

Walter Hines Page Scholarship Trip to the USA – April 2017

My experience as the recipient of a Walter Hines Page Scholarship for the academic year 2016-2017 was one which was enlightening, thought-provoking and extremely enjoyable. Investigating the development and assessment of literacy, as well as its implementation across the curriculum, I was given an excellent insight into the approaches being taken by our colleagues in the United States and it highlighted to me many areas in which our own system could improve. I was fortunate enough to be able to visit schools, colleges, literacy councils and literacy alliances in the Midwest, North East and South of the United States, in four different states: North Carolina, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Illinois. Throughout my visit, I witnessed a multitude of good practice taking place. As well as some incredible academic experiences, I was extremely privileged to be hosted by some wonderful members of ESU USA branches and the kindness and hospitality I was shown by them is something I am immensely grateful for and will remember always. Interacting with ESU members greatly enhanced my scholarship experience and I had many a discussion about our respective education systems which gave me a better understanding of the context in which I was observing teaching taking place.

Background

With the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in Scotland, a great deal of importance has been placed on literacy across learning. Education Scotland's Literacy across Learning Principles and Practices document outlines the importance of language and literacy in our personal, social and economic lives and states that:

“our ability to use language lies at the centre of the development and expression of our emotions, our thinking, our learning and our sense of personal identity.”

Another key assertion made by this document is how fundamental literacy is in allowing pupils to access the whole curriculum, not just the subjects which have traditionally been viewed as literacy based (i.e. English Language and Literature.) Education Scotland outline their belief that proficiency in literacy is “essential for progress in all areas of the curriculum.” From this belief comes the acceptance that literacy becomes the responsibility of *all* teachers of *all* subjects and all other staff in the school; that all subject areas have a responsibility to develop and monitor a pupil's literacy skills in reading, writing, listening and talking. In practice, this has been one of the most challenging ideas to implement on a practical level.

As a member of our school's Literacy across the Curriculum committee, it is my responsibility to help to devise methods of ensuring that literacy is embedded within all subjects in our school, not just within the English Department. We have collaborated with other members of the committee from different departments to look at some common tasks – report writing, group discussion, argumentative writing, etc. – that could be approached in similar ways across departments. In our own departmental profiling system, I have introduced a section for members of staff from other subjects to comment on the literacy capabilities of pupils within their own classrooms (we often found that pupils displayed varying standards of literacy across different subjects and so their abilities were not accurately recorded.) We also introduced a whole school correction code so that pupils were having consistency across their learning experiences in having their spelling, punctuation and grammar corrected. This aimed to establish the importance of this in subjects where they may traditionally not have viewed the standard of their literacy as being important. These methods have only had a very limited effect, due to time constraints,

change in staffing and a reluctance to participate. For this reason, the committee – and the English department in particular – are always looking for ways to further develop and embed literacy across learning. There has also always been a view that literacy itself is the domain of primary school teachers – in terms of teaching the basic skills in reading and writing – and that we, as secondary teachers, only have the responsibility to address any major issues or provide remedial education. This is also a mind-set which needs to change.

The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) monitors performance in literacy every two years – and numeracy in alternate years – for Primary 4, Primary 7 and S2 pupils from sample schools across the country. SSLN published the results of its 2014 survey in April 2015. This survey showed that 80% of S2 pupils were performing well or very well in reading, 55% were performing well or very well in writing and 52% were performing well or very well in listening and talking. That only 55% of our S2 pupils are performing ‘well’ in writing, in particular, is a fairly alarming statistic. It was even more alarming to discover when the 2016 results were published upon my return that this figure had dropped again to 49%. It is very clear that steps have to be taken to rectify this issue.

Plan for Research

Before my trip, I had read about the work of the ‘National Center for Literacy Education’ in improving literacy learning within American schools and in celebrating the success of schools who are achieving great results in this area. Of particular note was their focus on a collaborative approach to literacy and their belief in literacy work across all subjects – something we are, as mentioned, in the process of developing as part of Literacy across Learning. I was keen to see how educational establishments implemented whole school literacy and how this informs classroom practice. While it transpired that I was unable to visit the National Center for Literacy Education directly, I was able to visit schools who were putting some of these principles into practice and utilising resources, such as literacy coaches, to help them achieve their goals.

I was very fortunate in that both of my host ESU branches were instrumental in arranging my educational visits, as well as hosting me so warmly during my trip. They were able to determine which organisations and establishments within their local area would be best able to provide me with the information and experiences which I required to be able to address my area of study. I am extremely grateful to Gary Evans of the ESU Sandhills branch and Janet Pitman of the ESU Monmouth County branch in particular for their tireless work in making contacts, arranging extremely worthwhile experiences for me and transporting me to and from my visits during my time in both North Carolina and New Jersey. Both Janet and Gary utilised contacts from their time within education and working with the ESU to identify appropriate links that could be made between initiatives and programmes and my own research. I was also able to arrange to visit the school of a former colleague, Michelle Oakley. I knew Michelle would be able to offer valuable insight due to her experiences as an English teacher in both Scotland and the United States and that she would be able to recognise some of the main similarities and differences with regards to the teaching and development of literacy. I am extremely grateful to Michelle for arranging such an entertaining and enjoyable few days in her school, as well as to her and her family for so generously hosting me.

As the structure of the school system in the US and Scotland are different, I was keen to visit different types of school and to see literacy education happening at different stages. In my

own school, I have responsibility for teaching all year groups from S1-S6 (students aged from 11 to 18) and all levels of the curriculum (Broad General Education, National 4, National 5, Higher, etc.) and so I felt it was important that I was able to observe and discuss with teachers how literacy instruction and assessment may differ at different stages of education. Thankfully, the visits arranged for me gave me ample opportunity to do so.

While the focus of my visits would be literacy, I was keen not to be entirely focused on programmes for struggling readers or children who are illiterate as these are areas in which training, funding, resources and development are already taking place within my local authority. I was more interested to see how schools and other institutions were developing the literacy of those who were already literate to at least a basic level and how this was implemented throughout different areas of the curriculum.

I set off on my trip on 18th March full of excitement and anticipation for the experiences that lay ahead of me.

The Trip

North Carolina

I arrived in Pinehurst, North Carolina on Sunday 19th March where I was met by Connie Atwell, a member of the ESU Sandhills branch. Connie had been instrumental in helping to arrange my visit to Pinehurst and I was delighted to finally meet her. After a lovely dinner where we were joined by Connie's partner and two of their friends, I was taken to the home of Sally Bold Frick and Ed Frick, members of the branch, who would be so generously and warmly hosting me for the next few days.

On the first day of my visits, I went to Sandhills Community College, where I met Maria Campbell, Director of College and Career Readiness. I spent an incredibly enjoyable and enlightening morning with Maria, as she talked me through the courses and programmes on offer in the Division of Continuing Education and Workforce Development. The college offers High School Equivalency classes, Adult Basic Education, Adult High School, ELA, Basic Skills, Pre-Employment Training and various other courses to students who need specific skills in order to be able to function more effectively in life or in their chosen career. Maria's students come from different backgrounds: some are adults who, for various reasons, were unable to graduate from high school and now need or want to be able to do so; some are students for whom English is not their first language and they need a higher level of English literacy; some are adults with additional support needs for whom special education classes are provided; some are students there to learn specific workforce skills, such as firefighting, human services and electrical. Maria and her colleagues perform a life skills appraisal on each student, as well as an oral screening, to determine their skills and standard of literacy in order to determine which of their courses or programmes is most suitable for them.

In the afternoon, I had a meeting with Kathy McGougan, the Program Coordinator/Office Manager of Moore County Literacy Council in Southern Pines. Kathy spoke to me about how more than 10%, or over 7,000, Moore County adults lack the literacy skills to function well in everyday life. The council works on self-referral and the programmes are mainly delivered by trained volunteers. The council's tutors work with adults who want to improve their literacy skills for a variety of reasons: some of them need to improve their literacy to be

able to perform their job to a higher standard; some want to be able to read to their children and help them with homework; some are students whose first language is not English and some just want to become more proficient in English literacy to help them in everyday life. The council's tutors all receive in-depth Pro Literacy training. When a student comes to the council, their skills are assessed and then an individual learning plan is created for them. Students typically spend a set amount of time each week with their tutors, although this can vary.

In the evening, President of the Sandhills branch of the ESU, John Sapp, and his wife, Linda, hosted a wonderful cocktail reception for me in their home. This was a delightful evening which gave me the opportunity to meet many more members of the branch. I was able to give some indication of what my research was about and talk about some of my findings from the day, as well as engage in discussions with the branch members about their own views on and experiences of different aspects of my topic.

On the second day of visits in North Carolina, I was taken to Pinecrest High School in Southern Pines. Here, I was wonderfully looked after by Lorna Martin and her English department over the course of the day. I had the opportunity to observe a variety of classes of all grades, levels and undertaking different kinds of work. I was interested to see how technology was utilised to engage the students but also to see the difficulties that this could pose. I noted that students still had specific grammar lessons where they were taught about types of words, their structures and sentence structures. This is something which appears to have fallen by the wayside in our own curriculum and is possibly another contributing factor to the decline in standards of literacy.

At Pinecrest, I was first introduced to 'Common Core'. This is an education initiative, adopted by forty-two of the fifty states, to ensure consistency in standards in English language arts and literacy and mathematics across the country. The standards state that "*instruction in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language be a shared responsibility within the school.*" This was of particular interest to me, and my research, given that my focus was on literacy across the curriculum. I learned that, as well as having their own outcomes, different subject areas (such as Social Studies and Science) are given clear guidelines on what the students have to learn with regards to literacy in their subject. This sounded similar to the recently published CfE Benchmarks for Literacy in Scotland, which outline the areas for which teachers have a shared responsibility in the teaching and assessing of literacy.

Through discussions with members of the department, something that came to light was how much their students were held accountable for their literacy. With each piece of submitted work and homework graded, students had to ensure that everything they produced was of the required standard as it could have the potential to affect their overall grade (and subsequently their college admission) or even affect their ability to progress to the next grade.

I had an extremely interesting afternoon in the AP class of Ann Peterson, one of the members of the English Department. Her students were very interested to ask about different aspects of the Scottish education system and were very shocked (and envious!) to discover that our students receive their university education for free in Scottish universities. We had an extremely entertaining discussion about renewable energy, classroom lessons, examinations, sports and other aspects of both Scottish and U.S. culture. I really enjoyed

the time spent talking informally to these pupils about the similarities and differences between them and my own students.

New Jersey

The next day I travelled from North Carolina to New Jersey and was met by the wonderful Janet Pitman, a member of the Monmouth County ESU branch. Janet and I discussed some of my observations so far and my forthcoming visits and we also had an extremely interesting conversation about third person journaling. She told me about an article she had been reading about this type of writing and the impact it can have on mental health. The theory is that writing in this way allows us to be more open-minded and non-judgemental about our own feelings and actions, while still allowing us to process the way we have dealt with situations. I found this fascinating and resolved to do some research on this upon my return to school. After a lovely meal on the Jersey Shore, Janet took me to the home of my hosts, Ralph and Meta Wyndrum who looked after me so well for the next three days.

On my first day of visits in New Jersey, Janet took me to Holmdel High School where I met Marilyn Bellis, the K-12 Humanities Supervisor. I had a discussion with Marilyn about the structure of my day, the people I would speak to and the things I would observe. She was also able to tell me a little bit about the Holmdel Schools and some of the work being done there.

After this, I had a meeting with Courtney Conroy, a Social Studies teacher, to discuss the development of literacy within her classroom. Courtney explained how she had identified the need for high levels of literacy in order for her pupils to be able to access, and make the most of, the curriculum in Social Studies. She discussed how she placed particular emphasis on reading to analyse so that students were able to extract, understand and evaluate information from source texts. Courtney's students were explicitly taught these skills from the time that they entered her class at the start of a school year and they became embedded in lessons as time went on. They kept dialectical journals, where they recorded their observations of and reactions to the texts they read in her classes. They each had guidelines, and as the year progressed they had their own experience of completing these journals, to help them start their journal feedback. These guidelines prompt them to ask questions, revise meaning, form interpretations, evaluate, reflect and predict during and after reading texts in class. We also discussed Common Core which I had heard about during my time at Pinecrest High. Courtney spoke to me about the specific literacy skills that were applicable to her as a Social Studies teacher and the many ways she taught these skills to her students.

After my discussion with Courtney, I was able to observe some of this reading to analyse and critical thinking put into action in her classroom. I observed her World Civilisations class where students were studying absolutism. Technology was utilised extremely effectively in Courtney's lesson as students made use of Google Snap & Read to help them access the texts. This facility reads sections of the text to them, allows them to make annotations which can also be read back, has a facility to change the complexity of the language and makes it extremely easy for them to cite sources.

As our own curriculum seems to move even more towards teaching exam content as specific information to be learned, the process used by Courtney to develop the critical thinking of the students in her class was inspiring. These young people were able to form their own opinions on the texts they read, reflect on what they gained from it and evaluate its connection to other texts and information.

Next, I met English teacher, Margaret McDonald. Margaret was the recipient of an ESU scholarship for summer study in Edinburgh and we discussed her experiences as well as my observations so far. The teachers I met seemed supportive of the core standards in supporting them with developing and assessing literacy and I was glad to have witnessed good examples of literacy being focused on in subjects outside of English.

After lunch – and an interesting discussion on the similarities and differences between the Scottish and U.S. education systems – with Margaret and Courtney, I was taken to another Holmdel School, The William R. Satz Middle School, which is on the same campus as the high school. Here, I was able to observe a lesson being delivered by Kathi Howard, a Social Studies teacher and Kathleen Klinger, an English teacher, on a collaborative project. These teachers combined their Grade 7 Social Studies and English classes to produce a piece of argumentative writing on the explorer, Magellan. Making links between the types of writing that are done in different subjects is something we have tried to do in our school through the Literacy across the Curriculum committee but so far we have only identified specific tasks which may be similar. Through their combined lessons, these teachers taught linking, writing skills and the importance of mechanics as well as content, evidence, referencing etc. This task seemed hugely beneficial to the students. It allowed them to make cross-curricular links, identifying how they can transfer their skills between different subjects, and it also allowed them to see the importance of literacy skills in other areas of the curriculum. With one third of the overall grade for this essay being dependent on mechanics (spelling, grammar, transitions, use of information from documents, etc.), it meant that the students could see the value of literacy across their curriculum.

Cross-curricular tasks like this are useful in promoting shared values and ideals. One of the problems we encountered when discussing this in our committee was the very specific expectations on students in their final exams. For example, students may write a piece of discursive writing, comparing a variety of sources, in English that has one set of standards but the standards for a similar type of writing in History may be very different. Students may have key ideas, points or structural devices that are mandatory in Social Subjects which would differ from expectations elsewhere. This provides a barrier to this kind of collaborative practice and so has an impact on the students as they do not see their skills as transferrable.

Later that afternoon, I visited another of the Holmdel schools, Indian Hill School, and met with Genevieve Kotzas, a 6th grade Social Studies teacher who had recently completed her Masters with a thesis focused on literacy. Genevieve spoke to me in more detail about Common Core and the expected standards. For grades 6-8, students are expected to be able to identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view, distinguish between fact, opinion and reasoned judgement, read and comprehend social studies text in the appropriate complexity band independently and proficiently and determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text. While the Common Core Standards are very similar to our own Literacy Benchmarks or Literacy Experiences and Outcomes in CfE, the fact that they are subject specific seems to make a huge difference. Teachers of other

subjects are very clear about what they are expected to do with regards to literacy and that it must form part of their teaching.

Genevieve also spoke about how it was now her standard practice to make literacy part of the grade criteria in Social Studies. She often makes one third of the overall grade dependent on mechanics, based on the core standards, and so the students have to pay a great deal of attention to their literacy in order to achieve to a good standard.

On the second day of my visits in New Jersey, I went to Monmouth Regional High School in Tinton Falls and was met by English teacher Theresa Ciccone. After a short tour, I was introduced to Maths teacher, Jack Pensabene who explained to me that he had identified where literacy comprehension skills were having a negative impact in his own subject. He found that his students were having great difficulty translating word problems into mathematical equations and that when he would set word problems as homework in particular, most of his students would avoid doing them. Jack astutely observed that this issue was a literacy one rather than a mathematical one and so employed the help of the school literacy coach to support him in rectifying this problem. Jack explained that, in fact, the literacy coach ended up being of as much – if not more – use to him as the students. He was able to devise ways to make these word problems more accessible to his students and to give them the skills they needed to comprehend and decipher exactly what they were being asked to do.

I then spent a short time observing an AP Spanish class where the students were engaged in lots of discussion and ICT was utilised effectively to engage them. I also visited an English class where the pupils were annotating poetry and I had the opportunity to talk to one of the teachers about the forthcoming exams. The examination system is very different to the Scottish system where students take final exams of several hours in each of the different subjects they have studied that year. In Higher English, for example, 70% of the overall grade for the year comes from the final 3 hour (split into two parts) examination in May, with the other 30% coming from an externally assessed – by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) – portfolio of writing. While it may seem that the work undertaken by our students throughout the course of the year therefore does not 'count', the content of our examination is based on the literature they have studied throughout the year (40% of their overall grade) and the skills in understanding, analysing and evaluating texts that they have acquired (30%.) In contrast, exams in the U.S. such as the ACT test a student's knowledge of mechanics and rhetorical skills – punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, strategy, organisation and style. While both systems have their different drawbacks and benefits, in terms of literacy, having the most important examinations of a student's school career based almost entirely around their literacy skills can only serve to emphasise their importance and encourage focus on and development of these.

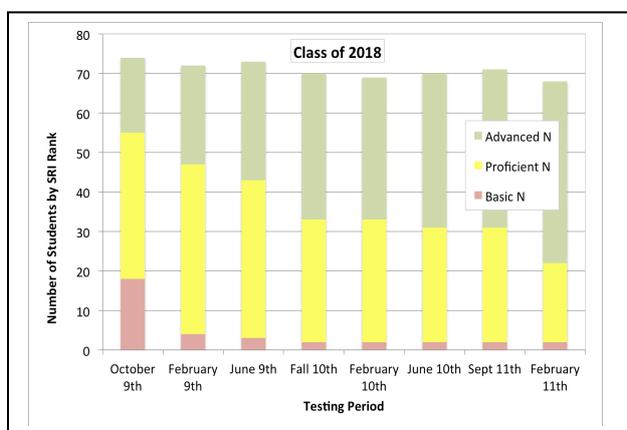
I then had an opportunity to sit in on some of Theresa's classes, including her film studies class. The students in this class participate in film study as well as producing their own videos. I was able to talk to some of the students about their perceptions of literacy and where they feel those skills had been necessary and utilised effectively. Some of the tasks and activities they discussed were: researching the background and culture to texts they were studying; a model restaurant project where they had to plan out the creation and running of a restaurant and a wide variety of project work undertaken in all of their subjects. It was interesting to see that these students understood the value of their literacy skills across the curriculum.

In the afternoon, I was taken to the Marine Academy of Science and Technology (MAST) in Highlands, New Jersey, where I met English teacher, Kathryn Trinidad. MAST introduced an innovative reading project in the academic year 2010/11 called 'Let's Just Read' where, for around 30 minutes every day, the whole school stopped what they were doing and read. The school timetable was rearranged to accommodate this and both staff and pupils undertook the challenge. Kathryn took me through a presentation she had given a few days earlier examining the results of this initiative.

The school had noted that students' test scores were below expectations, they did not have the time to read for pleasure, struggled to comprehend primary sources and lacked close reading ability. Research suggested that reading for pleasure is something that would help to tackle all of these issues and so, between 9.17am and 9.43 am every day (the time slot that the reworking of the timetable allowed), the whole school reads. As our department, in conjunction with our school librarian who is an invaluable resource to us, is constantly trying to find ways to promote the importance of reading to our students, a project like this was inspiring. Kathryn talked me through some of the results of the initiative now that it had been underway for five years. One of the most significant was that the school's 9th graders Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) scores now averaged 15 points higher than national expected growth. Also of significance were the results of a student survey:

- 69.9% of the 289 respondents read more than they did before the "Let's Just Read" program
- 62.3% of the respondents said their attitude toward reading is more positive as a result of the program
- 71.6% of the respondents read more for pleasure outside of the read period

From other measurable results that Kathryn showed me, it was clear to see the massive impact that 'just' reading can have on a student's ability. Although the project was not without some problems – lack of engagement from some students and staff, for example – the outcomes were overwhelmingly positive.



Graph shows a reduction in the number of students performing at 'basic' level and a significant increase in the number performing at 'advanced' level from initial testing periods through 9th and 10th grade.

While our school librarian, in partnership with the English Department, runs a reading challenge for our S1 pupils in the January – April school term, the benefits of extending reading programmes across all ages and stages are evident.

In the evening of my final day in New Jersey, Janet very generously hosted a wine reception for me in her home where I had the opportunity to meet other members of the Monmouth

County ESU branch and some invited guests. The evening was extremely enjoyable and insightful as we had the opportunity to engage in lengthy discussion as a group about the focus of my research and the experiences of Janet's guests in relation to this.

Massachusetts

I left New Jersey and flew to Boston where I was met by my friend and former colleague, Michelle Oakley, now residing in West Brookfield, Massachusetts. As previously mentioned, I knew Michelle would have some insight on areas in which the Scottish education system could improve its teaching, development and assessment of literacy as she has taught in both Scotland and the U.S. Over a pleasurable weekend where I was able to enjoy many aspects of historical and cultural Boston, we discussed these issues. Michelle spoke about how she felt our senior students in Scotland were more 'university-ready' than her US students given the structure of the curriculum in S4-S6 and our thorough examination system, where the content of their course over the year is examined at the end of that year. She spoke about the differences in the U.S. examination system but also pointed out how much more enjoyable lessons could be for students – and teachers – when every task they undertook or every text they read wasn't done so in preparation for a final examination.

On the Monday, I undertook the first day of my two visits to the school in which Michelle now teaches. Bay Path Regional Vocational Technical High School is a school in Charlton, Massachusetts which offers its students vocational and technical training as well as an academic curriculum. Offering over 20 different career areas, including culinary arts, programming and web development, dental assisting, electrical and plumbing, students split their time between 'shop' weeks and academic weeks. Students spend a full week in classes on their chosen career area and on alternate weeks, they receive classes in the core academic subjects of English, Maths, Social Studies, Science and Physical Education and Health.

On the days I visited the school, it was the turn of freshmen and senior students to have their academic classes. The first class I was able to observe was a freshman English class who were studying *Romeo and Juliet*. My first observation of this class was that their lesson started with vocabulary tasks and this was something that was common to all the English classes I observed in Bay Path. Students discussed the possible meanings of new vocabulary words, learned their definitions, put them in context by completing sentences and then undertook homework tasks creating flashcards and riddles in order to help them memorise their new vocabulary. The completion of this homework, as well as regular vocabulary tests, help to form part of a student's overall grade for the class and so is taken seriously and has value to them. The impact of this focus on vocabulary can be seen through the writing and critical evaluations that these students then go on to complete and helps them to demonstrate a higher proficiency in literacy.

Over the two days I spent in Bay Path, I was able to spend time observing and working with the freshman students on '*Romeo and Juliet*' and with the senior students on their class text, '*The Things They Carried*.' Under our current model, literature taught at NQ level always has an outcome, be it textual analysis questions for the Scottish Text element of the Critical

Reading examination paper or a critical essay for the same paper. It is rare at our senior level (S4-S6) just to be able to teach a novel, play or poetry for the enjoyment of the literature itself given that time and resources mean that all of our teaching is geared towards the final examination. What I found in my time in Bay Path was that the students seemed to have a far greater enjoyment of literature and engage more readily with texts as they do not have one eye on the 'final product' as my own students do. Class discussions on the texts were very animated and profound and students seemed to gain a lot from just reading and discussing the text in a classroom environment. Obviously our teaching of texts is done in a similar manner – reading together, class discussions, and collaborative work – but, when freed from the prospect of having to focus all of your observations on a text and the writer's craft into a critical evaluation, there seems to be much more pleasure gained from the study of literature, which, in turn, inspires instead of deadens a love of reading.

On the second day of my time at Bay Path, Michelle had me participate in a lesson she was delivering to her seniors on the use of accent and dialect. The students looked at and discussed examples of different accents and different words and phrases that were used in different regions of their own country. They read an article entitled 'Mind our Language' by linguistic historian, David Crystal, where he asserted his belief in the importance of regional accents and dialects in the development of a language. There then followed a discussion on the notion of 'Standard English' and where this is important or not so necessary. Following on from this, a really enjoyable part of the lesson was when I read 'Six O'Clock News' by Tom Leonard to the class and participated in the ensuing discussion when they tried to decipher the Glasgow dialect. This was actually a really useful exercise in highlighting different types of literacy as the students indicated that, faced with the words on the page, they could make no sense of the poem whatsoever. When I read it to them, however, and they could follow the words I was saying on the page, the words and meaning became much clearer. While this was a class of highly literate senior students and the difficulty was in relation to another dialect from another culture, these observations are very similar to ones made by myself while undertaking a research project with one of my students who is a struggling reader for my Masters course. Even when something is written in the child's own language (Standard English or dialect), sometimes they cannot make meaning from it until it is read to them and they can see the words make sense on the page.

Chicago

I left West Brookfield and moved on to Chicago, after a brief stopover in Boston. I was unable to visit the National Center for Literacy Education in Illinois so, instead, I met with Alison Hanold of the Chicago Literacy Alliance at their Literacenter, a shared workspace dedicated to literacy. The Chicago Literacy Alliance has more than 100 member organisations who, between them, work with more than 3.6 million people of all ages – from young children to seniors. Some of their member organisations include Chicago Citywide Literacy Coalition, Children's Literacy Initiative, Literacy Chicago, Reach Out and Read and Young Chicago Authors. Alison explained to me that the alliance came about when members and leaders of organisations in Chicago realised that they were doing the same or similar things or were involved in the same types of projects. They decided to form the alliance to help organisations to know what was going on with other organisations, so that they could work collaboratively and pool resources and so that their efforts would be more effective.

The Literacenter itself was opened in 2015 and offers opportunities to meet peers and share experiences; presentation, meeting and workspace facilities; a non-profit bookstore; a 'Lit Lounge' with games, pianos and movies and office services such as copying and mailing facilities. It is a wonderful space and Alison told me about some of the collaborative projects that have utilised the centre, such as Chicago Reads and Literacy Nights.

The goal of the Literacy Alliance is a future where 100% of Chicago residents are functionally literate. Alison offered me the opportunity to meet and discuss specific projects and programs with some of the member organisations but, unfortunately, my schedule did not allow for this.

My time in Chicago signalled the end of my trip and I returned home enlightened and inspired by the wonderful experiences I had and some of the wonderful tasks, lessons and initiatives I had witnessed.

Issues Arising from Research

It is undeniable that there is a great deal of work to be done to try and improve the basic literacy skills of those who cannot access the curriculum at all and my local authority is in the process of implementing a new program and training of teachers to try and make progress in this area. There was strong evidence from my research, however, that even those who are functionally literate place little importance on their own literacy skills when they perceive that it 'does not matter' or will have no impact on what they are able to achieve in a particular class or subject. This reinforces my own experiences as a teacher – where students who have had a 'technical knockout' in a critical essay can and will raise their own literacy standards because it has actually had an impact on them, their achievement and their grade.

What became increasingly apparent to me over the course of my experience was that literacy improved with accountability. When the students perceived that literacy was valued and important, and that it would have an impact on their grade, they paid much more attention to it and took greater care to ensure high standards of literacy. This was evident in many areas, such as when mechanics represented a third of the grade in both a 6th grade History class and a 7th grade collaborative Social Studies and English class. Students also viewed literacy as important when their learning of vocabulary and grammar and the work they produced on this formed part of their overall grade.

The fact that there are core subjects in American schools also seems to have an impact on standards of literacy. The prescribed curriculum of English, Science, Maths and Social Studies means that students have ample opportunity to fully develop their skills in these areas. Students can choose elective subjects to supplement these but that focus remains on core subjects means that standards are higher. BGE, while giving pupils greater variety and short experiences of lots of different types of subject, removes the depth and detail in each subject and the time that can be spent on it – particularly in primary schools. In my time working with primary teachers in our school's primary liaison programme, they often comment that the time they now have to spend on language is greatly diminished because of all the other areas of the curriculum they have to teach. This is almost certainly a factor in the declining standards of literacy.

Having common core literacy standards in all subjects, including science and technical subjects, right through until grade 12 has a significant impact on the standards – and

expected standards – of literacy across the curriculum. Giving students very specific literacy targets for that individual subject reinforces the importance of literacy throughout their education.

Conclusions

Currently, experiences and outcomes/benchmarks for literacy in CfE are documented along with those for English and are separated from those of other subjects which are also supposed to take them into account. The format of Common Core, where each individual subject is given its own, relevant, literacy standards to meet means that each subject teacher – and in turn their students – specifically incorporates the teaching of these literacy standards as they are a requirement for achievement and progression. Despite the best efforts of the government, local authorities and schools, linking literacy outcomes in with those for English serves only to reinforce the idea that literacy is the domain and responsibility of English departments. Perhaps if we were to adopt a similar format as our American colleagues and devise specific literacy targets for each subject area, there may be much more progress made with regards to literacy across learning, particularly as our literacy across learning principles and practices seem to end at the end of the BGE (S3) stage.

Similarly, the accountability for literacy in US schools makes a huge difference to standards. In Scotland, we are currently in a situation where BGE pupils progress from one school year to the next (although not necessarily CfE level) without achieving any of the standards of the literacy. At National Qualification (NQ) level, in an examination diet of around 40 different subjects, 20 marks (20%) in the English Critical Reading paper and the ESOL paper are the only places where standards of literacy in English ‘matter’ – these are the only final examinations where the ability to spell and construct proper sentences and paragraphs has a direct impact on the overall result for a student in that subject. Despite teachers’ best efforts to provide our NQ students with broad and worthwhile educational experiences, ultimately they (and we) are judged on their ability to pass and achieve good grades in their final examinations. For this reason, our teaching has become geared towards teaching to exams and, if literacy requirements are not part of these exams, then it is inevitable that the teaching, correcting and assessing of these is going to take a back seat.

There are many other issues – social, economic, political – which affect progress in basic literacy, particularly at primary school level but, in maintaining, raising and ensuring standards in secondary schools, accountability seems to be the key factor – for both teachers and students. I have lost count of the number of times I have had students grumble, when confronted about spelling, punctuation and grammar, that ‘it doesn’t matter anywhere else’ and, to an extent, this is true. It is an unquestionable fact that unless students perceive that something is important or necessary for them to achieve, they will give it little consideration or effort. Until this changes, standards of literacy in our secondary schools will not improve and literacy across learning will be something that is an afterthought.

As part of the Scottish Government’s ‘Closing the Attainment Gap’ initiative, my own local authority are investing time and money to improve basic standards of literacy in students. While this initiative is admirable and I am hopeful that it will have success in giving basic reading and writing skills to some of our less able students, taking them – and the rest of our students – beyond this basic level and giving them a high degree of proficiency in literacy is

something that must be prioritised. Bringing other subjects on board with this must be something that is mandatory and not viewed, as it currently is, as something that is almost voluntary. Accountability for both our students and staff in literacy in all areas of the curriculum is the only way to develop our students' proficiency. Making literacy 'important' and 'necessary' in each subject is the first step in ensuring that this happens. Even in the subject where literacy should matter the most, English, only 20% of the final examination grade requires acceptable standards of literacy (portfolio of writing must also meet basic standards but there are opportunities for students to receive feedback on and redraft this work) and, from my own and colleagues' recent experience, even during the marking of these exams we are encouraged not to be overly insistent on extremely high standards of literacy in order for students to pass. The result of this is that students who do not have high proficiency levels in literacy gain the necessary grades in English, as well as other subjects, to go on and teach themselves – at primary level or indeed as secondary English teachers. This can only result in standards falling further.

I found my trip to be highly enjoyable, enlightening and inspiring. I discovered many aspects of the Scottish and U.S. education systems which were surprisingly similar and some in which we could both learn from each other's good practice. I look forward to further discussions with my own Literacy across the Curriculum committee to try to devise ways to implement some of the good practice I was fortunate enough to witness.

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