

SELMAS response to National Improvement Framework Consultation



Scottish Educational Leadership
Management and Administration Society

1. Introduction

A sub-group Committee gathered under the auspices of the Scottish Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society (SELMAS), on October 6th 2015 to consider the National Improvement Framework. The comments contained in this paper reflect the discussion that took place. In the time available it has not been possible to consult more widely with colleagues who attend SELMAS events, so this should not be assumed to represent the views of SELMAS, but only those of the sub-group.

2. General comments on the Framework

Whilst most of the comments focus on what we considered were gaps in the document or areas with which we disagreed, it should be acknowledged that the Improvement Strategy is welcomed in principle, in that it will help to lend focus to the work of the majority of educational leaders and teachers working within Scottish education.

The group was in agreement with the vision as expressed, of raising attainment and achievement for every child and achieving equity.

The key priorities, of focusing on reading, writing and numeracy, closing the attainment gap, improving young people's health and wellbeing and ensuring sustained improvements in school leaver destinations would indeed contribute to achieving the vision. These are objectives with which few would disagree and which should certainly be encapsulated in a document such as this that states unequivocally the aspirations of the Scottish education community for every young Scot.

The group commented that it would have been very helpful had the report included a note of the publications, and the supporting research, which had been consulted in putting the Framework together.

3. Time frame for Consultation

Reaching agreement on a Framework in which everyone with an interest in Scottish education can feel a degree of ownership is in itself a worthwhile exercise; it can potentially stimulate debate and deepen understanding about our aspirations for young people and how we set about achieving them. It could enable politicians and policy makers to feel with a degree of confidence that their direction of travel was in harmony with the wishes of the people they represent. In this context, and given the importance of the Framework, the group felt that the consultation period was very short and that this potentially passed-up an opportunity to engage fully with all educators, with learners, with parents and families, with employers and with the wider community in discussing the development and direction in which Scottish education is moving and should be progressing.

4. Curriculum for Excellence – Progress towards meeting its objectives

In the First Minister's introduction and within the body of the draft document reference is made to the success of Curriculum for Excellence and the contribution it has made in transforming

children's learning, confidence and motivation. The group felt that it was time to stop making this sweeping assertion about Curriculum for Excellence and to present research and other relevant evidence, unequivocally to demonstrate increased achievement for the majority of young people, a narrowing of the achievement gap, increased equity and greater satisfaction amongst parents and carers and employers that Curriculum for Excellence has had its intended impact. It would also be desirable to show that the teaching profession is comfortable with its role in delivering the curriculum and feels on top of its demands.

5. General comment on the structure of the Framework

As stated earlier, the broad thrust of the framework is welcomed. It is appropriate that it should set out the aspirations for Scotland's children and young people, the milestones towards achieving these and the means by which progress will be measured. Nevertheless, we felt that the Framework ought to have more to say about *how* these ambitions will be met. We can see, for example, how by the increased focus on school improvement, involving schools and parents in agreeing and evaluating school improvement plans, we will ensure that more schools become good or better at self-evaluation, but how will this translate into increased attainment and achievement? Specifically, what will we do to improve literacy and numeracy, which the First Minister recently identified as a challenging area and one in which insufficient progress has been made? This is commented upon under the heading of teachers' professionalism, but it is unclear what is intended.

We will measure for evidence of impact, but what will we do differently to meet the standards set? The same might be said of narrowing the achievement gap, improving children's health and wellbeing and improving opportunities for school leavers. These are not new challenges for Scotland's teachers. If we assume that they are doing their best, within existing resources, both in terms of finance and teacher numbers, to enhance children's life chances in each of these areas, what will be done *differently* and how will teachers be supported in meeting the aspirations which we all share?

6. School Leadership

As stated in Teaching Scotland's Future and widely acknowledged, the group felt strongly that the quality of leadership was a cornerstone for improvement. This is acknowledged but receives scant coverage in the draft Framework. School leadership is probably the key aspect in terms of its impact on children's learning, but this should be seen in the wider context, for state schools, of authority leadership and political leadership at local and national levels. The central role of the Scottish College for Educational Leadership is not referenced in the Framework.

A wider consideration, perhaps something of a red herring in terms of agreeing a National Framework and moving forward in the short term, is to raise the issue of whether Scottish school education requires to be administered and led by 32 different local authorities. In what way does this enhance either consistency or efficiency? We also considered the changing expectations of the role of headteachers, and reflected on the recommendations which emerged in last years *By Diverse Means* report on this theme. Although these may be considered longer term considerations, they may well emerge in the context of the debate which will accompany implementation of the Framework.

7. Assessment of Children's Progress

As stated in the draft Framework, the use of standardised tests is common across authorities and the point is well made that the different approaches do not facilitate data sharing or analysis at

national level. However, it was not without reason that Curriculum for Excellence was not intended to be assessment led and there is a danger that a return to a national system of standardised testing will result in our once again experiencing some of the pitfalls encountered previously, such as the drawing up of league tables by the press and the impact that can have on school morale, including the morale of young people, parental choice and employer bias.

In addition, the pressure of preparing children for national tests puts pressure on teachers to focus on the demands of the test rather than on the broader aspirations of Curriculum for Excellence. On balance, it is perhaps preferable that a variety of approaches makes it difficult to draw invidious comparisons. There are other ways of conducting research to demonstrate progress and with the support of the universities these might yield more reliable information. The key question to be applied in relation to a national approach to standardised testing is “Will it close the gap?”

The group acknowledged the arguments considering the importance of developing literacy and numeracy skills in children and young people, but regretted that there was only passing reference made in the framework to other aspects of pupil development. Evidence suggests that if only literacy and numeracy are subjected to National Testing, then there is a danger that creativity, health and well-being, skills development, aspiration and confidence, etc will be seen by pupils, teachers and parents as less important.

Also it would be helpful to see the research which examines the link between measuring progress, and improving performance.

8. Teachers’ Professional Development

The group welcomed the plans to increase access for teachers to enhanced professional development opportunities. This should be framed in the context of Teachers’ Professional Update. However, it should be acknowledged that professional development is about much more than obtaining qualifications or indeed the support of ‘experts’. School staffs have within them a vast array of skills and talents, which emerge when teachers have opportunities to work and learn together within and across schools and sectors. This is a cost effective model for professional development and it is one which enables teachers to exercise autonomy rather than develop dependency.

There is a case too, within the Framework, for addressing the issue of teacher competence and providing reassurance to the wider community that this is an issue which is taken seriously at national, authority and school levels.

9. Areas to be considered for inclusion in the Framework

The group felt that there were significant omissions from the draft, or aspects that deserved amplification. Not having the time available to discuss these in depth, we listed them for consideration:

- as stated earlier, evidence that Curriculum for Excellence is having its intended impact;
- the importance of *early intervention* and support for learning;
- the critical importance of *early years* education and the need for development of that sector as a priority;
- the importance of *partnership*: between schools, across all sectors and with other agencies and stakeholders, such as parents and carers and families, employers and further and higher educational interests;

- amplification to promote a shared understanding of *health and wellbeing*, what this involves and the potential contribution and responsibilities of all including (partnership with) parents and carers;
- teacher confidence, competence and morale;
- the need to be more specific about *skills development* and the assessment of skills;
- the connection to *Developing Scotland's Young Workforce*.

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