

**Education and Culture Committee**

**6th Meeting, 2016 (Session 4), Tuesday, 23rd February 2016**

**Educational Attainment Gap**

**Clerk's note**

In order to inform today's evidence session with local authorities and the Cabinet Secretary, the Committee held an informal discussion on the educational attainment gap on Tuesday 26 January.

Two discussion groups were formed, each comprising a range of stakeholders and committee members. The main points made by group 1 are set out below. The main points made by group 2 are set out on page 4. A list of all participants is contained in the annexe, page 7.

**Discussion group 1: key points**

The main points that arose from this discussion have been grouped together under the following headings—

**Clarifying the ambition**

- There was support for the Scottish Government's focus on addressing the attainment gap that persists between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. One participant said there is an 'excellent policy framework' in place;
- However, there was a unanimous agreement that the term 'closing the attainment gap' must be clarified by the Scottish Government as there is not one standard definition. There are various ways of measuring differences in attainment, which can appear from the early years right through to the senior phase. There are also different types of attainment gap e.g. in technological knowledge or in health and well-being;
- One contributor warned of the risk of defining 'the gap' by reference to the latest educational development; reacting to the findings of the most recent SSLN<sup>1</sup> by suggesting standards were falling was described as a 'ludicrous over-simplification';
- The consensus view was that it is possible to *narrow* the gap to a considerable degree, given existing levels of inequality in Scotland (and assuming that clarity is provided on the overall aim);
- It was agreed it would be difficult to *close* the gap completely given individual differences between pupils. One participant said we should make sure there is no 'opportunity gap';
- There was no view on how long it would take or how much it might cost to close the gap.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish surveys of literacy and numeracy.

**Possible risks of focusing on the gap**

- Participants – while agreeing with the aim of reducing inequality – warned of the danger of reducing this very complex problem to looking at various metrics; “therein lies madness”;
- There are multiple gaps and therefore, it was suggested, a need to have a more sophisticated dialogue about what we’re trying to do;
- It was suggested that focusing on learners with the greatest needs and making improvements for all pupils (by investing in approaches that raise overall quality) would deliver success; ‘closing the gap’, therefore, should not be the goal, it would be a by-product of wider improvement;
- One speaker considered that just seeking to close the gap would probably result in failure.

**Wider achievement**

- The discussion about the meaning of the term ‘attainment gap’ led to a related discussion about ‘achievement’ in school (which can be seen as progress made by pupils other than that recorded by exam attainment);
- There was a strong agreement that we need to focus much wider than exam results; it would be a “fundamental mistake” to see exam success as the only way forward. The ‘gap’ is also about wider achievement;
- It is possible to make absolute comparisons between pupils or schools, but the better approach may be to concentrate on the development of individual pupils;
- One contributor considered that work around the ‘gap’ should be more closely linked to the ‘four capacities’ of Curriculum for Excellence<sup>2</sup>, not all of which are measured by exam results.
- In response to the point that parents and employers place a real importance on exam results, it was suggested that the wider aims of Curriculum for Excellence could have been articulated better;
- One participant highlighted a lack of coverage or awareness in the media about pupils’ wider achievements, pointing out that their school was doing well but still had a gap in attainment;
- Another speaker cautioned that Scotland already has a world-class system (through the SCQF<sup>3</sup>) for recognising other learning and cautioned against ‘reinventing the wheel’.

**Parental factors**

- It was noted that inequity is built into the education system as some teachers in disadvantaged areas are ‘up against it from the start’;
- In areas of high unemployment some people do not see education as being important. We need to make sure parents also appreciate the value of lifelong learning. Some felt that parental selection – where they can choose which

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<sup>2</sup> “The purpose of the curriculum is encapsulated in the four capacities - to enable each child or young person to be a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor.”

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/thepurposeofthecurriculum/>

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

schools to send their children to – makes things very difficult and that there needs to be a better mix of pupils in schools;

- There was some discussion about putting the best teachers into areas of greatest disadvantage. However, it was pointed out that teaching in difficult areas is not for everybody – they need to know the area well and get a lot of support.

### **Specific approaches to improving attainment**

- One speaker considered that the greatest improvement in attainment would result from focusing on what delivers the best results, namely, investment in high quality teachers; leadership skills; and early years interventions. It was suggested that the recent focus on teachers numbers and reduced class sizes were mistakes; the key variable is teachers not class size;
- Other participants also considered partnership working between schools and other bodies to be crucial (there was some concern about teachers finding the time to do this);
- It was suggested teachers should look at each child as an individual and understand that there are certain factors that can affect their wellbeing. There is a need to identify – through assessment tools such as the Boxall Profile<sup>4</sup> – and address pupils' social and emotional behaviours; preliminary findings of the effectiveness of nurture groups in Northern Ireland has shown that literacy and numeracy amongst disadvantaged groups has improved.

### **Learning lessons**

- There was a discussion about whether policy-makers have learned from previous efforts to close the attainment gap; whether current approaches are fully evidence-based; and whether there are sufficiently good links between policy makers, researchers and practitioners.
- Notwithstanding some of the points above (about what would lead to improvement in education), participants said there is a lack of clear evidence about what works in Scotland. Approaches are not always fully evidence based – it was suggested we sometimes have “policy-based evidence making”. Political parties need to be careful about pursuing the latest educational ‘wheeze’;
- There has not been enough investment in education research, indeed, it was suggested there is “virtually no education research worth speaking about in Scotland”;
- We have to be careful about how and the extent to which we seek to learn from and draw comparisons with other countries. South Korea and Finland both have successful education systems but Finland, for example, is a more equal country than Scotland;
- Despite some of the issues raised, it was noted that various aspects of Scotland's educational system are highly regarded internationally.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://nurturegroups.org/introducing-nurture/boxall-profile-online>

*Learning lessons: National assessments*

- There was some discussion about the new national assessments and the necessity of Scotland being able to realise the benefits these can deliver while avoiding the disadvantages that have arisen from previous testing regimes;
- One participant warned of creating a perception that school is all about test results, which is dangerous; testing shouldn't be the purpose of the process, rather, the culture in which learning takes place is the most important factor;
- Tied to this, there is also a need to be cautious about using and acting on data generated, as this can have strange effects throughout the education system. It was suggested we need evidence rather than data.
- Fundamentally, we need to know the overall policy aim before agreeing on what we should be measuring.

**Discussion group 2: key points****Initial Discussion; setting the scene**

There was an initial discussion around terminology and in particular the meaning of "attainment". The linkage to achievement was discussed alongside the 4 capacities from the curriculum for excellence. It was suggested if C for E is the main driver the aim and the outcomes at its heart must be clear from the outset to allow them to be measured.

A suggested aim was ultimately to ensure education is "Getting people to achieve their full potential at some time in their lives". Underpinning the aim the following thoughts were expressed:

- Not about closing the gap, which is both misleading and unrealistic. A system change is required.
- People must want to do things for themselves
- People must feel cared for and valued
- The approach must be outcome related with long term aims
- There were equality issues including providing people with the skills to get a job and
- Giving pupils skills and opportunities.

It was suggested an over focus on attainment to ensure university admittance was happening rather than recognising individuals and allowing people to move through education at different paces/different times in their lives. Resources should be focussed not on university education but on those who won't get there.

The issue was much wider than education policy, other areas must be involved with a need to work across current policy silos. The objective had to be to avoid ongoing problems continuing to be trans-generational requiring engagement with parents who themselves have no aspirations.

It was recognised the answer would be expensive and resource intensive with early intervention required given opportunities start at an early age.

**Current schooling issues**

The current approach to teaching and learning was uniform across all schools, with accountability linked to judgments based upon perceived ability at an early age which were then perpetuated throughout school life.

Current attainment measures are neither diagnostic nor remedial. Setting was criticised as not working unless a policy to allocate the best teachers to the lowest sets was to be adopted (see also the submission from Professor Boyd re setting which was agreed by others). Schools were not learning systems and significant cultural change was required.

Governance has remained unchanged for 40 years, while everything else has been subject to change. The governance system, top down, was suppressing individualism in pursuit of conformity. It reduces accountability and does not encourage risk taking or innovation, noting it might be seen as risking showing up others. (A system which highlights those who are different and particularly focuses on failure with individual schools who dare to be different blamed for trying to innovate (e.g. Hermitage school)).

Responsibility and accountability is unclear with so many tiers involved, teachers, heads, local authorities, Education Scotland and national government all involved. Multiple and conflicting accountabilities do not help.

Local authorities have the power (over budgets etc.) yet all follow similar systems/methods and keep in step with each other. A cultural shift at a national level was required with a loosening of control at all levels. Schools did not have local identities in their own communities.

Target setting is an issue, targets are not owned by the schools and there are dangers of “teaching to targets”. What is being measured is what gets done, care on what is measured is required. Virtual comparators depress aspiration.

It was noted that really challenging children were few in number and also observed that not all teachers want to work with challenging pupils.

**Suggestions**

A range of suggestions for improvement/change were made:

- More autonomy for head teachers
- More inspiring leadership
- Partner schools across demographic gaps
- It should be about preparing pupils for the workplace.
- Pre-school education is critical and the key.
- Need aspirational schools and parents.
- Let pupils decide who are the best teachers and who they want to teach them!

- Good governance and high level endorsement is important. Governance in particular is the way to release change and innovation.
- Have a system measure at S3 which does not measure individuals. This would prevent any production of league tables which were seen as the enemy. There was a need for credible advice and assistance in schools which did not measure.
- A “can do” attitude was required with policy owned locally.

East Renfrewshire are regularly the highest performing authority. There, aspiration to succeed is driven by the centre, bought into by councillors and applies across their full range of schools and to all pupils.

The role of Education Scotland was queried and whether they could successfully combine working for Government and their Inspection role. It was suggested that nobody at school level considers Education Scotland to be of assistance/add value. It was added that it was the Inspectorate’s job to measure and benchmark although it is unclear what they are trying to achieve and how.

An unfavourable analogy was made with multi-national businesses. The most successful have a clear purpose, clear accountability, local responsibility and understood levels of devolution culture leading to local agility. They also share best practice.

It was also noted the London Challenge schools remained sustainable and continued their high performance even after additional funding ceased. The culture had changed and they worked for local children giving a sense of identity. In Scotland there is a need to identify the schools who have narrowed the gap and allow the evidence to be scrutinised on what has worked.

Interestingly it was near the end of the discussion when the question was asked about the role of children and how empowered they are and involved in their learning. Is there an overriding tendency to do it to children, give them no say in design or what works for them and assume they shouldn’t have any input into the system of learning.

**Author’s note.** [A partial attempt at an overview as opposed to a summary]

The central approach is always about more rules and control. Should the professionals simply be told “just do it, fix it and deliver” after all they are highly trained and skilled.... Are we becoming obsessed with measuring the wrong thing and why are we measuring individual pupils’ attainment? Should we be measuring the added value brought by leaders in schools and individual teachers and let them learn from each other? Finally are we “doing it to pupils” and not seeking their views, surely they have something to contribute and can say what works for them?

David Cullum, clerk to the committee

**Annexe – participants**

In addition to members of the Education and Culture Committee, the following people took part in the Committee's discussions—

- Mark Batho, Vice-Principal (University Services), Abertay University\*
- Dr Alan Britton, Senior University Teacher (Social Justice Place and Lifelong Education), University of Glasgow
- Sir Andrew Cubie, independent consultant\*
- Professor Graham Donaldson, educational consultant and part-time professor at Glasgow University\*
- Donna Hamilton, consultant\*
- Cristina Iannelli, Professor of Education and Social Stratification, University of Edinburgh
- Frank Lennon, Headteacher, Dunblane High School
- Sophie Slater, Policy and Communications Officer, Nurture Group Network
- Helen Stollery, Head of Training, Nurture Group Network
- David Watt, Executive Director for the Institute of Directors in Scotland\*
- Lindsey Watt, Headteacher, Castlevue Primary School, Edinburgh

\*These participants were nominated by the Goodison Group, which has linked with Scotland's Futures Forum in the area of learning and skills<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Scotland's Futures Forum was created by the Scottish Parliament to help its Members, along with policy makers, businesses, academics, and the wider community of Scotland, look beyond immediate horizons, to some of the challenges and opportunities we will face in the future