

# Global Education Episode 18: Standardised assessment in Scotland

*Dominique Russell*

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*Hello, and thank you for downloading this episode of Global Education from Teacher magazine. I'm Dominique Russell.*

*Scotland has recently implemented a new approach to assessing children's progress in its schools. It's an online national assessment called the Scottish National Standardised Assessments, or SNSA for short, and it aims to support improvement in classroom practice by providing information to teachers to inform the next steps in learning. All of this is done while still overseeing what's going on locally and nationally. It's delivered to students in Primary 1, Primary 4, Primary 7 and Secondary 3 – which in Australia is equivalent in age to Prep, Grade 3, Grade 6 and Year 9.*

*Now, the particularly unique aspect of this assessment is the fact that it places teacher professional judgement at the centre. It's also been developed to be accessible for students with additional support needs. And, as well as this, the test is adaptive – so, students are presented with questions according to how well they've answered the questions previous.*

*To find out more about how all of this was achieved, and how the assessment is assisting teachers on the ground, I'm joined in this episode by David Leng. He's a professional adviser to the Scottish Government Learning Directorate. And he's played a huge part in the development, implementation and continuous improvement of the assessment. Let's get things started by hearing David describe how the SNSA is different to assessments Scotland has delivered in the past.*

David Leng: There was a lot of standardised assessments available in schools. Some commercial packages had been bought, some designed by local authorities, but there was not a consistent program across Scotland. Most of the commercial packages were based on an English system.

So, what we set out to do was to make sure that we had a standardised assessment that was based on the Scottish Curriculum; that was consistent for teachers anywhere in the country; and that was designed to help them deliver their own curriculum in their own classrooms. So those were the kind of key distinguishing factors, and that would then allow us to know that there was a consistent support for teachers in terms of information about children's progress, right across our education system.

So the Scottish assessment model is basically predicated on the teacher's professional judgement as being the most important element. And it's the teacher professional judgement that we publish. So, on an annual basis, we collect what we call 'achievement of curriculum for excellence levels' – that's the milestones, if you like, within our curriculum – and those are based entirely on the teacher's professional judgements. But, of course, as soon as you have judgements made by people, you potentially have variations and variability and lack of consistency. So, what we were trying to do was to give them good quality, consistent, high standard information that helped them make judgements that were based on robust evidence and not just on personal circumstances.

We're very committed to continuous improvement, and ... part of the credibility of the program is that it's not, you know, we've designed it and that's it. What we're trying to do is to design something that we believe works and, you know, working well with ACER [Australian Council for Educational Research] on that ...

**Dominique Russell: Another aspect of the assessment seeks student feedback. But, they're also asking for teacher feedback. Here, David explains how all of this is done.**

DL: So we tend to use the feedback from both children and our teachers to feed into our continuous improvement cycle. And that's now started, we've got the first set of surveys back. I also do an annual user review, which involves focus groups, involves visits to classrooms and observation of practice, involves gathering data around how the children have actually performed in the assessments, the training program we do. So all the evidence that we can basically get hold of that then allows us to analyse how effective the assessment's been and where the areas of improvement should be.

So, last year when we did that there was about 10 key areas of improvement which we identified and that became a part of this year's continuous improvement program.

**DR: As I mentioned earlier, the assessment is designed to be as accessible as possible for all learners. I had David explain what steps they took to make this possible.**

DL: Well we set out from the beginning – and I think that's the way you need to do it, is design it from the start – and then we then trialled it with schools and children who had, for whichever reasons, difficulties accessing traditional standardised assessments. So, it could be visual impairment, or it could be audio impairment – how do you get around that? It could be that some children are just slower at doing things. So, one example that came out of our trialling was that we took timing off it; it used to be a timed assessment and now there's no timing at all. They can take as long as they wish. They can take breaks. We put an audio element into it so they can hear the instructions, and we also advise teachers to use their professional judgement.

The aim of the assessment is to assess literacy and numeracy skills, it's not to assess their ability to do an online assessment. So if the teacher recognises – I'll give you a specific example: there's a question in the Primary 1 one where children have to take a pile of books and divide them into two. So, it's on the screen and I was observing a classroom and a teacher had brought a pile of books and put it on the table and literally, physically did it. And so the child who was struggling to interpret the screen was able to see very quickly because they could see the physical thing. And that was fine because that was appropriate, that child needed a physical stimulus.

So we've tried to work out a range of strategies from certain standards in terms of the IT – there's international standards around accessibility, so we've pushed them as high as we can – round to strategies in terms of supporting children to make it as inclusive as possible.

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**DR: The SNSA puts teacher judgement at the centre. As David is going to explain here, that includes allowing teachers to choose at what time in the year they have students sit the assessment, instead of making them allocate set dates or periods of time the assessment must be conducted.**

DL: I think ... they're still developing an understanding of the purpose of assessment. Traditionally standardised assessments were done at the end of the year and they were done to gather evidence on how well children progressed at the end of their academic session – so, they were summative assessments, effectively, and they were done to be able to then make a judgement on good progress, or whatever.

We've designed this so that end of year summative judgement is the teacher's judgement, and that this assessment is to feed into that teacher's judgement and therefore the teacher can decide when's the best time for me to get that information? And if they're genuinely going to

use it in a formative way, then they may do it earlier in the year which would advise them on what might be the next steps of learning, and gives them time to actually do the interventions. Because if you do it at the end of the year, there's not much you can do. You've kind of lost the opportunity.

So it's slowly beginning to change, when they do it. Some teachers have still not quite got it, if you like, in terms of the purpose. But we're now beginning to see some people being quite creative, innovative. And also different age groups might do it at different times. As an example, those children doing it in secondary schools might do it slightly earlier because they've got to make choices about future course provision, etcetera.

The whole point is to support teachers to trust their judgement and to give them the choices and the control of how it's done. And that's a change in culture in terms of standardised assessments, and it's a bit of a risk, but we're pretty committed to it and we believe that it's going to be successful.

**DR: Once the students sit the assessment, the data is handed back to the teachers instead of to the government – the government actually never receive any drilled down results for individual schools, they're only able to see what's going on at a local and national level. It's a lot of data to be handing back to the teachers though, so I asked David how they're assisting educators with how to use the data.**

DL: We have a training program, a support program, that goes alongside which can be either face-to-face or it can be online. We have published case studies, we've published guidance materials. And we'll continue to work with professionals to showcase how effective data use has been used, and how it's leading to improvement in the classroom. And our aim is that, as part of the continuous improvement we've talked about, is to, in a sense, build up an expertise and share that around the profession so that people can learn from each other.

Peer-to-peer learning is always, you know, the most successful, so the more we can do that the more ... and we have a forum now for teachers who can come and talk together. So we're trying to build up a use. It's their judgement, so let's help each other do as well as we can with it.

*That's all for this episode. To access the full transcript of this podcast and some links to some further reading, just head to [teachermagazine.com.au](http://teachermagazine.com.au). And, to hear more of our podcasts, whether it's from our series on Behaviour Management, School Improvement, The Research Files, or more on Global Education, just search 'Teacher ACER' wherever you get your podcasts.*

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