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Improving literacy in Scotland: four policy proposals



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Making a difference to policy outcomes locally, nationally and globally

POLICY BRIEF

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Improving literacy in Scotland: four policy proposals

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Abstract

Literacy matters for Scotland's prosperity. This paper explains why. It identifies some current issues in literacy teaching in primary and secondary schools. It highlights the evidence on efficient and effective teaching content and approaches. It explores current policy challenges around building teachers' professional knowledge and data use. Lastly, it suggests four ways to improve attainment.

I Background

Having remained relatively static over a number of years, literacy levels in Scotland are now showing small signs of improvement. The PISA survey, which measures reading attainment in 15 year-olds, indicates that Scotland is just slightly above the OECD average and has a narrower spread of attainment than many countries. Boys lag behind girls, a pattern evident in every participating country. Socio-economic factors are the strongest predictor of how well a child will learn to read in Scotland, and while our lowest attaining pupils score much better than elsewhere in the UK, they do not do as well as those in New Zealand, Canada or Finland. Scotland has fewer pupils in the highest-attainment category for reading. Parts of China (Shanghai and Hong Kong), Singapore, Japan and South Korea top the PISA list for overall reading attainment, but a long list of other countries are also above Scotland, including Ireland, Poland, Estonia, Canada, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Although the PISA reading survey has been criticized, it matters because reading is one of those skills that fundamentally shapes the sort of society we create. It gives pupils access to the rest of the curriculum, underpins exam success and is an important pathway for social mobility. Reading and writing are important for employability in almost all sectors of the modern job market: traditional manual workers such as janitors or home-care assistants earning the minimum wage must nowadays be able to write incident reports, and since computers now fulfill many routine literacy tasks in the office, sophisticated digital literacy skills have become an entry-level requirement for junior office jobs. Reading also impacts on social attitudes. Longitudinal studies show that middle-aged Scots who report reading for pleasure in their mid-teenage years are more likely to be engaged in civic activities and to hold liberal views 30-40 years later. This is true even after allowing for other variables such as course-taking, educational attainment, gender, and socioeconomic status (Paterson 2009).

II What Works?

Teachers' knowledge of what matters for literacy development

Both the PISA studies and the *Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy* (SSLN) show that socio-economic factors tend to be associated with, but need not determine, literacy attainment. 'Outlier' schools provide positive examples of how schools can challenge and change the pattern: children living in poverty learn to read and write perfectly well when school systems promote strong community and family links, when classroom environments actively encourage children to see themselves as competent readers/writers, and when teachers create the right 'literacy learning mix'.

Knowledge generated by randomised controlled trials, design experiments, cohort studies, and ethnographic studies indicates three important ingredients that together create a powerful 'learning mix' for reading.

Comprehension: focusing on: teaching a broad curriculum to build vocabulary and general knowledge; helping readers to recognize the text purpose and structure; teaching specific strategies appropriate to the text (for example, teaching readers to: connect to prior knowledge, infer, visualize, clarify, hear the prosody, summarize, ask question,; re-read, analyze). Teaching that involves modelling, discussion and collaborative tasks on interesting texts are particularly effective. Not effective are those that involve worksheets and de-contextualised comprehension questions.

Decoding fluency: focusing on: phonic knowledge as a necessary but insufficient basis for reading. Pearson *et al* (2010) show children can become good at phonics but remain poor readers and high frequency words make up a large part of reading but are often phonically "irregular". It is useful to teach children to use the overall meaning of a sentence or text in conjunction with phonics to work out what words say. Fluent readers read more text, encounter more unfamiliar words and get more practice at reading than non-fluent readers. In consequence, they find reading less effort, enjoy it, develop confidence, have more emotional and cognitive "space" to respond to the text, and develop a positive self-image as readers. Fluency thus helps comprehension, engagement and decoding. It is best developed by getting children of all ages to read beyond the reading scheme. Over-teaching phonics detracts from the class time for reading continuous text and developing fluency (Thompson *et al* 2008).

Engagement and identity: promoting and monitoring reading engagement in ALL pupils is an important and subtle teaching activity that often goes unnoticed. Margaret Meek wrote that 'Being part of a literate society is a feeling as well as a fact' (1987) and engaged readers enjoy reading, choose to read, have the time, opportunities and reading materials, and are often part

of a community or social network that talks about books and recommends them to each other. They have positive self-images and want others to see them as competent. Teaching for reading engagement requires: knowledge of books; meaningful, intellectually stimulating tasks, and protected spaces where pupils can network around their reading and construct their own reading identities. The PISA results indicate that engagement closes the reading attainment gap associated with poverty.

Quality teaching, not programmes

We know that teacher quality matters. Hall (2013) reviewed empirical studies of highly effective early years literacy teachers to discover what makes them different from their colleagues. They do not use unusual programmes or activities but instead make all activities more effective as literacy learning experiences:

- They prioritize literacy learning and ensure time on task;
- They emphasise that literacy is about communication, so they contextualise tasks, make them clearer, give precise explanations and links to pupils' out-of-school lives, and create tailored literacy environments in the classroom;
- The pre-school teachers are "masterful guardians, catching, cradling, and championing every child's discoveries about print". They repeat literacy experiences as necessary and create inviting, print-rich, and home-like environments;
- The P1-3 teachers integrate and balance teaching pupils about the code of print with activities that provide meaningful uses and purposes for reading and writing. The varied learning experiences enable responsive teaching, overt modelling, coaching and contextualised explanations during tasks (rather than just before and after each task). By using well-established routines and teaching a range of reading cues (grapho-phonetic, picture, syntactic and semantic), they teach pupils to be self-regulated and independent. Crucially, they are well-planned but flexible, ensuring children work at a level of "easy difficulty", seizing the "teachable moment" whenever it occurs, and creating instructional density by having multiple goals in a single lesson.

Literacy Skills that are Discipline Specific

Secondary and upper primary teachers need to teach literacy skills that are specific to particular disciplines, rather than generic comprehension skills and conventions (spelling and punctuation). To be truly literate, older pupils must understand the reading mind-sets, behaviours, and specialized language conventions (the text structures, syntax, vocabulary) that apply to specific disciplines. Such literacy work should show pupils how to read, write and think in the discipline, teaching the disciplinary norms of precision and accuracy and the interpretive processes, arguments and standards of evidence that the subject demands. Literacy instruction in History or Modern Studies teaches pupils to question how the text positions the topic and reader, to note who has written it, why, and to apply technical vocabulary and knowledge to

analyse and contextualise writer, topic and text. In Chemistry or Physics texts require a different kind of interrogation, structure and vocabulary – a different literacy knowledge base. Such instruction is particularly important to deliver equity for poorer children because disciplinary literacy is where they often encounter problems.

Useful Data

The term ‘data’ goes beyond attainment tests to encompass systematically-collected data from surveys, focus-groups or observations. It can enable schools and teachers to become more effective by highlighting which groups are well-served by current approaches and which are not and uncover how individuals and groups experience literacy at school and home. School systems that provide useful, accessible data and help teachers to use it are better positioned to deliver equity (Datnow and Park 2014). Categorising children into general literacy attainment bands is not helpful, particularly when the bands lack clarity about what is being measured. Teachers need focused, specific guidance on those aspects that matter most for development (i.e. comprehension; decoding fluency; engagement).

III Policy challenges facing Scotland

Teacher Knowledge: Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

Building primary and secondary teachers’ professional knowledge of literacy teaching is crucial. Becoming literate is complex. It can go wrong at many points, in many ways. Teachers must be diagnostic and sufficiently knowledgeable to create a learning mix that works. Studying literacy should be a major plank in ITE courses, particularly for primary teachers. Yet there is huge variation in the contact hours allocated to study literacy learning across Scottish Primary ITE courses. A 2013 Freedom of Information request by the convener of the Scottish Parliament’s Education & Culture Committee, Stewart Maxwell MSP, revealed that while one institution allocates just 20 hours in a four-year degree; others allocate four times as much. By way of contrast, primary ITE courses in England must provide a minimum of 90 hours of contact time, just studying how to teach phonics.

Literacy Across Learning

The national ‘literacy across learning’ policy was introduced with the slogan “every teacher a teacher of literacy”. However, national advice focused on generic skills and conventions. Secondary and upper-primary teachers need advice on the specific literacy demands of different disciplines, and how best to integrate literacy teaching into lessons. Secondary-school literacy assessments are generic and the sole responsibility of the English Department, which further downplays the crucial role subject specialists play in creating a literate population.

Useful data

Scotland currently offers no national literacy tests for primary and early secondary pupils. Two-thirds of local authorities buy commercial tests – an expensive option offering little support in understanding, interrogating and using the results. High-stakes tests in England have undoubtedly narrowed the curriculum and de-professionalized teachers, but with Scotland's devolved system premised on difference and teacher professionalism, we could forge our own, more productive, dialogues and school cultures for data-use.

Proposal 1: The Scottish Government should ask the General Teaching Council for Scotland, which validates professional qualifications, including all ITE courses, to review whether sufficient weight has been given to literacy teaching in its validation processes to ensure that all student teachers are adequately prepared to teach literacy.

Proposal 2: Education Scotland should develop subject-specific Communities of Enquiry, where secondary subject specialists and upper primary teachers work with academic experts in linguistic analysis, genre pedagogy and literacy teaching. Each community would be charged with reviewing the evidence on the literacy demands of their subject; reviewing subject-specific literacy pedagogies that work; locating resources; trialing pedagogical approaches, and producing subject-specific guidance on literacy.

Proposal 3: Scottish Government should initiate a new national conversation about data-use in education focusing on how it can underpin educational innovation by grounding teacher action, generating new understandings, questions and potential solutions for classrooms and schools. These conversations should involve parents, pupils, the media, political, public and private bodies, as well as teachers and educational administrators and contribute to a new understanding of the usefulness of data in schools.

Proposal 4: Scottish Government should encourage schools to create positive cultures for data-use, and provide free, nationally available tests, standardised where appropriate, in those specific aspects important for literacy development. Each school could then determine their own policies on whether, when and how to use them, and with whom.

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