Writing a Literacy Policy in Secondary Schools

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to secondary schools on the writing of a Literacy Policy or Strategy. It takes into account Education Scotland advice on Literacy as well as other theory on the development of Literacy across Learning. However this is not an academic document on the meaning of literacy[1]. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to provide practical advice that will help schools to implement the Highland Literacy Strategy (2013).

Section 1: Principles and Practice

Essential Elements

The Highland Literacy Strategy identifies 41 essential elements for the development of a school Literacy Policy (based on the Journey to Excellence broad areas of excellence), the most critical of which are as follows[2]:

Vision and Leadership

1. Establish a Literacy Group[3]
2. Ensure that all staff[4] have a clear understanding of the importance of literacy and their role in its development
3. Ensure that clear systems are in place to track and monitor pupils' literacy

Learning and Teaching

4. Promote the importance of literacy to pupils
5. Share standards in literacy
6. Ensure there is a balance in the development of literacy skills in reading, writing, talking and listening[5]
7. Ensure that literacy activities build on prior learning

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[1] There is much research on the nature of literacy. Useful materials on literacy can, of course, be found on the Education Scotland website, here, but there are other ways of approaching this area and staff should be encouraged to develop their own understanding of the nature of literacy.

[2] The complete list of essential elements can be consulted in the online version of the strategy here.

[3] This should be an ongoing group (with membership varying over time) rather than a group with a limited timespan designed to satisfy the outcomes relating to a School Improvement Plan project.

[4] Including non-teaching staff such as Pupil Support Assistants

[5] The balance is in the development of literacy across the whole school and not in individual Departments/Faculties

Culture and Ethos

8. Promote a positive attitude to literacy amongst all staff, learners and parents/carers
9. Ensure literacy has a high profile throughout the school
10. Set and share appropriately high standards
11. Give learners responsibility for their literacy learning

People

12. Give clear consideration to each person's role in leading literacy learning
13. Provide high quality CPD for staff to improve competence and confidence
14. Involve the ASG in sharing standards activities
15. Encourage young people to reflect on their literacy learning
16. Take account of the views of young people when devising literacy learning opportunities

The template in Section 2 below takes these elements into account at the planning stage but of course continuing self-evaluation of the effectiveness of the Policy will be essential in ensuring that they remain a reality in its implementation.

Overcoming barriers

To ensure that the Literacy Policy remains an active document within the school it will be necessary to consider what factors might mitigate against its success. Below, six such barriers are identified and a recommendation made suggesting how they might be overcome. In each individual school further potential barriers may well be identified. It is recommended that during the implementation of the Policy a "pre-mortem" is carried out by those engaged in planning with the intention of identifying ways in which the Policy may fail. This will allow the school to prepare to dismantle these potential local barriers.

Barrier 1 – Lack of staff engagement

Where staff do not feel motivated to make the Policy work, it is very likely to fail, or to exist within the school as an agreed document with no real currency. Research suggests people feel more motivated when a) they have a degree of autonomy, b) when they feel an increasing sense of mastery and c) when there is a strong sense of engaging with others as part of a team to a specific end.

a) The development of the policy should place responsibility for identifying key literacy areas for study with Departments/faculties rather than leaving this to SMT or the school Literacy Group. If this happens individual teachers are more likely to feel that the Policy is there to assist them in their teaching rather than being an imposition with no direct relevance (or, worse, likely to produce a negative impact on pupils' subject-based learning). In particular, explicit discussion needs to take place about how the Literacy Policy will improve pupil attainment in each specific subject area. It would be most effective if such discussions took place at Department/Faculty level.

b) CPD should be carefully planned to address the needs of staff in the school to help them to develop their skills in literacy teaching in such a way that they will be able to see how they are becoming increasingly skilled in the area. This will mean consulting with staff about their needs and using specialists from within and outwith the school to deliver CPD to meet these

needs. It is suggested that the development of teaching literacy skills becomes a regular item at Department/faculty meetings (perhaps once a month) and that there is careful evaluation of the impact of CPD in Departments/Faculties.

c)   Sense of team is likely to begin at Departmental/Faculty level, so a) and b) above will help to develop this sense with regard to literacy. It is also important that there is a clear picture of how actions at Department/Faculty level are contributing to impact at whole school level. This will require gathering of data about pupil attainment (including assessment data) and attitudes of pupils, staff and parents/carers. An assessment of progress towards whole school literacy targets will help staff to feel they are contributing to the larger picture. It is essential, therefore, that clear whole school targets are agreed (and "implementation of the school Literacy Policy" is not a suitable target).

The establishment of a Literacy Group within the school is part of the Highland Literacy Strategy, but the Strategy does not specify how such a group should be formed. It is recommended that the Literacy Group is comprised of volunteers rather than conscripts, but that individuals with an interest in or expertise in issues relating to literacy could be approached when the group is being built. The remit and role of the Literacy Group should be clearly shared with all staff, and the Group should be presented as representative of all staff (and therefore a critical part of the whole-school "team"), with systems in place to ensure good communication and an openness to the views, ideas and concerns of other staff within the school who are not on the Group.

Barrier 2 – Disproportionate bureaucracy

A common reason for staff not engaging with a Literacy Policy is a sense that working on Literacy is an imposition on teachers already dealing with a large and complex workload. Dealing with Barrier 1, above, should help with this issue but it is important that steps to minimise bureaucracy should be seen to be taken. The following are suggested:

- Departments/faculties should, in eth Broad General Education, select those Literacy Significant Aspects of Learning (SAL) that would have most impact on attainment within subject areas. Work on Literacy within a Department/faculty should then focus on these SALs, thus obviating the need to track individual Es and Os and simplifying record keeping.[6] SMT should not insist on Departments/faculties identifying more than one literacy SAL as a focus, though of course in many cases more than one will be identified.

- In the Senior Phase, the equivalent of literacy SALs for the National courses should be identified in each Department/Faculty (in other words, which aspects of literacy would contribute most to pupil attainment at all levels in the Senior Phase).

- The proposal in the original Highland Literacy Strategy that "there should be at least one literacy success criterion with learners for each learning activity and that feedback concentrates on that criterion" should be taken to refer to learning sequences rather than individual lessons.

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[6] Note that this is a departure from the Highland Council Learning Strategy (2013), which recommends an approach based on Es and Os. However, given that few secondary schools have built a Literacy Policy that has been sustained in the past two sessions, it would be sensible to address the reasons for that, and basing the Policy on SALs would decrease the sense that a Literacy Policy is a workload imposition. The increasing emphasis on SALs from Education Scotland and HMI is a new factor that post-dates the writing of the Highland Council Literacy Strategy document.

- Tracking of literacy development in Departments/faculties should be based on SALs rather than Es and Os and the system in use in the school should be as streamlined as possible, minimising data entry for staff.
- The school should develop a system for gathering information about literacy progression across learning that does not require any double entry by staff and key points regarding the impact of the Policy should be drawn together by SMT or personnel from the Literacy Group for dissemination to staff so that it is clear what value has been added by the Policy and by the planning and interventions of Departments/faculties.

Barrier 3 – Lack of Confidence

Staff lack of confidence is usually based on a self-perception (which may or may not be accurate) that individuals do not have the expertise to help pupils to develop literacy. This is often coupled with a conclusion that the proper place for discussing literacy with pupils is within the English Department/Faculty, or perhaps more widely in those subjects where literacy is perceived to be of more importance (such as Social Subjects Departments/Faculties).

The SALs approach (and the corresponding Senior Phase literacy skills[7]) described above should help with this, since staff will be focusing on those specific aspects of Literacy that they themselves have picked as being areas of expertise required in particular courses or subject areas. It follows that teachers will be in possession of these skills (since they have attained qualifications in the subject that must require those skills), even if they have not had a great deal of experience of teaching them.

It should be emphasised by SMT (and through the Literacy Group) that while all teachers are responsible for the *development* of literacy skills, it does not follow that all teachers are responsible for the *assessment* of literacy skills. It is recommended that assessment of literacy resides with the English Department/Faculty (this principle is acknowledged by SQA in the assessment arrangements for the National exams). Other Departments/Faculties can comment on pupil progress in the specific SALs that have been identified as being of key importance but such comments would be seen as advisory and of interest to teachers in the English Department/Faculty and beyond but would not be reported on. Tracking and monitoring systems within the school would need to ensure that such advisory comments from across the school would be readily available to support English teachers in their assessment of pupils' literacy. Only English teachers would be reporting on literacy levels.

A mapping exercise to establish where the various SALs are covered would be relatively straightforward to carry out at whole school level and this should be shared with staff, making it very clear that all staff are therefore contributing to the overall development of literacy in individual pupils.

The Literacy Group would oversee the process of checking for a degree of consistency of approach across the school, though this does not necessarily involve a completely uniform approach in the learning and teaching strategies related to each individual SAL: where there needs to be consistency

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[7] From this point in the document onwards reference to the SALs approach can be taken to refer also to the corresponding Senior Phase skills in literacy.

is in the message that literacy development is of the utmost importance and that literacy development at the individual level means challenging progression built on prior learning.

Barrier 4 – Insufficient learner awareness

There is a danger that pupils are not aware that literacy skills are being developed across all of their learning. Learning happens best when the Highland Learning Policy principles of Engagement, Participation, Dialogue and Thinking are realities in the learning environment[8]. This means making the literacy work explicit, ensuring that young people take responsibility for their own learning.

Each Department/Faculty should promote the particular SAL(s) upon which there will be a focus. This will be done mainly (though not exclusively) through the sharing of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria, and through visual displays in classrooms and other display areas (for example, in corridors).

The mapping exercise across the school mentioned above can be shared with pupils to help them to understand how the development of literacy skills cuts across subject areas. This could also be communicated with parents/carers, perhaps as a diagram showing how the SALs for Literacy can be mapped to different subject areas (and also perhaps explaining why each SAL is important in Skills for Learning, Life and Work).

Sampling of pupil views (for example through questionnaires and focus groups) could help to establish where further work needs to be done, both in developing Literacy SALs and in helping pupils to make the connection between subject areas as appropriate.

Barrier 5 – Existing beliefs about literacy

A difficult barrier to be overcome can be existing beliefs about literacy, especially the belief that the development of literacy is not the responsibility of all teachers, since individual teachers have not been trained to deliver content that is not central to their subject. Similarly, pupils can hold a belief that only English teachers should be speaking to them about their literacy development, since they are perceived to be the only language specialists in the school, and parents may well echo either or both of these beliefs.

The origins of such beliefs are beyond the scope of this document. However, it is essential that the existence of such views is acknowledged within the school and that they are addressed through genuine discussion. It is not sufficient, for example, to counter the argument that literacy development is beyond the remit of subject specialists by simply asserting that it is not. Furthermore, it would be wrong to imply that such beliefs are untenable. Instead the emphasis on addressing Barriers 1 and 3 above may help to change views, especially if Departments/Faculties and the Literacy Group are at the centre of the process, rather than SMT.

Explicit discussion with pupils and parents about the way Literacy across Learning can impact positively on attainment will help to alleviate any concerns. For many parents the notion that all teachers will contribute to the development of literacy will probably run counter to their own school experience so effective communication and dialogue will be essential (perhaps starting with the Parent Council).

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[8] *Highland Learning Policy*, 2013, previously issued to all teaching staff and available as a pdf download here.

Barrier 6 – Insufficient knowledge about prior learning

It is crucial that knowledge about pupils' prior learning in literacy is shared with all staff. This includes, of course, the sharing of information at key transition points, such as the Primary/Secondary transition and the Broad General Education/Senior Phase transition.

For genuinely progressive programmes of literacy development to be built, there will have to be very clear systems in place to ensure that all staff really know what next steps in learning would be appropriate for the young people in their classes. Without these systems it would be impossible to build learning sequences that maximised the attainment of young people.

The 4 Contexts for Learning

In planning a Literacy Policy for the school, the 4 contexts for learning should be addressed.

- Curriculum Area and Subject-based learning will be addressed as described above.
- Opportunities for personal achievement: pupils should be encouraged (perhaps during Key Adult conversations) to identify literacy learning opportunities through wider achievement activities in which they participate, both within and outwith school. Such opportunities could form part of the pupil profile.
- Interdisciplinary Learning: Literacy development should feature in every IDL project, with the identification of one or more than one Literacy SAL (agreed by the staff involved in planning the IDL activity and shared with pupils in terms of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria).
- Ethos: the development of literacy is a matter of entitlement and empowerment, so the sharing of the Literacy Policy should contribute to ethos by explicitly emphasising the school's commitment to these concepts and the role of literacy in their pursuit.

Sharing Standards

The school will already have in place systems for sharing standards and internal verification both internally and across the ASG. This document is not the place to expand on these processes. It goes without saying that sharing standards will be an essential part of the process of developing Literacy across Learning. This process will probably be centred around exemplar material with commentaries produced by those responsible for the assessment of literacy (i.e. the English Department/Faculty) but the details of this will vary from school to school.

Conclusion

In some ways, the development of Literacy across Learning is not a complex concept, particularly since many teachers are already fully engaged with the process. The difficulties that do exist are the manifestations of genuine concerns about what such development means for individuals. The recommendation is that a systematic approach will help to alleviate these concerns, though it is important for schools to commit wholeheartedly and as part of an ongoing process. The emphasis on encouraging reflection and dialogue about literacy development, above, reflects the importance

of collegiality and the concept of everybody involved in a school being learners (in line with the revised Learning Policy and the GTCS Standard for Career-long Professional Learning[9]).

What follows is a template for the content of a Literacy Policy. This is not to say that a school's Literacy Policy has to follow the template: indeed it is more important for the Policy to meet the needs of the individual school. The underlying principle, that development of literacy in the context of subject-based learning will help pupils to raise their attainment, is more important than the specific shape of the school's Literacy Policy. A paper Policy will have no currency (or indeed validity) unless all involved are genuine participants in its production and implementation, and the writing of a Policy is only an early step in the task of raising literacy standards.

Donald Paterson, Quality Improvement Officer

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August 2014

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[9] The GTCS *Standard for Career-long Professional Learning* can be found [here](.).

Section 2: Learning Policy Template

NAME OF SCHOOL inserted here

Your logo here.

LITERACY POLICY

Date inserted here

Section 1 – Aims

In this section outline the school's commitment to Literacy across Learning. This statement should be produced through consultation with staff (and possibly pupils and parents). The following paragraph is extracted from the Highland Council Literacy Strategy (2013):

> *The Highland Literacy Strategy aims to raise standards in reading, writing, talking and listening. To equip our learners for life in the 21st century, it is vital that, as leaders of learning, teachers recognise the fundamental importance of literacy and its place in the curriculum. All teachers have a responsibility to promote and develop reading, writing, talking and listening skills.*

This paragraph could form the first part of the Aims section of the school Policy, and would be followed by a more school-specific section. This section would include subsections on:

- Ways in which the importance of literacy has been shared with
    * Staff
    * Pupils
    * Parents
- The production of the Learning Policy (and how it is the result of collegiate processes)
- Ways in which literacy is given a high profile within the school
- Ways in which high expectations about literacy are set and maintained.

Section 2 – Systems

In this section describe the various systems in place within the school designed to promote literacy as outlined in Section 1 of the Policy. This section will include subsections on:

- The school Literacy Group (its formation and functions)
- The role of Departments/Faculties in addressing Significant Aspects of Learning in literacy
- The connections between SALs and key literacy skills in the Senior Phase in Departments/Faculties
- A map of the above two bullet points to visually demonstrate links between literacy in different areas of the curriculum
- Methods by which knowledge about pupils' abilities in literacy are shared at all transition points
- Systems to ensure that all pupils experience a suitable literacy skills progression, regardless of academic attainment, and taking into account all types of additional support needs
- Oversight of literacy development (for example ensuring full coverage of the Significant Aspects of Learning)
- Tracking and monitoring progress
- Assessing literacy, including the role of English teachers in assessment (including helping pupils to identify next steps in their learning)
- Communicating with parents/carers regarding literacy development

Section 3 – Programmes of Work

This section would contain links to actual programmes of literacy work devised in Departments/Faculties. Initially, this will represent work in progress, but will be increasingly populated as time goes on. This section would also cover the way challenging literacy targets are set for pupils across the school.

Section 4 – Understanding Standards

In this section an account will be given of the various process in place within the school to ensure that there is consistency of approach in the delivery and assessment of literacy:

- Within the school
- Involving the ASG

Section 5 – Supporting the Policy

In this section there will be a description of how the Policy is supported through:

- Consultation with staff, pupils and parents/carers
- Learning opportunities for staff (as part of the Career-long Professional Learning process)
- Surveying of views to ensure the Policy is delivered effectively

Section 6 – The 4 Contexts for Learning

This section will outline how literacy is prioritised in the school in terms of

- Curriculum Area and Subject-based learning (a reference to Section 2, above).
- Opportunities for personal achievement
- Interdisciplinary Learning
- Ethos

Section 7 – Evaluation and Improvement

This section will outline how the school will evaluate the Policy's effectiveness and amend it in line with feedback of various kinds and analysis of data. The processes involved here will echo self-evaluation processes already existing within the school. The emphasis here will be on how the school knows that the Policy is being implemented fully and is making a difference in terms of pupils' literacy and through what agreed processes alterations to the Policy will be introduced as and when necessary.

Please direct any questions about this paper and the Template in the first instance to donald.paterson@highland.gov.uk.