

## **Report for Connect (formerly SPTC)**

### **Scottish National Standardised Assessments (SNSA)**

Following the introduction of the new standardised testing across Scottish Schools during 2017-18 concerns were soon being expressed by school staff and parents. Some of this consisted of anecdotal stories direct to members of the Connect board, and some started to appear on Social Media. As a result of concerns being expressed, and to garner more information, I agreed to ask via Twitter for teachers and parents to share any experiences or views about the tests and how they were being implemented. This was in May 2018.

There was quite a response via Direct Messages to myself on Twitter, as well as general open tweets across the platform. The responses kept coming in over the course of May, and it would seem these were heightened by the fact that many schools and local authorities were carrying out blanket testing in that month.

Government advice on this states:

***‘In consultation with the school and local authority, teachers will decide when within the school session is most appropriate time...Assessments can be carried out: during the school year providing diagnostic information on how individual children are progressing.... At the end of the school year to help inform teachers’ judgement...’*** (standerdisedassessment.gov.scot)

This raised a common concern for many teachers and school leaders, in that the decision on when the tests should take place had been taken by the local authority and then imposed on teachers and schools. Option one in the Government option, seemed to be one being rarely implemented.

## **FEEDBACK**

### **Support for learning teacher:**

SNSA aaaaahhhhhh! As you can imagine this is an extra to what we are all doing. Local authority has decided to do them in May, which is probably a good time of year.

Getting them all logged on, finding the website (the long name) and saving it in favourites takes time in itself. Logging onto the website is laborious for P1 as adult needs to do it as they are so long. OK for most P4 and P7.

This was a response from a support teacher who had spent a full week of her time administering the tests 'as teachers just don't have the time'.

The government guidance states '***The assessment should not require a change to the way you teach and there should be no additional workload for you or your children.***' It would seem this has not been the experience for many teachers and in many schools.

**Primary headteacher:**

One of the problems we faced is that the usernames include the child's middle names, so some of our kids are taking a long time to log in. One pupil has 5 middle names, time was up and he was still trying to log in. iPad froze on one pupil when on question 9, and when he logged out and back in again it had registered as complete. I phoned help desk and they said all his answers after question 9 were wrong. He will need to do the assessment over again.

**Primary DHT:**

Did 10 of the P1 literacy tests today and used senior pupils to help them log in, with headphones etc. Although the children coped really well with it I am not sure they really understood what was happening as it's not a familiar style of assessment in our school!

**Primary headteacher:**

P7 and P4 all done apart from absences. Will probably still be doing P1 at Christmas!!

**SFL teacher:**

I have seen some people posting on Twitter pictures of one adult sitting with one pupil at a desktop with a large monitor. Not a possible situation in many schools. We have too many other demands to sit one to one with each pupil.

**Class teacher:**

Most frustratingly, I am a class teacher administering the tests in class using 2 iPads and a desk top. Class of 27 = 81 tests. Huge impact on learning and teaching as you can imagine.

**Teacher:**

....to add to what I'm sure is a huge pile. I took some of our P1s (using mentor time I have for a student – a separate issue there) for their assessments today. We have three P1 teachers, who stayed with their classes, while three class teachers, two learning support teachers and three PSAs spent all day doing the assessments 1-1, roughly 20-30 mins per child per literacy test, plus 15-20 mins for numeracy. Aside from the straight salary cost there, imagine the opportunity cost!

**Headteacher:**

Who does my work while I collect meaningless data for HQ/Scot Govt?

**The overwhelming concern expressed was concerning the tests for P1 children. The complaints focused on the inappropriateness of subjecting very young children to testing, which flies in the face of all the research: they learn best through play at this age; we should not formalise learning too quickly for young learners; and they can offer little meaningful information about children who will all be developing at different rates. Many teachers and headteachers expressed concern at the impact the tests had had on very young learners, despite attempts to try and present them as a game and non-threatening.**

**Teacher:**

The tests themselves are (obviously) far too narrow to give a decent picture of a child's learning, but also seem generic rather than based on the taught P1 curriculum. I had one wee girl who was becoming so visibly crushed by it that I told her we would just leave it – I couldn't let her suffer for something so unrealistic. Most of the children were exhausted by them, especially literacy, and certainly schools shouldn't have P1 children doing both in one sitting. I have two primary age daughters and if they were still in P1 I'd be withdrawing them from these. My opinion is that all the planned primary tests are at best unnecessary and possibly detrimental, but the P1 test seems to be actively harmful and a phenomenal drain on resources to no obvious benefit to the learners.

## **Primary HT:**

Highlights of the P1 SNSA reading test included a passage on hummingbirds! Hummingbirds??? Vocabulary included hover and perch. It also included a question asking what an alternative word for 'beak' was. So testing general knowledge then? It is impossible to do with a class of P1. SMT now doing individually, with all 72 P1s!!! Aaarghhh!!

## **SFL Teacher:**

P1 pupils need good competent keyboard/generic skills to complete assessments (click and drag, do not double click, etc.) Our screens do not show the 'Next' key unless pupils scroll down to find it.

P1 pupils have a lot of pointer movements to make every time they go to the next screen (go to top left to read out instructions then read our questions and possible answers, now find the 'next' button etc.)'

## **Further comments from Teachers:**

- P1 reading requires them to read or hear about four sections of a story before they answer questions – lots of memory rather than find the answer in the text.
- Lots of words and names used in P1 assessments that are not decodable using Alphabetic Codes taught in P1.
- P1 pupils need lots of support to get through the practice and two assessments. We do not have time to do 1-1 support so independent working through them digitally may not give correct measure against benchmarks.
- I was demented this morning. Getting P1s set up. Broken headphones, notebooks with no audio! Eventually got them all working independently and keeping them happy. No idea how they have done. What a palaver! Glad I am retiring early after next session.
- I have observed P1s taken into unfamiliar room, with unfamiliar supply teacher to do tests. Supply teacher told me herself one of the pupil's eyes filled with tears. I have observed another P1 (recommended that they stay in pre-school but rejected by parents) looked at me with a terrified look as they entered the room for testing.

Some of these narratives were quite disturbing in their description of the impact for our very youngest learners, but they do give a flavour of the concerns being expressed by some teachers and headteachers.

As I said earlier, I received a stream of responses during May and before schools went on holiday for the summer. These have continued over the summer and the groundswell against the P1 testing in particular has grown, not helped by the apparent confusion in advice and response from the government and its agencies.

Whilst you can acknowledge that this was the first year of the tests and there may well be teething problems, the level of concern continues to grow. Some of the concerns had been expressed before the tests were introduced by the Government's own panel of independent educational advisors and others in the profession. Others are to do with the tests themselves and their administration.

I would sum up the major issues being expressed as follows:

- The appropriateness of such testing for young learners
- The impact on morale, confidence and self-esteem of young learners
- The validity of the results and their interpretation
- The fact that, although the government says otherwise, they do not reflect the principles of Curriculum for Excellence, nor the taught curriculum
- The further narrowing of the curriculum and 'teaching to the test' if they are to be used as an accountability measure
- The mixed approaches being experienced in their application, and different levels of support being given
- The workload and time implications for teachers and schools, and time taken away from learning and teaching
- The fact that teachers are saying the tests are not telling them anything they don't know already about learners
- The confusion around whether the tests are 'mandatory' and the impact this may have on school and parent relationships
- How the test results will be used by local authorities, HMIE and government as an accountability measure
- The inappropriateness of the content of many of the test questions

- The requirement for IT skills which are often not present in such young children
- Tests being presented as measuring literacy and numeracy, when they can only measure aspects of these
- A lack of suitable hardware and infrastructure in many schools to support the application of tests
- Technical problems with the tests themselves
- The 'blanket-testing' approach being adopted by most LAs

Because of LAs and schools blanket testing whole classes and Year groups, it has caused teachers and schools to just get them over with as quickly as possible, to detriment of some pupils and the validity of the results? As they are seen as just another add-on to workload, contributing little to understanding learners and where they are in their learning, they are viewed by many as another unnecessary chore driven by political agendas, not what is best for young learners.

Many people did not respond, or will not, because they are afraid of repercussions from their local authority or others. Quite a few teachers have said they did not feel the tests were too stressful for the children, but still queried their usefulness. We must remember also that the vast majority of teachers are still not on Twitter. I am still hearing stories about the negative impact of the tests, and the associated accountability agendas, are having in schools and especially P1 teachers. Teachers are already being told they have to spend less time on play or outdoors to make sure children achieve benchmarks by end of year, and headteachers are being asked how they are going to improve percentages in some schools!

**George Gilchrist**