Response to the Draft National Improvement Framework for Scottish Education  
School of Education, University of Stirling

Introduction

The draft National Improvement Framework (NIF) is an attempt to provide a coherent strategic overview of educational policy, aimed at improving learning outcomes for all Scotland’s children. While we recognise the importance of this and support its aims fully, in this document we wish to draw attention to a number of significant caveats in relation to the proposed methods for achieving them. The proposed NIF represents a significant initiative in educational policy, and it is important to recognise its attendant educational, social, economic and political possibilities and risks.

Rationale

At present the NIF provides no clear rationale for the proposed changes. No data/evidence is presented, there is no articulation of the implied issues that are being addressed, and no literature or other scientific substantiation is mentioned to support the various proposals.

We suggest that an opening section be added to the NIF to explain the issues more precisely with some evidence (this should be easily pulled together from the Scottish Government’s existing data). The ‘attainment gap’ is simply announced as though all readers will understand what exactly is understood to comprise ‘attainment’, what and where is the issue with attainment, and where Scotland is now in addressing the same issues that CfE was supposed to address.

The introductory section of the NIF ought to provide the rationale for this particular set of proposals. If not research-based, or borrowed as a successful model from elsewhere, what has informed this design?

Curriculum for Excellence

The NIF makes a number of claims in relation to Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). First Minister Nicola Sturgeon says that CfE has transformed the quality of children’s learning and increased their motivation and confidence. While no clear evidence base exists yet for such claims, there is a considerable body of evidence from around the world which, taken together, indicates a danger that the aims of CfE (to offer a broad general education within the context of school-based curriculum development) could be undermined by the main tenets of the NIF. For instance, evidence has emerged from Australia of the potential for high stakes testing, such as that proposed in the draft NIF, to damage and undermine curricula which are similar to CfE. A powerful example is provided by the Queensland New Basics curriculum, which has been effectively undermined by the new NAPLAN testing regime (Lingard and McGregor 2013).

Closing the gap and school improvement

The NIF does not define clearly what is meant by ‘the attainment gap’. Hence, the mantra ‘closing the gap’ reduces what is a complex set of issues around educational, social and economic disadvantage to an easily identifiable slogan with the hope that these issues will be amenable to equally short-term solutions. This is to reduce the entrenched and intractable nature of such deeply engrained societal problems to possibly over-simplistic educational solutions. The rationale behind the proposals should
therefore be developed more fully and be based on sound evidence rather than over-generalised assertion.

Testing

While drawing on the OECD report, *Synergies for better learning* (OECD 2013), the framework ignores the research evidence around similar policies centred on high stakes pupil testing. In particular, evaluations of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) in the USA (see e.g. Berliner 2011, Dee and Jacob 2011, Hursh 2005, Nichols and Berliner 2007); and educational policy introduced by the Labour Government in England (e.g. Alexander 2011, West 2010) are highly critical of the effects of these respective policies. While research indicates that NCLB has resulted in large gains for some groups of pupils, the gains for the most economically disadvantaged have been much more modest and thus NCLB has made ‘minimal headway’ in closing the attainment gap (Dee and Jacob 2011). In England, Alexander (2011) claims that, throughout the period of major school reforms which introduced testing, the attainment gap persisted in reading, maths and science.

Regimes of high-stakes testing are known to give rise to unintended/unwanted outcomes. Research indicates (see, for example, in the US, Amrein and Berliner 2002; in Australia, Klenowski and Wyatt-Smith 2012, Thompson and Harbaugh 2013; in England, Alexander 2011) that such unwanted/unintended outcomes include:

- improvements in test results do not necessarily reflect improvements in learning and teaching.
- it is questionable whether literacy and numeracy alone constitute a valid measure of pupil learning across the curriculum or in relation to the skills needed for employment and citizenship.
- testing may result in lowered motivation and disengagement with learning among some groups of pupils.
- testing may result in a narrowing of curriculum and the widely recognised phenomenon of ‘teaching to the test’.
- testing itself can lead to stress and anxiety in pupils which potentially undermines other aims of the NIF in relation to pupils’ health and wellbeing

The NIF acknowledges that testing may give rise to unwanted outcomes and states that the results of the proposed tests will be used for diagnostic purposes only. This gives rise to a tension between the developmental and accountability functions of the NIF which will be difficult to reconcile. Further, such testing for diagnostic purposes is known to be highly complex, giving rise to methodological issues around the validity and reliability of the testing regime.

Moreover, Nicola Sturgeon has conceded that a consequence of the release of data to the media may result in the generation of league tables1. While such tables will be unofficial they are nonetheless likely to have considerable impact through parental influence and result in the unwanted outcomes coming to the fore.

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Pupils’ health and well-being

It is acknowledged that a further aim of the NIF is to develop wider measures to assess pupils’ health and well-being. We welcome this focus on pupil welfare, but question how such measures will be developed. We also note a tension between this educational aim and the focus on testing which is reported as having the potential to give rise to adverse effects on mental health (Alexander 2011).

Feasibility and sustainability

The document does not mention feasibility and sustainability, nor does it indicate timelines for the introduction of the proposed activities. Hargreaves and Fink (2004) are among those who stress the problems that have been caused by school improvement efforts implemented with unrealistically short timelines. Moreover, these authors emphasize that sustainable school change recognizes and cultivates many kinds of excellence in learning, teaching and leading and they aver that sustainable change ‘does not impose standardized templates on everyone’ (p.9).

There are a number of potential risks and costs posed by these proposals. It is unclear whether these have been scoped and sufficient supports put in place to address them. (For example, the aim for all headteachers to have met the Standard for Headship by 2018/19). Further work should be undertaken to scope these costs.

System influence on attainment

The document seems to emphasise the role of individual teachers and headteachers. Of course these are important, and an emphasis on raising professional capacity is to be welcomed. But in addition, school improvement research (Hargreaves 2006, Priestley et al 2015) emphasises that key issues are the culture and support of the particular system in which the staff practise, and the need for systems thinking and shared responsibility. The NIF should therefore more explicitly consider the structures and cultures which frame professional action as well as professional capacity. This includes considering how accountability frameworks can disable professional practice.

In addition, research cautions that usage of data in education, such as that specified in the NIF, is a complex endeavour. If data are not used very carefully, and in a system context, they may negatively affect the quality of pedagogy, learning and student outcomes (Grek & Ozga 2010). Large studies of schools, using data to support school improvement initiatives, have found that school systems as a whole play a critical role in supporting schools and educators to use data effectively (Farrell 2015). The above risks can be summed up by ‘Campbell’s Law’ (Campbell 1979) which states that: ‘The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor’.

The wider educational sector

The focus in the document is on the school sector. However, CfE is designed to provide education from 3-18. This raises the question of how other parts of the system, for example colleges, will be involved in contributing to the goals of the NIF.
Role of the universities

The NIF envisages only a minimal role for universities in supporting the drive for improved learning for pupils which centres on an increased focus in ITE on literacy and numeracy. The importance of data literacy is also acknowledged in the NIF and we recognise this as a key area of professional learning.

It should be recognised that universities are able to play a more significant role through providing high quality research evidence and expertise to inform policy. In addition, universities can contribute to the development of the ‘extended professional’ (Donaldson, 2010) through master’s level qualifications.

Moreover, the initiatives heralded in the NIF require the development of a sustained and systematic research agenda, to provide an evidence base against which they can be evaluated, to scope risks and to mitigate those risks. The expertise to conduct such research lies in the universities.

We note, finally, that the timescale, within which the consultation is to be carried out, allows only very limited scope for making substantive changes. We therefore suggest that the Scottish Government appoint, through the Scottish Teacher Education Committee (STEC), a group of experts who can provide a research-informed view on the proposal. This could be a one-time meeting, if time is short. This would enable the authors of the NIF to claim that it has been subject to consideration by education experts.
Note

This response was developed by Professor Cate Watson, following consultation with Dr Valerie Drew, Professor Richard Edwards, Professor Tara Fenwick, Dr Maureen Michael, Professor Mark Priestley and Dr Joseph Smith.

References


