

Report summary

Improving literacy in secondary schools: a shared responsibility

There is nothing new about the focus on whole-school literacy. As a headteacher commented in *The Times Educational Supplement*:

If you want a sure way to provoke a collective groan in your staffroom, announce that you are intending to hold a training day devoted to whole-school literacy. 'We did that five years ago!' someone will shout.¹

The staffroom response presented in this snippet has the snappiness of caricature but it crystallises attitudes that may explain, in part, why so many literacy initiatives over the years have failed to have a long-lasting impact on daily practice in secondary schools. It reveals a diminished view of what 'literacy' encompasses.

At its most specific and practical, the term applies to a set of skills that have long been accepted as fundamental to education. The Department for Education is clear and emphatic – the curriculum should offer opportunities for pupils to:

- 'engage in specific activities that develop speaking and listening skills as well as activities that integrate speaking and listening with reading and writing'
- 'develop speaking and listening skills through work that makes cross-curricular links with other subjects'
- 'develop reading skills through work that makes cross-curricular links with other subjects'
- 'develop writing skills through work that makes cross-curricular links with other subjects'
- 'work in sustained and practical ways, with writers where possible, to learn about the art, craft and discipline of writing'

¹ Geoff Barton, Headteacher, King Edward VI School, Bury St Edmunds, in *The Times Educational Supplement*, 5 March 2010.

- 'redraft their own work in the light of feedback. This could include self-evaluation using success criteria, recording and reviewing performances, target-setting and formal and informal use of peer assessment. Redrafting should be purposeful, moving beyond proofreading for errors to the reshaping of whole texts or parts of texts.'²

It is common for any one of the strands – speaking and listening, reading and writing – to be used as if it were synonymous with the wider concept of 'literacy'. When those in the wider world – employers, for example, or representatives of national or local government – complain about falling standards of literacy, they most often have in mind spelling, punctuation and grammar. The blame is then directed towards schools, although examples are legion of businesses that subvert standard spellings and syntax in their trade names and slogans, and of official publications and signage that disregard standard rules of punctuation. The message for those still at school or college is that the rules and conventions they are being taught have little to do with 'real life'. This was one of the more discouraging findings of the long English report in 2009: 'Pupils who were less enthusiastic about the subject and made poorer progress said that it had little to do with their lives or interests outside school.'³

'Literacy', however, is more than the mechanics of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The National Curriculum demands that connections be made between each strand and across subjects, which calls for thought and understanding, for recall, selection and analysis of ideas and information, and for coherent, considered and convincing communication in speech and in writing. All pupils should be encouraged to:

- 'make extended, independent contributions that develop ideas in depth'
- 'make purposeful presentations that allow them to speak with authority on significant subjects'
- 'engage with texts that challenge preconceptions and develop understanding beyond the personal and immediate'
- 'experiment with language and explore different ways of discovering and shaping their own meanings'
- 'use writing as a means of reflecting on and exploring a range of views and perspectives on the world.'⁴

² 'English: curriculum opportunities', Secondary National Curriculum until 2014, Department for Education; updated 26 April 2012; www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/secondary/b00199101/english/ks4/programme/opportunities.

³ *English at the crossroads* (080247), Ofsted, June 2009; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/080247.

⁴ 'English: curriculum opportunities', Secondary National Curriculum until 2014, Department for Education, updated, 26 April 2012; www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/secondary/b00199101/english/ks4/programme/opportunities.

This survey looks at how some secondary schools have identified and are successfully tackling weaknesses in pupils' literacy – not only in their speaking and listening, reading and writing, but in their readiness to engage with challenging concepts, to make constructive connections between subjects and to learn from the thinking and experience of others. This wider view of literacy features in the teaching and learning policies and the practices of the schools visited, where:

- long-term planning for literacy, rather than a focus on 'quick fixes', is understood to be important
- headteachers and senior leaders give active, consistent and sustained support
- the need is recognised to make the case for literacy in all subjects and answer the question for teachers, 'What's in it for us?'
- effective use is made of specialist knowledge to support individual departments and teachers
- teachers are encouraged to identify effective practice in different areas of the curriculum and to learn from each other
- there is an emphasis on practical ideas that teachers can use in longer term plans and schemes of work
- effective use is made of the library and librarian
- senior leaders keep a close eye on developments through systematic monitoring and evaluation.

Leaders and managers at all levels in these schools appreciated that there was no one way to get it right and that departments were likely to identify different literacy priorities and approaches as being particularly useful in their subject area.

Making the case for literacy

The case for promoting literacy across the secondary curriculum is urgent and essential. Too many pupils still emerge from our schools without the confident and secure literacy skills they need to thrive as adults. In January 2012, the National Literacy Trust updated its *State of the nation* review of literacy.⁵ It found that one in every six adults struggles with literacy, with a literacy level below that expected of an 11-year-old. Levels of achievement are often associated with pupils' levels of deprivation. In 2009, a survey by the Department of Children, Schools and Families showed that only 33% of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals (FSM) achieved C or higher in English, compared to 62% of non-FSM pupils. It found a 32% gap between those pupils in areas of greatest deprivation who achieved Level 5

⁵ *Literacy: state of the nation*, National Literacy Trust, January 2012;
www.literacytrust.org.uk/research/nlt_research/2364_literacy_state_of_the_nation.

at the end of Key Stage 3 and those in areas of least deprivation.⁶ Another survey commissioned by the government in 2009 reported that professionals working with school leavers not in education, training or employment (NEETs) agreed that these young people often had experiences of school that were not positive. While for some this may have been because they disliked school, for others it was related to their inability to engage with education due to poor basic literacy skills or learning difficulties.⁷

A survey of 566 employers, undertaken by the Confederation of British Industry in 2011, highlighted the dissatisfaction felt by more than four in every 10 of these employers about the low standards of basic literacy demonstrated by many school and college leavers.⁸ The All Party Parliamentary Group on Education recently reported that literacy is a huge issue for the nation, our society and our economy, not just for schools.

The importance of literacy has been recognised by governments across Europe and beyond. A recent European Union report spoke of a 'literacy crisis that affects every country in Europe':

If smart growth is about knowledge and innovation, investment in literacy skills is a prerequisite for achieving such growth... Our world is dominated by the written word, both online and in print. This means we can only contribute and participate actively if we can read and write sufficiently well. But, each year, hundreds of thousands of children start their secondary school two years behind in reading; some leave even further behind their peers... Literacy is about people's ability to function in society as private individuals, active citizens, employees or parents... Literacy is about people's self-esteem, their interaction with others, their health and employability. Ultimately, literacy is about whether a society is fit for the future.⁹

⁶ *Deprivation and education – the evidence on pupils in England: Foundation Stage to Key Stage 4* (DCSF-RTP-09-01), Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RTP-09-01.

⁷ *Increasing participation: understanding young people who do not participate in education or training at 16 and 17* (DCSF-RR072), Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/Youthandadolescence/Page7/DCSF-RR072.

⁸ *Building for growth*, Confederation for British Industry, 2011; www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/news-articles/2011/05/building-for-growth.

⁹ *Final report of the EU High Level Group of experts on literacy*, 2012; ec.europa.eu/education/literacy/resources/final-report/index_en.htm.

Ofsted's reports present a mixed picture, not one that is entirely or even predominantly bleak. In *Removing barriers to literacy*, for example, inspectors identified good practice that others could replicate.¹⁰

The most successful schools emphasised that there was no 'eureka' moment, that is to say, specific or unusual practice. Rather, they made what one school described as 'painstaking adjustments' to what they did when their monitoring provided evidence of weaknesses and they stuck with what worked.

Inspectors also found:

In the secondary schools where teachers in all subject departments had received training in teaching literacy and where staff had included an objective for literacy in all the lessons, senior managers noted an improvement in outcomes across all subjects, as well as in English. The high-performing colleges visited adopted similar strategies to improve outcomes.

The most recent schedule for the inspection of maintained schools and academies in England has emphasised the importance of literacy. The descriptors for an outstanding school now include the following criteria.

- Excellent practice ensures that all pupils have high levels of literacy appropriate to their age.
- Pupils read widely and often across all subjects.
- Pupils develop and apply a wide range of skills to great effect, in reading, writing and communication.
- The teaching of reading, writing and communication is highly effective and cohesively planned and implemented across the curriculum.
- Excellent policies ensure that pupils have high levels of literacy, or pupils are making excellent progress in literacy.

Aspects of literacy are now built into each of the key judgements made in a school inspection: overall effectiveness; achievement; the quality of teaching; and leadership and management. An outstanding school is likely to have outstanding policies and practice in promoting literacy across the curriculum. All groups of pupils must be seen to make good or better progress, including those for whom English is an additional language, those with special educational needs and those known to be eligible for government funding through the pupil premium.

The evidence gathered during this survey shows that teachers in a secondary school need to understand that literacy is a key issue regardless of the subject taught. It is

¹⁰ *Removing barriers to literacy* (090237), Ofsted, 2011; www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/090237.

an important element of their effectiveness as a subject teacher. National teaching standards, which set the benchmark for the evaluation of teaching by school leaders and by Ofsted, require teachers to 'demonstrate an understanding of and take responsibility for promoting high standards of literacy, articulacy and the correct use of standard English, whatever their specialist subject.'¹¹ It is the responsibility of school leaders to check that teachers have that understanding, to establish training programmes when needed, and to monitor rigorously how effectively teachers are developing pupils' literacy skills as an integral element of their wider learning.

Effective teaching of language, its meaning and use in a geography lesson, for example, helps pupils to learn geography more successfully. Similarly, pupils are unlikely to make good progress in physical education (PE) if they are unable to speak clearly about tactics or strategies in sport. Survey evidence also indicates a link between more engaging approaches to developing pupils' literacy skills and a marked fall in rates of persistent absence from previously hard-to-reach pupils or those at risk of dropping out of education.

Evidence from survey visits to schools suggests that teachers are easily convinced about the primary importance of literacy in all subjects if the case is carefully and successfully explained. For example, one school in the survey promoted literacy to all teachers using the following arguments.

'What's in it for departments?

- Literacy supports learning. Pupils need vocabulary, expression and organisational control to cope with the cognitive demands of all subjects.
- Writing helps us to sustain and order thought.
- Better literacy leads to improved self-esteem, motivation and behaviour. It allows pupils to learn independently. It is empowering.
- Better literacy raises pupils' attainment in all subjects.'¹²

Nevertheless, the case for literacy does need to be made more effectively if teachers are not to argue, 'We did that five years ago... and it made no difference.' Schools should directly address the question: 'What's in it for me?' This report's findings should help to answer that question and promote cross-curricular literacy in schools.

¹¹ *Teachers' standards* (DFE-00066-2011), Department for Education, 2012; www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/SchoolsSO/Page1/DFE-00066-2011.

¹² Springfield School, Portsmouth.

Main report published April 23 2013
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/120363.

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No. 120363

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