

THE DRAFT NATIONAL IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK  
FOR SCOTTISH EDUCATION: a report of a discussion which brought  
together education researchers and Scottish Government officials

## Summary of key points arising from the discussion

*The draft National Improvement Framework has the twin aims of improving attainment overall while also closing the gap between the most and least disadvantaged children.*

- *It is not clear that both aims can be achieved by employing the same interventions.*
- *To address the attainment gap, it is essential to develop a better understanding of the ‘gap’ and how poverty and other factors lead to poorer educational outcomes.*
- *The key question relating to achievement of the aims asks how schools and families can contribute effectively to improving attainment, but is **not** addressed in the draft.*
- *In contrast, a key component of the Framework is the development of a new national standardised assessment, focussed on literacy and numeracy, for children in primaries 1, 4, 7 and in S3.*
- *Such **summative** assessment has some value, but does not offer the required **diagnostic** assessment for improvement of individual pupils’ learning to close the gap across the whole curriculum, or **formative** assessment for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching and parental contributions, or any comment on reconciliation with the greater autonomy introduced under the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) reforms. Recognition of the need to avoid unintended consequences of standardised assessment is reassuring, but the Government needs to articulate how this is to be achieved.*
- *No mention is made of the urgent need for the independent research, development and evaluation that will be needed for the long term to enable a proper understanding of the innovations.*
- *A fully costed implementation plan providing detailed information, guidance and support on the delivery of the Framework’s priorities and drivers should be published. Long-term strategic implementation of the Framework will require consideration to be given to the re-prioritisation and re-deployment of existing education expenditure.*

## Introduction

- 1 The draft National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education<sup>1</sup> aims to bring together key information to evaluate the performance of the school education system and to inform the action needed to improve attainment and wider outcomes for children in Scotland. It seeks to ensure that progress is made on closing the gap in attainment between those in the most and least deprived areas. The Framework sets out six drivers where activity and support are planned: school improvement; school leadership; teacher professionalism; assessment of children’s progress; parental involvement and performance information. A key component of the Framework is the development of a new national standardised assessment, focussed on literacy and numeracy, for children in primaries 1, 4, 7 and in S3.
- 2 The absence of a systematic programme of independent evaluation and collection of dedicated data on the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) reforms has been a long-standing concern of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE). The RSE is therefore in principle supportive of the Scottish Government’s commitment to establish an improvement framework which has as its focus the systematic collection and use of data to assess the performance of the school education system.
- 3 To complement the Scottish Government’s series of engagement meetings on the draft Framework, the RSE hosted a Chatham House Rule roundtable discussion on 4th November 2015. It brought together around 25 members of the education research community in Scotland to discuss, inform and evaluate the draft Framework. Participants included those with experience and understanding of how effective educational development, research, evaluation and dissemination should be undertaken. Senior officials from the Scottish Government and Education Scotland introduced the draft Framework and participated in the discussion. The meeting was chaired by Professor Sally Brown OBE FRSE, Convener of the RSE’s Education Committee.

<sup>1</sup> Draft National Improvement Framework; Scottish Government; September 2015 <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/09/7802>

- 4 In preparation for the meeting and to identify key discussion points, participants were invited to submit in advance their brief reflections on the draft Framework. This report, prepared by the RSE, presents the key discussion points. It has also drawn upon the written submissions. The report has not been endorsed by the meeting participants. Nor does it necessarily reflect the views of the RSE. It has been submitted to the Scottish Government to inform the development of the Framework.

## Overview of the draft National Improvement Framework

- 5 The Framework aims to create the conditions for improving attainment overall, while also closing the 'gap' in attainment between the most and least disadvantaged children in Scotland. It has sought to build on best practice which exists internationally for the systematic and objective collection and use of data. The draft Framework has been informed by the OECD's research, *Synergies for Better Learning*<sup>2</sup>, which has been adapted in the context of Scotland. The Framework is designed to promote local improvement underpinned by national assurance. A key impetus for the Framework is the need to have robust and reliable national assessment data to improve understanding of the extent to which learners are making progress in their learning in primary and the early years of secondary school.
- 6 The roundtable was advised that the Scottish Government is particularly keen to receive feedback on the drivers of improvement specified in the draft Framework. It was also recognised by the Government that in addressing the attainment gap, there first needs to be a better understanding of the 'gap' and how it can be measured. This will help inform the interventions to be used. In the context of strengthening evidence-based education policy, the Government invited views on how the research community could be harnessed to help inform developments, particularly those relating to data and evidence frameworks aimed at improving outcomes for disadvantaged children. Advice was also sought on how the potential unintended consequences of the Framework could be avoided. Participants were advised that the Government will publish the revised Framework in December 2015 with the expectation that it will continue to evolve.

## Importance of data and evidence

- 7 Participants agreed that there is a need for the collection of systematic and objective data on learners' performance. It was remarked that there is a chronic shortage of quantitative objective data in Scotland on how learners' performance can be assessed over time. However, in order to devise an appropriate data framework, there is a prior need to develop a better understanding of the 'attainment gap', and of the dynamics of poverty, including why poverty leads to poorer educational outcomes for children and young people. It was acknowledged that it is not only about the immediate learner destination, but the life-time implications of deprivation.
- 8 It was recognised that applying education interventions in isolation will not address the wider determinants of educational underachievement. The importance of ensuring that the Framework makes connections between education and other relevant contexts, including health, housing and employment, was emphasised. The Scottish Government indicated that an integrated approach is being applied, with connections being made with Children, Young People and Families' services. In this context there was support for the Framework including the improvement of young people's health and wellbeing as a key priority. However, it was recognised that how this priority will be applied in practice needs to be expanded upon.
- 9 It was also noted that while the draft Framework indicates that it will make use of a 'range of data and evidence' to plan improvements, what this will comprise is not specified in the document. This needs to be expanded upon in the next iteration of the Framework.

## Importance of pre-school intervention

- 10 It was recognised that there is considerable evidence that by the start of primary school, disadvantaged young children are already well behind the development of their peer group. This would suggest that interventions with this group should take place from birth and well before the formalised education of nursery school. This implies that pre-school considerations need to feature more prominently in the Framework.

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2013), *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment*, OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/synergies-for-better-learning.htm>

## Need for an Implementation Plan

- 11** While the draft Framework sets out the vision, purpose, priorities and drivers for improvement, it was recognised that more detailed information, guidance and support is required on how they are to be delivered. A prominent question is: *how will the desired improvements in attainment, including reducing the gap in attainment between those from different backgrounds, actually be achieved through the Framework?* It was suggested that a fully costed implementation plan, taking into account the resources and staffing capacity available to local authorities and schools, should be developed to support the introduction of the Framework.
- 12** It was recognised that while the Scottish Attainment Challenge Funds (£100m allocated over four years) could be used to pilot innovative developments, it is a very small (and time-limited) amount compared to the annual revenue expenditure on education by local authorities (in 2012/13 it was £4.8 billion<sup>3</sup>). It was emphasised, therefore, that making progress should not be predicated on the availability of resources from the Attainment Challenge Funds. Rather, it was suggested that long-term, strategic implementation of the Framework will require consideration to be given to the re-prioritisation and re-deployment of existing education expenditure. In this context it was suggested that current commitments, including maintenance of teacher numbers and reducing class sizes, places limitations on the strategic options available.
- 13** It was also recognised that the OECD<sup>4</sup> research is clear on the need to find a balance between achieving a consistent national approach and remaining flexible enough to respond to the particular circumstances of different local authorities and schools.
- approaches are envisaged. This is an important issue that needs to be addressed in the next iteration of the Framework as it has profound implications for how schools, among others, organise themselves and deploy their resources.
- 15** In addition, it was questioned whether these two aims are mutually compatible. It was recognised that universal approaches (e.g. increased parental involvement; provision of pre-school education; and strategies to improve learning, teaching and assessment) aimed at raising attainment may do so but in a way that does not lead to greater equity. Indeed, some universal approaches might even widen the gap between learners from different backgrounds. It was indicated, for example, that parental involvement could increase the gap as parents with greater 'cultural capital' have a more influential impact on their children's achievements than parents in poverty. It was suggested, therefore, that in order to achieve equity, interventions targeted at improvements for disadvantaged learners will need to be used.
- 16** However, it was commented that care needs to be taken that disadvantaged learners are not simply seen as having '*gaps*' in learning that need to be '*plugged*'. Rather, it was suggested that consideration should be given to new ways of envisaging the curriculum. This could include looking at sociocultural learning models whereby children are active agents in their learning and where schools are more informed about the ways they can best support individual learners. It was recognised that this would require a cultural shift in how learning and teaching are conceptualised.
- 17** Reference was made to the research-inspired University of Cambridge *Learning without Limits* project<sup>5</sup> where learning and teaching does not rely on fixed beliefs about ability. In addition, reference was made to the approach in Finland where learners are co-constructing their learning within autonomous school learning communities.<sup>6</sup>

## Addressing tension between raising attainment and achieving equity

- 14** The Framework has the twin aims of *improving attainment overall, while also closing the gap between the most and least disadvantaged children*. However, it was commented that it is not clear whether the expectation is that these aims will be achieved by employing the same interventions or if different

<sup>3</sup> £4bn of which was provided through the block grant

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 2

<sup>5</sup> Hart, S., Dixon, A., Drummond, M.J. and McIntyre, D. (2004) *Learning without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press; and Swann M., Peacock A., Hart, S. and Drummond, M.J. (2012) *Creating Learning without Limits*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

<sup>6</sup> Sahlberg, P. 2007. *Education policies for raising student learning: The Finnish approach*. *Journal of Education Policy*, 22(2), 173-197  
Sahlberg, P. 2010. *Rethinking accountability for a knowledge society*. *Journal of Educational Change*. 11(1), 45-61.

## Support for educational research

18 This reinforces the importance of investment in long-term educational research to understand and inform developments. However, it was commented that while the need to apply evidence-based approaches is highlighted in the Framework, educational research in Scotland has not been well resourced. It was added that when educational researchers have been connecting with school teachers, this has tended to be on an *ad hoc* and piecemeal basis. This has, it was claimed, led to a dearth of educational research evidence. This will therefore need to be addressed if educational research is to contribute effectively to Framework development.

## National Standardised Assessments

19 The draft Framework states that national standardised assessment is at its ‘heart’. It sets out four points at which standardised assessment, focused on literacy and numeracy, will take place – P1, P4, P7 and S3. It was recognised that standardised assessment is a useful, albeit imperfect, tool. This reinforces the role of assessment in informing and supporting, but not replacing, the ongoing professional judgements made by teachers. However, concerns were expressed that national assessment provides evidence of performance on a particular day; that it does not reflect the uniqueness of each child’s progression through the curriculum; and that it can have negative effects on children’s self-esteem. Reference was made to research evidence<sup>7</sup> on the negative impact of national curriculum assessment in English primary schools.

20 The draft Framework refers to standardised assessment being applicable to all students. However, it was questioned how it would apply to children with individual educational needs in special schools and those integrated in mainstream schools for whom such assessment is inappropriate. In response, it was noted it is the Government’s intention that the assessments will be adapted as necessary to ensure they are inclusive. It was also confirmed that the Scottish Government will seek advice from the Advisory Group for Additional Support for Learning.

21 It was also enquired whether parents will be able to ‘opt-out’ their children from the assessments. It was noted that while nearly every local authority (30 out of 32) uses some form of standardised assessment, moving from a local to a national

approach with greater prominence has the potential to alter people’s (including parents’) perceptions. This emphasises the importance of ensuring that parents are fully informed of the developments and there is clarity on how the data will be used.

- 22 The following were reported as being important considerations in ensuring the appropriate introduction and use of national standardised assessment:
- The assessments are developed by experts who are familiar with the Scottish curriculum and its context.
  - Care needs to be taken to ensure that assessment is not driven by a desire to assess outcomes which are capable of easy measurement.
  - Data analysis will require advanced statistical tools to avoid making simplistic, causal inferences.
  - Timely provision of the assessment data to schools and teachers to maximise its usefulness.
  - Teachers are given training and support in how to use data to inform practice.
  - The provision of targeted one-to-one support for pupils at risk of falling behind their classmates (this will require sensitive use of data to identify learners but avoid labelling and stigma).
  - Assessment results should not be used to separate pupils into ability groups, with research evidence clearly demonstrating that ability grouping exacerbates inequalities.
- 23 It was also recognised that the Framework needs to provide more insight into what the assessment will look like. For example, is it envisaged that assessment will comprise of formal ‘quasi examinations’, or will it be contextualised and the approach varied within each assessment point?

## Relationship between Curriculum for Excellence and national standardised assessment

24 It was commented that the Framework needs to reconcile the philosophy of CfE (greater autonomy to schools and teachers; enhancement of teacher professionalism; and less prescriptive curricula) with the notion of national standardised assessment. In doing so, the Framework needs to more fully articulate its relationship with CfE.

<sup>7</sup> Reay, D., & Wiliam, D. (1999). *‘I’ll be a nothing’: structure and agency and the construction of identity through assessment.* British Educational Research Journal, 25(3), 343-354.

**25** It was questioned whether the decision to have four national assessment points implies a shift from a broad education, as envisaged under CfE, to an education system that is more reductionist. It was commented that the number of formal assessment points may create a culture where there is too much emphasis on measuring literacy and numeracy, potentially creating a dynamic which values these curriculum areas disproportionately.

## Informing and improving classroom practice

**26** It was commented that in order to improve learning outcomes, the data and evidence derived from assessment must be used to develop and improve classroom practice. This means that schools and teachers will need timely access to the assessment data. In developing the Framework, consideration needs to be given to the initial and continuing professional learning and development requirements of teachers so that they can be equipped to support improvement. It was also acknowledged that as currently constituted, the draft Framework reads like a *data framework* as opposed to being an *improvement framework*. The next iteration needs to provide more information about how the data will inform the arrangements for improvement and purposeful intervention.

## Formative and Summative Assessment

**27** It was acknowledged that by their nature standardised assessments are summative. In order to improve pupil learning, effective diagnostic assessment is also required so that teachers, pupils and parents know clearly what has to be learned to improve. There are, therefore, questions about the implications of the Framework for innovative learning, teaching and assessment and for the development of formative approaches. The Framework therefore needs to be clear on how it will achieve a balance between summative and formative assessment.

## Avoiding the unintended consequences of national standardised assessment

**28** A range of potential unintended consequences of national standardised assessment were highlighted, including: distortion of teaching and learning; manipulation of test results; high-stakes testing resulting in the creation of school league

tables; increasing workload and bureaucracy for teachers; increasing stress levels among teachers and learners; and the prospect of labelling or stigmatising students.

**29** While the official recognition of the need to avoid unintended consequences is reassuring, it was questioned how this would be achieved in practice. Attention was also drawn to the Report of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee on *Testing and Assessment*<sup>8</sup> which considered the consequences of high-stakes uses of testing in the context of national testing in England.

## Publication of the outcomes of standardised assessment

**30** The draft Framework states that the Scottish Government will consult on the publication of data and the format of information to ensure that there is appropriate access to information to drive improvement. This poses a question about who should be able to access the Framework-related data. There was discussion of the need for a publication strategy that avoids creating unhelpful comparison and competition between schools. It was asked whether there will be restrictions on publication, potentially placing limitations on the coverage of Freedom of Information legislation. The need for a holistic approach to the Framework was emphasised in order to avoid the establishment of one iconic measure.

## Developing a strategy for parental involvement

**31** It is recognised that parental engagement is crucial to making progress on improving the attainment of disadvantaged learners<sup>9</sup>. A key issue is how to reach those parents who are currently less engaged in their children's learning. It was acknowledged that the planned use of annual parental satisfaction questionnaires on their own are unlikely to achieve the goal of improving outcomes for children and young people. Participants were not aware of the existence of evidence on the impact of parental surveys on attainment. It was therefore suggested that in developing a strategy for parental involvement, the Framework should seek to capitalise on existing evidence of the key ingredients for successful parental involvement and focus on supporting schools to develop innovative approaches in working with parents in supporting their children's learning.

<sup>8</sup> Report [2008] of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee on *Testing and Assessment* <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmchilsch/169/16902.htm>

<sup>9</sup> *The Role of Aspiration, Attitudes and Behaviour in Closing the Educational Attainment Gap*; Carter-Wall and Whitfield; Joseph Rowntree Foundation; April 2012 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/role-aspirations-attitudes-and-behaviour-closing-educational-attainment-gap>

## **Additional Information**

Any enquiries about this Advice Paper should be addressed to Mr William Hardie, Secretary to the RSE's Education Committee (email: [evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk](mailto:evidenceadvice@royalsoced.org.uk)).

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