

GL Assessment: Response to Children and Young People Committee Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income Households, September 2013

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GL Assessment

GL Assessment is a division of the GL Education Group, a leading independent provider of educational resources and training for schools, including literacy and numeracy assessments and SEN diagnostic tools, stakeholder surveys and professional development services. These resources and services provide teachers with the tools they require to help raise standards in education.

GL Assessment specialises in literacy, numeracy, reasoning, SEN and attitudinal assessments, and has relationships with over 85% of UK primary and secondary schools. Tests are nationally standardised, giving measures such as National Curriculum levels and standard age scores, and include parental reporting where appropriate. In-depth interpretation services help to identify appropriate intervention strategies.

We provide Welsh versions of some of our key assessments and work with many primary and secondary schools in Wales, helping them to identify pupil strengths and weaknesses and the root causes of any difficulties. One of our most popular assessments, the Cognitive Abilities Test, is used by 70% of secondary schools in Wales. Our other popular assessments include Progress in Maths (PiM), Progress in English (PiE) and the New Group Reading Test (NGRT).

GL Assessment's sister company, GL Performance, provides management tools, stakeholder surveys, and professional development and interpretation services for schools. Its portfolio includes Schoolcentre, an online tool that brings together self-evaluation, school improvement and performance management and Kirkland Rowell Surveys, provider of contextualised and weighted parent, staff and pupil surveys.

Inquiry Response

The link between poverty and educational outcomes is significant and it is vital that the Welsh Government's policies support schools to improve the attainment of the most disadvantaged pupils. GL Assessment works with schools across Wales, as well as through Government programmes such as Flying Start, to help improve the outcomes for these pupils.

Importance of Early Years Assessment – Flying Start

GL Assessment believes that the best means of improving the educational outcomes for disadvantaged children is through the use of consistent formative assessment and intervention programmes. This allows those working with these children to identify areas of weakness in their development and abilities and subsequently introduce targeted support to bring about improvements. It is particularly important that this type of assessment and intervention is conducted from an early age to ensure that any individual difficulties are identified and addressed before they become entrenched.

For example, we have had significant involvement with the Welsh Government's Flying Start programme. As part of their work under the programme, health visitors across Wales have successfully used GL Assessment's *Schedule of Growing Skills* (SGS) to assess children's developmental levels. SGS provides a reliable 'snapshot' of a child's developmental level, including areas of strength and potential delay. It assesses development across nine key areas, including physical, cognitive, speech and language, and social interaction. SGS provides a standardised tool for developmental screening and encourages consistency in assessing the development of pre-school children from low-income families. The impact of a low income on child development can be seen even at the early age range Flying Start covers. Therefore it is vital that development is properly assessed and interventions are introduced early so that children are fully prepared to start full time education.

In Carmarthenshire, SGS has been particularly useful in identifying children with speech and language issues and subsequently ensuring that they are referred to specialist speech and language therapists. SGS has also helped to demonstrate the effectiveness of Flying Start itself: 61% of the two-year olds entering the programme in Carmarthenshire achieved scores in cognitive tests that showed they were at or above their chronological age. At age three, that had raised to 84%, an increase of 23%. The implementation of Flying Start has clearly had positive outcomes and it is important that the Welsh Government continues to support this type of assessment and early intervention as a key means of improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children.

Importance of Assessment in Schools

As well as having a crucial role in early years, a consistent formative assessment and intervention programme should also be implemented across Welsh schools as a key means of improving educational outcomes for all children, but particularly children from low-income families. It is important that the assessments used as part of such a regime provide detailed, standardised reporting specifically on the results achieved by disadvantaged children. Along with more general reporting, this would allow a direct comparison to be made between these children and their more advantaged peers, both in their school and nationally.

For example, one assessment that is widely used by Welsh schools, particularly at the transition between primary and secondary school, is the *Cognitive Abilities Test* (CAT). 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. CAT provides schools with a solid basis for introducing targeted interventions to improve pupil attainment in literacy and numeracy. Ideally it is used in conjunction with other formative assessments such as *Progress in Maths* (PiM) and *Progress in English* (PiE) which assess attainment as well as ability levels in maths and English. By comparing these results to CAT scores, teachers can see where pupils are not yet reaching their potential and implement improvement strategies.

The latest edition of CAT, CAT4, additionally assesses spatial reasoning abilities and a Welsh language version has just been published. Some pupils have an aptitude for STEM subjects but the way these and other subjects are taught makes it difficult for these pupils to learn. This is because teaching, even in STEM subjects, has a strong verbal bias which prevents some pupils from playing to their strengths even in subjects

where spatial ability is required. By identifying these pupils, and tailoring teaching and additional support accordingly, schools can help them to succeed in the subjects for which they have an aptitude.

As well as providing detailed reporting on individual pupils, which is key for the identification of those pupils in need of targeted support, CAT also provides analysis on the results of pupils by group, including those eligible for free school meals. As CAT is a nationally standardised test this allows schools to compare the scores of its most disadvantaged pupils with other pupils in their cohort within the school but also at a national level. This also allows individual schools to compare the results of their free school meal pupils with those of different schools in Wales and across the UK. Schools should be encouraged to collect this type of data by governing bodies, local authorities and regional education consortia. This will help them to understand how the disadvantaged pupils at the schools they are responsible for are achieving and identify what work needs to be undertaken to improve the outcomes of these pupils. Local authorities and consortia in particular should use this data to identify those schools that are able to produce good pupil outcomes and note examples of best practice to be shared with those schools that are less successful.

In order to properly monitor the success of schools in improving pupil outcomes, governors, LAs and the consortia should implement progress tracking systems alongside a consistent formative assessment regime. It is crucial that with any progress monitoring, and indeed with the use of formative assessments as a whole, full training is provided for all teachers and school leaders on the proper interpretation and use of data to inform pupil improvement. There is a role for LAs and consortia in ensuring that schools are encouraged to use this type of system and that teachers and governors are trained to use it. Ultimately this will help improve the outcomes for children from low-income families by identifying any weaknesses early and monitoring their progress consistently. As they approach statutory examinations schools will be able to identify early on if the required progress is being made and introduce further interventions if necessary.

Parent and Pupil Engagement

As well as encouraging consistent formative assessment of children from low-income families, the Welsh Government, LAs and education consortia should also be encouraging schools to actively engage with parents to develop a positive relationship with them. Parents can have a significant influence over their children in terms of their attitude to school, their attendance and their behaviour. Using stakeholder perception surveys, like Kirkland Rowell Surveys provided by GL Assessment's sister company, can identify any areas where parents are dissatisfied and those who may, as a result, not be providing appropriate support for their children, impacting on their attainment. By understanding parent perceptions schools can work to make improvements and also identify those pupils who may need additional support from the school to mitigate any lack of support at home.

As part of this process of engagement, it is important that schools develop a full understanding of the attitudes of low-income pupils towards education. Negative attitudes to school can lead to poor behaviour and absences which ultimately have a detrimental effect on attainment. It is therefore important that as well as identifying the areas of development and ability difficulties that need to be addressed that schools also assess pupil attitudes.

For example, the Pupil Attitudes to Self and School (PASS) attitudinal survey is used by 38% of secondary schools in Wales to address behavioural problems such as persistent absences. The survey is comprised of short psychometric statements that feed into nine attitudinal factors linked to key educational goals. These include how well children are responding to the curriculum, how prepared they are to learn and their attitude towards attendance. A low score in any factor can accurately pinpoint negative attitudes that may not otherwise be apparent. In the case of attendance, a low score can highlight a potential problem before a child starts missing school, giving teachers a chance to intervene at an early stage and reduce the likelihood of truancy. Using PASS also allows schools to compare their pupils to those in other, similar schools to identify any behaviour trends, such as persistent absences, that may need to be addressed.

PASS can also be helpful in understanding the root causes of other poor behaviours, providing teachers with the information they need to improve them. For example, one school found that two students who exhibited similar conduct had very different causes. PASS revealed that one had no self-esteem but a good attitude to school and was well-motivated to learn. The other had high self-regard but a terrible attitude to school. This knowledge enabled teachers to tailor support appropriately, building the confidence of the first student and ultimately improving their attainment while helping the other student to focus on their goals beyond school and put in the work needed to achieve them. Similarly, Ysgol Brynhyfryd, a bilingual comprehensive school in Denbighshire, has successfully used PASS as a tool to help the school improve attainment. The school cites that the survey has had a positive impact in reducing the potential number of NEETS from the school by identifying those at risk of truancy and disengagement and allowing teachers to intervene and provide pupils with the support they need to succeed. Likewise, PASS was successfully used in a three year project, Building the Future Together, which has recently concluded in Rhondda Cynon Taf. PASS was used to tackle the disengagement of 11-19 year olds across all 19 secondary schools in Rhondda Cynon Taf - an area of significant socio-economic disadvantage. A combination of CAT and PASS helped to pinpoint where interventions would have the most impact, reducing the number of NEETs and improving future employability.

Nine LAs in Wales have also been using PASS as part of the Minority Ethnic Language and Achievement Project (MELAP) which was part-funded by the European Social Fund, through the Welsh Government. This project was designed to improve the future employment prospects of ethnic minority children and young people in Wales, particularly those for whom English is a second language. In Pembrokeshire it has been particularly useful in identifying those who are doing well academically, but whose attitude is suffering. For example, PASS results flagged up a boy who was doing well on the surface but was experiencing anxiety about exams. The school had no idea as his results in class were good, but he was very distressed about his ability to take exams and needed support to build his confidence. As a result, the school was able to intervene by introducing additional study skills classes to improve his confidence about exams.

Attitudinal assessment is vital if schools are going to be able to improve educational outcomes for children from low-income families. Unless these pupils are motivated, well behaved and attending school any efforts to improve attainment through intervention programmes and targeted support will not have the maximum impact. Therefore, this type of assessment should also be supported through Welsh Government policy and by LAs and education consortia.

The Pupil Deprivation Grant

GL Assessment welcomes the introduction of the Pupil Deprivation Grant as a valuable way of providing targeted support to the most disadvantaged pupils in Wales. We believe that the best means of supporting disadvantaged pupils is through the implementation of consistent formative assessment and intervention programmes and that the Pupil Deprivation Grant should be used to introduce this type of support. Not only can such assessments help to identify areas where these pupils need extra support but the data can also be used to track progress and monitor the success of the Pupil Deprivation Grant. As such the Welsh Government, LAs and education consortia should be encouraging all schools to implement such a regime and use the data in this way.

Conclusion

Improving the educational outcomes of children from low-income families is rightly a key focus of the Welsh Government and GL Assessment supports these efforts. The link between poverty and educational outcomes is significant and schools, governors, LAs and education consortia should be acting to identify any difficulties those children may have from an early age and throughout their time in formal education. We believe that the best way to improve outcomes for these pupils is through the implementation of consistent formative assessment and intervention regimes. Targeted support is essential and this should be the focus of spending

of the Pupil Deprivation Grant. However, in order to make the most impact it is also important that there is engagement with parents and the children themselves to ensure that they have the attitudes to education and the motivation needed to maximise their potential.