GL Assessment Submission to the Scottish Education and Culture Committee Inquiry into the Educational Attainment Gap – Role of the Third and Private Sectors

GL Assessment is the leading provider of formative assessments to UK schools.

We specialise in literacy, numeracy, reasoning, SEN and attitudinal assessments, and have relationships with over a third of primary schools and over half of secondary schools in the UK. Our assessments provide teachers with the tools they require to help raise standards in education, especially for the most disadvantaged pupils.

Tests are nationally standardised, giving measures such as standard age scores, and include parental reporting where appropriate. GL Assessment has delivered over 7 million online tests to schools in the UK and worldwide and our assessments include the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT), the New Group Reading Test (NGRT) and the new Progress Test Series for English, maths and science.

We provide training and continual professional development for teachers in the most effective use of formative assessments and the interpretation and analysis of assessment data. A particular emphasis is placed on the ‘triangulation’ methodology of assessment which is used by many schools that have good assessment practices. This methodology combines the use of summative and formative assessments alongside teachers’ experiences and views of pupils to most accurately assess the progress of pupils. It is our view that the comprehensive use of formative assessments underpins this process.

Over thirty years, we have established a supportive and trusted relationship with schools in Scotland and across the UK, as well as internationally. We regularly contribute to policy discussion and have provided advice to Whitehall and the devolved administrations on a range of assessment policy issues. Schools value our independent assessments because they provide a reliable, unobtrusive and cost effective means to best target educational interventions and therefore improve educational outcomes.

Philosophy of assessment

GL Assessment has a distinct philosophy of good assessment practice. We believe in a ‘whole pupil’ approach, examining an individual’s attitude, ability and attainment to provide a complete understanding of their needs. This enables schools and colleges to get to know each pupil as an individual, understanding their strengths, areas where they might need support and intervention, and removing any obstacles that are impacting negatively on attainment. Crucially, this philosophy places the individual pupil at the very heart of a school’s programme of assessment.

We view assessment as a continuous process that should include the use of formative assessments to monitor progress and inform the personalisation of teaching and learning for individual young people, helping to ensure the best possible educational outcomes in summative assessments. This process should include baseline checks to establish a pupil’s current and potential attainment, ongoing formative assessment and regular interventions from teachers to adapt learning strategies.
Raising standards and achievement for disadvantaged pupils: A comprehensive and consistent programme of assessment

GL Assessment warmly welcomes the Education and Culture Committee’s focus on addressing the educational attainment gap in Scotland. We have also welcomed the Scottish Government’s ongoing attempts to address this issue. GL Assessment is keen to play an active role in the discussions about the educational outcomes of disadvantaged pupils and bridging the attainment gap between them and their peers.

The private sector can play a significant role in this process, providing expertise and resources for schools that local authorities do not have the capacity to develop and supply. GL Assessment’s work in this area is particularly focused on the lowest attaining pupils and is based on the principle that if you can raise the performance of this group, all students in a class will benefit.

We do not believe that the third and private sectors should encroach on the responsibilities of local authorities, but rather support their work, much in the same way that formative assessments do not replace teacher observation and experience, but support it.

Comprehensive and consistent programmes of formative assessment from GL Assessment or other assessment publishers provide a means through which teachers can highlight factors which prevent, and target interventions to improve, educational attainment. These assessments should therefore form a cornerstone of any educational strategy to bridge the gap highlighted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2014. Schools should be encouraged to institute programmes of regular formative assessment to help their poorer pupils. Indeed, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report into bridging the attainment gap in Scottish education specifically highlights the value of “evidence-based approaches [to] reduce the attainment gap……based on timely, relevant data.”

For example, it is important that teachers are equipped to accurately measure the potential of pupils and to identify areas of strength and weakness. Reasoning assessments are already used by many schools in Scotland to achieve this. One such assessment is the Cognitive Abilities Test (CAT); the benefits of using CAT to track pupil progress were highlighted in the 2013 Welsh Government report Priority review: Effective pupil tracking, in which it was labelled an “[example] of effective practice”. CAT cannot be prepared for as it measures underlying reasoning abilities and therefore provides schools with a comprehensive profile of a pupil’s developed abilities through verbal, non-verbal, quantitative and spatial reasoning tests. It provides schools with a solid basis for introducing targeted interventions to improve pupil attainment and is often used in conjunction with other formative assessments. Results include statistically reliable indicators for a student’s future summative assessment results, helping teachers to set achievable but challenging targets and identify quickly if progress has halted.

This is particularly important regarding English and maths, as results in these subjects will have a significant bearing on a young person’s future employability. Regular formative assessments in literacy and numeracy should therefore be at the heart of any programme of assessment. Progress in Maths (PIM) and Progress in English (PIE) assess attainment as well as levels of ability. By comparing the results of these assessments to CAT scores, teachers can see if and where pupils are not yet achieving standards expected of them. They can then implement strategies to bring about improvements to help pupils achieve their potential.

In 2013, the Northern Ireland Education and Training Inspectorate Review of computer-based assessments in primary schools showed that many schools in the country felt that alternative assessments such as PIE and PIM

---

were more robust than the new Northern Ireland Literacy Assessment (NILA) and Northern Ireland Numeracy Assessment (NILA). Indeed, the report found that 91% of respondents were using PIE and 98% using PIM.

Holy Family Nursery and Primary School in Derry, Northern Ireland is an urban school, 64% of whose 450 pupils aged 3 to 11 years are on free school meals (FSM). Approximately 30% of pupils require additional support with their learning. Whilst not a Scottish school, its experiences of using CAT, PIM and PIE do provide a useful insight into the benefits of using a range of formative assessments to raise the educational attainment of disadvantaged pupils.

The school currently tests pupils in May each year using the three assessments. The teaching staff use their own experience and the assessments to identify aspects of the curriculum that the pupils have found challenging and the skills that need to be developed further. The school then sets targets and defines strategies to ensure these are met.

Holy Family has found that one of the most significant benefits of assessing all cohorts in this way is being able to spot school-wide issues. The school can then implement whole school action plans, professional development programmes for staff, invest in relevant text books and resources, and set targets in subsequent years related to the specific problem.

Starting early: Age-appropriate assessments

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report into closing the attainment gap in Scottish education states that:

_The gap between children from low-income and high-income households starts early. By age 5, it is 10–13 months. Lower attainment in literacy and numeracy is linked to deprivation throughout primary school. By age 12–14 (S2), pupils from better-off areas are more than twice as likely as those from the most deprived areas to do well in numeracy._

In the _Rise Review_ of September 2013 (‘How intake and other external factors affect school performance’), one of three major considerations for policymakers was identified as ‘equality in attainment on entry to school’. The paper states that ‘the later that educational inequality is left, the more difficult it becomes to reduce.’ Many of GL Assessment’s tests are specifically designed to be used with the very youngest age groups and provide a secure, age-appropriate way of anticipating and addressing issues which, if left unchecked, could severely damage a child’s development. The paper also highlights the need for baseline checks in or before Reception; assessments such as those offered by GL Assessment allow early years providers to take the first step towards comprehensive data collection and analysis.

Assessments should be tailored to the needs of the age group, focusing on capability rather than on learned ability. Because these are for such young children, we are careful to design assessments which, although thorough, are not too daunting or demanding. They involve informal interactions between child and adult, meaning that effective communication by the adult plays a vital role in the end result. The aim is not to subject the child to unnecessary tests, but to create a dialogue which the child can actively enjoy. One-to-one experiences like this can highlight difficulties in expression and communication; if these are not supported at this vital early stage, children can struggle in later education.

---

For example, the York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension (YARC) sound deletion and sound isolation tasks is a test of phonic awareness for non-readers that is widely used in Scotland. Assessments of this type have been shown to offer an early indication of whether a child will struggle with phonics at a later stage.

The YARC tests have been developed specifically for very young learners and are administered one-to-one. YARC has been used by The City of Edinburgh Council across its primary, secondary and special schools to support reading development, in partnership with key services, such as Speech and Language Therapists and Educational Psychologists. The Council’s interventions are aimed at meeting the needs of learners who require additional opportunities and support to succeed in reading and writing, in particular the lowest attaining 20% and the most disadvantaged learners.

Identifying root causes of barriers to achievement

As part of efforts to raise attainment for disadvantaged Scottish pupils, it is important that schools consider the barriers that some disadvantaged children face to doing well at school, beside the academic ones discussed above. Pupils’ home life, the support that they receive beyond the school gates and their self-esteem can all have a massive bearing on their performance in the classroom. The impact of many of these factors is more acute for disadvantaged pupils and so particular attention needs to be paid to ensuring that they are identified and addressed. GL Assessment places great emphasis on helping schools to identify these barriers, so that appropriate interventions can be made.

One such tool which we work with schools to use is the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) attitudinal survey, which identifies the root causes of disengagement or behavioural problems amongst young people, and is widely used in England to demonstrate the impact of Pupil Premium funding for disadvantaged pupils. The survey is comprised of short psychometric statements that feed into nine attitudinal factors linked to key educational goals. These include how well a young person is responding to a programme of training or study, how prepared they are to learn and their attitude towards participation. A low score in any factor can accurately pinpoint negative attitudes that may not otherwise be apparent and allows education providers to identify the root causes of the poor behaviours that can lead to disengagement from education.

The Hereford Academy is based in an area with a high level of deprivation. 39% of students have a recognised special educational need and yet the school was rated ‘good with outstanding features’ by Ofsted in June 2011. The Academy is using the PASS attitudinal survey to gain an insight into any emotional obstacles holding their students back, to tailor effective interventions and then to measure their impact. The Academy assesses the whole school with PASS once a year, and in general can predict the 15 or so pupils that are likely to score poorly. The school’s Intervention Team holds a panel meeting every week and uses data from PASS to inform discussions of what needs to be done as well as measure the work in progress.

Destination Guidance

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report highlights the fact that, “Children from deprived households leave school earlier” and “Low attainment is strongly linked to destinations after school, with long-term effects on job prospects.”

We place a strong emphasis on the need to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds children to stay in education and move into work, particularly through better careers advice. Again, this is an objective which can be

---

supported by the appropriate use of consistent and comprehensive formative assessments. Through accurate and granular educational assessment, young people with specific strengths can be identified and directed towards an appropriate academic or vocational route – perhaps one which they had not previously considered - ensuring that all pupils are given the advice and support to succeed.

**Monitoring and evaluating efforts to bridge the attainment gap**

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation calls upon school management teams to “Monitor how new initiatives affect the gap.” We wholly support this recommendation; it is crucial that schools understand the true impact of, and are held to account for, interventions that they make. Formative assessments allow schools and governors to measure the success of interventions introduced on the back of initial testing and to highlight the interventions that work best.

By using funding to establish a comprehensive assessment regime, schools are able to provide disadvantaged pupils with a guaranteed level of additional help whilst benefitting the whole school. Underachieving pupils can affect the attainment of all pupils as they require extra attention from teachers and more resources. By constituting an effective programme of assessment, both disadvantaged pupils and their peers can achieve better progress.

The data produced by the formative assessments which we offer can be broken down into different categories such as gender and, most pertinently, if a pupil is disadvantaged. Using this data, schools should be required to baseline, demonstrate the progress of and explain what they have done to assist disadvantaged pupils.

In February 2013 five schools across the UK with high rates of Free School Meal (FSM) eligible pupils took part in a trial of Connectors, a peer-to-peer reading programme developed by Scholastic Education designed to improve literacy. All five schools wanted to ensure that they were using interventions that helped to close the gap between FSM and non-FSM children. In order to evaluate their efforts effectively, the schools’ leadership team needed to know how well pupils could read at the outset. By using the *New Group Reading Test*, the schools were able to establish their pupils’ reading ability at the start of the intervention and then monitor progress in the middle and at the end.

The NGRT is a screening and monitoring test for groups of pupils. It assesses reading and comprehension in a single test and it comprises three sections: phonics, sentence completion and passage comprehension. Test results provide teachers with a comprehensive overview of a pupil’s reading and comprehension ability while providing a wealth of diagnostic information identifying areas where they may be experiencing difficulties.

The schools undertook a repeat of the NGRT after three months and nine months of the trial to obtain a comprehensive overview of each pupil’s reading and comprehension ability, and see how that had progressed since the start of the intervention. The assessment also helped the school to identify how certain groups of children – such as those on free school meals or the seven per cent of pupils that have English as an additional language – were progressing with their reading.

**Conclusion**

GL Assessment fully supports the Education and Culture Committee’s focus on efforts to bridge the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. We want to assist where possible the Committee’s Inquiry into raising the attainment of pupils and would be delighted to discuss in more details the role that formative assessments can play in this process. Third and private sector organisations can play an important role in this...
process, providing tools and advice to assist schools and ensure that all pupils are helped to maximise their potential.

Raising educational attainment, addressing the barriers to young people succeeding in education and ensuring that young people are directed towards the most appropriate academic or vocational path, are all vital elements of improving the educational outcomes of our most disadvantaged pupils. They are also all components which a consistent and comprehensive programme of formative assessment can help address. Therefore, we believe that, as part of any strategy, schools should be encouraged to institute such programmes.