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Exploring Tensions and 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) in 2010, many secondary schools have changed their curricular structure, influenced by the CfE requirement to run a period of Broad General Education (BGE) in the lower school to the end of S3. The flexibility afforded to Head Teachers means that schools have significant autonomy to design their own curriculum, which has resulted in a wide range of curricular structures in place across Scotland. However, schools find it challenging to attain a balance between ensuring learners receive their entitlement to a BGE in S1-S3 while also supporting progression to the senior phase.

This empirical research uses Glasgow secondary schools as a case study, and seeks to understand the reasons for the challenge, the nature of the challenge, and how schools manage and address the challenge. It interrogates relevant policies and examines the curricular structures and organisation of learning in Glasgow's BGE curricula, as well as inspection reports. The researcher's experience as a school leader in Scotland, faced with such challenges, has motivated the research aims.

The research offers explanations for why schools find achieving this balance challenging. It provides deeper understanding of the type of curricular structures in place in Glasgow, and the rationales for them, as well as how schools attempt to address the challenge. It makes recommendations for practice and policy to help alleviate the challenge and considers the implications of impending further national reforms.

Acknowledgements

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List of Abbreviations

BGE	Broad General Education
BP	Briefing Paper
BTC	Building the Curriculum
CA	Curricular Area
CfE	Curriculum for Excellence
ES	Education Scotland
Es&Os	Experiences and Outcomes
FG	Focus Group
GCC	Glasgow City Council
GTCS	The General Teaching Council for Scotland
HGIOS4	How Good is our School? (4th Edition)
HMI	His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education
HT	Head Teacher
HTC	Head Teachers Charter for Empowerment
HTC	Head Teachers' Charter
LA	Local Authority
LOs	Learning Outcomes
NQ	National Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
QI	Quality Indicators
S1	Secondary 1 (the first year of secondary school)
S2	Secondary 2 (the second year of secondary school)
S3	Secondary 3 (the third year of secondary school)
SEED	Scottish Executive Education Department
SfH	Standard for Headship
SG	Scottish Government
SP	Senior Phase
UN	United Nations
UNCRC	United Nations on the Rights of the Child
WPR	What's the Problem Represented to BE?

1. Introduction

Scottish Education has undergone, and continues to experience, an intense period of restructuring since the turn of the 21st Century (Humes, 2020). A series of reforms designed to improve the quality of education and ensure that all students have access to equal opportunities has been implemented, or are at the early stage of implementation, resulting in significant turbulence for those who receive and deliver education.

Secondary school education performs several functions and has an obligation to broaden horizons and to furnish young people with a range of contemporary knowledge and skills (Shapira & Priestley, 2020). The curriculum can be considered as the principal vehicle for performing this function and is a powerful lever for preparing young people to thrive in, and indeed shape, the future (Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD), 2020a). Much of education reform in Scotland since 2000 has been driven, directly or indirectly, by Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), 2004a), which was implemented in Secondary schools from August 2010. CfE is seen as a transformational change to Scottish education (Priestley & Humes, 2010), and its purpose is that every young person

> "should be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors to society and at work. By providing structure, support and direction to young people's learning, the curriculum should enable them to develop these four capacities" (SEED, 2004:12)

CfE aimed to create a curriculum that enables all young people to understand their world, achieve to the highest possible levels, and to prepare them for lifelong learning and work (Ibid.). To do this it sought to ensure that the curriculum was neither fragmented nor overcrowded with content, and to provide a coordinated curriculum for all young people from the age of 3 to 18 (Ibid.). This latter point differed from previous Scottish curricula, in which different years of schooling were dealt with separately, in discrete stages (Humes, in Priestley & Biesta, 2013). Prior to the introduction of CfE in 2010, secondary education in Scotland had been organised in two-year groupings, S1-2, S3-4, and S5-6, in what is often referred to as a 2+2+2 model (Scott, 2019b; Priestley, 2023). Under this arrangement pupils generally studied

all subjects in S1 and S2. During S3 and S4 pupils would work towards their National Qualifications in selected subjects (Ibid.), following which those pupils who stayed on would study up to 5 subjects in each of S5 and S6. However, the introduction of the coherent 3-18 curriculum would change that.

Between the publication of CfE in 2004 and its introduction in 2010, a series of documents was produced to provide advice and guidance to support schools in the development of their curriculum. Through these documents, it was communicated that, under CfE:

- pupils would have a set of entitlements that the curriculum should deliver,
- the arrangement of school years in two-year groupings would change, and
- schools would have the autonomy and flexibility to design their own curriculum to meet the needs of young people within their own context (Scottish Government (SG), 2008; SEED, 2004b; SEED, 2006; Education Scotland (ES), Online).

This had significant implications for learning, teaching, and assessment, and the organisation of learning.

Despite its visionary intentions, the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence has not been without its trials (Priestley & Minty, 2013; Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). School leaders have encountered a myriad of challenges that demand expert navigation and resolute decision-making. The challenges experienced have been complex and interconnected, ranging from issues concerning curriculum design and alignment to concerns over assessment practices and the allocation of resources (Shapira et al. 2023). In 2020 ES published a thematic review of secondary inspection findings, focused on the curriculum, which reported that, in around 50% of schools in Scotland "all young people are not receiving their full entitlement to a BGE" (ES, 2020:8), and that schools

> "have found it challenging to achieve a balance between providing all young people with their entitlement to a BGE in S1-S3 while providing appropriate depth in learning during the BGE to prepare young people for progression to qualifications in the senior phase" (ES, 2020:10).

This is of particular interest to the researcher. As a Head Teacher (HT) of a medium-sized secondary school in Glasgow, he is responsible for the design and implementation of a curriculum that should be in line with national expectations. With four years' service as a HT , he is experienced in curriculum design and development. However, his self-evaluation, and feedback from ES, have indicated that the curriculum in his school does not conform to national guidelines. The researcher has found it challenging to balance what he felt were the competing demands of CfE policy documents, and was interested to note that around half of Scotland's schools are in a similar position.

This empirical study will explore the tensions and challenges faced by school leaders in curriculum design and implementation at the transition from the Broad General Education to the Senior Phase. An interpretive approach, using Glasgow City Council (GCC) as a case study, will draw from a critical analysis of relevant policy documents, documents related to the curriculum of Glasgow's secondary schools already in the public domain, and from a qualitative survey of all Glasgow secondary HTs, followed by a smaller focus group.

Through a comprehensive examination of these tensions and challenges, this research seeks to offer valuable insights into the multifaceted landscape of implementing CfE in Scotland's schools. It is expected that the findings of this study will be relevant and informative for colleague HTs, offering insights into the challenges faced and, it is hoped, aiding the development of strategies to overcome them. In addition, the outcomes of this study will aid the researcher in further developing his school curriculum.

2. Policy Analysis

In seeking to understand the tensions and challenges faced by HTs, it is necessary to examine the policies that contribute to these.

Moran (2006) et al. argue that, in the public sector, officers of the state use policy to "exercise control" and to "shape the world". Given that schools operate within the public sector, this definition is certainly germane. Looking specifically at educational policy, Olsen et al. define policy as being any course of action (or inaction) relating to the selection of goals, the definition of values, or the allocation of resources" (2004:71). In addition, Scott defines policy documents as texts that "seek to influence the public perception of a policy agenda" (2003:2). This policy analysis examines the current policies in Scottish education that drive and influence the design, development, and implementation of the curriculum. The purpose of this policy analysis is to consider three educational policies that are relevant to CfE, curriculum design, and HTs' leadership of curricular change. None of the policies examined appear to be attempting to "exercise control". However, all make very strong attempts to shape the world and influence practice and outcomes, as will now be examined.

Two principal methods of policy analysis were considered to provide a framework for analysis: The What is the Problem Represented to be? (WPR) model proposed by Bacchi (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) is a powerful method, provoking critical thinking and deep reflection, as evidenced by the near 100 applications of this approach in published education research in the past three years alone. In addition, Scott's Continua Framework for Policy Analysis (2003) can be extremely useful in examining the extent to which policies are fragmented or coherent, and prescriptive or non-prescriptive. However, while acknowledging the potential of both approaches, it was the judgement of the author that adhering to these methods in their entirety would be restrictive for the series of policies currently under scrutiny. Therefore, aspects of both frameworks are, at times, drawn upon.

While a separate literature review follows in chapter 3, research literature also informs the policy analysis.

This policy analysis focuses on:

- The Headteachers' Charter for School Empowerment (ES, 2019b)

- Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (SEED, 2004a)

- How Good is Our School? 4th Edition (ES, 2015)

2.1   The Headteachers' Charter for School Empowerment

The Headteacher's Charter (HTC) (ES, 2019b) for School Empowerment represents a significant shift in educational policy, recognizing the pivotal role of school leaders in driving positive change and fostering educational excellence. It seeks to enhance school leaders' capacity to respond effectively to local needs, improve student outcomes, and foster a culture of innovation and accountability (Ibid). The concept of Head Teacher empowerment sits within the broader framework of An Empowered System (ES, 2019c), which is underpinned by statements from the OECD that empowered and collaborative school leaders who empower others, "are well placed to ensure the highest quality of learning and teaching" (ES, online). Although CfE pre-dates the adoption of system empowerment as a formal policy, the principles of The Empowered System underpin CfE, with CfE offering autonomy and flexibility to school leaders on a range of curricular issues.   Scotland's approach to introducing CfE is in line with trends observed in other systems, with schools being afforded more autonomy and finance directly from central government, while the influence and role of local authorities (LAs) is reduced (Forde *et al*., 2022). Applying Bacchi's model (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), the problem representation here is that a lack of empowered actors within the education system is adversely affecting pupil outcomes.

Autonomy involves HTs creating policy by making decisions that are contextually appropriate and which impact positively on their community, rather than enacting decisions made by others (Forde *et al*., 2022).   Through the HTC, the SG expects local authorities (LAs) to empower HTs by granting them greater decision-making authority and flexibility in key areas, such as curriculum design, to improve outcomes for pupils (Forde *et al*., 2022). This echoes the Standard for Headship (SfH) (General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), 2021), in particular *3.1 Curriculum, Pedagogy, Leadership and Strategic Vision*, which is concerned with the leadership of the HT in designing and implementing a curriculum based on policy and research.

In one respect, the HTC is a prescriptive policy, in that it sets out the SG's expectation that LAs will empower school and school leaders. This expectation is not open to interpretation or negotiation. Beyond this, however, the HTC is non-prescriptive. While it aligns with the SfH (GTCS, 2021), it is considerably less detailed, providing ample scope for LAs and HTs to interpret this guidance in their own way. Autonomy and empowerment are not *independence* and therefore one must question the nature of the autonomy that is 'on offer' (Thompson et al., 2020:218) – to what extent are the different actors at LA level willing to relinquish decision making to HTs at school level? In addition, autonomy and empowerment certainly cannot resolve all problems schools face, such as those related to funding, workload, or inequalities (Ibid.). Indeed, the dangerous side of autonomy is where it becomes 'coercive' (Ibid.) and provides opportunities for actors at the level of national or local government to lay the blame for societal challenges on those trying to resolve these issues at school level (Mowatt, 2018).

As evident in HGIOS4 (chapter 2.3), His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) examine the extent to which schools are empowered and the concept of empowerment features in the *Leadership and Management Quality Indicators* (QIs). However, this is only one aspect of leadership and management, and is not a dominant theme in the *Level 5 Illustrations*, the *challenge questions*, or the *features of highly effective practice*. However, in practice, almost all HTs in Scotland feel empowered to make curricular decisions to meet the needs of their young people (ES, 2019d), and HTs are embracing that empowerment (ES, 2020).

As a policy text, the HTC does not contain any glaring contradictions and does largely re-enforce the professional standards. Any weaknesses of the policy stem from its lack of prescriptiveness leaving it open to interpretation and prone to failing at the point of implementation.

2.2   Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

Introduced in 2010 and underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Priestley & Biesta, 2013), CfE is Scotland's school curriculum which aims to ensure young people develop the knowledge, skills, and attributes required for life in the 21st century (SG, 2019a). It defines *four capacities* that young people should develop if the policy is to achieve its purpose, namely that they should become *confident individuals, successful*

learners, responsible citizens, and *effective contributors* (SEED, 2004a). By proposing and implementing CfE, it was clear that the then Scottish Executive were of the view that the existing Scottish Curriculum was not fit for purpose and needed to change, and that a new curriculum would better meet the needs of Scotland's young people. This is the problem representation.

The intention to develop and implement a new curriculum in Scotland was announced through the publication of *A Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) (SEED, 2004a). However, an early problem with CfE was that the concept was filtered through several authors, or groups of authors, who contributed to its development during the many distinct early development stages (Scott, 2015), as outlined in figure 1. Consequently, what CfE began to 'look like' was not in keeping with the recommendations of the of the original 2004 report (Ibid.).

National Debate on Scottish Education (2002) — Curriculum Review Group (CRG) established — CRG publish *A Curriculum for Excellence* (2004) — Ministerial Response to CfE (2004) — Curriculum Programme Review Board (CPRB) — Programme Management Board (PMB)
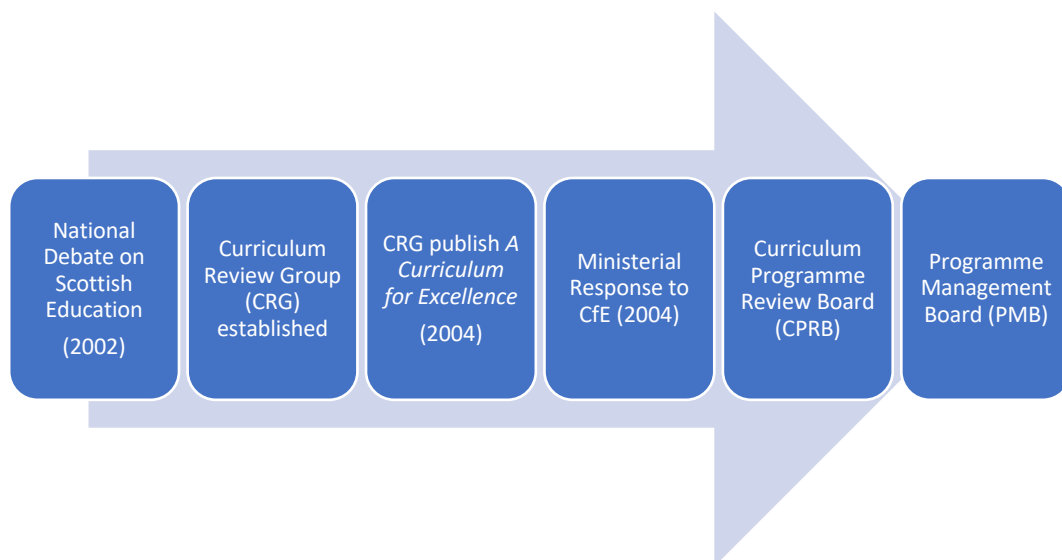
Figure 1: *The early development of CfE*

The requirements of CfE are not outlined in their entirety in a single document, but rather in a series of documents published over a period of several years. These outline the *entitlements* (SG, 2008) that young people can expect from their education, which include:

- A broad general education (BGE), including well planned experiences and outcomes (Es&Os), across all the curriculum areas through to S3.
- A senior phase of education after S3 which provides opportunities to obtain qualifications.

In addition, CfE also states that the BGE "takes place from the early years to the end of S3 and is represented by learning across all of the Es&Os to the third curriculum level" (Ibid.; ES, online).

These entitlements, and the detail of the above documents indicated the SG's intention that, on implementation of CfE, that there would be an extended period of general education to the end of S3, rather than to the end of S2. This signalled a significant change in the curriculum structure in Scottish Secondary schools. Figure 2 outlines how the structure of the curriculum in Scotland differs before and after the introduction of CfE. The traditional, pre-CfE, secondary curricular structure is often referred to as 2+2+2, indicating a 2-year lower-school, followed by a 2-year middle-school, and finally a 2-year upper-school. However, the advent of CfE, with secondary schooling now comprising a 3-year BGE phase (S1-S3) followed by a 3-year SP (S4-S6) has given rise to secondary structures referred to as 3+3. While analysis by Shapira et al. (2021) indicates that over four-fifths of state-funded secondary schools now have a version of a 3+3 curriculum, deeper scrutiny reveals the variety of ways in which schools implement this type of structure.
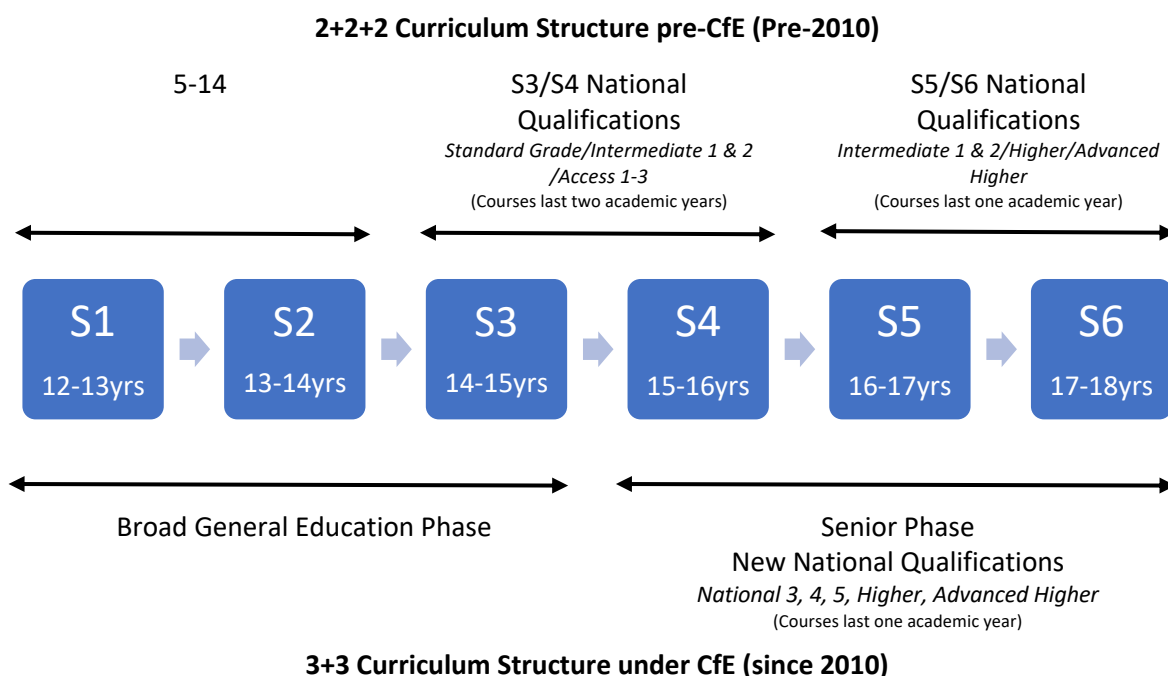
Figure 2: The organisation of schooling before 2010 (top) and since 2010 (bottom) (adapted from Shapira et al. 2023)

The origin of the new 3+3 structure is of interest. The original CfE publication proposed a coherent 3-18 curriculum. No detail beyond that, or any structural, changes were proposed. The suggestion of a new S1-S3 phase in secondary schools first appeared in the CfE Ministerial Response (SEED, 2004b) without consultation (Scott, 2018), and was reinforced in subsequent publications (SEED, 2006). These confirmed that the coherent 3-18 curriculum had become a 3-15 BGE curriculum, followed by a 15-18 curriculum (Scott, 2017). However, as Scott highlights, no educational rationale or evidence has been provided to support a change from a two-year to a three-year lower secondary school phase (Scott, 2019b), nor were the expected benefits outlined (Scott, 2015).

A series of *Building the Curriculum* (BTC) documents were published by the SG to support schools in the development and implementation of CfE. Of these, BTC 3 (SG, 2008) is the key document relating to curricular planning and structure (Scott, 2017). However, this did not provide a single framework or structure for the curriculum, or any advice or support on how to structure the curriculum to implement the required changes (Priestley et al., 2021, Scott, 2019a). Consequently, these documents were not of use to Head Teachers, who were faced with the need to alter curriculum structures and had the flexibility and autonomy to do so (Scott, 2019a). This lack of clear guidance has, Scott argues, resulted in a range of curricular structures and approaches (Scott, 2019a), with more variation now seen than was the case in the pre-CfE era (Ibid.; Shapira et al. 2023).

The move from a 2+2+2 curricular structure to 3+3 changed the purpose of S3 in two principal ways:

- From the first of a 2-year middle-school phase to the last of a 3-year lower-school phase, and
- From the first of a 2-year phase in which young people work towards exams and qualifications, to the last of a 3-year non-examinable broad general education phase.

CfE documents provide advice and guidance, but not direction, on how S3 should be used. Points of advice include those shown in figure 3 below:

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.

But, 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

Figure 3: *The contradictory advice on the use of S3*

This is unclear and contradictory. In addition, the *entitlements* outlined above can be mutually exclusive and it can be challenging for schools to ensure that young people receive them all. Indeed, ES report that schools find it challenging to balance the need to provide all young people with their entitlement to a BGE while also providing in-depth learning to prepare young people for the SP (ES, 2020).

A series of Briefing Papers (BPs) was produced between 2012 and 2014 which purported to "provide succinct advice on the progress being made in key areas of change, to help inform discussion and promote further, innovative development" (ES, 2012:1). BP6, centred on the S3 experience, was part of a move by ES to support change by "evaluating and sharing evolving practice as part of a national professional learning community" (Ibid.:1). However, all advice within BP6 was worded in terms of *schools are* and *staff are*. What it did not do was make any recommendations or provide advice on what schools ***should*** do. In addition, BP6 not a thematic review based on inspection reports. It is therefore not clear what format, criteria, or framework ES used to undertake its evaluation. This gives the impression of ES attempting to influence a certain desired course of action, without giving explicit direction, and without providing evidence that this would be more effective.

CfE is a non-prescriptive policy and is open to interpretation at many levels. Indeed, this is a key feature of the policy, with many documents containing references to flexibility and autonomy for schools, enabling them to make key decisions on the nature and shape of the curriculum (SG, 2008). However, this flexibility, arising from the non-prescriptive nature of the policy, has resulted in a range of interpretations at school level. Indeed, this was reported as a concern in the recent National Discussion on Education (SG, 2023a), Initially, a move away from the previous regimented curricular arrangement was welcomed (Priestley et al. 2021). However, the sudden change from prescription to autonomy was a culture shift, and during the development phase, many HTs sought reassurance that they were operating in line with expectations (Ibid.). Curricular autonomy and flexibility carry risks, one of which is the wide variety of ways in which schools will interpret and implement the curriculum, potentially leading to fragmentation (OECD, 2020a), which, as Scott (2019a) contends, has been observed in many schools in Scotland. This is contrary to the purpose of CfE, which was to create a coherent curriculum (SEED, 2004a). Scott (2019a) describes the BGE as being in a state of flux which has yet to settle in many schools, which he attributes to the vagueness of CfE policy documents, in particular BTC3 (Scott, 2018). Consequently, at the point of implementation CfE has become fragmented policy, with contradictory messages.

2.3   How Good is Our School? 4th Edition (HGIOS 4)

HGIOS4 is a self-evaluation tool published by ES which allows schools and school leaders to evaluate their work in key areas, termed *Quality Indicators* (QIs).

Internationally, school evaluation has an internal self-evaluation element, and an external review led by government or an associated agency (Gouedard et al., 2020), which in the Scottish context is ES. The HGIOS4 framework is used by HMI, the section of ES responsible for scrutiny, during school inspections and this ensures that the document is well-used and plays a prominent role in self-evaluation in Scotland's schools. By utilising HGIOS4, schools can evaluate their work using a series of *Challenge Questions* and a list of *Features of Highly Effective Practice*. This allows schools to reach an evaluative rating about each aspect of their work, using the six-point scale ranging from *Excellent* to *Weak*.

HGIOS4 is a non-prescriptive policy. While it does influence practice in schools, it is open to interpretation. Each QI includes a *Level 5 Illustration*, which is a commentary on what might be observed or should be in place if a rating of *Very Good* was to be awarded. However, neither these, the *Challenge Questions*, or the *Features of Highly Effective Practice* are rigid criteria that must be satisfied. Schools can achieve ratings of *Very Good* in a host of different ways.

Within QI 2.2, HGIOS4 provides a very strong steer to ensure compliance with some of the requirements of CfE, with the *Level 5 Illustration*, the *Challenge Questions* and the *Features of Highly Effective Practice* referring to several key aspects of the curriculum, including the *Contexts for Learning*. While it might be argued that this represents ES supporting schools to develop high-quality curricula, one might take the view that schools are being strongly influenced into conforming with certain requirements of CfE, without being explicitly directed to do so. However, due to the variety of ways in which schools can and do meet the requirements of QI2.2, it must be considered a non-prescriptive policy.

Interestingly, QI 2.2 makes no reference to curriculum structure or to the S3 curriculum. While it does mention pupils' *entitlements* in general, and outlines what the curriculum should do, it does not refer to any specific *entitlements*, and does not provide any guidance or steer on how learning should be organised in the BGE or SP. It makes no attempt to clarify CfE documents, and does not specify what is expected in terms of supporting progression from the BGE to SP. This has implications for inspections, as will be explored in the discussion. In view of this analysis, HGIOS4 could be considered a fragmented policy given that it reinforces contradictions inherent in other policies.

3. Literature Review

The literature review examines the recent research relevant to the curriculum, curriculum reform and CfE. The criteria for selecting research literature were as follows:

- Current: all research was published during or after 2010, the first year of CfE implementation, with many being published within the last three to five years.

- Relevant: all research is relevant to the above themes and provides a deeper understanding of curriculum theory, curricular reform, CfE, and school leadership of the curriculum.

- Reputable: all of the research literature was written by reputable and influential authors, i.e., authors who have many peer-reviewed publications and/or citations, and includes the OECD.

3.1 The Curriculum and Curriculum Reform

The curriculum can be defined as "the sum total of resources…that are brought together for teaching and learning" (Luke et al. 2013:10). Similarly, the OECD propose the definition "the totality of young people's learning experiences" (OECD, 2020a), which aligns with the definition adopted by the SG for CfE (SG, 2008).

As outlined in chapter 2, the development of CfE was a significant programme of educational reform. Gouedard et al. (2020) contend that curriculum reform is amongst the most high-stakes and politically delicate changes that a government can embark upon, and can be costly and demanding, both politically and financially. Indeed, as Humes (in Priestley et al. 2021) highlights, the political and professional reputations of many individuals, and indeed education systems, depend on curricular reform being perceived as being successful. As Priestley et al. (2021) argue, for curricular reform to be effective and sustainable, it needs to win the hearts and minds of teachers. The fact that, 20 years after the birth of CfE as a policy, further reform is required to ensure it meets its aims, suggests that this particular curricular reform has not yet proved successful. This may be attributable to authorship issues (see chapter 2.2), but also the absence of an evidence base to underpin the proposed changes. As many researchers have highlighted (Ford, 2011:online; Priestley and Biesta, 2013; Priestley et al. 2021) CfE as an idea was under-conceptualised from the outset, and there was little input from academics, few insights from research, and no theoretical or intellectual basis for it. It

is possible that, had the creators of CfE made use of research evidence at an early stage, it might have secured the confidence of teachers and led to success at an earlier stage.

Priestley et al. (2021) argue that the process of curriculum reform is an active process of arbitration, mediation, and change across many *sites* or *layers* of educational systems. Building on the work of Thijs & van den Akker (2009) they propose an outline of these sites, as shown in table 1. This is helpful when considering the various actors who have influenced the development of CfE in Scotland.

Site of Activity	Examples of Activity	Examples of Actors
Supra	Transnational curricular discourse generation, policy borrowing and lending; policy learning	OECD; World Bank; UNESCO; EU
Macro	Development of curriculum policy frameworks; legislation to establish agencies and infrastructure	National governments; curriculum agencies
Meso	Production of guidance; leadership of and support for curriculum making; production of resources	National governments; curriculum agencies; Local authorities; textbook publishers
Micro	School-level curriculum making: programme design; lesson planning	Head Teachers/School Principals; Depute Head Teachers, Principal Teachers; Teachers
Nano	Curriculum making in classrooms and other learning spaces: Pedagogic interactions; curriculum events	Teachers; students

Table 1: Sites of Curriculum Development
Adapted from Priestly et al. (2021)

Internationally, curricular reform has moved away from a *top-down* approach, where the success of the implementation was measured by faithful *adherence* to the reformed curriculum by teachers (Gouedard et al., 2020). The dominant view of curriculum reform is now a *bottom up* approach that stresses the discretion and autonomy of implementers. Teacher agency plays a central role in enactment, as teachers are not merely facilitators (Ibid.)

but curriculum makers (Priestley, 2013; Priestley et al., 2021), and this universal trend of autonomy-centred enactment makes the concept of *adherence* obsolete (Gouedard et al., 2020). The OECD highlights that leadership of curricular reform is crucial (ibid.) and in systems where school leaders have responsibility for the curriculum, which includes Scotland (GTCS, 2021), HTs play a key role in overseeing it. HTs create a culture of change, initiate and sustain improvement, and ensure effective implementation at school level (the micro level) (Gouedard et al., 2020). This ensures that staff are not passive conduits of someone else's curriculum. Rather, they are making the curriculum at the micro and nano-level, alongside other actors, including young people (Priestley et al. 2021). At the macro-level (see table 1), CfE policy aligns with this international trend (Piestley & Shapira, 2018), as Scottish education has moved away from a prescriptive curriculum that teachers were expected to deliver. Instead, teachers are now expected to take an active role in school-based curriculum development (Priestley, 2013).

3.2   International Comparisons

Humes and Priestley (in Priestley et al. 2021) argue that Scotland's curricular reform is a manifestation of a world-wide movement to re-shape the public's view of the skills, attributes, and knowledge required in the 21st century and, in the view of the OECD, other educations systems are, or will need to, reform their curricula in order to inculcate such skills in young people (OECD, 2020a). The OECD defines *21st century skills* as those competencies necessary for individuals to flourish in a competitive global arena, and be contributing and responsible members of society (Ibid.).

The CfE refreshed narrative (ES, 2019a) stresses the importance of these transferrable skills as vital requirements in adjusting to technological and economic change – a recognition that advanced educations systems now operate within a wider international context (Priestley et al. 2021). This is evidence of Scotland's curriculum being influenced by economic and political concerns, and not solely by human ones. In addition, the stated purpose of CfE is that all learning should be underpinned by *Big Ideas* (ES, 2019a), i.e., the *four capacities* which are "transformative competencies" (Shapira et al., 2023) that the OECD argues every learner should be equipped with to adapt to ambiguity and complexity and to shape the world (OECD, 2020a). Centring the curriculum on *Big Ideas* – i.e. key concepts or crucial learning –

commonly appear in curricula as a way to emphasise essential concepts that, considered from different perspectives, are crucial to many subject areas (OECD, 2020b).

3.3   Curricular Reform in Scotland

Shapira et al. highlight the lack of research or data that exists on curriculum reform or structures in Scotland, and point out that what little scrutiny there is has focused on the SP. The reasons for, and nature of, the change in curricular structure have been outlined in chapter 2.2, and as highlighted, a wide range of curricular structures exist across Scotland. Scott's analysis of BGE curricula in S1-S3 has found 9 'families' of structures, although not all structures within the same family are identical (Scott, 2019b).   The OECD defines a coherent curriculum as one in which young people "can progress from basic to advanced concepts, is pitched at appropriate levels developmentally, and supports teachers to respond to young people's needs" (OECD, 2020a:29). However, Scott argues that evidence gathered from Scottish state secondary schools indicates that there is significant fragmentation in the BGE curriculum (Scott, 2019a).

On the introduction of CfE, third year (S3) changed as outlined in the CfE Policy Analysis, and a small body of literature provides a picture of the BGE and S3 curricula nationally. While formally part of the BGE phase, one stated role of S3 is to act as a transition point, and to prepare young people for the senior phase (ES, 2012). However, as Stobart (2021) highlights, changing the examinable phase of secondary school to begin at S4 posed challenges for schools and pupils, who required 160 hours of learning to complete qualification courses, potentially leading to the creation of another *2-term dash* in S4 (Scott, 2019a). Comparing Scotland to other systems internationally using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), a three-year lower secondary school phase (ISCED2), followed by a three-year, examinable, senior secondary school phase (ISCED3), is not uncommon. However, it is uncommon for pupils to be required to undertake high-stakes exams after one year in ISCED3 (SP or equivalent), and to take exams in each of the three years of ISCED3 (Stobart, 2021), as presently happens in Scotland. Scott (2019a) argues that anxiety over the limited time available to complete S4 qualifications, coupled with a lack of detail in BTC3 and other CfE publications, has resulted in uncertainty as to how best use the BGE, in particular S3, to prepare young people for the SP (Scott, 2015). Similarly, recent research by Shapira et al.

(2023) examining the impact of CfE on young people highlighted that schools, due to the available flexibility, deal with the interface between the BGE and SP in a variety of ways. Very often a *back-wash effect* is observed, with S3 being used as a year in which young people 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.

Some researchers have presented evidence that teachers prefer the curricular status quo over proposed changes (Gouedard et al., 2020), with resistance to change often being far stronger than the willingness to reform (OECD, 2020a). This has been observed to some extent in Scotland, where nearly one-fifth of state funded secondary schools still run an undisguised, traditional 2+2+2 curricular structure (Scott, 2015, Shapira et al. 2021), which some have suggested is contradictory to the spirit of CfE (Scott, 2015). Furthermore, many 3+3 structures look similar or identical to the pre-CfE model at the S1/2 stage (Scott, 2018), leading Scott to question whether many of these 3+3 structures are merely 2+2+2 structures in disguise (ibid.). The retention of this traditional or near-traditional approach may be viewed as an example of this resistance, and conservatism on the part of curriculum-makers (Scott, 2018). However, Scott (2019) contends that vaguely worded policy documents and time-pressures to complete courses has led many schools to create a curriculum structure that ensures the smoothest possible approach to exams and qualifications at the end of S4. As Stobart (2021) argues, and as a practitioner the researcher would agree, exams have long dominated teaching and the curriculum in S4-S6 in Scotland, and specifications for NQs have replaced CfE as the *de facto* curriculum. This view has meant that CfE has been framed as the implementation of new qualifications, which have come to shape and define CfE in secondary schools, with the BGE being largely overlooked as a result (Priestley et al., 2021). This challenges the view that a near traditional curriculum structure in Scotland is an example of conservatism, or resistance, but rather is a desire not to jeopardise young people's attainment and life-chances

3.4   Policy Analysis and Literature Review Summary

The literature review demonstrates that CfE is an example of an attempt at *bottom-up* curriculum making, rather than a *top-down* curriculum imposed by government (at the

macro- and meso-level) on schools (at the micro- and nano-level). The policy analysis, supported by research literature, details the ways in which different policies interact and contribute to the process of curriculum development within secondary schools. As detailed, the policies are overwhelmingly non-prescriptive and open to interpretations, and one contains contradictory advice. Both the policy analysis and the literature review highlight some of the effects national policy and intentions observed at school level (nano- and mico-level). However, the paucity of available research on curricular structures is a concern, and it cannot be ignored that schools continue to find 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. Nor can it be ignored that in almost half of Scotland's schools, young people do not receive their full entitlement to a BGE (ES, 2020). This requires deeper exploration. Therefore, this study seeks to address these issues and explore the following questions:

- Why do schools find it challenging to achieve a balance in the BGE between providing all young people with their entitlements while prepare them for progression to qualifications in the senior phase?
- How do school leaders structure their curriculum to address these challenges?
- Within the BGE structure, how is S3 used to support the transition to the SP?
- How might current reforms in Scottish education influence these challenges?

4. Methodology

This study's aim was to explore the curricular tensions and challenges faced by Glasgow secondary school HTs in supporting the transition from the BGE to the SP.

A case study approach to the research is adopted. A case study has many definitions and has been described as contested terrain (Cohen, 2018). However, a fitting definition pertinent to this research is "an in-depth investigation of a specific real-life policy or program from multiple perspectives in order to capture its uniqueness and complexity" (Simons, 2009:21). A case study is a qualitative approach and is particularly suited to research questions such as those of this study, as it seeks to answer *how* and *why* problems (Mfinanga et al., 2019). What constitutes a *case* is equally contested, but Pring (2015:55) describes it as being "a person, institution, or a collection of institutions". In this study, the *case* is a collection of Glasgow secondary schools, represented by their HTs. In line with the case study approach, this study employs a range of data collection methods to make use of all relevant and available evidence (Mfinanga et al., 2019). Following the policy analysis and literature review, the research was conducted in three phases:

1. An examination of documentation
2. A questionnaire
3. A focus group.

Each of these is outlined in this chapter.

The study draws from an interpretive paradigm, allowing the researcher to view the situation from the viewpoint of the participants (Cohen, 2018). In addition, a constructivist paradigm, in which the researcher's intent is to make sense of the meaning others have, and inductively develop a pattern of meaning (Cresswell, 2018), is also relevant. According to the constructivist model, people construct their own worlds and learning through interactive and contextual processes (Cohen, 2018:23). The constructivist researcher examines the processes that contribute to the construction of these worlds (Ibid.). Constructivist perspectives are common in educational research due to the comparatively low influence of the researcher on the situation being studied, thus preserving the integrity of the research (Ibid.).

It is the researcher's ontological position that there is no one objective truth to be discovered, as reality is based on individuals' experiences and social interactions. Regarding curricula, HTs have developed their own using their knowledge, experiences, and interpretations. There is no *correct* curriculum to be uncovered. Epistemologically, knowledge is within people's experiences, and is created through their interpretations and perspectives of these experiences, within their contexts.

The aim of this research was to make sense of the themes and patterns in relation to secondary BGE curricula and develop explanations to better understand these themes and patterns.

4.1 Sample

This study took place within Glasgow City Council (GCC). All secondary HTs were invited to take part, and 28 out of 30 secondary schools responded to the questionnaire. This is a very high response rate and ensures that responses are representative of the city, and are not confined to one geographical area, socioeconomic context, denominational sector, or school size. All GCC HTS were invited to be part of the focus group, and the five volunteers who took part in the focus group represented a cross section of schools and lengths of service.

4.2 Document Analysis

The first phase of the research involved analysing relevant school documents already in the public domain that contained information on the schools' curricula. These documents were:

- School handbooks (available on GCC website)
- School curriculum rationales (from school website)
- Options information (From school websites)
- Inspection reports (from ES website)

These documents were scrutinised to provide data that was relevant to the research questions. Information obtained here also informed the questions for the questionnaire and the focus group.

4.3   Questionnaires

The questionnaire was structured and contained a combination of both closed and open-ended questions (appendix 1). Whilst qualitative research of this type usually includes open ended questions, in the judgement of the researcher some closed questions were necessary to gain an understanding of BGE curriculum structures across the city. However, the questionnaire also contained open-ended questions thus allowing a deeper level of discovery. A draft of the questionnaire was issued to non-participating school leaders to ensure that the questions were not leading, misleading, or confusing. Following their feedback, the questionnaire was refined prior to its wider distribution. The questionnaires were completed anonymously to ensure a high level of returns and honest answers.

4.4   Focus Group

Phase three of the research consisted of a focus group (FG) of five HTs who previously completed the questionnaires. The length of service of the HTs ranged from one year to 8+ years in post, with all having been involved in curriculum design in previous roles at system or school leadership level, as well as in their current role.

The FG involved the researcher asking five open-ended questions (appendix 2) that allowed the themes arising from the questionnaire to be explored in greater depth. In addition, two of the questions explored the theme of leading curricular change. Whilst questions probing this theme were included in the draft of the questionnaire, feedback indicated an extended response would have been required, and this may have resulted in respondents being reluctant to take part, or gained ill-considered and rushed responses, leading to poor quality data. Ergo, these questions were removed from the questionnaire and include in the FG only.

Hennink (2013:2) describes the purpose of a FG as being to "identify a range of perspectives on a research topic, and to gain and understanding of the issues from the perspectives of the participants themselves". Furthermore, she highlights that the interactive nature of FG discussions is their "unique characteristic" which allows the researcher to gather data "not accessible through individual interviews" (Ibid). Prior to the FG discussion, the researcher designed five questions, structured around the research objectives, that were intended to stimulate discussion, rather than elicit a specific response. The FG was conducted on

Microsoft Teams. The detail of the meeting was automatically transcribed by Teams, and the transcription was analysed by the researcher.

4.5   Validity and Reliability

As Cohen et al. (2018) highlight, case studies do not necessarily have the same external checks and balances found in other research approaches. However, they still conform to the principles of validity and reliability.

Issues of professional bias and familiarity centre on the fact that the researcher is a practitioner and a peer of the research participants. As a practitioner, he is responsible for developing and implementing the curriculum in his school. The curriculum in the researcher's school will have certain features that may or may or not be compliant with national guidelines. To ensure validity, it is important that the researcher does not allow the research become a justification for his own curriculum. This situation, where the researcher is part of the researched world, is a principle of validity in qualitative research of this type (Cohen 2018:247). In addition, as a peer HT, the researcher has professional working relationships with the participants. Given the research questions, there is a danger that HTs would decline to participate, or give inaccurate answers for fear of consequences, should aspects of their curriculum not be in line with national guidance. This was overcome by ensuring that the questionnaire was anonymous, and sharing the Plain Language Statement and Privacy Statement.

Creswell (2018) highlights that a limitation of FGs can be that not all participants are necessarily as perceptive, and some may dominate the conversation. To mitigate this, the researcher actively facilitated the discussion, bringing all participants into the conversation, and sought to ensure reasonably equal contributions. Furthermore, for both the questionnaire and the FG, the questions were designed to avoid advocating a particular position, exerting undue influence, or steering respondents to a particular response.

Cohen (2018) details a table of problems and solutions in internet-based surveys, and a series of reflective questions for researchers conducting FGs to consider. These were consulted and, where relevant, employed during the respective stage of the research. In addition, as Arksey

and Knight (1999) highlight, having several participants present can provide a cross check, leading to more complete and reliable data. The transcription of the FG meeting was checked immediately to ensure accuracy.

4.6   Ethics

All participants in both the FG and questionnaire did so voluntarily. All were informed regarding anonymity and their right to withdraw following the FG. The research and methods were approved by the University of Glasgow School of Education ethics committee.

4.7   Data Analysis

As Cohen (2018:643) points out, analysing qualitative data is not a simple process. There is no single or correct recipe for analysing qualitative data, which is often dependent on interpretation. In case studies data analysis should:

- Use all available evidence.
- Address the most significant aspects.
- Draw objectively on the researcher's prior expert knowledge of the issue (Mfinanga et al., 2019).

An inductive data analysis process was employed, whereby the researcher examined the qualitative data multiple times, subjecting it to interpretations, and derived themes to create understandings and summaries that explain the data. These were then related to the research questions.

5. Findings

The findings chapter reports the analysis of the data collected from questionnaire responses, FG responses, and document analysis.

5.1 Analysis of Questionnaire and Focus Group Responses

The questionnaire responses and FG discussion generated a significant quantity of data. Rowley (2002) argues that case study data analysis should involve examining and categorising the evidence. Rowley's approach was applied, in line with the analysis method outlined in chapter 3. The results of both methods have been analysed together, as themes were common to both. From this, six key themes emerge, as shown in figure 4.
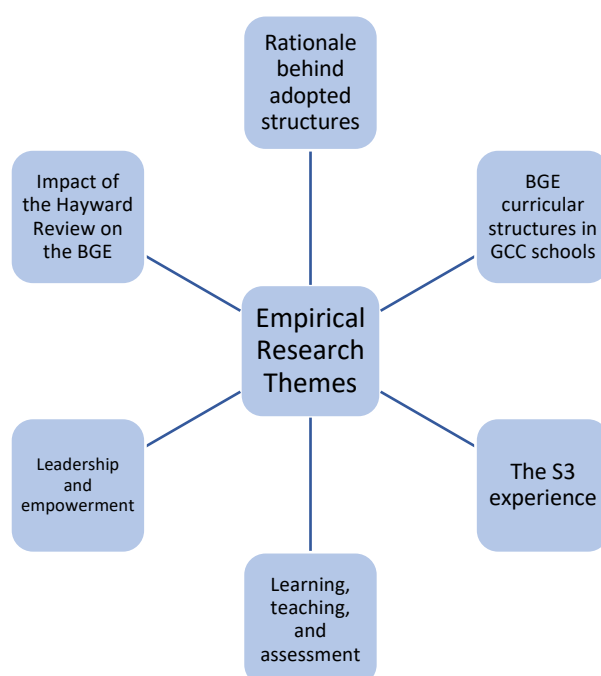
Figure 4: Themes emerging from analysis of questionnaire and FG responses

Each of these themes will be explored in detail.

5.1.1 Rationales for Curriculum Structure

The questionnaire asked respondents to indicate the rationale for the curricular structure they adopted. The two most common reasons given were to *raise attainment in the senior phase*, and *to improve young people's learning experiences*, with 22 out of 28 schools indicating one or both reasons. For three schools, *raising attainment* was the only reason given for adopting their structure. However, it is not clear what evidence exists to support the

idea the model adopted will effect the intended improvements. The importance of raising attainment was also evident in the FG, with three HTs commenting on their *conservative model* or *old-school approach*, which is focused on raising attainment. For three schools, parental input or pressure influenced the curriculum structure, while two also referred to building their curriculum around the four capacities and the refreshed narrative (ES, 2019a).

Ten respondents indicated that allowing more time before choosing subjects for National Qualifications (NQs) was a consideration. However, seven of those schools have two specialisation points within the BGE, one at S2, and again S3, which results in young people reducing the number of subjects they study. While this does not equate to finalising NQ options at this stage, research shows that early and multiple specialisation points, whilst allowing a degree of personalisation and choice in line with CfE, can lead to curriculum narrowing (Shapira et al., 2023).

Almost half of the questionnaire respondents indicated that their curriculum structure was, at least in part, driven by a desire to ensure that they complied with the requirements of CfE, and that they were displaying fidelity to the policy (Gouedard et al., 2020). Indeed, as one FG participant mentioned, in the early days of CfE implementation "a lot of discussion was about how compliant our practice was with policy". However, of these schools, six do not require young people to select a subject from each curricular area, and five indicate that for most students, their S3 curriculum carries over into S4. In view of this, one must question how "compliant" these structures are.

5.1.2   BGE Curriculum Structures in GCC Secondary Schools

While the curriculum is about more than timetabling structures and options columns (Scott, 2019b), to address the research questions, it was necessary to first gain an understanding of how the BGE curriculum is structured in Glasgow secondary schools. The questionnaire did not directly ask whether the school adopted a curriculum structure that was guided by a 3+3 (CfE-type) model or a 2+2+2 (pre-CfE type) model for 2 reasons. Firstly, while the two designations are helpful generalisations, and will be used in this document, they mask many structural nuances (Shapira et al., 2023), as one school's 3+3 model is not necessarily identical to another's (Scott, 2018). Secondly, given that a 3+3 type model is perceived as being more

in-line with the requirements of CfE (Priestley, 2021) and is the type of model that most schools in Scotland profess to employ (Shapira et al., 2023), there is a danger that respondents would feel the need to respond to this effect which, in turn, could influence responses to subsequent questions.

Table 2 shows the range of subjects studied in each of the BGE years in Glasgow's schools, and the average number of subjects in each year group across the city. In addition, the number of schools that allow specialisation points in each year group is shown. This demonstrates that a wide range of BGE curricular structures exist, with questionnaire data suggesting that no two schools share the same structure. In the pre-CfE era, almost all secondary schools would have had 14 subjects in first and second year, following which young people could specialise. This would result in an 8 certificable-subject curriculum (plus 3 core subjects) in S3, which would continue through to S4 (Scott, 2018). Now, significant variation can be seen in the number of subjects studied in each year group. In addition, whilst most schools have only one specialisation point within the BGE, usually for the S3 curriculum, there are some schools with two or three specialisation points within the BGE, including two with specialisation points in first year. This is largely in keeping with patterns observed nationally, with GCC schools mostly studying the same number of subjects as other schools in Scotland in S1 and S2 (Shapira et al, 2023; Scott, 2019a). However, Glasgow schools, with an average 11.4 subjects in S3, study fewer subjects than most schools in Scotland (Shapira et al., 2023).

Table 2: 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 school year	2	11	27

5.1.3   The S3 Experience

With the status of S3 changing since the introduction of CfE, its purpose and use have, theoretically, also changed. Indeed, the SG were so keen to stress the new status of S3, that they published a briefing paper (SEED, 2006) focussed entirely on the S3 experience. The new status goes beyond the number of subjects studied.

The questionnaire asked participants to share what they communicated as the purpose of S3. Naturally, being an open question, 28 unique responses were received. However, nine recurring themes were observed, with most responses covering more than one theme. Chart 1 shows the frequency with which each theme is mentioned by respondents. The most common theme was an acknowledgement that S3 was a part of the BGE and that the experience should reflect this. Most schools in this category also acknowledge that S3 was the final year of the BGE and that this phase of schooling should be *closed-off* during this year. Two typical quotes include:

> "[S3 is] the end of the BGE, it offers the opportunity for young people to express greater personalisation and choice within and across the curriculum areas. Our S3 leave the year with an "exit grade" which underlines the end of S3 as a transition point and emphasises the learner journey, and where it has finally taken them at the end point of the BGE."
>
> *Questionnaire Respondent*

> "to allow all learners to have their entitlement to the fullest BGE with a degree of specialisation"
>
> *Questionnaire Respondent*

These responses indicate that attempts are being made by a majority of GCC schools to treat S3 as a part of the BGE, and schools who gave such responses tended to have high number of subjects in S3, compared to the Glasgow average. However, other responses to the questionnaire suggest that the S3 experience may not, in practice, always be in line with the communicated purpose. Six schools who communicate S3 as being part of the BGE also indicate that, for most of their students, the S3 curriculum continues into S4, which suggests

that their curricular structure is more akin to a pre-CfE era 2+2+2 structure. For schools with this combination of responses, it might be argued that their CfE curriculum structure is one in name only, and an example of a traditional curriculum in disguise (Scott, 2017). Moreover, many of the responses regarding the restrictions that are placed on pupils during specialisation points suggest that it would be challenging to ensure all young people receive all of their entitlements, as will be explored in chapter 6.
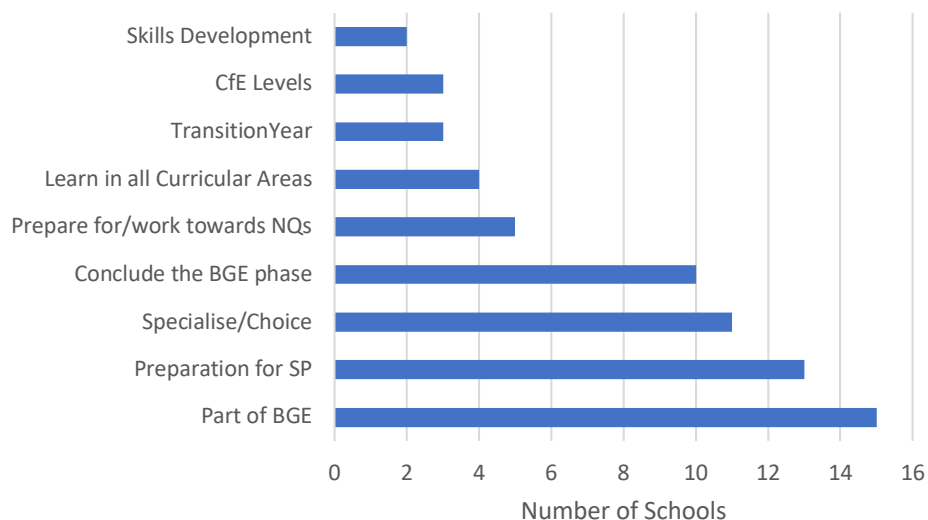
Chart 1: *What do you communicate as the purpose of S3?*

Almost half of respondents stated that the purpose of S3 was to prepare young people for the SP, with some explicitly mentioning the word *transition*. All schools in this category also state that raising attainment in the senior phase is a key part of their curriculum rationale and tend to have lower numbers of subjects in their S3 curriculum. This is not against national guidance (SG, 2008; ES, 2016), although it poses the question as to how S3 prepares young people for the SP, in terms of specialising, learning, teaching and assessment. This will be explored more fully in section 5.1.4. Indeed, five respondents who state that S3 is to prepare pupils for the SP also mention preparing for, or working towards, NQs in S3. Two examples of such responses are:

"[the purpose of S3] is preparation for S4"

Questionnaire Respondent

"The transition is basically beginning N4/N5 courses"

Questionnaire Respondent

Whether this is in line with CfE guidance depends on how the guidance is interpreted, as will be explored in the discussion.

Eleven respondents stated that opportunities for specialising was a key purpose of their S3, with most of these schools having only one specialisation point within the BGE, at S3. As one respondent stated:

"[S3 gives] young people the opportunity to focus on key subject areas by lessening the number of subjects from S1 and S2. This allows pupils to have focussed understanding of certain subject areas, so instead of 15 subjects they are able to choose a lesser number which will deepen their understanding of certain subjects"

Questionnaire Respondent

The provision of opportunities to specialise in the curriculum is absolutely in line with national guidance. As CfE Briefing Paper 6 states, through "specialisation, learners will have opportunities to stretch their learning" (ES, 2012:2). Interestingly, some respondents link the opportunities for specialism with NQs. This will be explored further in Chapter 6.

The themes that were mentioned less frequently are of interest. While S3 is still part of the BGE, as most respondents acknowledge, only three mentioned CfE levels, and only three mentioned learning in all curricular areas (CAs) (two respondents mentioned both). Given that S3 should be the year when learners "complete their entitlement to a BGE, including all of the experiences and outcomes to third level" and when they "stretch their learning into the fourth curriculum level Es&Os and beyond" (ES, 2012:2), it is reasonable to expect that these themes would feature more prominently in the purpose schools attach to S3. Again, the low importance of these themes is perhaps a consequence of the tensions and challenges as will be explored further in the discussion. Similarly, only three questionnaire respondents mentioned skills development, despite S3 being an opportunity to develop the skills for

learning, life, and work (Ibid.). However, the place of skills in the BGE curriculum did feature more regularly, in the FG feedback.

5.1.4 Learning, Teaching, and Assessment

The questionnaire probed the extent to which learning, teaching and assessment are influenced by NQs. In line with other aspects of the questionnaire, a range of responses was received. More than half of respondents indicated that, in their schools, most learning and teaching in S3 was planned around the learning outcomes (LOs) for NQs, whereas only four respondents stated that learning and teaching in S3 was not planned around NQ LOs at all. Those schools whose S3 experiences are more influenced by NQs tend to have a lower number of subjects in their S3 curriculum and are more likely to plan assessments in S3 around NQ assessment requirements. Indeed, eight respondents indicate that assessment in S3 was entirely planned around NQ assessment. Overwhelmingly, these schools allow young people to drop all subjects from a curricular area at specialisation, and state that raising attainment in the senior phase is an important consideration in adopting their curriculum model. However, a small number have indicated that their model was adopted, at least in part, to ensure compliance with the requirements of CfE, and a significant number indicate that their model is in part driven by a desire to allow more time to develop learning before making choices for NQs. This would suggest a contradiction and a symptom of the inherent tensions that exist (see discussion).

In addition, those schools where NQs had greatest influence on learning, teaching and assessment generally placed fewer restrictions on pupils at specialisation points within the BGE, with pupils being permitted to drop all subjects within a curricular area, or not being compelled to choose from each curricular area.

5.1.5 Leadership and Empowerment

Given the centrality of the HT in curriculum design and implementation (GTCS, 2021; ES 2020) it was important to elicit HTs views on their leadership of CfE. This is also relevant to the empowerment agenda (ES, 2019b; 2019c). Professional standards 2.1 and 3.1 are both entitled *Curriculum, Pedagogy, Leadership and Strategic Vision* and the subsequent sub-standards articulate the requirements for HTs to have a "critically informed understanding of

curriculum" (GTCS, 2021:7) that allows them to lead staff in designing, implementing, and evaluating a curriculum that is based on theoretical knowledge and design principles (Ibid.). This aspect of the research was explored via the FG discussion.

With regards to what guided their leadership of the curriculum design, participants were unanimous that guidance and advice documents from ES or the SG were not a helpful resource. Indeed, many mentioned that official documents created some tensions and challenges that school leaders are left to resolve. Each school attempts to resolve the tensions and challenges in their own way by designing a curriculum that meets the needs of the young people at each school. However, respondents felt that this does not necessarily resolve the tensions, and coverage of Es&Os remains an area of concern. As one HT stated:

> "I don't feel I've been given any advice from the SG or ES regarding how to achieve the balance of deep learning, and a broad, general education."

In addition, participants largely agreed that formal, accredited HT training programmes such as *Into Headship* did not provide specific training to lead curricular change. However, most were of the view that such professional learning activities increased their professional knowledge surrounding curricular issues, and awareness of curriculum theory. One contribution, which was typical of views expressed was:

> "While *Into Headship* or *In Headship* did not give direct training on the 'nitty gritty' of curricular change, it did give me the headspace for reflection and reading."

Despite these points, all HTs felts confident about their ability to lead on curricular change. This confidence in their capacity had been developed by experiential learning in their current and previous senior and middle leadership roles, as well as collaboration with, and support and challenge from, HT colleagues. These interactions have taken place through informal connections, and more formally through GCC HT meetings that focus on curricular matters, which are often led by peer HTs who comprise GCC's *curriculum committee*. All participants were of the view that the curriculum had become more of a priority for GCC in recent years, and as a result there had been more opportunities for deep and rich curricular discussions.

This was welcomed since, as one respondent stated, "curriculum development is a collegiate activity." However, HTs confidence in their ability to lead curricular change challenges Scott's provocative questioning of HTs competence in this field (Scott, 2019a).

With regards to empowerment, all HTs felt fully empowered to make curricular decisions that are appropriate for their school, and none had experienced any downsides to empowerment and autonomy. This suggests that the overarching aims of the HTC (ES, 2019b; 2019c) are being realised in GCC. However, all reported that they felt unable to fully exercise their autonomy. This was not due to direct limitations on empowerment or autonomy placed on schools by GCC or the SG. Rather, HTs were of the view that other factors indirectly acted to restrict the extent to which they could exercise autonomy in respect of curriculum development. Participants were unanimous that extrinsic accountability measures, for example pressure to raise attainment, prevented them from exercising their autonomy to its fullest extent.

5.1.6   The Impact of the Hayward Review on the BGE

The questionnaire and FG phases of the research were completed prior to the publication of the Hayward report on 22 June, 2023. However, the interim report documents resulted in practitioners having an idea of the direction of travel. Whilst the Hayward review was concerned with qualifications and assessment in the senior phase, the "backwash effect" of NQs into the BGE (Stobart, 2021:40) has been keenly felt. Those who commented were keen to see a reduction in the influence that NQs have on the BGE, and to see the S3 experience become more in keeping with the spirit of CfE. Two quotes from the questionnaire are typical:

> "If the Hayward review moves towards point of exit examinations, then this would likely lead to there being less pressure on the S3 curriculum and the need to specialise as much and as early. The rush to qualifications in S4, S5 and S6 means that from S3 onwards pressure is put on the system to gear young people towards the specific details of the SQA course requirements."
>
> *Questionnaire Respondent*

"We have been considering changing our BGE structure so that S3 is more fully a BGE experience, rather than linked entirely with S4. Very conscious that we currently operate a 2+2+2 structure."

Questionnaire Respondent

5.2   Documents Examination

This phase of the research involved scrutinising the school handbooks, which are available for 28 secondary schools on the GCC website. In addition, where schools have published a curriculum rationale or other information that provides detail about the curriculum, these were examined and where possible compared with recent HMI reports.

Not all school handbooks were up to date, and most gave only very superficial information regarding the curriculum. However, 21 of the 28 handbooks contained a version of the phrase:

in line with their CfE entitlement, pupils learn in all curricular areas, until the end of S3.

implying that the school curriculum was CfE-compliant. No school handbooks cite a specific CfE policy document that explicitly states that learning in all CAs until the end of S3 is mandated or is a CfE *entitlement*. Similarly, no explanation is given as to why handbooks mention this perceived *entitlement*, but not other *entitlements* that are explicitly mentioned in CfE policy documents.

A small number of schools provide details on their curriculum structure in either their handbook or other documents. Three schools that provide such detail also received recent HMI inspections. Table 3, which summarises their curriculum structure and the recent comment from HMI, shows that all 3 schools have different curricular structures. S*chools 2* and *3* allow significant freedom in their choices, allowing pupils to drop a curricular area completely in S3. Inspectors have deemed the curriculum of *school 1* compliant, while *schools 2* and *3* have received comments suggesting further changes to ensure that their curricula align with national guidance. However, HMI do not state specifically which piece of national guidance supports their feedback. Interestingly, despite these comments, HMI have taken no

further action. Neither school has been ***directed*** to modify their curriculum, and HMI have disengaged from both.

Indeed, the opposite problem can arise, where schools create a curriculum structure that appears to be in line with national guidance but receive criticism from HMI that results in changes that make the curriculum less compliant. As one FG participant responded:

> "I initially developed a true BGE curriculum built around the four capacities and skills development and ensuring that young people learned in all CAs until the end of S3. Then we were inspected by HMI who told us that were not adequately preparing young people for the senior phase, so I had to change it."
>
> *FG Participant*

Table 3: *Comparison of schools' curriculum structures and HMI report comments (emphases by the researcher)*

School	Specialise during S1?	Specialise during S2?	Specialise during S3?	Further Specialise during S4?	Pupils learn in all C.A.s until end of S3?	HMI Summarised Inspection Findings Extract
School 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Young people experience learning across all eight curriculum areas in the BGE. They have important opportunities to exercise choice and personalise their curriculum pathway as they progress to S2, S3 and S4. At S2, young people follow a core curriculum of English, mathematics, social sciences, Spanish, home economics, physical education (PE), religious education (RE) and personal, social and health education (PSHE). They then choose two technologies subjects from three on offer, and two expressive arts subjects from four on offer. At S3, young people's core curriculum includes English, mathematics and PE, with choices from sciences, technologies, social subjects and the expressive arts, as well as one further choice from across the range of options.
School 2	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	Young people in S1 and S2 follow a BGE experience with course choice taking place at the end of S2. In S3, all young people follow a reduced number of selected subjects. Senior leaders should continue to review the S1 to S3 curriculum to ensure all young people experience their **entitlement to all curricular areas in the BGE**. At present, **not all young people receive their full BGE entitlement**. Staff should also consider how well this curriculum prepares young people effectively for the senior phase. In S4, young people continue with their S3 courses.
School 3	✗	✗	✓	✓	✗	Senior leaders should continue to ensure that young people are able to attain highly across **all curricular areas in the broad general education**. The existing curricular model is such that a few young people **do not have the opportunity to progress and attain across the full range of curricular areas in S1-S3.**

6. Discussion

This study set out to explore the tensions and challenges faced by school leaders when designing the BGE curriculum, particularly at the transition stage from the BGE to the SP. The discussion section will address the research questions considering the literature review, the policy analysis, and the data gathered.

6.1   Why do Tensions and Challenges Exist?

In its summary of *Secondary Inspection Findings: Curriculum*, ES (2020) report that schools find it challenging to achieve a balance between providing young people with their entitlement to a BGE experience in S3 while also providing appropriate learning to prepare them for the SP. It does not, however, explore **why** schools find achieving this balance challenging, nor does it give any explicit and specific advice that might alleviate the challenge. This study has sought to provide that exploration.
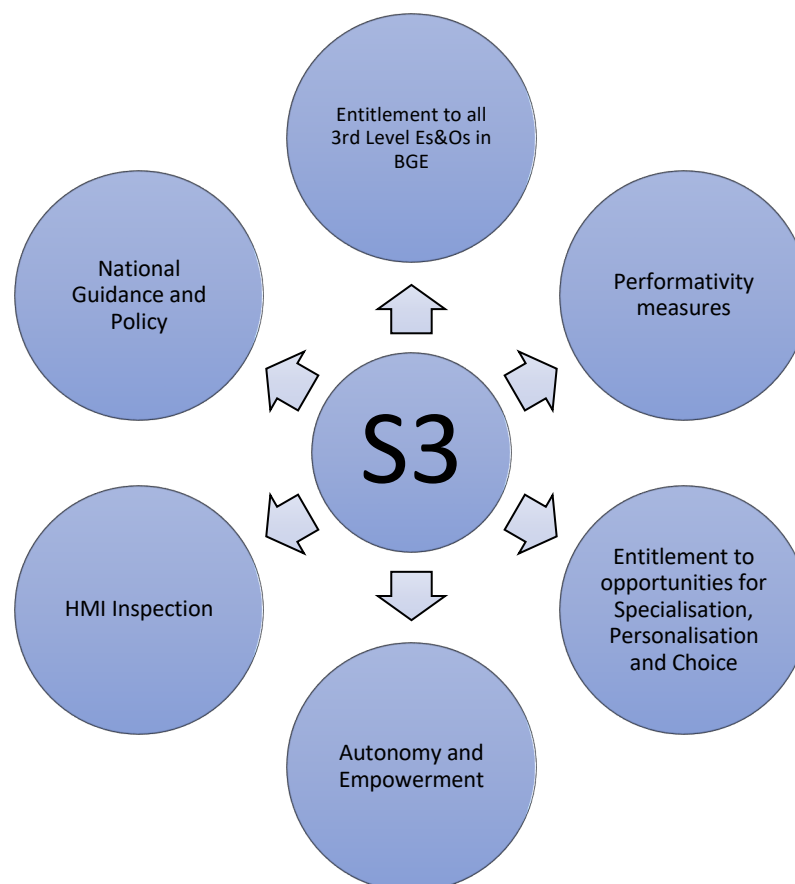
Figure 5: The interacting tensions in the BGE

Evidence from the questionnaire, the FG, and the examination of documents in addition to the findings from the policy analysis, indicate that several inter-related tensions are at play in

the BGE in general, but largely hinging on S3, as outlined in figure 5. The interplay of these tensions will be explored below.

6.1.1   Tension between Competing Entitlements

Firstly, there is a tension between providing young people with the opportunity to experience all third level Es&Os in all CAs, and providing them with opportunities for specialisation, and personalisation & choice, both of which are curricular entitlements (SG, 2008; 2019). As the findings show, all schools in Glasgow offer opportunities for specialisation on at least one occasion in the BGE. 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 curriculum area, some schools offer pupils a greater degree of freedom, with at least one school offering a completely free choice. While most Glasgow schools offer specialisation for S3 only, some offer more than one specialisation point. However, regardless how many specialisation points are offered, or when these take place, the inclusion of *any* specialisation points poses the question:

are young people receiving their entitlement to all 3rd level Es&Os by the end of S3?

Specialising involves reducing the number of subjects studied, which in turn must result in reducing the number of Es&Os being covered. Almost all GCC schools organise learning in discrete subjects, rather than broad CAs in S3. In this context, at a specialisation point, pupils can opt to study one or more of, for example, chemistry, physics, and biology, as opposed to studying general science. Therefore, should a pupil elect to choose only physics and chemistry in S3, he would study only those Es&Os related to these two subjects. Unless the pupil had covered all 3rd level Es&Os related to biology prior to the specialisation point, the opportunity to specialise has resulted in him not receiving his entitlement to a BGE to the end of S3. This is the tension. Findings from this study show that less than a quarter of GCC schools report that all young people experience all 3rd level Es&Os by the end of S3, suggesting that this tension is being keenly felt in Glasgow. Shapira et al. (2021) found that schools who provided opportunities earlier in the BGE tended to have a lower number of subjects in their S3 curriculum. However, Glasgow schools, with an average 11.4 subjects in S3, study fewer subjects than most schools in Scotland (Ibid.). 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.

6.1.2 Performativity Measures and Accountability

Secondly, and following on from the first, there is a tension between attainment accountability measures, and both the BGE entitlements discussed in section 6.1.1. This tension arises partly because of the ambiguous and contradictory advice as outlined in chapter 2, and partly due to external pressures placed on HTs after the BGE. The contradictory nature of the advice can be represented as shown in figure 3 in chapter 2.2 (reprinted below for clarity).

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.

But, 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

Figure 3: *The contradictory advice on the use of S3*

The HT, in collaboration with staff and other stakeholders, 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. In addition, HTs are also cognisant of the need to maximise attainment in S4, and many look to S3 to directly support this.

As Shapira et al. (2021) reported, data on pupil outcomes are very influential in informing decisions regarding BGE curricula in Scotland. This is supported by the findings of this study, which demonstrate that in almost 80% of Glasgow schools, raising attainment in the SP was at least part of the rationale for their curriculum structure. In addition, more than half 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 assessment requirements, and place fewer restrictions on pupils' choices at specialisation points. Conversely, very few respondents stated that learning and teaching in S3 was not planned around NQ LOs or assessments at all. This supports research by both Stobart (2021) and Priestley et al. (2021) who have highlighted how much exams and qualifications dominate learning, teaching, and the curriculum in Scotland, at the expense of the BGE experience, as detailed in chapter 3.

Using the results of the questionnaire, the researcher offers a theoretical continuum for learning, teaching, and assessment in S3, as shown in figure 6. This ranges from 1, in which the S3 experience is dominated by the requirements for NQs, much like S3 in the pre-CfE era, to 10, in which the S3 experience is built around CfE Es&Os, in what might be termed a *pure* BGE experience.
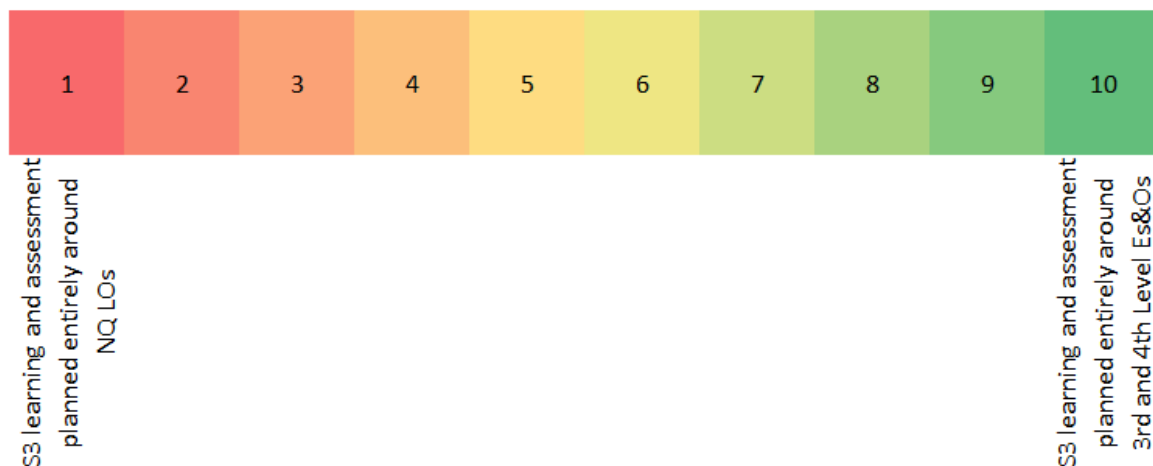

Figure 6: A theoretical continuum for learning, teaching, and assessment in S3

While the questionnaire did not ask respondents to place themselves at a particular point on this scale, findings demonstrate that the S3 experience in GCC schools cover most of this

continuum. In addition, those schools whose responses indicated that their S3 experience is likely to be in the lower half of the continuum 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 (Gouedard et al., 2020) and the curriculum (Priestley, 2013; Priestley et al. 2021), and that, 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, to some extent at least, in most Glasgow schools. Indeed, as one FG participant stated:

> "when it comes to the BGE I'd like to be more radical but extrinsic accountability measures get in the way. A big driver in S3 is getting young people to get their five passes at level 5 in S4. This prevents a more radical approach to the BGE".
>
> FG Respondent

Furthermore, those schools whose S3 is more heavily influenced by the requirements for NQs are prime examples of the specifications for NQs effectively becoming curriculum (Stobart, 2021; Priestley et al., 2021), and the observed 'backwash' into S3, supporting Stobart's assertions (Stobart, 2021).

6.1.3   National Policy, Guidance, and Inspections

While CfE policy documents are clear on some expectations, others are less well understood. Many of these have been explored in the Policy Analysis and earlier in this discussion. As outlined in chapter 2, CfE and HGIOS4 are non-prescriptive policies that are open to interpretation. Findings in this study suggest that this had led to differing understandings of what is required to ensure a curriculum aligns with national policy. As outlined in chapter 5, almost half of respondents indicated that their curriculum structure was, at least in part, informed by a desire to comply with the requirements of CfE. However, most of these respondents' schools state that young people do not experience all 3rd level Es&Os in all CAs by the end of S3. This is contrary to explicit CfE requirements (SG, 2008) and, in view of this, these schools' curricula do not meet the requirements of CfE. This failure of school curricula

to align with national guidance appears to be linked to the management of their specialisation points, as discussed in section 6.1.1.

As outlined in the examination of documents, many GCC school handbooks contain the phrase *in line with their CfE entitlement, pupils learn in all CAs, until the end of S3*. However, no CfE document states explicitly that learning in every CA until the end of S3 is required, and it is certainly not a stated *entitlement*. While one may interpret the *entitlement* to a BGE to the end of S3 to **imply** that pupils must study in all CAs until the end of S3, this is not necessarily the case. As demonstrated in chapter 6.1.1, it is possible to study in all CAs until the end of S3, but not provide young people with the opportunity to experience all 3rd level Es&Os. Therefore, in this context a school could manage their specialisation points to ensure that every pupil in S3 learned in every CA, but their curriculum would not be in line with national guidance.

Scott (2019) has referred to the vagueness of CfE documents, and the lack of curricular exemplification in BTC3. ES reported that in approximately half of Scotland's secondary schools, young people are not receiving their full entitlement to a BGE (ES, 2020), and findings from this research suggest that this is certainly the case in many Glasgow schools. This researcher argues that the vagueness to which Scott refers has resulted in different interpretations of the policy, including from HMI, which has contributed to the tensions and challenges. Indeed, HTs contributing to this research stated that guidance and advice documents were not helpful, which challenges the findings of Shapira et al. (2021) who found that CfE policy documents were at least moderately influential in the curriculum design of the majority of schools, although their research did not look specifically at S3.

HMI have maintained a position of neutrality regarding curricular structures and have not endorsed or recommended any models (Scott, 2015). As Scott (Ibid.) points out, HTs would find it helpful if HMI would report on the relative strengths and weaknesses of different structures. In 2020, ten years after CfE began to be implemented, ES did highlight learning in all CAs until the end of S3 to be an example of good practice (ES, 2020), suggesting that this is its preferred model. However, it did not offer any evidence as to why this approach was

deemed to be 'good', and whether it was evidentially more effective than others. This is not the same as an analysis of strengths and weaknesses.

As evidenced in table 3, HMI have suggested that schools review their curricula where they do not align with this feature of effective practice. However, they have taken no further action beyond making this suggestion, and this supports Scott's (2015) assertion that adoption of a traditional or near-traditional curricular structure does not necessarily lead to criticism from HMI. Shapira et al. (2021) report that school inspections are one of the most important factors influencing BGE curricula in Scotland, and that self-evaluation, including the use of HGIOS4, is used by most schools to inform their curricular decisions. As the OECD state, frameworks for self- and external evaluation (i.e. HGIOS4), and therefore inspection, need to be updated to reflect the objectives of the curriculum (Gouedard et al., 2020). The findings of this study suggest that HMI have yet to fully update its framework, HGIOS4, and therefore its inspection regime to explicitly reflect the objectives of CfE. Indeed, given that HGIOS 4 is the framework for evaluating the curriculum, and evaluating attainment and achievement, it could be argued that this is also contributing to the tensions outlined in section 6.1.1. It may be that the new inspection body, recommended by the Muir report (SG, 2022), which will be independent from the agency responsible for curriculum, learning, and assessment, will revise its framework for inspection and self-evaluation to be more helpful for school leaders in curriculum design.

6.1.4 Autonomy and HT Empowerment

As discussed in the policy analysis, HT empowerment (ES, 2019b; 2019c) is a central to the SG's approach to school improvements and the literature review outlines the benefits of, and barriers to, an empowered system. In step with HT empowerment, school autonomy and curricular flexibility is intrinsic to CfE as a policy. As outlined in the findings, HTs have not found policy or advice documents helpful, and some researchers have pointed to the vagueness of these (Scott, 2015). As discussed in chapter 3, internationally there is trend to move away from a *top-down* approach to curriculum development. It may be that a desire on the part of ES and the SG not to stifle empowerment has contributed to the lack of clarity in policies, as outlined in section 6.1.2 and 6.1.3.

The findings show that HTs in Glasgow welcome this empowerment, and do not see any downsides to being afforded this autonomy. However, findings show that accountability, whether attainment metrics or the inspection framework, are a significant barrier to autonomy. This conflict, therefore, contributes to the tension when designing the BGE curriculum, particularly for S3.

6.1.5 Underlying Factors Contributing to Tensions

This researcher contends that the lack of research, and the disparate and multiple authors developing the policy, as outlined in chapter 2, have contributed to the existing tensions experienced in CfE, particularly the BGE and S3.

6.2 How do School Leaders Address Tensions and Challenges?

As outlined in section 6.1.4, the leadership of curriculum development is key part of the role of the HT; the SfH mention *curriculum* 32 times and devote several *standards* and *professional actions* to leadership of curriculum development (GTCS, 2021).

School leaders in Glasgow are confident about their ability to lead curricular change in their schools. Findings show that schools have a rationale for the curriculum and structure adopted, which challenges Shapira et al.'s (2021) assertion that there is a lack of a clear rational for the different curricular structures implemented. Where HTs are of the view that their curriculum, including its structure, does not meet the needs of all young people, or does not meet the requirements of CfE, this is acknowledged and HTs can articulate plans and next steps in the development of their curriculum. Scott (2019) questioned HTs' capacity to lead curriculum development. HTs' responses to the FG challenged this, but HTs did acknowledge that their capacity has been built not by formal CLPL training courses, but by experiential learning and collaboration with colleagues. The implications of this might be that more formal training on curriculum development for school leaders at all levels, especially HTs, would be beneficial.

While Shapira et al. (2021) express concern that, in many cases, BGE curricula lack opportunities for specialisation, personalisation, and choice, findings indicate that this is not an issue in Glasgow, with all schools offering at least one specialisation point during the BGE.

However, HTs do acknowledge that tensions and challenges exist with designing the BGE curriculum, and state that policy, guidance, and advice documents produced at the macro and meso level have not been helpful or supportive.

6.3 How does S3 Support the BGE to SP Transition?

As outlined in section 6.1.2, there are a variety of ways in which schools make use of S3 to support transition from the BGE to the SP. Advice from ES and the SG is not clear and, as the policy analysis shows, can be contradictory.

Within Glasgow, a minority of schools have, quite openly, adopted a traditional standard grade-type 2+2+2 structure, with S3 falling within the middle school. In curriculum structures such as this, young people choose subjects at the end of S2, which are studied for the duration of S3 and S4, and typically seven or eight of these are examined and accredited at the end of S4. Schools whose curricular structures resemble this description tend to have lower numbers of subjects studied in S3, are more likely to state that raising attainment is a key part of their rationale and are less likely to place controls on the subjects young people choose. When communicating the purpose of S3, schools in this category are more likely to refer to the SP or NQs, and less likely to refer to the BGE. In addition, in these schools it is more likely that learning, teaching, and assessment will be influenced by the requirements for NQs. This supports findings from across Scotland (Scott, 2015; Shapira et al., 2021), as outlined in chapter 3.

Other schools have adopted a CfE-type 3+3 structure, with S3 falling within the BGE, and nationally, more than four fifths of state-funded secondary schools have shifted to a version of a 3+3 curriculum structure (Shapira et al., 2021). Schools in this category will have at least one specialisation point within the BGE, usually at the start of S3. In addition, pupils tend to study a relatively high number of subjects in S3 and be less likely to continue with all their subjects from S3 into S4. Within their rationale, these schools are likely to communicate a desire to conform to the requirements of CfE, to improve learning experiences and allow more time before young people finalise their choices for NQs. Schools in this category, when communicating the purpose of S3 are more likely to affirm its place in the BGE, and recognise

the importance of *closing* the BGE. Learning, teaching, and assessment is more likely to be influenced by the CfE Es&Os than NQ specifications.

These two categories are a neat simplification, but mask the nuances of the curricular structures in Glasgow. As the findings highlighted, no two schools of the 28 who responded have the same structure. This supports the findings of research that examined curricula nationally and found that BGE curricular structures in Scotland could be split into 9 families (Scott, 2019b), with schools implementing a 3+3 model in a variety of different ways (Scott, 2019b, Shapira et al., 2021), as outlined in chapter 3. As detailed in the findings and in section 6.1.3, there are many schools in Glasgow with 3+3-type structures whose curricula do not meet the requirements of CfE. In addition, many 3+3 structures look similar or identical to the pre-CfE model at the S1/2 stage (Scott, 2018), which may be examples of disguised 2+2+2 structures (see chapter 3).

Beyond curricular structures, learning and teaching in S3 also supports preparation for the SP. As outlined in section 6.1.2, the tension between raising attainment and young people's entitlements is at play in S3, with S3 learning and teaching is some schools being dominated by the requirements of NQs. 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 in S3, is attributed by Scott to conservatism on the part of HTs, LAs, or parents (Scott, 2018). And, as noted in the findings, a small number of HTs did highlight the influence of parents on curricular structures. However, this researcher contends that any conservatism is due to a deep desire not to take risks with young people's futures. The findings show that many of the challenges that the change of status of S3 has posed nationally, are manifesting themselves in GCC schools.

In section 6.1.2 the researcher proposed a theoretical continuum for S3 curricula, and further research is required to explore S3 curricula, and learning and teaching, in more detail. However, while the existing vague and/or contradictory advice remains in place, without clarifications being offered, this variety of curriculum structures will most likely remain in place.

6.4 Future Development of BGE Curricula

The recommendations of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment were published in June 2023, shortly after the empirical research for this study was completed. From this, it is now clear that significant change will take place in the senior phase in the coming years, which will likely impact on the BGE. As both Stobart (2021) and Humes & Priestley (in Priestley et al. 2021) have reported, the specifications of NQs have had a significant influence on how CfE has been implemented in schools, resulting in an implementation gap (Ibid., SG, 2023a) – a difference between the curriculum intended by its designers at the meso- and macro-level, and the curriculum enacted by those at the micro- and nano-level. As the report on the National Discussion on Education recently reported, some parents have expressed concern that CfE no longer matters after S3, as qualifications are "the most important thing" (SG, 2023a:60). However, the recommendations of the Professor Hayward's review include improvement in progression between BGE and the SP, and a reduction in the number of examinations in the SP (SG, 2023b), meaning that a diet of NQ assessments for entire cohorts of S4 pupils likely to be abolished. It might reasonably be concluded, therefore, that the backwash effect of NQs into the BGE, especially S3 (Stobart, 2021) will diminish. This will allow schools to modify their S3 curricula to one where NQ specifications have less influence on teaching and assessment. Certainly, many contributors to this study were positive about the impact of the changes to the SP and felt hopeful that this would allow them to be more creative with their BGE curricula.

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the tensions and challenges faced by school leaders when designing the BGE curriculum, and sought to explore the following questions:

- Why do schools find it challenging to achieve a balance in the BGE between providing all young people with their entitlements while prepare them for progression to qualifications in the senior phase?
- How do school leaders structure their curriculum to address these challenges?
- Within the BGE structure, how is S3 used to support the transition?
- How might current reforms in Scottish education influence these challenges?

This chapter will summarise the key findings, address the limitations of the study, highlight the implications for practice and policy, and make recommendations for future research.

7.1   Summary

As outlined in the findings and discussion, the study found that:

- It is difficult to ensuring young people experience all Es&Os to third level, whilst also ensuring they have opportunities for personalisation, choice, and specialism in their curriculum. These experiences and opportunities are curricular entitlements.
- The pressure on schools to maximise and improve exam results, *the performativity agenda*, can lead to HTs making decisions about curriculum design that result in young people not receiving their entitlement to a full BGE experience. This performativity agenda also acts to restrict the extent to which HTs exercise autonomy.
- Glasgow HTs have not found policy documents to be a helpful resource when engaging in curricular design. Advice is often vague and, at times, contradictory, especially in relation to S3.
- HTs have found a lack of clarity regarding what HMI expects in relation to curriculum design. CfE policy documents, HGIOS 4, thematic reviews, and inspections have not provided HTs with any clarity, certainty, or reassurance.
- HTs remain confident about their ability to lead curricular change and find collaborative working with, and support from, peers to be the most effective approach to professional learning around curriculum making and implementation.

- There is hope that impending reform to qualifications and assessment will alleviate some of the pressures associated with the attainment agenda and provide opportunities to be more creative and radical with the design of the BGE curriculum in S3. This in turn could make S3 more of a BGE experience, centred on Es&Os and CfE entitlements, rather than a standard grade-era S3 experience centred on examinations and qualifications.

7.2 Implications for Practice and Policy

ES has highlighted that a significant proportion of young people do not receive their entitlement to a BGE, and that schools find it challenging to achieve a balance between providing all young people with a BGE experience in S1-3, whilst also supporting an effective transition into the senior phase (ES, 2020). This study has highlighted some of the reasons that that have led to ES's findings. To reduce the challenges and improve the balance, it is recommended that ES:

- Review policy documents and remove contradictory advice regarding S3. This could be achieved through a process of engagement with HTs and other curriculum-makers at different levels in schools and local authorities.
- Clarify expectations regarding curricular structures, and learning and teaching in the BGE, without compromising the empowerment agenda (ES, 2019b; 2019c) or HTs entitlement to curricular autonomy. It is recognised that this will involve a change to the inspection framework document and is likely to be the responsibility of the new inspection agency (SG, 2022).

With regards to school leaders, this study highlighted some evidence of confusion as to what young people's curricular entitlements are. It is recommended that support for school leaders is provided by ES and LAs to help them keep abreast of entitlements, and be aware of what is, and is not, an entitlement when designing the curriculum. Furthermore, this support should extend to direct advice and opportunities for collaboration, enabling HTs to keep their curriculum rationale and structure under regular review, perhaps using the theoretical continuum, as outlined in chapter 6, to evaluate their BGE curriculum and experience. Such opportunities for structured collaboration could offer a forum for HTs to highlight tensions and challenges to ES, which could facilitate collective solution making.

This supports the Curriculum *Call to Action* in the recent report on the National Discussion on Education (SG, 2023a).

The lack of a theoretical underpinning of CfE remains an issue, and LAs and HTs must be aware of this when making curricular decisions. They should therefore not feel pressured into making curricular decisions purely for compliance reasons. It is recommended that HTs keep abreast of new research as it is published and should consider contributing to and participating in such research as new opportunities arise. LAs have a role to play in supporting HTs in this regard by approving requests for research and evidence gathering, and using existing opportunities for HT collaboration to facilitate engagement with research.

Finally, the tensions and challenges outlined in this study will continue to exist for the medium-term at least. These are not of HTs' making, but they have been put in the position by the SG of being responsible for resolving them. The tensions and challenges will only be alleviated should ES provide clarity in their policy documents, or if the reform of qualifications and assessments has the desired impact as outlined in chapters 5 and 6. It is recommended that HTs accept this and recognise that they are doing their best to navigate these whilst also ensuring the best possible outcomes for young people, such as exam results and destinations. LAs should consider using their internal processes, such as validated self-evaluation, to identify and share good practice in relation to curriculum design and how tensions and challenges are addressed.

7.3   Limitations

This research was a case study on leadership of the design and implementation of the curriculum in Glasgow's schools. No schools out-with Glashow were invited to participate, and it is therefore not known whether the Glasgow situation is representative of the national picture.

In addition, whilst the research methods – a qualitative study employing a questionnaire, a FG and document analysis - provided valuable insights into the BGE curriculum in GCC schools, these do not necessarily provide all the available data. An examination of schools'

curriculum maps, rationale, and options information, along with the views of other stakeholders, would have provided more detail and insights (see section 7.4).

With regards to the interpretive case study approach adopted, as outlined in chapter 4, this was appropriate given the nature of the research questions, the evidence gathered (Mfinanga et al., 2019), and the participants in the research (Pring, 2015). As the researcher was directly involved in the collection of the data, and the analysis, he has become a "passionate participant" in the process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 115). According to Díaz Adrade (2009) this is an advantage of an interpretive case study approach, as it provides an opportunity to gain deeper insights into the issue under investigation. However, Yin (2003) cautions researchers who employ a case study approach to be aware that their findings will be challenged and highlights that case studies are viewed as lacking in sufficient objectivity and rigour. Díaz Adrade (2009) contends that this applies even more so to interpretive research using an inductive thinking process, as employed in this study. As he demonstrates, case study design, in combination with grounded theory complement each other and can be used effectively by interpretive researchers (Ibid.). The researcher would consider this combined approach for future research to improve the level of objectivity and rigour and reduce the risk of his findings being challenged.

7.4   Recommendations for Future Research

An interesting future study could be undertaken within GCC to examine schools' curricular maps, rationales, and options information. This could be combined with interviews with individual HTs, as well as collecting the views of curriculum makers at all levels in schools and at LA level, and pupils. This approach could provide a more detailed understanding of curricular structures, the balance of entitlements, and the extent to which learning in the BGE, especially in S3, is influenced by the requirements for NQs.

While GCC offers HTs autonomy on curricular design, some LAs offer less autonomy, or impose a curricular structure on schools (Scott, 2018). Further research could be undertaken regarding how the tensions and challenges are addressed and managed in different local authorities. Research should also be undertaken to assess the impact on pupils of LA-mandated structures versus school-designed structures.

Finally, research should be undertaken to examine the impact of BGE curricula on pupil outcomes. Whilst some recent research (Shapira et al., 2023) has explored the impact of curriculum policy on pupil outcomes, this did not explicitly examine the impact of the BGE. Given the forthcoming reforms to qualifications and assessment (SG, 2023b), and its potential to lessen the *backwash effect* of NQs into the BGE (Stobart, 2021), it would be of benefit to school leaders to understand how decisions about the BGE curriculum impact on learners at the point at which they leave school.

7.5 Conclusion

This research has provided the researcher with enhanced understanding of his leadership of curriculum design and implementation and will inform his professional practice going forward. As the tensions and challenges are experienced by HTs across Scotland (ES, 2020), this study will be relevant to school leaders and curriculum makers nationally. It is the researcher's aspiration that this study will inform curriculum development, particularly as schools embark on further curricular reform considering the changes to qualifications and assessment. Given the centrality of the curriculum to the work of schools in achieving the purpose of education more universally (OECD, 2020a), and that as a curriculum reform policy CfE aligns with recent international trends (Priestley, 2013), it is hoped that the findings of this study have the potential to inform curriculum development globally.

Word count: 16458

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

1. Do young people have the opportunity to specialise (make options) for their S1 curriculum?

2. Do young people have the opportunity to specialise (make options) for their S2 curriculum?

3. Do young people have the opportunity to specialise (make options) for their S3 curriculum?

4. How many subjects do young people study in S1 (including 'core' subjects - PE, PSE and RE)?

5. How many subjects do young people study in S2 (including 'core' subjects - PE, PSE and RE)?

6. How many subjects do young people study in S3 (including 'core' subjects - PE, PSE and RE)?

7. At Specialisation points within the BGE, are young people compelled to choose at least one subject from each curricular area?

8. At specialisation points, can young people opt to study more than one subject within a curricular area?

9. At specialisation points, can young people opt to study all subjects within a curricular area (for example, choose History, Geography and Modern Studies)?

10. At specialisation points, can young people opt to not study any subjects within a curricular area (for example drop Sciences, or Technologies completely)?

11. How many young people continue with exactly the same set of subjects when they progress from S3 to S4? (e.g. 7 subjects plus core in S3 are all taken forward to S4).

12. When young people progress to the senior phase, can they pick up a subject they had previously 'dropped' at an earlier specialisation point (e.g. drop Physics at the end of S2, but opt to study Physics in S4)

13. In S3, are the curriculum areas organised in discrete subjects (e.g. Chemistry, Physics and Biology as opposed to Science)?

14. What reasons drove your adoption of this model?
    (Select as many as are applicable)
    - To increase attainment in Senior Phase
    - To improve young people's learning experiences
    - To provide more time for young people to develop their learning in the BGE
    - To ensure compliance with the requirements of CfE
    - To allow young people more time before finalising choices for NQs
    - Other

15. If you selected 'Other', can you provide further information?

16   In S3, is learning planned around Learning Outcomes for National Qualifications?
- In all non-core subjects for the whole of, or most of the year
- In all non-core subjects for a part of the year
- In some non-core subjects for the whole of, or most of the year
- In some non-core subject for a part of the year
- Not in any non-core subjects

17   In S3, do young people undertake assessments that are designed around courses for National Qualifications?
- In all non-core subjects
- In some non-core subject
- Not in any non-core subjects

18   In your school, what do you communicate as the purpose of S3?

19   Which of the statements below best applies to your BGE curriculum?

20   Do wish to add any further detail in relation to any of the above questions?

21   At this stage, have you any thoughts on how the outcome of the Hayward Review might impact on your BGE curriculum?

Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions

1. There are a variety of curricular structures/architectures in Glasgow, and S3 has seen the most change. Can you tell me about what has informed your BGE architecture, in particular what you do with S3?

2. Education Scotland report that schools ""find it challenging to achieve a balance between providing all young people with their entitlement to a BGE and while providing in-depth in learning to prepare young people for the senior phase".

   How do you try to achieve this balance?
   How helpful have you found advice documents from SG or ES?

3. The GTCS Standard for Headship mentions Curriculum 27 times. However, Professor Scott (2019) questioned whether HTs had been successfully trained to be capable of leading curricular change. How confident are you in your ability to lead curricular change, and how have you developed your ability to lead on this?
   – SQH
   – Into Headship
   – Collaboration with colleagues

4. CfE has provided schools with freedom and responsibility to design and implement a curriculum that meets needs of the school. Education Scotland report that almost all headteachers feel empowered to make decisions about their curriculum.
   ▪ How empowered do you feel?
   ▪ Are there any constraints to the extent to which you are empowered?
   ▪ Are there any downsides to this empowerment?

5. In what ways has your leadership of developing and implementing CfE so far prepared you for implementing the recommendations of the Hayward review?

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