

Education and Skills Committee**6th Meeting, 2019 (Session 5), 20th February 2019****SNSA inquiry - focus group with teachers and union representatives**

Members met with a small group of teachers and teaching union representatives (from NASUWT and EIS) on Wednesday 6 February (8 attendees). This included three primary teachers, one of which was a headteacher, and a secondary teacher (Head of English). Members present were Clare Adamson (Convener), Alasdair Allan, Ross Greer, Oliver Mundell and Liz Smith.

Usefulness of information generated by SNSAs

Two teachers suggested that it was quite useful alongside other assessments they do as a matter of course. When asked if there was a value added by the SNSAs the responses suggested it was something else, amongst other measures, to back their professional judgement. The secondary teacher and the headteacher were fairly positive about the accuracy of the data that they have seen. A number of attendees suggested it was more valuable to be having time interacting with their pupils. It was suggested that generally experienced teachers know where pupils are in terms of assessing them against CFE levels. One teacher suggested that on balance the SNSAs were not required.

One attendee suggested the SNSAs had a narrow focus and so were not particularly helpful in identifying ability and therefore P7 data could not offer any steer as to which subjects or qualifications an individual might perform well in, for example when choosing National 3, 4 or 5.

The secondary teacher suggested there were clear advantages for secondary teachers over primary teachers in assessing students as they were considering data on students set against the qualifications they were working towards.

Timing of SNSAs

Two teachers suggested their schools were instructed by the local authority to do the assessments in May which was not diagnostically helpful for the classroom teacher administering the assessments. It can then be a challenge to find time at the start of the next school year for the pupil's next teacher to find time to interpret the results and the information may be a little out of date. One teacher said teachers in their school had not been informed the assessments were taking place, an attainment adviser took the pupils to sit them. In relation to P7 data this could not be analysed in time to use it in the academic year and this information was not necessarily passed on to the secondary school. The headteacher suggested their local authority had not directed the school, the school decided to do P1 assessments in March.

Local authority and school level assessments

An EIS representative suggested that assessments pre-dating SNSAs were not uniform, the application across the country was patchy with a lot of schools rejecting the idea in favour of formative assessment.

Teaching time

One attendee assumed the working time agreement would be revisited if the SNSAs remained in place due to the time required to complete them. A number of attendees suggested that what was also needed was more time for moderation, to let teachers get together to discuss individual pupils.

Training

Two of the teachers suggested they and colleagues in their schools had not received training on the SNSAs. A Committee member suggested training was available online and asked if teachers had accessed it. Three had not and one said the webinars are 'to be confirmed' on the website. There was agreement more time was vital as other time pressures means that the training is not completed in their schools. The headteacher had arranged for a session of training with teachers but poor internet connections and technology meant half of the meeting was spent trying to support the training software on the school's system.

Resources

Technology was raised by a number of teachers, including that the limited number of computers needed for computing and other classes made scheduling blocks of assessments at a set time a necessity to ensure access to computers. One of the members asked whether the same issues applied to other assessments such as CEM assessments and the teachers who had or currently use other assessments confirmed the same issues applied.

The secondary teacher said their school had dealt with the issue of access to computers by purchasing 30 ipads which S3 pupils were adept at using. On that basis the teacher and his colleagues used the time for marking. Two primary teachers suggested they were having a different experience, one suggesting their school had 70% pupils from SIMD 1 and 2 who do not tend to have access to computers at home, so sitting the assessment on a computer at P1 does not feel normal and can be daunting. The primary headteacher suggested pupils took the assessments in the corner of the class area so they did not feel they were being led away for a test. This was possible in their school as it has smaller class sizes. The NASUWT representative suggested the policy implementation felt rushed, for example technology and training was not in place in advance of implementation.

Additional Support Needs

The headteacher had watched some students take the assessments including one with additional support needs, and saw a young girl being hesitant and taking a long time to take the assessment and then guessing answers quickly. On that basis the headteacher was able to understand why the results were not reflective of that particular pupil's abilities. Two primary teachers suggested that if they had the discretion they would not make pupils with

English as a second language sit the assessments. The secondary teacher said they were from an inclusion school and found that the technology SNSAs used was a much bigger issue for those with additional support needs.

National data

One member asked if this data is not used to assess inequalities and progress narrowing the gap, what data is useful? The EIS representative suggested taking the time used for the assessments and putting the effort towards the 'formative agenda' would be preferable. This included freeing up time for teacher moderation. ACEL data should be sufficient for the Government in their view. They also suggested SSLN had been a good assessment tool and low stakes. They said that the political focus on SNSAs meant that their significance, given the small amount of the curriculum they cover, had been forgotten. SNSAs are not an overall picture of a child's attainment (for example they cannot assess writing ability as they are on a computer).

Low stakes / high stakes

When asked whether teachers considered the tests low stakes or high stakes, a number of teachers supported the idea it depended where you are in Scotland in terms of deprivation. One teacher said in their school, with a relatively deprived catchment, staff did not know the SNSAs were happening as the school did not want the children to know in advance and worry about it. Another teacher supported this observation and also suggested that 'magnet' schools where parents are keen to send their children can treat assessments more as high stakes. The secondary teacher in a relatively affluent area suggested their school was not treating assessments in this way but some parents may do so.

The EIS representative suggested teacher feedback through their survey work on the assessments reflected that whether it was perceived as low or high stakes was dependant on how people considered the data could be used. Examples they were aware of included schools using P7 SNSA results to decide who goes into which S1 maths set. They highlighted this makes assessments medium stakes at least and that pupils had a very low chance of moving set once allocated to one.

The secondary teacher echoed the point on how the data is used being important. They had some reservations on how senior management teams in schools would interpret them, and more concerns about local authority level interpretation and use of data. The possibility of data being published under FOI, the influence of concerns on big online forums such as Mumsnet was, in their view, having an unsettling impact on teaching colleagues at their school. The headteacher suggested if taken at different times and the data is used in different ways then it is not a 'standardised' assessment.

Parents / pupils

When asked whether teachers were sharing information with parents the teachers suggested they were not planning to do so, beyond parents evening more general discussions on overall performance. They agreed without

context the results would be misleading for pupils and could be misconstrued making the results damaging rather than helpful.

Roz Thomson
Clerk to the Committee
13 February 2019