

ENGLISH

A portrait of current practice in Scottish schools and pre-school centres

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English – a portrait of current practice is one in a series of portraits by HMIE, depicting current practice in key aspects of the Scottish curriculum. The portrait series is a recent initiative by HMIE, flowing from the *Improving Scottish Education* report¹. It is intended to promote improvements in Scottish education by drawing on the findings of inspections to stimulate reflection and debate. From time to time, portraits will be enhanced to include case studies of effective practice, usually to coincide with a good practice event in that subject. This is an enhanced portrait.

An important purpose of the portrait series is to relate existing pedagogy and curricular provision to the aspirations of *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*². By stimulating debate about teaching for effective learning, the portraits will challenge us all to review the extent to which current practice is successfully promoting the four capacities in all young learners. The series sits alongside *How Good Is Our School? The Journey to Excellence*³ in focusing on the two key dimensions of excellence:

- engaging young people in the highest quality learning activities; and
- focusing on outcomes and maximising success for all learners.

This portrait is based on evidence obtained from HMIE visits to schools during the period 2004 to 2007. These visits included both general inspections and other visits to examine effective practice. Inspectors evaluated the quality of learning, teaching, meeting learners' needs and achievement. The portrait also draws upon the work shared at the HMIE conference in June 2006, *Good Practice in English, 3-18*. It illustrates ways in which effective teachers work successfully with pupils to develop each of the four capacities of *Curriculum for Excellence*. It identifies how teachers might contribute more to developing successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. In particular, teachers can help young people to achieve their potential by ensuring that they build meaningfully on prior learning. They can provide regular opportunities for learners to develop skills in critical thinking, and challenging contexts within which learners can apply these skills. Across the stages, teachers can ensure that children and pupils use and develop their literacy skills to support all of their learning, within and beyond school.

Improving Scottish Education

Improving Scottish Education was published by HMIE in March 2006. It suggests building on the strengths in Scottish education to meet the needs of learners and improve their levels of achievement so that they are able to meet the challenges of a global society.

A better quality of service provided to young people by schools, and the commitment of teachers are supporting improvements in the overall quality of achievement and attainment in English. Improving the literacy skills of all of our young people continues to be a key priority for all schools. Language and literacy skills, and critical thinking are at the heart of all learning, thinking, overall wellbeing and personal and social growth. They contribute directly to the cultural and economic health of our country.

¹ *Improving Scottish Education*. HM Inspectorate of Education 2006

² *Curriculum for Excellence* outlines the purposes and principles of the curriculum 3-18 to provide a framework within which improvements to Scottish education can and should be made. CfE aims to focus classroom practice around the four capacities of education: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

³ *How Good Is Our School? The Journey To Excellence*. HM Inspectorate of Education 2006

Across the curriculum, the potential is enormous to increase the scope for pupils to think for themselves, to articulate their thoughts as they encounter new ideas and to explore and explain these ideas. It is through the use of language in listening, talking, reading and writing, in real life and in new and varied contexts, that pupils become aware of what learning is and how they learn best. We know that poor literacy skills are a major barrier to learning. We also know that this barrier contributes to increased absence from school, poor attitudes to learning, limited opportunities for employment and, for some, increased involvement with the criminal justice system. The loss to the economy from literacy levels that are too low has been estimated at over one and a half billion pounds⁴. Competence in literacy and English language is crucial in enabling young people to access the curriculum, to engage in learning, to achieve positive post-school destinations and ultimately to participate fully in society.

English and Curriculum for Excellence

How can English help to develop successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors?

The increasingly complex demands made on young people in our information-rich society make it crucial for them to develop a broad range of literacy and communication skills. They need the confidence to think and respond critically and to use a full range of language skills in both predictable and unpredictable situations. *Curriculum for Excellence* is our opportunity to make sure they succeed. It is the context for promoting high achievement by developing new, innovative and ultimately more effective ways of raising achievement in specific aspects of learning. Many schools are responding to this challenge, actively promoting pupils' holistic achievement as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. In so doing, they have recognised the central role of English, not only in teaching and learning the joy of using our language effectively, but also in helping us to understand what and how we think and how to relate to others.

Successful Learners

What do we do currently to develop successful learners?

At all stages, young people learn well when they

Signpost to successful learners

Successful learners often display the following characteristics. Pupils

- *can listen effectively to adults and to each other;*
- *can talk confidently about their feelings and opinions;*
- *can defend a point of view effectively;*
- *can take an active part in group discussions led by other pupils and adults;*
- *read widely for pleasure and can discuss features of the books they have read;*
- *can recognise and describe styles and types of writing;*
- *have a good knowledge of strategies to help them tackle reading unfamiliar words and phrases;*
- *can read an unseen text aloud, at an appropriate level of difficulty, fluently and with good expression;*
- *are skilled in researching information from a variety of sources, including non-fiction texts and the Internet;*
- *can write well for a range of purposes and audiences; and*
- *can use their skills in English to support their learning in other areas of the curriculum, for example enterprise in education or social subjects.*

⁴ *The long term costs of literacy difficulties*, December 2006, commissioned by the KPMG Foundation.

are clear about what they are learning and why. Well-planned opportunities for pupils to be active in their learning help them to achieve success, for example by working together to analyse texts, sharing their work with others regularly and commenting constructively on each other's work. Pupils relish choice and challenge, sometimes surprising themselves and their teachers by the amount and quality of work they produce.

In pre-school establishments, children make good progress in their communication and language skills. Most can listen and respond to stories and explanations and talk confidently about their thoughts and experiences. By the time they are ready to enter P1, most children are able to recognise their own name in print. Many can write it. Children's ability to recall the sequence of stories and act them out is improving. Most children are able to use captions, signs and labels effectively in their play context. They are becoming more confident in making marks and in using early writing skills within a context of play.

In many primary schools and secondary English departments, teachers successfully foster a curiosity in pupils about language in a wide range of contexts: rhymes, stories, articles, comics, reports, websites, films, text messages and advertisements.

Reading and talking in groups

S4 pupils, working in groups, distributed articles on different aspects of the theme they were studying (youth crime). Each took responsibility for preparing a note on a shaped template of the key points. They used a range of reading skills during this first stage, including skimming and scanning, close reading and inferential reading. During the following group discussion, pupils presented their findings, explained their reasoning and refined their notes. They fitted their templates together to form a 'doughnut' shape, creating a strong visual representation of their conclusions. Each group shared their findings then reported back to the rest of the class. Pupils responded very positively to the topicality and relevance of the theme, and the levels of responsibility given to them by this approach. They demonstrated their knowledge about language (especially the language of persuasion) very well and used integrated language skills to good effect.

Well-managed activities help pupils understand and develop their communication skills. Through skilled use of sound, rhyme and word play, teachers build effectively on children's early learning. Thereafter, they engage pupils in regular, enriching experiences of listening, talking, reading, viewing and writing, often in the context of literature.

Teachers' own use of language exemplifies effective communication: through clear explanations and instructions and thought-provoking questions; and by listening carefully and responding sensitively to pupils' ideas and suggestions.

Talking and listening for successful learning

To help P5 pupils understand the importance of their language skills to learning in other areas of the curriculum, their mathematics lesson on problem-solving and enquiry began with a review of the skills for group discussion. Once the pupils were well rehearsed in how to arrive at a well-argued group response to a problem, they tackled a range of practical mathematical problems successfully. The lesson built pupils' confidence in their mathematical abilities. They benefited from thinking out loud, as they explained to one another how they had analysed the problem and why they chose the solution they did.

Sometimes, teachers bring a book and join pupils in personal reading sessions, and take part in class writing activities. They set a wide range of homework tasks which develop pupils' thinking and language skills, make varied and challenging demands on their independence and creative thinking, and include the consideration of language used in the context of pupils' homes, interests and communities.

Increasingly, teachers are using information and communication technology (ICT) effectively to engage pupils in different approaches to reading, writing and making presentations. Well-planned research tasks also help pupils to develop important skills in handling information on the Internet responsibly. Inspectors often find that boys, in particular, are highly motivated by the way ICT allows them to think creatively and imaginatively, develop greater responsibility for their own learning and explore different styles of communication and expression. Overall, there continues to be too much variability in the extent to which teachers use ICT to enliven teaching for effective learning.

International measures of Scottish pupils' attainment confirm important strengths. Scotland continues to perform at a consistently very high standard in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The 2005 Scottish Survey of Achievement: *English language and core skills* (SSA) indicated that many pupils exceeded expected levels of attainment, especially in reading, and that there had been an overall reduction in under-achievement.

Particular features of pupils' attainment in English include the following.

Multi-media and effective communication

Across the country, increasing numbers of schools are using multi-media approaches to provide pupils with stimulating and challenging tasks. Working in pairs, pupils used mp3 players to listen to and comment upon audio texts. Pupils in other classes, used mp3 player/recorders to record their discussion of a text. They then replayed their discussion and evaluated not only what they had learned from each other about the text but also the quality of their comments. In other lessons, pupils created their own digital texts, combining original narratives with audio, graphics and/or video to produce engaging stories.

SSA results indicated that around 75% of pupils had very good or well-established skills in reading, or at least had made a good start at the level expected of them. Around 50% of pupils at P7 and S2 demonstrated well-established skills at an appropriate standard. In writing, some 15% of pupils at P7 attained higher than the expected level. At S2, just over 50% of pupils attained the expected level and just over 10% exceeded the expected level. Girls continued to perform better than boys, particularly in writing and talking. More than half of pupils demonstrated well-established listening and watching skills and answered questions successfully beyond the levels expected for their stage. In talking, the survey suggested that the proportion of pupils at each stage attaining expected levels decreased with age.

Inspectors find that pupils at P1 and P2 are making very good progress with their learning in English language. Building on their pre-school experiences, active approaches to learning provide children with frequent and varied opportunities to use their developing language skills, as they interact and work with each other. The national focus on developing strategies to improve the learning of young children has made a positive impact on their attainment in listening, talking, reading and writing. By P2, many pupils attain Level A in reading and writing. By P3, almost all attain or exceed national levels. In almost all schools, this good pace of learning is sustained into P4. However, it begins to slow down at P5.

Particular features of pupils' attainment in primary schools include the following.

Most pupils:

- listen and respond well to points raised during class and group discussions;
- talk confidently about their feelings and opinions on a range of topics;

- use appropriate evidence to support their point of view, verbally and in writing;
- read regularly for pleasure and discuss features of the books they have read;
- read an unseen text aloud, at an appropriate level of difficulty, fluently and with good expression, tackling unfamiliar words and phrases well; and
- write effectively for different purposes and audiences.

Features detracting from this otherwise positive picture include the following.

A few pupils are not sufficiently skilled at listening to others. While most pupils are developing useful skills for discussions, in too many schools pupils are not able to interact confidently and effectively enough with their classmates in group discussions.

At P6 and P7, inspectors often find a lack of confidence in pupils' use of higher order reading skills, those needed to analyse texts fully and understand the impact made by aspects of the writer's craft. In addition, nationally collected data continues to show that boys' attainment in reading is lower than that of girls. Although schools work hard to help develop regular reading habits, including targeted initiatives to engage boys' interests, there is scope for them to enjoy more challenging texts. This would help extend pupils' vocabulary and broaden their ideas and horizons.

Particular features of attainment in secondary schools include the following.

- Most pupils who do not attain level E or beyond by the end of S2 nevertheless make good progress from their previous level of attainment.
- By the end of S2, increasing proportions of pupils reach national attainment levels earlier than expected, especially in reading. Standards of attainment in writing have remained relatively static.
- Only a few schools and education authorities monitor pupils' attainment in listening and talking systematically through primary stages up to S2. In general, many pupils do not know how well they are doing in these important aspects of their language development.
- At Standard Grade, almost all pupils attain a General or Credit award.
- Over 70% of S5 Higher candidates gain A-C grades and around 50% of S6 candidates do so.
- The quality of transitions from Standard Grade to Intermediate and Higher courses continues to be too variable. Often, pupils are not encouraged to extend their higher order skills in readiness for the demands made on them after Standard Grade. Pupils easily identify what makes a significant difference to their S5 experience. For example:

“ We read so much non-fiction during S4, for WI pieces and debates, that I found some of the Higher passages easier than I'd expected.”

“The History and English departments taught us a common approach to essay writing during S3 and S4. That really helped me with my work in both subjects and [this year] with my critical essays, personal study and writing.”

“ I now appreciate how helpful it was to insist that we didn’t redraft everything all the time. We got into the habit of trying to put as much of the important detail into the first draft – and take a bit more time over it.”

Pupils are equally clear about the areas of particular difficulty (and pressure) for them once they have embarked on their Intermediate or Higher course. For example:

“ I wish I’d been expected to analyse poetry to this depth before I started Higher.”

“ It would have been good to do a critical evaluation on a book of my own choice and not just on the class texts, to get me ready for the personal study.”

“I’d never written a literature essay against the clock before S5.”

In primary and secondary schools, inspectors see pupils’ wider achievement, and their confidence in using language effectively for a variety of purposes, in a broad range of activities. Pupils often have a leading role in school assemblies, for example. Team captains present lively reports on sports fixtures; members of various school committees provide updates or make appeals on environmental improvements, fund-raising projects and health promoting initiatives. Pupils in P6 and P7, and S5 and S6 act as ‘reading buddies’ or study partners for younger pupils, using what they have learned to support others. When asked about the achievements that matter most to them, pupils often speak of the pleasure they get from their involvement in school shows. They talk of the increased self-discipline they have developed from learning lines, taking direction and meeting deadlines, and how this has benefited other aspects of their school work. *“We know how important it is to listen or you can let everyone down.”* Finding creative solutions to practical problems, by talking things through from different perspectives is another feature of productions which pupils find exciting and satisfying. Sometimes, they have the added enjoyment of performing plays they wrote themselves.

The growing number of bilingual pupils in Scotland’s schools brings many unique strengths, including the opportunity for all pupils to understand and learn from different cultures. Many bilingual pupils are steadily developing their acquisition of the skills in English language which they will need for social interactions and further learning. But some require additional support at key stages so that they can achieve as broadly as possible. High quality, targeted support by education authorities and schools needs to be further assured if bilingual pupils are to develop personally and contribute fully to the richness of Scotland’s society, culture and economic wellbeing.

In both primary and secondary schools, some teaching approaches are designed to ensure pupils learn and use higher order language skills and critical thinking, including organising and summarising, and supporting and justifying points of view. Effective strategies include providing a good amount of independent thinking time, or ‘lead-in’ time. Often this kind of

Collaboration and skills for work

Some secondary schools and education authorities have developed effective programmes to prepare pupils for employment. One school’s partnership with local tradesmen supported coaching in construction skills for a group of S4 pupils, who built a dry stone wall. They collaborated with pupils studying Biology to design and develop a thriving garden. Throughout this programme, pupils’ reading and writing skills were key to their success: agreeing design decisions, practical problem solving, talking, listening, identifying and justifying resources, and preparing an entry of garden produce for the local horticultural show.

reflection and preparation is done at home, after which pupils bring well-considered ideas and views for further group and class discussion. Well-managed individual or collaborative research tasks which rely on pupils' commitment and resourcefulness also contribute to their deeper understanding and critical thinking. Some schools engage pupils in particularly challenging and motivating inter-disciplinary projects, which develop and encourage a wide range of higher order skills, including modifying and defining.

Planning for excellence: how English might contribute more to developing successful learners?

In planning to meet the learning needs of all pupils better, many teachers have placed a strong emphasis on how they enable pupils to engage fully in their own learning. They have ensured that pupils use and practise their language skills in rich, varied and relevant tasks. In considering how we might promote further success, the following questions identify aspects where many schools and teachers could usefully review the quality of provision.

- How have we built on pupils' prior learning to raise levels of achievement, including building on pupils' learning through play from early years into primary school?
- At all stages, do pupils have sufficient opportunities to develop and use their talking and listening skills to support their thinking and learning across the curriculum? Do we give them enough time to think and discuss issues fully, to help them form views and reach conclusions?
- In primary schools, do we ensure that the early gains in pupils' achievement in reading and writing are sustained into the later stages of primary? By P6 and P7, are too many pupils in our school or class achieving below appropriate national levels of attainment?
- At P6 and P7, do we ensure the teaching of reading always challenges pupils sufficiently, particularly higher achieving pupils? Are their skills in analysing texts or appreciating register well enough developed?
- Do we ensure that pupils are able to explain their thinking orally and in extended written responses, across the curriculum?
- Although in many schools we work hard to help develop regular reading habits, including targeted initiatives to engage boys, could we help pupils to enjoy more challenging texts, to extend their vocabulary and broaden their ideas and horizons?
- At the secondary stages, do we build systematically on pupils' prior broad experiences of reading for information across the curriculum?
- While pupils frequently demonstrate effective reference skills, often well supported by librarians, are their skills of note-making and information handling secure?
- To what extent has our school helped raise levels of achievement and attainment in English for all pupils?

- What has helped contribute to raising the levels of achievement and attainment of the lowest performing 20% of pupils in our school?
- What aspects of our arrangements for monitoring pupils' progress are most effective in ensuring we meet the needs of all learners?

Confident Individuals

What do we do well currently to develop confident individuals?

Pupils' literacy skills are life skills which help them to broaden their horizons and communicate effectively in increasingly varied and demanding situations. The more language pupils have at their command, the more confident, and excited by language they become - especially when they are encouraged to express themselves "in our own language". Inspectors find that pupils respond very positively to opportunities to communicate in Scots: learning and using Scots words and expressions, exploring different dialects through personal experience and literature, writing, reciting and singing in Scots.

Welcoming Scots in the classroom

In one primary classroom, pupils had prepared language labels in Scots, English and French for the skeleton they were using in their science topic: 'The Boady'. The teacher reported that pupils were highly motivated by seeing links between languages, and by the fun of working with Scots words.

Pupils at S2 built successfully on what they had learned at Scots language workshops to prepare and perform their own, modern version of 'Tam o' Shanter' as a play. Their work showed their understanding of key features of Burns' use of language, and their readiness to draw upon a wide range of Scots and English vocabulary to create rich and vibrant dialogue.

" We speak five languages in this classroom – Scots, English, French and German, and now we're working with an assistant from the Czech Republic and learning his language too." SQA examiners' reports on pupils' literature essays at S4 to S6 confirm that significant numbers continue to study Scots texts. However, many teachers remain unclear about the role of Scots in pupils' language development.

Pupils may develop skills as confident individuals by making books to read to younger children; helping younger or less secure readers as paired reading tutors; using ICT confidently to 'publish' their writing, developing websites; preparing and delivering effective talks; and producing school newsletters and magazines.

Outwith school, many take part in local and national debating competitions and demanding public speaking events. Building on their experience of drama performances, in schools as

Signpost to confident individuals

Confident individuals often display the following characteristics.

- *They communicate confidently when talking and writing, in a wide range of contexts.*
- *They listen attentively and respond constructively.*
- *They actively develop and apply their language skills, across their learning.*
- *From reading widely, they gain confidence from having a well-developed vocabulary and an understanding of how writers use language for a variety of purposes.*
- *They enjoy choosing what to read from a wide selection of texts written for different purposes.*
- *They are critical thinkers who can distinguish fact from opinion and are confident about justifying their own point of view.*

well as theatres, pupils may develop increasingly sophisticated personal and social skills and broaden their understanding of how to communicate ideas and emotions. At the secondary stages in particular, regular engagement with live drama helps to develop the critical skills necessary for effective and successful learning in literary study.

In schools where pupils write regularly for a variety of purposes and real audiences, attainment in writing is often very good, or outstanding. Teachers help pupils to develop the confidence to experiment with words, sentence structures, styles and narrative voices. The contexts for writing are rich and exciting. Before, during and after writing pupils have opportunities to discuss their ideas and develop them further. In such schools, there is a culture which builds confidence through nurturing and celebrating writing.

Planning for excellence: how English might contribute more to developing confident individuals?

When pupils have opportunities to be involved in discussions about their learning and progress, with each other as well as teachers, they develop increased confidence and self-belief. They understand clearly that their language and literacy skills will help them to develop socially as young people, to learn throughout their lives and to be adaptable to the many new situations they will encounter. The more schools enthuse pupils to want to take part in a wide range of enriching activities, the more confident pupils will become. In many schools, particular areas where teachers could further increase pupils' confidence include the following.

- Are we ensuring that pupils know clearly what skills they have and how to use them effectively for different purposes?
- Do we focus on the integrated development of pupils' language skills? *"Once I'm clear about what I can do, I can use that in different situations. A passage in a test won't come back around."* Sometimes teachers focus too much on preparing pupils for tests and assessments.
- Do we help pupils to grow in confidence by engaging in challenging, enjoyable experiences and contexts which build judiciously on their prior learning?
- How can we continue to build pupils' confidence and skills in written communication? Many teachers and education authorities have worked hard to develop resources and methodologies to help improve pupils' skills and confidence in self-expression through writing. However, overall progress in raising standards of writing continues to be slow.

Learning from each other

Individuals and groups in the senior stages of primary school and in secondary stages prepared oral presentations on key points or themes in the literary text they were studying. Preparations included very effective posters which illustrated pupils' clearly justified interpretations and conclusions and became general reference materials for the class. The posters, presentations and subsequent discussions were of a very high quality. This work allowed pupils to use a range of language skills, to produce reports which were relevant for the whole class and to present them to real audiences.

Celebrating writing

S1/S2 pupils in a lunchtime writing club worked together to produce a series of very imaginative and well-structured 'whodunit' stories. The quality of the work was such that the English department had integrated the stories into its talking and listening programmes, stimulating lively and wide-reaching discussions while also celebrating successful writing very effectively.

Pupils themselves have identified a range of factors which made a difference to their writing. The following sentiments have been expressed when things are going well

"I have plenty of time to think about what I want to say and to discuss ideas before I start writing."

"My teacher gives me good feedback and other chances to write stories in the same genre so that I can see I'm getting better."

"We do self- and peer-correction first and I feel good about handing my work to my teacher to read after that kind of checking."

And when things are going less well:

"I don't write well if the task is irrelevant or unreal, like writing letters that are never meant to be posted and are about things that don't matter to me."

"I put lots of good ideas in my plan but then run out of time for my story – but I was told I had to have a plan."

"Mostly it's worksheets for subjects like science and RME and I just fill in words here and there. It doesn't seem to matter if I spell things wrongly and forget about paragraphs in other subjects."

Responsible Citizens

What do we do well currently to develop responsible citizens?

Many teachers have recognised the very significant opportunities afforded by English to develop responsible citizens. They have enhanced pupils' experiences in English by making learning relevant to their own development and to contemporary issues for young people. They help pupils to develop critical thinking by studying literature and by using current affairs and topical and ethical issues to stimulate debate. They use these contexts to develop close reading skills and to promote social and civic awareness. Such activities often help pupils prepare for life beyond school and the world of work.

The 2007 Principal Examiner's report⁵ (Standard Grade) highlights strengths in pupils' discursive writing on issues such as anti-social behaviour orders, teenage obesity and size zero, and about their own local issues. These represent the kind of topics that are clearly relevant to young people and as such create ideal contexts for pupils to express themselves from a personal and more involved perspective. Many effective teachers take time both to challenge their pupils to think about what matters to them and then to plan how they might share their views clearly and expressively, through a range of media.

Signpost to responsible citizens

Responsible citizens often display the following characteristics.

- *They support others, for example by becoming writing buddies and paired-readers.*
- *They avoid plagiarism and acknowledge the sources of their research.*
- *They remain open and responsive to the ideas of others and respect others' opinions.*
- *They set a good example by participating in lessons and out-of-school activities, by demonstrating the benefits of critical thinking and by their readiness to be creative and enterprising.*

Studying the nature and impact of media coverage quickens pupils' interest and illustrates the power of language and ideas in contexts which exert strong influences on society. Well-

planned research tasks help pupils to become skilled at finding information from a variety of sources, including the Internet.

Pupils demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility when teachers have made clear their expectations for how the information will

Language across learning: developing lifelong skills in real contexts

Teachers set P7 pupils the task of designing improvements to the school grounds. Pupils took responsibility for researching the materials, designs and costs using the Internet and a range of reference books and collecting taped advice from members of the community experienced in creating gardens in challenging conditions. They worked with partners to create a practical design, and presented the images and rationale for the design to their classmates. In the course of working with others: classmates, parents and friends, pupils had extended their learning to include creating instruction sheets for building nesting boxes and play equipment, writing letters to suppliers, developing clear, unambiguous signage and writing a summary of their presentation. Pupils' command of persuasive language developed to a point where they could give oral presentations of outstanding quality, effectively supported by a good range of high quality writing.

be used, and when they challenge pupils to discriminate between reliable and misleading or

⁵ Principal Assessor and Course reports for English are available at www.sqa.org.uk

biased information. Pupils often demonstrate understanding by communicating findings using their own words, and by acknowledging their sources in footnotes and bibliographies. Teachers often ask pupils to provide both written and oral feedback, for example through posters or essays, or by presenting their findings to peers in a talk. In some cases this might be enhanced through the use of multi-media display. Pupils speak positively of the benefits of reporting their research findings in both written and oral ways, and recognise that each approach helps to consolidate their learning and their communication skills.

Planning for excellence: how English might contribute more to developing responsible citizens?

The flexibility teachers and pupils have to determine the contexts for learning provides a very powerful opportunity for schools to develop responsible citizens. By using real-life contexts

Language across learning
A inter-disciplinary enterprise project focused on Europe. In researching food, culture and customs of several European countries, pupils learned to use oral and written functional language effectively to support their wider learning. They learned basic greetings, introductions and preferences in six European languages. They were able to link a range of English words perceptively to words in other languages. Their knowledge of, confidence in and curiosity about the derivation and diversity of the English language improved considerably during the course of this project. Pupils used ICT very confidently to illustrate these linguistic links and to support their oral presentations.

to teach literacy and communication skills, teachers can very readily promote high levels of interest, motivation, and commitment to learning.

Topical local and national events are plentiful. They are refreshed on a daily basis, and they often relate to pupils’ longer-term consideration of major issues of real interest to young people, such as global warming. It is the readiness of teachers to be responsive to these ever-changing circumstances and opportunities that often leads to rich and insightful learning and achievement in English, and pupils’ growing development as responsible citizens. Teachers who are seeking to further broaden their courses in English to help pupils to develop as responsible citizens

may find it helpful to consider the following questions.

- Do we do enough to engage pupils in reflecting on and discussing topical issues, and how these relate to specific literacy and communication skills?
- Have we reflected enough on the impact different topics have on pupils’ motivation in lessons and as demonstrated in the quality of their written work? Are pupils more or less responsive to contemporary issues that they recognise as relevant to their lives?
- Have we considered which particular skills in English are essential for young people to be responsible

Effective discussion and citizenship
Pupils were actively involved in decision making through their involvement with many school committees. These included the pupil council, the School Nutrition Action Group (SNAG), the Eco-committee and the ‘Buddy Club’. Pupils were trained in active listening and peer mediation. This enabled them to engage fully in productive dialogue and to debate issues in a mature manner. Group discussion skills were very well developed. Pupils were able to conduct meetings effectively, including chairing, taking and disseminating minutes, creating an action plan, and proposing a vote of thanks. The effectiveness of this approach to developing the ‘pupil voice’ in the school was evident, not only in the improvement they were able to effect in the school, but also in pupils’ very good skills in listening and talking.

citizens? Have we helped our pupils to reflect on the connections between, for example, the ability to express oneself clearly and the role one might play in society?

- Do we help pupils to take part regularly in class debates and group discussions on a range of topics in which they have an interest, including topical challenges for society?
- Are pupils encouraged to develop their oral communication skills with different audiences and in different groups, or do they tend to work with the same peers most of the time?

Effective Contributors

What do we do well currently to develop effective contributors?

Many schools have well-defined frameworks which ensure pupils develop skills progressively in listening and talking as well as in reading and writing. This is particularly useful as a strategy to help pupils contribute effectively in collaborative learning. Skills in listening and talking are critical to the success of group work. To contribute effectively in this shared learning, pupils need both the confidence to contribute articulately and the skills to judge when best to make their contributions constructively.

Some teachers build well on pupils' strengths as effective contributors, for example those who talk confidently in group situations, to improve their work in other areas. Pupils' success in contributing and the enhanced self-esteem they may get from being seen to contribute well, can have a profound effect on their motivation to improve their learning in areas where they may be less successful. Many teachers have recognised these important connections and plan effectively to make the most of them, for example to motivate pupils to achieve an appropriately high standard of accuracy and presentation in their written work.

Signpost to effective contributors

Effective contributors often display the following characteristics.

- *An enthusiasm for collaborative learning and group tasks.*
- *An ability to bring experiences from other areas of the curriculum into their English lessons.*
- *The ability to listen and respond, always constructively.*
- *An openness to different ideas and points of view and a willingness to build on them.*
- *Particular skills to offer alternative views without creating friction.*
- *An ability to follow a train of thought to a conclusion, bringing other members of the discussion along with them.*

Independence and active involvement

Pupils developed independence in learning very effectively through a 'literacy circles' project. At P4, pupils were learning to organise a group discussion and to analyse texts rigorously, closely directed by their teacher. By P7, pupils were able to set searching questions on a text they selected and to organise and run a very effective group discussion without teacher support. One pupil acted as chair, ensuring that all pupils took part. Everyone prepared their contributions in advance and were ready and eager to contribute. Pupils were able to support or disagree with the opinions of their classmates, particularly where these were well argued. They set clear outcomes for the discussion and evaluated these very effectively themselves.

Planning for excellence:

how English might contribute more to developing effective contributors?

Pupils' success across the curriculum is often founded on their strengths in literacy and communication skills. But all too often schools do not take sufficient account of pupils' language competence when planning and delivering courses and programmes across the curriculum. Connections across subject boundaries have been recognised in many effective schools, particularly at the primary stages. In secondary, however, all too often subject departments do not take account of the complementary nature of learning across the curriculum when they plan pupils' learning

experiences. As a result, learning remains too fragmented and opportunities for pupils to contribute learning from one area to enrich another are lost. Teachers who are reviewing how well they encourage pupils to be effective contributors might find it helpful to consider the following questions.

- How are we ensuring that all pupils contribute fully when learning with each other?
- How are we ensuring that pupils understand how today's lesson fits into the wider context of what they are learning, thereby promoting their confidence to contribute effectively?
- Are we building effectively on children's willingness to contribute to play experiences in nursery when they enter the early years of primary?
- Are we ensuring that pupils have an appropriate degree of choice about what and how to learn so that they can contribute and learn in a way that is meaningful to them?
- How are pupils able to contribute the knowledge and skills they bring with them from elsewhere (home, hobbies and interests, other areas of the curriculum) to the language work of their class?
- How do we help pupils develop the confidence and breadth of knowledge about how language works and how to use it effectively so that they become skilful, independent communicators, across the curriculum?

While much remains to be done in schools to help young people improve their current levels of language competence, and their life chances, the overall picture of young peoples' achievement in English is one of significant strength on which to build.