resistance and conservatism (Scott, 2018). However, Scott (2019a) contends that nebulously worded policies and time-pressures to complete courses have led many schools to create a curriculum structure that provides a smooth approach to qualifications in S4. As Stobart (2021) contends, exams have historically dominated the curriculum in S4-S6 in Scotland. Accordingly, CfE has been viewed as the implementation of new NQs, which now define CfE and have substituted it as the de facto curriculum in secondary schools. Consequently, the BGE has been largely disregarded (Priestley et al., 2021).

Methodology

A case study approach was adopted, using secondary schools in Glasgow City Council (GCC) as case study sites. Accordingly, the research employs a range of data collection methods to utilise all relevant and available evidence (Mfinanga et al., 2019). Following the literature review, the research was conducted through a survey followed by a focus group (FG) interview.

Data Collection

The survey, conducted online using a Microsoft Form, contained a blend of closed and open-ended questions designed to provide an understanding of BGE curricular structures and rationales in Glasgow secondary schools. It did not ask directly whether schools adopted a 3+3 or a 2+2+2 model as, while the two labels are helpful, they hide many nuances (Shapira et al., 2023). All Glasgow secondary HTs were invited to participate, with 28 from a possible 30 responding, ensuring a sufficiently large and representative sample. Responses were anonymous, and all participants provided consent for their involvement, in line with the ethical approval granted by the University of Glasgow.

The FG involved one interview with a group of five HTs who had completed the survey. The researcher posed two open-ended questions focussed on curriculum structures and rationales, allowing participants to discuss these in more depth.

Data Analysis

An inductive data analysis process was employed, whereby the qualitative and quantitative data was examined multiple times, and subjected to interpretations, with themes being derived to create understandings that explained the data (Cohen, 2018). These were then related to the research focus. Calculation of descriptive statistics of survey results was employed and findings are discussed in the following section with a focus on the general patterns emerging.

Findings

Survey Results

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that a wide variety of curricular structures exists within the BGE across Glasgow secondary schools. The number of subjects studied within each BGE year group varies across the city, and schools offer different numbers of specialisation points, at different stages across the BGE. The tables also highlight the range of ways in which learning is organised in S3, with a range of number of subjects being offered. While 12 subjects (including *core*) is the most common number in the city, the average is 11.4 subjects.

Table 1

Number of Subjects Studied and Specialisation Points in Each Year Group

	S1	S2	S3
Min # subjects in GCC Schools	12	11	9
Max # subjects in GCC schools	21	21	15
Average # subjects in GCC schools	15.1	15.1	11.4
# schools with specialisation within this year	2	11	27

Table 2

Number of Specialisation Points Within Each School

# specialisation points within the BGE	Schools (%)
1	64%
2	29%
3	7%

Figure 2 shows that the two most popular factors informing schools' curriculum rationales were raising attainment in the Senior Phase, and improving pupils' learning experiences, with nearly 80% of schools indicating one or both reasons. For three schools, raising attainment was the only reason given for their structure. In three schools, parental pressure influenced the curriculum structure. Ten respondents highlighted that providing more time before options for NQs was a factor, and seven such schools offer two specialisation points during the BGE, at S2 and again S3, resulting in pupils reducing the number of subjects studied. Nearly 50% of respondents suggested that their curriculum model was, partially at least, directed by an obligation to comply with the perceived requirements of CfE. Of these, six do not compel students to choose one subject from each CA and five highlight that, for most pupils, their S3 curriculum is also followed in S4.

Figure 2

*Reasons Driving the Adoption of Curricular Model*
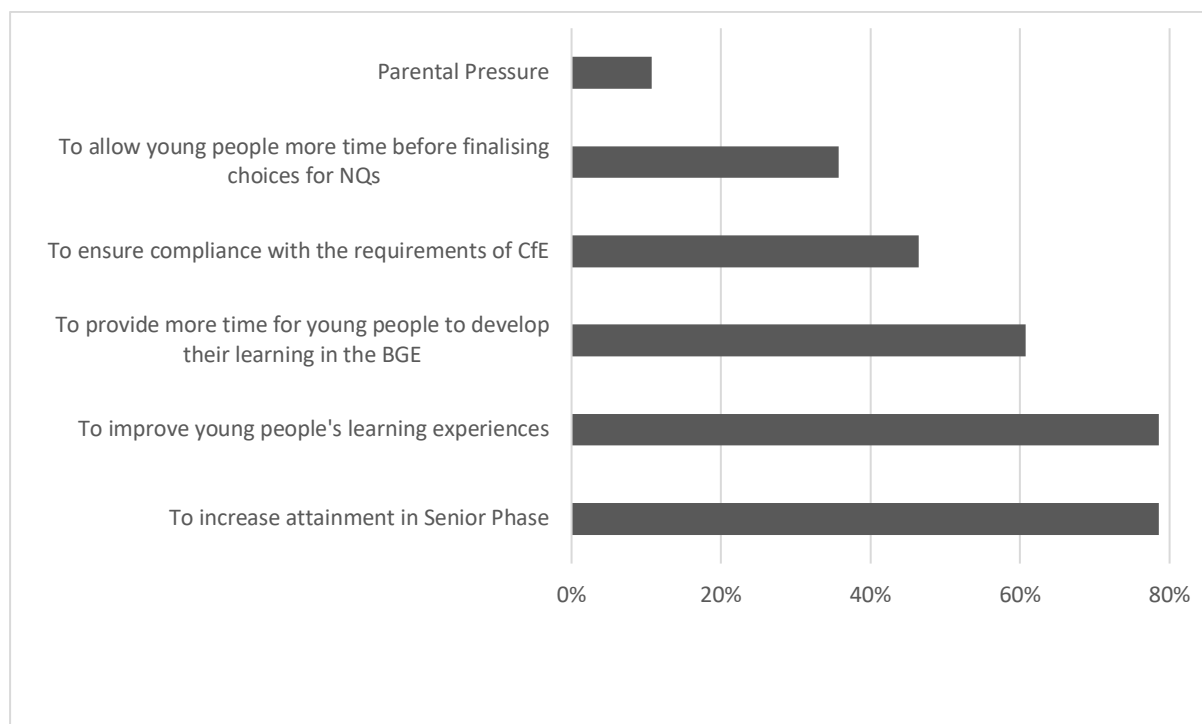
Schools place different restrictions on young people at specialisation points and these were explored to gain an understanding of the extent to which pupils were receiving their CfE entitlements. Table 3 details the responses of the participating schools and while some of the results may appear contradictory, it highlights that a significant number of Glasgow's young people are not studying in all CAs to the end of S3, and in some cases possibly earlier.

Table 3
Conditions Placed on BGE Pupils at Specialisation Points

|	Are pupils compelled to choose at least one subject from each CA?	Can pupils opt to study more than one subject within a CA?	Can pupils opt to study all subjects within a CA?	Can pupils opt to not study any subjects within a CA?
No	29%	4%	75%	50%
Yes	71%	96%	25%	50%

With regards to what schools communicate as the purpose of S3, nine overarching themes emerged, with most responses comprising multiple themes. Figure 3 details the frequency with which each theme is mentioned by respondents. The most common theme was recognition that S3 was part of the BGE and that the learner experience should align with this.

Figure 3
Communicated Purpose of S3
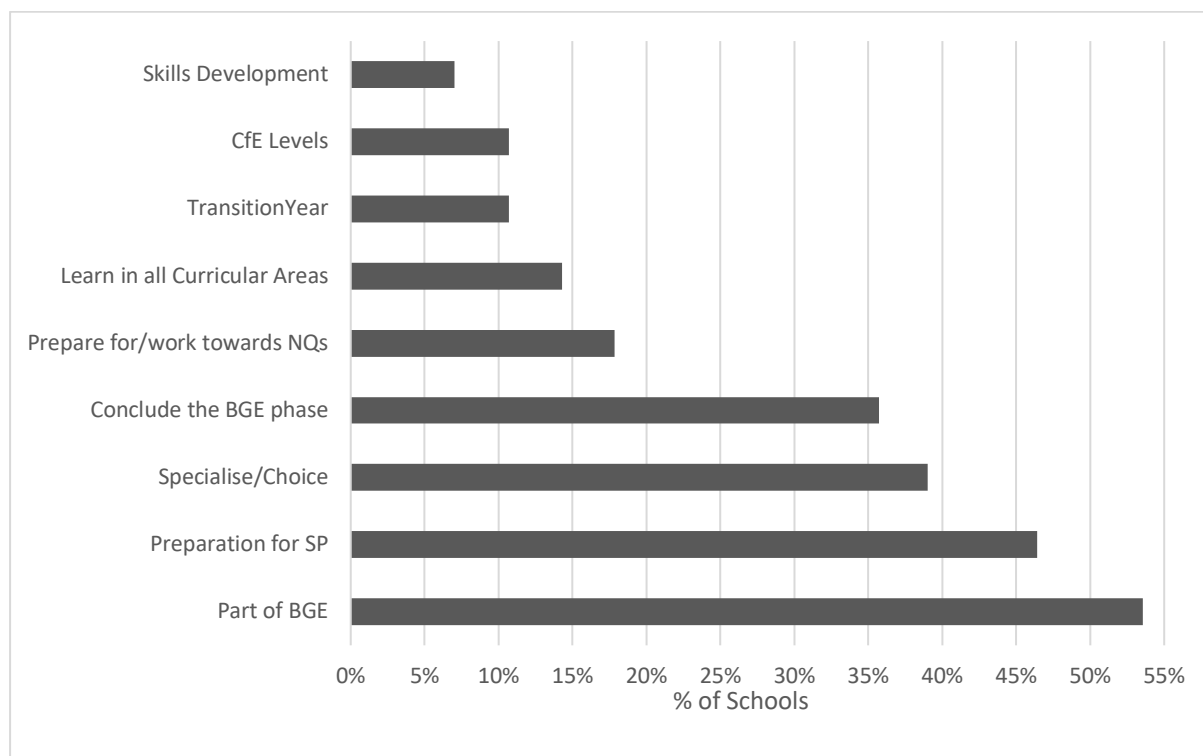
In order to understand the impact of specialisation, and personalisation and choice on pupils' curricular entitlements, it was necessary to establish whether learning in S3 was organised in discrete subjects, or in CAs. The overwhelming majority (93%) report that learning in S3 is organised in subjects (Figure 4).

Figure 4
In S3, Is Learning Organised in Curriculum Areas or Discrete Subjects?
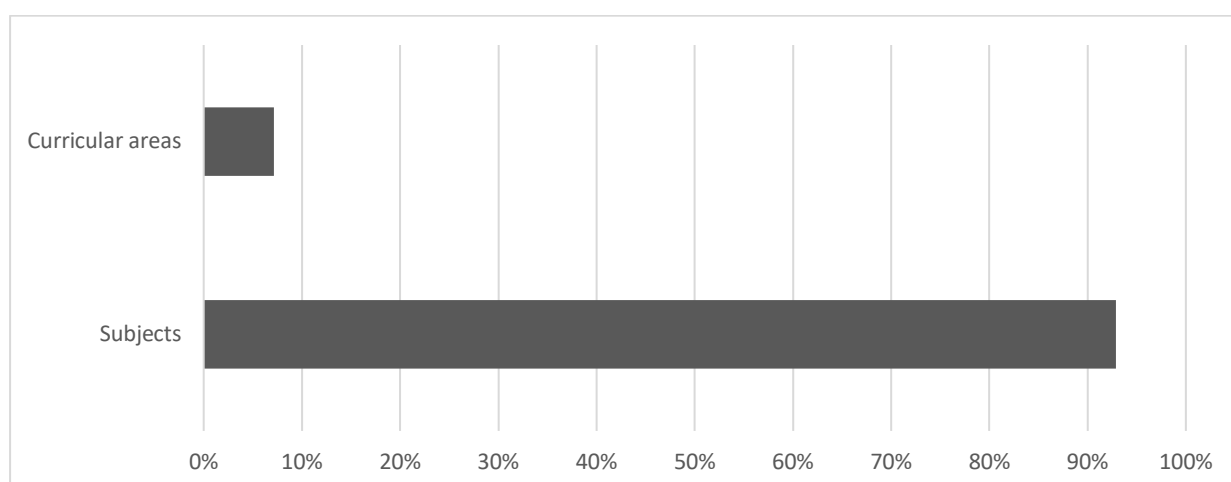
The study sought to establish how well the S3 pupil experience aligned with CfE requirements. The extent to which S3 learning, teaching, and assessment are influenced by NQs is detailed in Figure 5 and Figure 6. Fifty-four percent of respondents indicated that most S3 learning and teaching in their schools was planned around the learning outcomes (LOs) for NQs, while only 7% indicated that

learning and teaching in S3 was not influenced by NQ LOs at all. Those schools whose S3 curricula are more shaped by NQs generally offer fewer subjects and are more inclined to plan assessment around NQ specifications in S3. Of the schools responding, 89% indicated that assessment in S3 was at least in part influenced by NQ LOs, while eight schools (27%) indicate that S3 assessment was focused entirely on NQ requirements.

Figure 5
In S3, Is Learning Planned Around Learning Outcomes for National Qualifications?
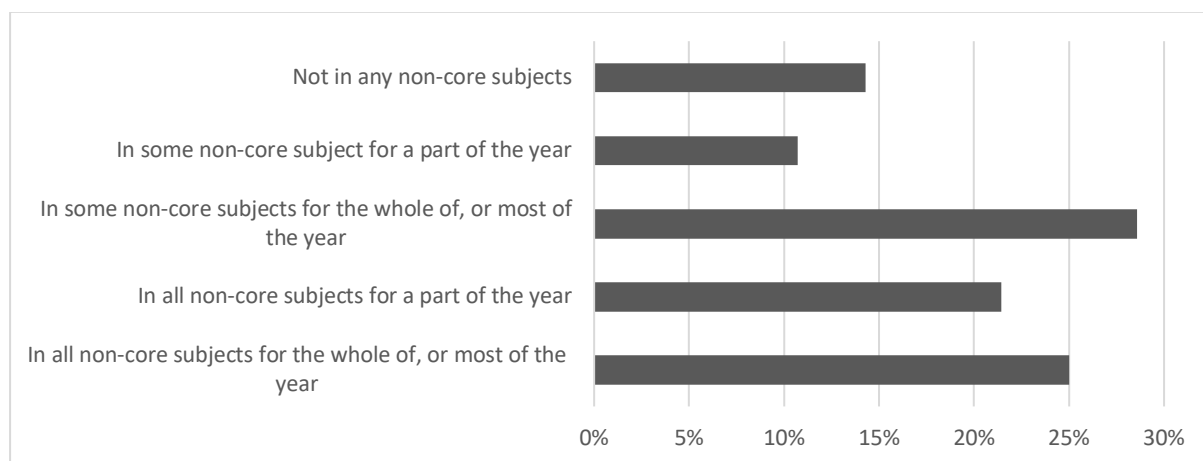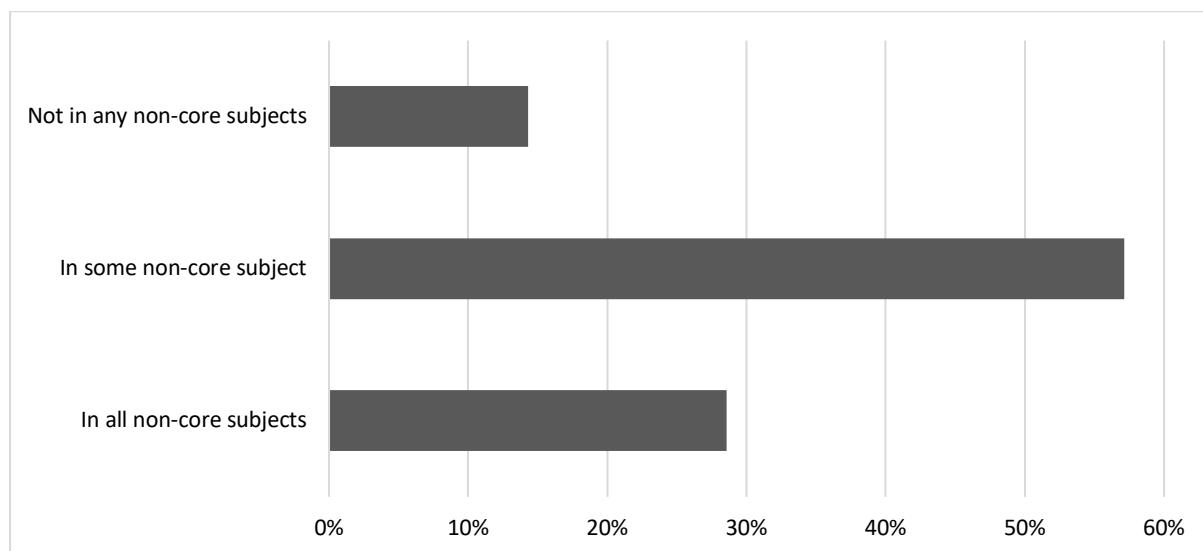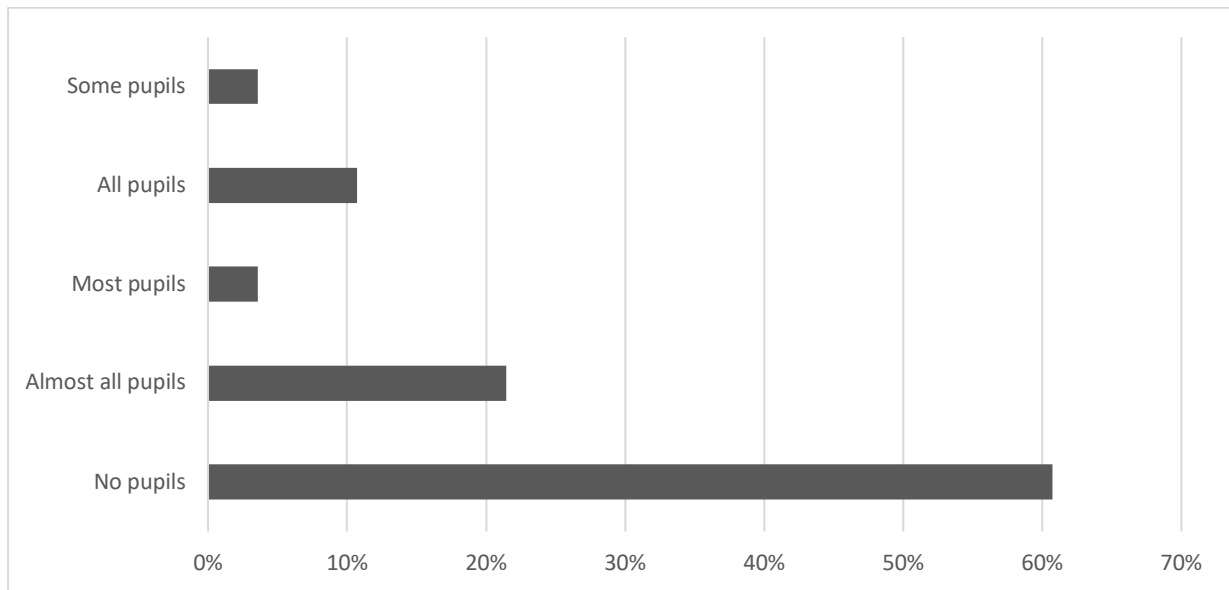

Figure 6
In S3, Do Young People Undertake Assessments that are Designed Around Courses for National Qualifications?

Nationally, many schools have a curricular structure that allows young people to choose subjects at the end of S3 (Shapira et al., 2023) allowing them to specialise in a smaller number of NQ subjects in S4. Participants in this research were asked how their curriculum in S3 compared to that in S4 (Figure 7). While 61% of schools had a different structure in S3 compared to S4, 39% indicated that for most pupils their S3 curriculum was followed into S4, as was the norm in the pre-CfE era.

Figure 7

How Many Young People Continue with Exactly the Same Set of Subjects when they Progress from S3 to S4?

Participants were asked to rate how well their curriculum ensured pupils receive their entitlement to a BGE, including all third level Es&Os, across all CAs, through to S3. The results (Figure 8) highlight that only 21% of schools confidently state that their curriculum delivers this entitlement, with 79% clearly struggling, like many others schools in Scotland, with achieving the balance.

Figure 8
Which Statement Best Applies to Your BGE Curriculum?
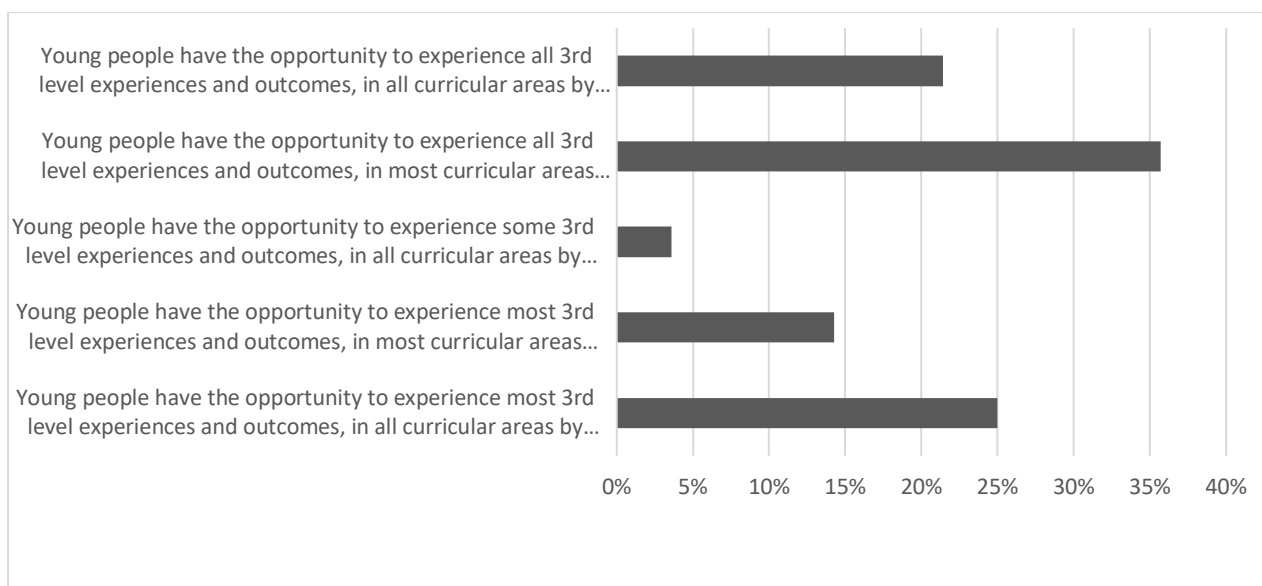
Focus Group (FG)

The themes emerging from the FG participants responses are summarised below:

Attainment

Maximising attainment was the principal consideration, followed by ensuring that pupils were prepared for the demands of study in the Senior Phase. As one FG participant stated: "A big driver in S3 is ensuring young people achieve five passes at level 5 in S4. This prevents a more radical approach to the BGE." Similarly, the need to prepare pupils for the SP by ensuring they had covered sufficient material before S4, and therefore avoiding the "two-term dash", featured significantly in responses.

Education Scotland

The influence of inspections, which is closely related to ensuring the curriculum complies with policy requirements, was a recurring theme. One participant testified:

> I initially developed a true BGE curriculum ensuring that young people learned in all CAs until the end of S3. Then His Majesty's Inspectorate for Education (HMIE) advised that we were not adequately preparing young people for the Senior Phase, so I had to change it.

However, all participants were unanimous that documents published by Education Scotland and the Scottish Government were not helpful in designing the curriculum.

Other Considerations

Two participants discussed how they provided young people with a free choice at specialisation points, which contributed to the difficulty reported by Education Scotland.

Discussion

Competing Entitlements

Pupils are entitled to experience all third level Es&Os in all CAs, and be offered opportunities for specialisation, and personalisation and choice (Scottish Government, 2008). Schools experience a tension in providing both. All surveyed schools in Glasgow offer opportunities for specialisation on at least one occasion in the BGE, with some offering more, which challenges research by Shapira et al. (2021) suggesting that BGE curricula lack opportunities for specialisation, personalisation, and choice. While some place certain parameters on the nature of the choices made, such as insisting that all young people select at least one subject from each CA, other schools offer pupils a greater degree of freedom, with at least two offering a completely free choice. Regardless of how many specialisation points are offered, or when these take place, the inclusion of any specialisation points reduces the number of subjects studied, which in turn reduces the number of Es&Os being covered. Ninety-three percent of GCC schools organise learning in S3 in discrete subjects, rather than broad CAs and, at specialisation points, pupils can opt to study, or indeed drop, one or more subject(s) within each CA. Unless a pupil has covered all third level Es&Os before specialising, the reduction in subjects studied is a barrier to the entitlement to a BGE to the end of S3. Findings from this study show that young people experience all third level Es&Os by the end of S3 in less than 25% of GCC schools, suggesting that this tension is being keenly felt in Glasgow. Shapira et al. (2021) reported that schools which afford opportunities for specialising earlier in the BGE generally offered fewer subjects in their S3 curriculum. Glasgow schools, with an average 11.4 subjects in S3, study fewer subjects than most schools in Scotland. This supports existing research (ibid.) providing evidence of

curricular narrowing in Scottish education and suggests that Glasgow is at the sharp end of this narrowing.

Advice Documents

FG participants were clear that CfE policy documents were not helpful with curriculum design. This contradicts the findings of Shapira et al. (2021) who report that such documents were at least moderately influential in the curriculum design of the majority of schools. One problem in the early stages of CfE was that the concept was filtered through several groups of authors, who contributed during its many distinct development phases, as outlined in Figure 9. Consequently, what CfE began to look like was not in keeping with the recommendations of the original 2004 report (Scott, 2015).

Figure 9
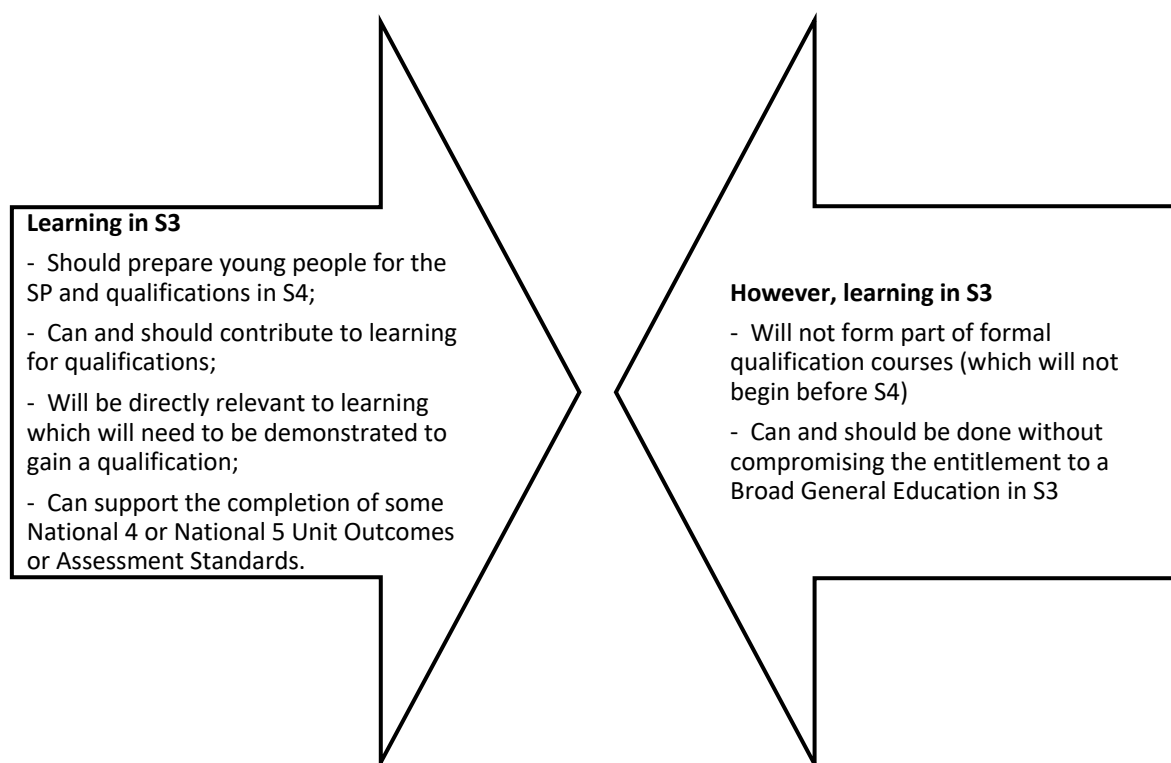*The Early Development of Curriculum for Excellence*
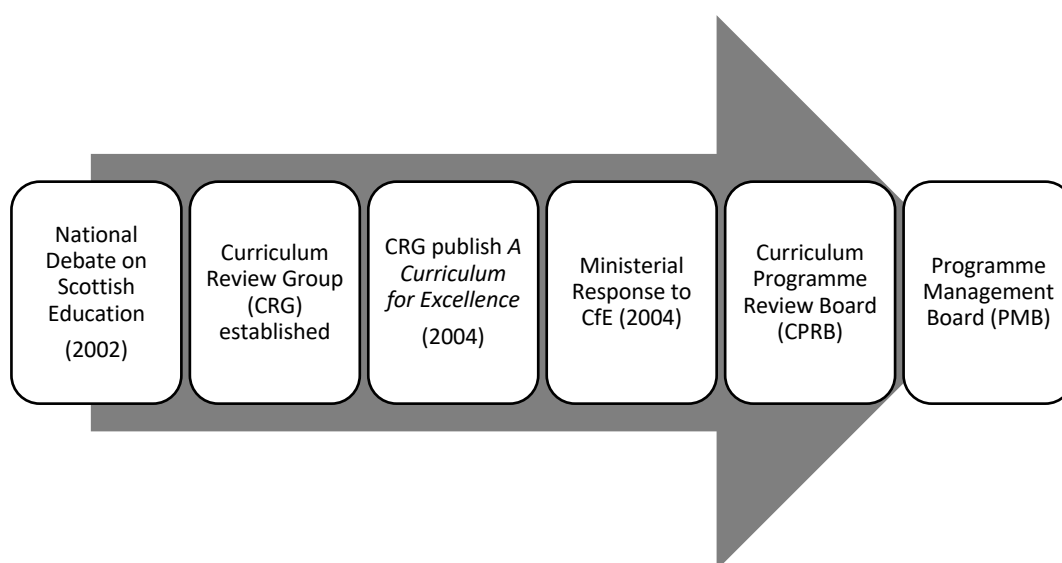
The requirements of CfE are not outlined in their entirety in a single document, but rather in a series of documents published over several years. Of these, BTC3 (Scottish Government 2008) is the key document relating to curricular planning. However, this did not provide any framework for the curriculum, or advice on how to structure the curriculum to implement the required changes. This, and other CfE policy documents, have been described as "vague" (Scott, 2018) and not helpful to HTs (Scott, 2019b), which echoes findings in this research.

Findings suggest that CfE documents had led to different understandings of what is required to ensure a curriculum aligns with national policy. Forty-six percent of survey respondents indicated that their curriculum structure was, at least in part, informed by a desire to comply with the requirements of CfE. However, 77% of these respondents state that young people do not experience all third level Es&Os in all CAs by the end of S3. This is contrary to explicit CfE requirements (Scottish Government, 2008) and, in view of this, these schools' curricula appear not to meet the requirements of CfE. This mis-alignment of school curricula and national guidance appears to be linked to the management of specialisation points.

The change in S3's status was outlined in CfE policy documents including Briefing Paper 6 (Education Scotland, 2012), which centred entirely on the S3 experience. This contained points of advice, but

not direction, on how best to use S3, including those shown in Figure 10 (ibid; Education Scotland, 2016). This advice appears to be contradictory. In addition, some points of advice appear mutually exclusive and it can be challenging for schools to satisfy them all. HTs must use this advice to design a curriculum structure and a programme of learning that balances these contradictory messages, whilst also trying to ensure that young people receive their entitlements. This is likely to have been a contributing factor to schools experiencing the difficulty reported by Education Scotland.

Figure 10
Contradictory Advice Regarding S3

Learning in S3

- Should prepare young people for the SP and qualifications in S4;

- Can and should contribute to learning for qualifications;

- Will be directly relevant to learning which will need to be demonstrated to gain a qualification;

- Can support the completion of some National 4 or National 5 Unit Outcomes or Assessment Standards.

However, learning in S3

- Will not form part of formal qualification courses (which will not begin before S4)

- Can and should be done without compromising the entitlement to a Broad General Education in S3

Attainment and Performativity

In designing their curriculum, HTs are aware of the need to maximise attainment, as found in both the survey and FG. Many look to S3 to directly support this, resulting in tension between raising attainment and young people's entitlements. As Shapira et al. (2021) reported, data on pupil outcomes is very influential in informing decisions regarding BGE curricula in Scotland. This is supported by the findings of this study, which highlight raising attainment in the SP was a key part of curriculum rationale in most Glasgow schools. Only 14% of respondents stated that learning and teaching in S3 was not planned around NQ LOs or assessments at all. However, over 50% of schools surveyed indicated that most learning and teaching in S3 was planned around LOs for NQs. These schools generally have lower numbers of subjects in their S3 curriculum, are more likely to plan assessments in S3 around NQ requirements, and place fewer restrictions on pupils' choices at specialisation points. This aligns with the work by Stobart (2021) and Priestley et al. (2021) who highlight the extent to which exams and qualifications dominate learning, teaching, and the curriculum in Scotland, at the expense of the BGE experience.

Schools who report that their S3 experience is more heavily influenced by NQs are also more likely to be influenced by measures to raise attainment. The tension between driving up attainment versus curricular entitlements is acknowledged in the literature, which shows that a "performativity

agenda" – a desire to increase attainment to ensure a school is seen as performing well - is known to impact on learning and teaching (Gouëdard et al., 2020) and the curriculum (Priestley et al., 2021). Moreover, in cultures of accountability and performativity, the curriculum may become de-prioritised (Peace-Hughes, 2020; Shapira et al. 2023). The findings suggest that this tension is evident in most Glasgow schools. Furthermore, schools where the S3 experience is more profoundly influenced by the requirements for NQs are key examples of the NQ specifications effectively becoming curriculum (Priestley et al., 2021; Stobart, 2021), and the observed backwash into S3.

The retention of a traditional approach to S3, whether by the adoption of a 2+2+2 structure, a 3+3 structure in name only, or due to NQ material dominating learning and teaching, has been attributed to the conservatism of educational leaders and parents (Scott, 2018). And, as noted in the findings, some HTs highlighted the influence of parents on curricular structures. However, this researcher contends that any conservatism may be attributable to a desire to avoid taking risks with young people's futures.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore underlying reasons why schools find it difficult to provide learners with their entitlement to a BGE to the end of S3 while also preparing them adequately for the SP. This difficulty is not of HTs' making, but they appear to have the responsibility for resolving it. Findings suggest the following possible explanations for the root of this difficulty:

- Glasgow HTs appear to have found policy documents unhelpful when engaging in curricular design. Advice can be open to interpretation and contradictory, especially in relation to S3. There also appears to be insufficient clarity regarding HMIE's expectations in relation to curriculum design.
- There is an intrinsic challenge in ensuring young people receive their entitlement to experience all Es&Os to third level, whilst simultaneously ensuring they have their entitlement to opportunities for personalisation, choice, and specialism in their curriculum. Provision of one entitlement can negate the provision of another.
- There remains significant pressure on schools to maximise and improve exam results. This can result in decisions about curriculum design that compromise pupils' entitlement to a full BGE experience.

Glasgow secondary HTs appear to have engaged in significant efforts to design curricula that comply with the requirements of CfE and meet the needs of all young people. However, as a consequence of the underlying reasons detailed above, the following is observed in Glasgow's secondary schools:

- A wide range of BGE curricular structures have been implemented. No two schools appear to have identical structures. The number of subjects studied in each of the BGE years varies markedly, as does the number and the timing of specialisation points. Similarly, a range of parameters is placed on young people at specialisation points across the city.
- In S3, pupils' experiences appear to vary. Most pupils will make options as they move from S3 into S4, but a significant number continue their S3 curriculum into S4. In addition, there is evidence that NQs have significant influence on learning, teaching, and assessment in S3, driven by a desire to secure the best attainment outcomes for young people. The back-wash effect is strong and it is not clear pupils' experiences in this transition year align with their entitlement to a BGE.
- Most schools report that not all young people receive all curricular entitlements by the end of S3.

- Therefore, the difficulties related to curricular entitlements and balance reported by Education Scotland appear to be evident in GCC schools. Evidence suggests that this is experienced in more than 50% of GCC schools, which is above the national rate.

Implications for Practice and Policy

To reduce the difficulty reported by Education Scotland, they and the Scottish Government can:

- Review policy documents and reconsider contradictory advice regarding S3. This could be achieved through a process of critical dialogue with HTs and other curriculum-makers at different levels in schools and local authorities.
- Clarify expectations regarding curricular structures and learning, teaching, and assessment in the BGE without compromising the empowerment agenda (Education Scotland, 2019) or HTs' entitlement to curricular autonomy.
- Provide exemplification for how schools can better achieve the balance between preparing pupils for the SP while providing their entitlement to a BGE to the end of S3, highlighting good practice where it exists. This could be supported by local authorities through internal processes such as validated self-evaluation.
- Acknowledge the lack of a theoretical underpinning of CfE when evaluating schools' curricular structures and rationales. Rather than expect schools to make curricular decisions for compliance reasons, Education Scotland should introduce approaches that ensure a balance of support and challenge towards curriculum standards and frameworks.

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