

Matthew Fitt's speech at Literature in Learning seminar Scottish Learning Festival September 2008

Good morning. I am the co-founder (with James Robertson) and Education Officer for the Scottish-Arts-Council-funded project Itchy Coo and director of my own company, Scots Education Resources. Since 2002 I have visited over 500 schools and delivered several hundred in-service sessions, and I have always taken a positive approach. Any of you who has worked with me will know that Scots can provide fun, enjoyable and beneficial platforms for learning when presented in effective and positive ways.

But today I will be highlighting the meagre and often reluctant official support for Scots within education. Our attitude toward Scots as a learning community historically has been appalling. As we will hear, this is changing and for the better but those who influence and shape education provision in Scotland have to start taking Scots more seriously than at present.

But I am here to talk about some very positive experiences and outcomes generated by engagement with Scots at a Scottish primary school. And the class I'm going to tell you about was Caroline Winning's Primary 6 group at Nethermains Primary School in Denny which is a Falkirk Local Authority school.

I was invited in 2007 by the school through the Scottish Book Trust's Live Literature scheme to work with Caroline's class for one hour per week over a period of 10 weeks. It was in effect a mini-residency. As well as being Itchy Coo's Schools Officer, I'm also an approved author on the Book Trust's list of authors. The school's intention was to learn more about Scottish Literature.

We started - P6, Caroline Winning and myself - in September last year. When I met the group for the first time, I spoke in English and asked the children to identify the language I was speaking. The answer came back: posh. It often does. Posh. My mother would be thrilled, but it seems to me that many children in Scotland regard the speaking of English as something beyond them, something too good for them. And for a school system with a mission to develop our pupils as speakers of English, this is a problem.

Then we got to talking about the Scots Language which all the children in the class referred to initially as 'slang'. Big problem. Slang is a low form of language. Slang is somewhere down there. If a young speaker of Scots is told often enough that their natural language is slang, then many of our young people develop the belief that *they* are somewhere down there, that they are in some way not good enough. It is unremarkable to note that many of our communities which lack confidence and experience certain social problems identified as resulting from that lack of confidence are communities where the prevalent language is Scots. Denny is one of these communities.

At the very beginning when I was talking in English, the children in this class were reticent, mumbled, gave poor eye-contact and were reluctant to read out loud and to answer questions.

Then we began in earnest with Scots, giving it its name - Scots, not slang - and a place alongside English, and French, and German. And for many of the children in the class, it was like someone had switched on a light.

Very quickly we were naming parts of the body in Scots. We went on to reinforce those words with some songs like Heid, Shooders, Shanks and Taes. In a short while, they were describing themselves in Scots.

“I am cawed Shannon. I bide in Denny. I am 10 year auld. I hae lang blond hair. I hae blue een. I am no muckle but I’m no that wee either. I wear school claes through the week but at the weekend I like to wear ma ain claes. I hae ridd breeks, a ridd jaiket and a yella sark.”

And taking traditional rhymes and making them their own.

**Katie Beardie had a coo
Used tae wear wan Nike shoe
Wisna that a fast wee coo,
Dance Katie Beardie**

And we read ‘A Wee Book o Fairy Tales in Scots’, ‘Hercules: bampots and heroes’, ‘King o the Midden’, ‘Blethertoun Braes’ and ‘The Eejits’, all by Itchy Coo - www.itchy-coo.com

And then writing about their pets.

Ma dug is cawed Tess. He has wee lugs. His tongue is muckle. He has broon hair. I walked him doon the park and let him aff the lead. He was bowfin at a lassie dug and then he ran aboot roond and roond in circles. He ran tae the dug and stared wae slavers dripping fae his mooth.

The lassie dug wis feart fae Tess and lowped ower a waw. *By Natasha*

And then developing in all sorts of creative directions.

The Scary Scorpion has teeth like knives and hauns like shovels. It has a thousand een aw around its muckle boady. It likes tae climb up tall biggings and gie folk a fright through the windae. It goes aboot wae its pal. The Scary Scorpion has nae lugs, nae neb and nae taes.

By Paul

Although I enjoyed working with the class, I didn’t do anything particularly different with this group. I’ve followed programmes of study similar to these many times in the past six years. My visits ended in the autumn. But the Scots Language work didn’t stop there.

Caroline Winning developed her own teaching materials, devising new ways of exploring Scots with her class.

And the real turning point was an assembly led by this P6 class to which the pupils' parents were invited.

I'm not sure what the parents were expecting but the pupils, *their* children, all stood on the school stage, when it was their turn to speak looked their audience in the eye, enunciated clearly and articulately in both English and Scots - and had their parents, and their head teacher, on the edge of their seats, surprised, delighted, a little bit stunned at the confidence the pupils were displaying, a confidence that simply wasn't there before.

The class participated in the Royal Mail Children's Book Awards ceremony, performing on stage to 400 people and one of them, Tassia, for a minute or so taking on the role of compere and doing that extremely well. They also took part in a local authority event at Airth Castle again impressing people from a wide-range of agencies.

The Head Teacher, Mary Connolly, received the class's Writing and Reading scores in June 2008. In 2006/7, the class had scored an average of 63% for Reading and Writing; this had gone up in 2007/2008 to 70%. Nethermains was 48th of 48 schools in the local authority league tables and the school has tried many strategies to raise attainment in previous years. But this year the only thing that was different and new was the introduction of Scots. Coupled with reports that all the children were reading and writing more and that her reluctant readers had become enthusiastic readers, Mary attributes this solely to the class's engagement with Scots.

What did this school do to make this happen? Like in most schools, Scots was not a complete stranger. The school newsletter is called the Nether Blether and there was a long tradition of participating in the annual Burns verse competition. But like in most schools, this is not enough. It is not enough to have just a wee bit of Scots, it is not enough to have a once a year or once in a school career Scots verse speaking contest. After the competition, the children still call the language slang and are unable to read it or write in it very well.

What Nethermains did was to let Scots in to the mainstream of the school, to accept Scots into the school's life and to utilise it as a learning tool.

There are many other examples like Nethermains and it is blindingly obvious that there are real educational benefits from engaging with Scots in this way. Usually, when we come across something like this which ticks all the boxes - social inclusion, cultural entitlement, enhancing self-esteem - Scotland's education system jumps on it.

But unfortunately many people in positions of influence in Scottish education still think this is all a bit of a joke. Some even despise it. Others have expressed a fear of it. There is a belief that our children will be corrupted by the Scots language. How can something which is uniquely ours corrupt our children? What does that say about us and how we perceive the value of our own culture? It is totally normal in Scotland to celebrate the creativity of Scots writers - next year as you know we'll see the Homecoming celebrations

to mark Burns' birth - and yet at the same time undermine our children's confidence with their Scots Language. We have kept our children deliberately illiterate in their own tongue.

After a few short lessons a number of the Nethermains P6 pupils were already developing a strong creative voice of their own. Staff often comment that children who have shown no interest in creative writing in English become keen writers of Scots when given the chance to write in it. What more could these children achieve if Scots had been an integral part alongside English of their education since P1.

But we have clear statements about Scots in A Curriculum for Excellence now. And our government is to be commended for listening to the campaign to include Scots in A Curriculum for Excellence which was incidentally led by the Itchy Coo project. A year ago, English, Gaelic, Urdu, Punjabi and Polish were recognised in Building the Curriculum 1, guidelines on Languages but Scots was not. Now Scots is a part of this. The Literacy and English Draft Experiences and Outcomes also include Scots and this does provide a good foundation on which to build.

But it's not enough. English Language 5-14 in 1991 mentioned Scots. No more substantial support was given but Scots was at least mentioned. It was absent from the early drafts of A Curriculum for Excellence. Grateful though we are that the curriculum now includes Scots, all that has effectively happened is that Scots has been reinstated. If no further support is forthcoming, then we are back where we were in 1991 being offered tokenism instead of action. No Scottish administration in recent years has seriously addressed the linguistic and obvious educational needs of this country's Scots speakers.

Support, real support, is now urgently required.

The will is there among the teaching community. Greenmill Primary School at Cumnock are planning a Scots Language Week this autumn when all classes for a week will be conducted in Scots. Carrick Knowe Primary School in Edinburgh are seeking to join a European Exchange Network for Bilingual schools, their school being bilingual in English and Scots. From Caithness to Galloway, staff are asking us for more Scots teaching materials, resources and training. We can't do all that.

To respond to this, some language advisors and quality improvement officers in some local authorities have taken Scots forward as they would anything else and applied their skill, professionalism and energy to developing new materials and teaching resources for their schools.

Fiona Norris at Inverclyde has produced a Scots Language teaching pack called 'When We Find the Gowd' - out in October, go visit Jess at the Inverclyde stand.

Jenny Watson through the Reading Bus Initiative published in September 'Fit Like, Yer Majesty?', a brand new Doric anthology for bairns. Visit the Aberdeen City stand over in the main hall.

And a quick mention for our new Itchy Cool schools competitions and projects website which can be found at www.itchy-cool.com .

As a result of the success of Nethermains, Falkirk Local Authority has begun training a Scots Language coordinator for each of its 8 cluster high schools. I'm honoured to be leading the training for Literacy Coordinator, Lynne Ferguson, with the blessing of the Director of Education. This will provide a very good model of what is possible.

But none of these splendid initiatives are enough in themselves. Scots needs legal and political support in education in the same way that Gaelic has quite rightly been given legal and political support if the good work being done by teachers currently is to be sustained in the long term.

But no local authority at this moment has any active or progressive policies on Scots in education.

Education departments spend millions on other languages but the amount of funding, resources and manpower available for the Scots language are miniscule. Are we to conclude that the linguistic needs of young people who speak Scots are somehow less valuable than the language needs of others in Scotland? If we see no consideration given to creating imaginative forward thinking policy to safeguard Scots within education, then that will be sadly the only conclusion which can be drawn.

If Scotland is serious in its aspirations to be a fair and inclusive society - and I know that it is - then we simply must address the social exclusion and injustice we have shown to children and adults who speak Scots as their first language. This has been going on now for a hundred and fifty years but the resources now exist and the will among teaching professionals to challenge this is evident.

There is noo an historic oppportunity for oor high heid yins tae mak this richt. Sae mak it richt.

I'll leave you with what the pupils at Nethermains Primary School themselves had to say...

- **I feel I have improved wi ma Scots language and writing skills. Noo I can write lang stories. (Regan)**
- **I enjoy writing lang stories more than I did afore. (Lorna)**
- **Writing has changed for me and I feel really confident. (Chantelle)**
- **The best hingmy o aw wid hiv tae be aw the Scots language. Ah learned tae write, read and many mair hings in Scots. Ma writing and reading hae improved. (Ciaron)**
- **The thing that has changed for me is that everything about me has changed. (Harry)**

Thank you.