

Scotland's developing literacy policies: one response to PISA

By Margaret M Clark OBE

The United Kingdom Literacy Association 53rd International Literacy Conference 2017 was held at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow from 30 June to 2 July. The opening address was given by John Swinney, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Minister for Skills and Education. The first keynote lecture, *Achieving Excellence and Equity: Scotland's National Improvement Framework*, was by Graeme Logan, a former primary school teacher, who has just taken up his appointment as Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education in Scotland. The session was chaired by Professor Sue Ellis of Strathclyde University who has, it was clear, a close working relationship with the Scottish Government and the inspectorate, and whose views are respected in a way not accorded academics and 'other experts' by ministers making policy decisions in England (see www.newman.ac.uk/26june and the *Education Journal* 310: 18-19 for my paper from the conference on 'Evidence-based literacy policies and a research-literate profession').

Attending the conference were speakers and delegates from many countries, therefore, it was appropriate for those present to be alerted at the outset of the conference to the distinct nature of education in Scotland. Furthermore, this does not date merely from the re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh in 1999, with education one of the devolved powers (see Clark and Munn, 1997; Clark and Waller, 2007). There is a tendency for authors and speakers from elsewhere to give the impression that there is a British education system, which has never been the case. Different education acts and policies govern education in Scotland and England. I am grateful to the staff of John Swinney and Graeme Logan for supplying me with notes on which I have based this article.

The Opening Address

Mr Swinney, the Deputy First Minister, in his speech focused on the importance of collaboration, singling out the work of the School of Education at Strathclyde University and Professor Ellis in particular, stressing that to quote: "One of my objectives is to ensure a deeper connection between research and practice". He reiterated the key focus of the Scottish Government to ensure that young people are equipped with the fundamentals of literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing. He also reflected on the strong interest from primary schools in Scotland in the First Minister's Reading Challenge, a new initiative to stimulate a love of reading for pleasure – with three quarters of primary schools taking part in the programme in its first year, commenting: "I have never seen an initiative take hold so quickly".

I saw evidence of this enthusiasm for reading when I attended the Book Award ceremony later that day, where prizes were given to authors and publishers of books from those short-listed for children in the age groups 3-6, 7-11 and 12-16. Filming this past year featured children and teachers in schools in different parts of Scotland who had read and discussed the short-listed books, choosing their favourite book and explaining on film why they had chosen it. I was impressed by the evidence from the children themselves and the teachers who were interviewed not only of their passion for books but also the articulate way they expressed their views, even the youngest children.

Scotland's National Improvement Framework

Graeme Logan HMCI stated that Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence defines literacy as "The set of skills which allows an individual to engage fully in society and in learning, through the different forms of language, and the range of texts, which society values and finds useful." He noted the following are among the aspects stressed: "the importance of listening and talking and of effective collaborative working in the development of thinking and in learning"; and "the importance of skills of critical literacy: children and young people need to be able to work out what trust they should place on the information and to identify when and how people are aiming to persuade or influence them opportunities to develop and apply these skills in stimulating and relevant contexts across the curriculum."

Having set the scene with quotations from the curriculum document he then quoted from a recently published report, *Quality and Improvement in Scottish Education 2012-2016* (published in March 2017). This report summarises findings from inspections and evaluative activities covering early learning and child care to adult learning. The report identifies some key areas of strength and some key areas where there is a need for more focused effort to achieve further improvements. He drew attention to some very positive aspects of early learning and childcare for children 3-5, such as that children listened and talked well for a variety of purposes and showed a keen interest in books and enjoyed sharing stories. He did note from the report that at times children were encouraged to copy words before they were ready to do so. The need for staff to have a clear understanding of progression in early writing was stressed.

In the age group 5-12 the report noted that children could listen and talk with confidence in a range of contexts and that where schools ensured listening and talking was developed in a progressive way, children made better progress. Children were found to be writing regularly and for a variety of purposes. This was to be encouraged, but also “a high priority should be given to technical accuracy”.

I find it interesting that in the age group 12-18 inspectors found: “Where talking in activities that had a relevant and real life context, such as campaign speeches or persuasive talks, young people applied their learning about language effectively.” One recommendation here is that schools ensure “that young people engage with texts of appropriate complexity and challenge”.

Adult learning was also considered in the report with a stress on the need for “well-targeted learning aimed at the most disadvantaged and those with low levels of qualifications”. In the final section of his lecture Graeme Logan turned to the challenges, where like many other countries, Scotland had to face evidence from the recent PISA survey published in December 2016 that Scotland’s ranking had fallen from 14th to 23rd. PISA results are seized upon by opposition parties in Scotland as elsewhere as evidence of a failing education system.

In response to this challenge the following points were made:

- The importance of tracking progress of each individual pupils over the course of their school career.
- To be clearer about standards expected in the classroom.
- There had been too much “well-meaning, but over-bearing, guidance” nationally and locally.
- the need to ensure literacy skills are “fully embedded across the curriculum”.

I found it significant that in Scotland the stress was on teachers’ professional judgement as the key measure of children’ progress, although, from August 2017 these judgements were to be informed by nationally consistent standardised assessments. Rather than imposing greater central control, concern was expressed at well-meaning and over-bearing national and even local guidance. This contrasts with developments in some countries in response to the recent PISA findings.

How successful these recommendations will be in raising standards of literacy in Scottish schools, and in silencing the critics, time alone will tell. What does seem clear is that if the recommendations are put in place children in Scotland will have a stimulating, creative and challenging experience of literacy from their earliest encounters with spoken and written language. It will also be interesting to compare these responses to PISA with the changes made by other countries who have also seen their rating on PISA fall.

“... if the recommendations are put in place children in Scotland will have a stimulating, creative and challenging experience of literacy from their earliest encounters with spoken and written language.”

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