

EDUCATION AND SKILLS COMMITTEE

SCOTTISH NATIONAL STANDARDISED ASSESSMENTS INQUIRY

UPSTART SCOTLAND

The adverse effects of national standardised assessments on the primary school curriculum, pedagogical practices and children's educational potential

- 1) The move from SSLN to SNSA means that all Scottish children will be assessed annually in literacy/numeracy at P1, P4, P7 and S3, as opposed to national sampling. The introduction of SNSA is part of a raft of measures devised by the National Improvement Framework with the primary aim of closing the poverty-related attainment gap between children and young people from the least and most disadvantaged communities. In this submission we shall argue that – in the long run – it will have the opposite effect.
- 2) There is considerable international evidence that national standardised assessment of literacy/numeracy leads to 'unintended consequences and perverse incentives' in educational practice, e.g.
 - narrowing of the curriculum (the areas to be tested become educationally 'salient' and time/attention are devoted to them at the expense of other curricular areas)
 - in order to help their pupils achieve as high a standard as possible, teachers 'teach to the test', which leads them to over-focus on measurable (and often superficial) aspects of curricular content
 - increasing anxiety about 'test performance' among pupils, teachers and parents. (See also [Exam Factories](#), NUT 2015)

High and low stakes assessment

- 3) The Scottish Government claims that the SNSA will not result in these behaviours because it is not a 'high-stakes' assessment (e.g. children's responses to the tablet-based task are not marked right/wrong and their scores will not be published). Yet the First Minister's call to be judged on her record in education means that SNSA is recognised by the public and media as a key factor of a **high-stakes policy**. As such, it puts considerable pressure on local authorities, schools and teachers to maximise children's performance.
- 4) International evidence (e.g. [Goldstein](#), 2004), shows that the linking of assessments to performance targets also raises the stakes significantly for schools and teachers. In Scotland, aspirational 'benchmarks' for children's educational performance were published to accompany the SNSAs. These are, not surprisingly, interpreted as targets. Along with advice to teachers that 'there is no need to provide curriculum level judgements in all curriculum areas – stick to literacy and numeracy', the benchmarks will exacerbate the 'salience effect' and 'teaching to the test'.
- 5) The SNSA is task-based (i.e. based on children's responses to literacy/numeracy tasks presented on a tablet) so the types of behaviour required for success can be easily identified. As well as narrowing teacher's perceptions of the behaviours underpinning success in literacy/numeracy, the SNSA tasks are already informing

commercial organisations which produce materials/services aimed at helping parents improve their children's performance.

- 6) Despite assurances to the contrary, the SNSA therefore has all the hallmarks of a 'tests-and-targets' regime in which literacy and numeracy are salient.
- 7) In Australia, NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program: Literacy and Numeracy) was similarly labelled 'low-stakes' when introduced ten years ago. It is now acknowledged to encourage all the 'unintended consequences and perverse incentives' associated with the high-stakes tests-and-targets regimes in England and USA.

Poverty, well-being and attainment

- 8) The pressures associated with a 'tests-and-targets' regime are increasingly being linked to the explosion of mental health problems among children and young people (e.g. [New Statesman](#), Sept 2018).
- 9) There is a [well-established link](#) between mental health problems and growing up in poverty. There is also a significant [poverty-related attainment gap](#) in language and problem-solving when children are five years old, which persists throughout their educational lives. Pressure on low-achieving children from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve standardised performance targets in literacy and numeracy (from Primary 1) is likely to exacerbate mental health problems, which is unlikely to improve educational performance. It is therefore improbable that the introduction of SNSA will help to close the poverty-related attainment gap – indeed it is more likely to widen it.
- 10) This certainly appears to be the case in England and the USA, where the poverty gap has widened considerably over the last 20 years. In Australia, the introduction of NAPLAN has coincided with a steady decline in both educational achievement and educational equity in the OECD's PISA charts and in November 2018 the [poverty-related attainment gap in Sydney](#) was shown to have widened.
- 11) Upstart Scotland is particularly concerned about the long-term effects of beginning a 'SNSA-and benchmarks' regime in P1, when children are only four or five. We are therefore submitting evidence to the Independent Review of the P1 SNSA showing that – for children who are not developmentally ready for instruction in the three Rs -- an early focus on literacy and numeracy skills creates 'self-fulfilling prophecies', thus widening the attainment gap. We would be happy to make this evidence available to the Education Committee.

Curriculum for Excellence, SNSA and international trends in assessment

- 12) A fast-growing body of international research points to the significance of childhood well-being for long term physical and mental health. Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* therefore showed great prescience in identifying health and wellbeing as one of three important curricular strands that underpin children's educational success (the other two being literacy and numeracy). Unfortunately, the introduction of SNSA in literacy and numeracy and guidance on the related benchmarks quoted

in (4) above have now effectively downgraded the educational importance of health and well-being.

- 13) *CfE* also introduced an Early Level (straddling Nursery and P1 – i.e. three to six years) to bring Scotland into line with well-established early years practice in most of the world (see UNESCO definition) where formal schooling does not begin until children are six or seven (this includes the whole of mainland Europe). Introducing a SNSA for literacy and numeracy skills in P1, when children are four or five, is entirely inconsistent with high-quality early years pedagogy. As we explain in our submission to the Independent Review of the P1 SNSA, it is likely to be damaging for all children, but especially for disadvantaged children who are especially likely to suffer from developmental delay.
- 14) In response to the research mentioned in (12) above, educationally successful nations are moving away from high-pressure educational regimes, especially in early childhood. [Singapore](#) (school starting age: six) will next year make significant adaptations to its famously rigorous system of assessment, including the abandonment of all national testing of children under eight years old. Similarly, the Education Minister in [China](#) (school starting age: seven) recently ruled that kindergarten children should be learning through play, there must be no early attention to academic skills and no testing.

Little to gain and much to lose

- 15) 'Tests-and-targets' regimes in other English-speaking countries have not improved overall performance in international educational comparisons. However, the pressures associated with this type of educational approach appear to be associated with an escalation of mental health problems among children and young people.
- 16) The Scottish Government claims that the SNSA will provide useful diagnostic information for teachers in tackling children's literacy and numeracy difficulties. However, these difficulties are likely to be exacerbated by the 'unintended consequences and pernicious incentives' associated with national standardised assessment, especially since the SNSA begins in P1. Indeed, we argue in our submission to the Independent Review of the P1 SNSA that it is likely to *create* literacy and numeracy difficulties, particularly for disadvantaged children.
- 17) In the light of all the international evidence quoted above, it is difficult to understand the Scottish Government's decision to move from SSLN to SNSA at this time (particularly as sampling techniques have previously proved effective in monitoring national performance in the three Rs).
- 18) Upstart Scotland therefore recommends that the Scottish Government revert to the SSLN system of monitoring national trends in literacy/numeracy performance. If, by any chance, it can be proved that the diagnostic information provided by SNSA at P4, P7 and S1 cancels out the adverse effects of 'unintended consequences and perverse incentives', we still recommend that the P1SNSA be dropped. Not only does its very existence compromise the future mental health and educational chances of very young children but, according to the [British Educational Research Association](#) (2018), tablet-based standardised assessment of this age group is 'likely to produce results with little predictive power and dubious validity'.