



This briefing provides advice for practitioners and can also be used to inform partners, learners and their parents or carers of developments in Curriculum for Excellence.

CfE Briefing ¹⁴

Curriculum for Excellence: Political Literacy

Scottish education is going through a period of transformation that will affect all learners. Approaches to the curriculum, learning, teaching, assessment, awards and qualifications are all changing. Education Scotland is supporting change by evaluating evolving practice and sharing it nationally to inform discussion and promote innovation. This briefing explores the place of political literacy within Curriculum for Excellence. It relates to all settings where children and young people experience aspects of political literacy, either in an educational establishment such as a college or school, or more broadly in a wide range of community settings and forums.

1. What is political literacy?

In CfE, political literacy is central to citizenship education. It is the particular combination of attributes and capabilities, skills (including higher-order thinking skills), knowledge and understanding that helps learners to become responsible citizens and to participate in society's decision-making processes. Political literacy is one of the foundations of modern democracy and its guardian. It is the means by which citizens make informed choices about the kind of society they want to live in. It helps everyone to understand political decisions and how they affect their own lives. It is the vital set of attributes and higher-order thinking skills that enables evidence and reasoned debate to trump unsubstantiated assertion and hyperbole. Political literacy matters in a society whose values¹ are wisdom, justice, compassion and integrity, one which demands equalities and fairness for all, and one which cherishes the right of every citizen to make up and express her/his own mind.

¹ The values are inscribed on the mace of the Scottish Parliament and have been adopted for CfE

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2. Where is political literacy in CfE?

CfE defines the **purposes** of the curriculum as the *four capacities* and political literacy is firmly embedded in them. For example, *successful learners* should be able to ‘make reasoned evaluations’. *Confident individuals* need ‘to develop and communicate their own beliefs and views of the world’. *Responsible citizens* should be able to ‘make informed choices and decisions’, whilst *effective contributors* will ‘apply critical thinking in new contexts’.

Many of the **attributes** within the *four capacities* underpin political literacy. These include, for example, ‘openness to new thinking and ideas’, ‘secure values and beliefs’, ‘commitment to participate responsibly in political, economic, social and cultural life’, and ‘resilience and self-reliance’. **Higher-order thinking skills** such as *knowing, understanding, analysis, synthesis and evaluation* help learners to make up their own minds and express their own views. Political literacy promotes **equalities** through positive values such as empathy and respect for others.

Experiences and outcomes (EOs) describe the more detailed contexts for learning about political literacy. The EOs are used to build progression in how children and young people learn to become politically literate, beginning in the early years.

3. What are the features of effective learning and teaching in political literacy?

The combination of attributes, capabilities, skills, knowledge and understanding mentioned above describes what needs to be learned. CfE also gives practitioners and learners the space to plan learning in a way which best meets learners’ needs. This means that practitioners will continue to use and build on a wide range of approaches in different classrooms, establishments and other settings. These approaches typically include discussions, debates, voting, topic work and interdisciplinary studies, personal research and reflection, the use of partnerships including visits and visitors, and ‘learner voice’, amongst others. Here are some features of effective practice in these approaches.

How do you ensure that all views are represented in discussion over time?

Discussions take many forms and are widespread across the curriculum. Skills in discussion are developed in everyday situations as children and young people learn many of the behaviours and practices from each other. This is where listening skills come to the fore and when children and young people learn to respect, value and recognise each other’s views. In the early years, issues tackled are those of immediate relevance and are often raised by the children themselves. With older learners, issues for discussion are often set by the practitioner through reference to a range of contrasting perspectives and evidence. Sometimes, learners themselves will initiate issues or be asked to introduce topics and assemble evidence from different sources to

inform discussion. These approaches are important because they give learners the space to develop the attributes, capabilities and skills of political literacy in depth. Practitioners are well used to ensuring that contrasting perspectives are explored so that learners can come to an informed view based on evidence and reason. Here are some of the features of good discussion.

- If consensus is achieved, it is done through negotiation, compromise and use of evidence.
- Participants feel safe when expressing views, asking questions and when agreeing to differ.
- Everyone feels comfortable to participate and that they are listened to and their contribution is valued.
- Participants are open to new ideas and ways of thinking, can decide to agree or disagree and can explain their own views.

Debates may be structured more formally than discussions and provide an organised context for testing issues and opposing views. Characteristics of effective debates include:

- a well thought-out proposition;
- balanced inputs which reflect each perspective and which are based on evidence;
- clear and well understood ‘rules of engagement’; and
- a strong emphasis on developing presentation skills through oral communication.

Voting, elections and mock elections are widespread and take place in many different contexts. At the earliest stages, children may vote on pieces of nursery equipment they wish to purchase or charities they wish to support, with supporters of the charities making a pitch. With older learners, elections may be held

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to elect representatives for roles in the establishments or communities, including membership of student groups or pupil/learning councils and committees. Mock elections often happen in tandem with national elections. Features include:

- clear purpose with everyone being well briefed about their choices;
- informative and constructive manifestos, hustings and other kinds of presentations; and
- fair and impartial handling of participants and issues by organisers.

Topic work and interdisciplinary studies are good contexts for exploring the knowledge and understanding of political literacy, and they can provide the context for using and improving attributes and skills through discussions and debates. Features might include:

- reinforcement of skills, knowledge and understanding using different perspectives;
- a strong emphasis on developing the skills which develop personal responsibility and independent learning; and
- significant scope for the learners' personal interest to inform what is undertaken.

Personal research and reflection help individuals to make sense of what they see and hear around them, enabling them to work out where they stand. Practice is likely to include:

- varied and contrasting sources of information;
- informal settings, including peer and social groups, as sounding boards; and
- contrasting ideas and contexts helping individuals to ground their own views and values.

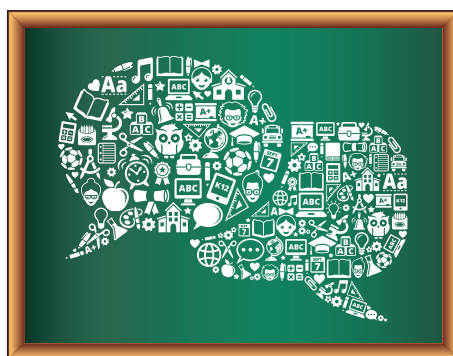
Partnerships, often including visits or visitors, are important because they broaden perspectives and offer new, real-life experiences. Effective practice might include:

- visits and visitors contributing to ongoing learning, including visits to places of political importance such as local Council Chambers or the Scottish Parliament;
- community involvement; and
- the use of local guidelines to ensure balance in the views learners encounter.

Learner voice gives children and young people the opportunity to bring about change and influence the experiences they have. For example, pupil/student/learner councils might use surveys or other methods to find out what people think and then to act on the views expressed. It might also be the context for developing strong and persuasive communication skills. And it can be when children and young people learn to represent one another fairly.

4. Using contemporary events to promote political literacy

Election time has for many years given a real, live opportunity for promoting political literacy. This might be when UK parliamentary elections are taking place or during elections to the Scottish Parliament and local government. Further afield, the context for political literacy is often



heightened and broadened when major social, economic or political issues occur such as, for example, international terrorism. And of course, interest may be stimulated when conflict or the efficacy of the democratic process is the subject of widespread news coverage and debate. Practitioners will continue to make the most of these real contexts for political literacy including, for example, in the run up to the Referendum in 2014 when people in Scotland will vote on whether or not Scotland should become an independent country. The extension of the vote to 16/17 year olds gives a particularly strong context for developing political literacy for that age group, and practitioners are already using their long-standing experience to do so.

Does everyone feel they can explore their own views and those of others in a safe, respectful environment?

Practitioners too learn from the world around them. By planning and providing learning experiences for others, they make important choices about the subjects/issues to be explored and about the approaches used. By taking part in these activities they may well find their own personal views being reinforced, challenged or changed. Practitioners may find themselves in situations where they need to broker opinion or tease out evidence, and they might be asked about their own views. In a politically literate community this is only to be expected and practitioners are well used to knowing how to respond appropriately and fairly in the context of GTCS professional standards². They are conscious that they may well be seen as role models and that young people can be strongly influenced by things they say

² <http://www.gtcs.org.uk/standards/standards.aspx>

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or do. As such, they take particular care not to promote any particular political view at the expense of others. They are also well versed in ensuring a balanced approach to exploring political issues by providing a blend of learning experiences over time which is demonstrably impartial. In all cases, practitioners will continue to create conditions where reasoned discussion and evidence thrive and where challenge is informed and constructive.

5. What impact do curriculum areas and subject choices have?

CfE gives all learners the opportunity to gain the skills, knowledge and understanding needed to be politically literate. Some choose to study this area in greater depth than others – they might study for a qualification in modern studies, economics, politics or sociology, for example, or for an award in Scottish studies. And those who don't also need engaging opportunities to develop political literacy. CfE enables this to happen because all young people are entitled to experience all of the EOs up to Third Level, and many of those at Fourth Level. Many of the EOs will be delivered through social studies or through areas such as health and wellbeing and interdisciplinary contexts. In languages, learners might develop a wide range of skills in talking including, for example, the use of appropriate register, as well as using contexts such as media extracts to look into important ideas such as how opinions are formed. In

RME, learners might discuss and reflect upon a range of beliefs and values which underpin political thinking and action. In social studies such as people in society, economy and business, learners might consider political and economic decisions. In mathematics and numeracy they might look at the impact of changes in taxation on prices and take home pay. In technologies, learners might apply ICT skills to research and evaluate information such as through on-line government information services, or indeed engage with social media on a wide range of topics. Learners might consider science from an ethical stance and relate this to choices made in the political world, such as decisions made about cloning, embryonic stem cell research or limits imposed on greenhouse gas emissions to curb climate change. In the expressive arts, they might explore the poster designers of the Russian Revolution or the street art of Banksy, or the social influences on Blues or punk rock, or indeed the rich history of political drama in radio, film and theatre. More broadly, learning experiences outwith the classroom can provide particularly relevant, real-life contexts. These might be in the community, or through outdoor learning, or indeed in assemblies and other gatherings. All of these contexts can help learners to develop their own political values. It is the combination of all of these CfE contexts that ensures everyone can become politically literate. And it is

practitioners and volunteers who work with learners in all contexts who can ensure that political literacy is for all.

Have you considered how to respond when learners ask about your own views?

6. What next?

In taking forward political literacy in CfE, it might be helpful to consider the following questions in addition to those embedded throughout this briefing.

- Does everyone have a clear understanding of the breadth of political literacy in CfE and how it relates to different areas of the curriculum as well as, in particular, to the social subjects?
- Does everyone involved apply local guidelines which are intended to ensure balance and impartiality in learning experiences?
- Does everyone involved have access to the wide range of evidence and perspectives available to them, for example online, and do they explore all of these?
- Do learners and their parents or carers understand how practitioners deliver political literacy and how they ensure impartiality?

Does everyone involved have a clear understanding of where the attributes, skills, knowledge and understanding of political literacy are delivered?

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