

Young Children Learning in Gaelic

Investigating children's learning experiences in Gaelic-medium preschool

Christine Stephen, University of Stirling

Joanna McPake, University of Strathclyde

Wilson McLeod, University of Edinburgh

Irene Pollock, University of Stirling

Funded by the British Academy



This study set out to explore children's experiences in Gaelic-medium preschool settings. We were interested in the learning opportunities they were offered and the ways in which the practitioners supported the children's immersion in Gaelic and their learning across the curriculum. In this review of the project we have drawn together a summary of our research methods, findings and the implications for practice, along with three reflections on current practices and the further developments needed to ensure that children attending Gaelic-medium settings have high quality preschool and Gaelic language learning experiences.

- **The Research Project:** Young Children Learning in Gaelic: Investigating children's learning experiences in Gaelic-medium preschool
also available as a downloadable Research Briefing in English and Gaelic from
<http://www.ioe.stir.ac.uk/research/projects/youngchildrenlearninggaelic.php>
- **Reflection 1** - Young Children and Gaelic: A language planning perspective,
Dr Wilson McLeod
- **Reflection 2** - Starting out in Gaelic: learning (in) a new language
Joanna McPake
- **Reflection 3** - Learning in another language: pedagogy in Gaelic-medium preschool
Dr Christine Stephen

Young Children Learning in Gaelic: Investigating children's learning experiences in Gaelic-medium preschool

Introduction

Gaelic-medium (GM) education is an important part of current efforts to re-vitalise the language in Scotland. Beginning Gaelic-medium education in preschool is seen as a crucial entry, enhancing the numbers entering GM primary education and facilitating transition to the school learning environment. However, in order to ensure that children receive the benefits that preschool education can bring it is essential that GM early education is of high quality. Government-funded provision is expected to offer children the same learning opportunities as their peers who attend English-medium settings. Meeting these expectations is challenging because most children enter Gaelic-medium preschool from English-speaking homes so that the nursery or playgroup is their only exposure to Gaelic. Our earlier study¹ mapped the range and extent of Gaelic-medium early education and childcare provision but in the research reported here our focus was on what happens within settings, the children's activities in the playroom² and the ways in which practitioners help them to learn Gaelic, as well as ensuring that national expectations about curriculum and learning outcomes are met.

The study used observation methods developed to investigate everyday curricula and pedagogic experiences in early years settings. Our case study settings all aimed to offer an immersion experience with Gaelic being used for interactions between the practitioners and children and for displays and resources where spoken or written language was involved. They followed the national curriculum guidance for the Early Level³ and adopted what can be described as 'typical' practices for preschool in Scotland. The emphasis was on learning through play and active engagement. Children attended for half-day sessions during which they spent most of their time making their own choices from the activities and resources set out for them, with only short periods gathered together in small groups or as a whole group to take part in adult-led activities.

Research Questions and Methods

We set out to investigate:

- how 3-5- year olds spend their time in GM preschool settings – the activities they are involved with and who they spend with
- what language is used when children talk to adults, to other children and what language they hear in the playroom.

Our observations were carried out in three Gaelic immersion settings:

¹ Stephen C., McPake J., McLeod W., Pollock I. & Carroll T. (2010) Review of Gaelic Medium Early Education and Childcare. Scottish Government Social Research, Research Findings No 57 available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/315694/0100403.pdf>

By playroom we mean all the indoor and outdoor spaces used by children in each setting.

² By playroom we mean all the indoor and outdoor spaces used by children in each setting.

³ Early Years: Curriculum for Excellence, Education Scotland available at <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/earlyyears/curriculum/index.asp>

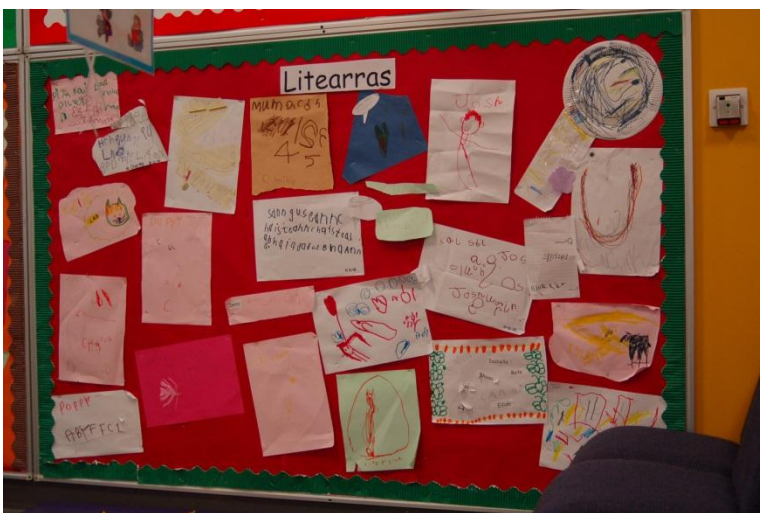
Young Children Learning in Gaelic

- nursery class in a Gaelic-medium primary school (Highfields)
- nursery class in a primary school with Gaelic and English strands (Newton)
- nursery class in a nursery school with Gaelic and English strands (Braes).

Two of these settings were located in the central belt of Scotland and one in the north of the country.

We conducted five rounds of observations over the course of one school year. Time-interval observations of the whole playroom and of the activities of specific ‘target’ children across the nursery session allowed us to record what children were doing, the resources they were using, their response modes, their language use with adults and peers and the pedagogic actions of their practitioners. We recorded the resources, materials and displays available in the playroom, paying particular attention to the resources and activities associated with provision of a rich language learning environment e.g. books, puppets, singing, props for dramatic play. The findings reported in this research briefing draw on the scans of the whole playroom and the observations of target children across the school year. The target children were chosen at random, although we tried to select from those who attended regularly and aimed for equal numbers of 3- and 4-year olds and of boys and girls.

On our sixth visit to each setting we invited the target children to take part in structured conversations designed to help them articulate their perspectives on their Gaelic-medium playroom and their use of Gaelic. In addition, interviews with practitioners and nursery managers covered topics such as the aims of the setting, language teaching and learning strategies and ways of recording children’s progress and planning for their further development. We took care to obtain informed consent to participate from the managers of each setting, the practitioners working there and the parents of the children we selected for the target observations. When we invited each target child to talk to the researcher we ensured their willing assent and respected their wishes if they chose not to take part or to leave before all of the structured conversation was completed.



Research Findings⁴

What are children doing in the playroom?

In each of the playrooms involved in this study children were expected to choose from the variety of activities and resources set out. Our data reflects what children chose from the options available and the activities that they were drawn into when they were required to take part in brief adult-led small group periods or times when all children were gathered together under the direction of an adult e.g. for singing at the end of the session.

What was on offer varied across the settings and children were observed over time pursuing individual interests (e.g. playing 'families', drawing) or choosing to use particular resources such as sand or construction equipment. Nevertheless, there were variations between settings in the provision of learning opportunities which might have particular relevance for language immersion playrooms. For instance, during our five observation periods puppets were only used in one setting, group story reading happened sometimes in two settings but was not seen at all in the third and there were few opportunities available for other group activities which could support language development e.g. reciting finger rhymes and poems, hearing a story told by an adult or children sharing news. There were Gaelic books on display in each setting and the books changed over time. However, the settings had varying numbers of books available and at Newton there were books written in English in the library area as the space was used for English-medium provision too. There were ample opportunities for play with small world resources, dolls and dramatic play props but many fewer activities planned to support the development of language for reasoning and limited use of technologies to stimulate the understanding and use of Gaelic.

When we look at what children are doing in terms of curriculum areas then we find that they were most frequently observed engaged in activities that can be categorised as related to expressive arts and language development. They were less frequently observed to be engaged in activities concerned with health and well-being, mathematics and science. However, there was more emphasis on number at Highfields than either of the other settings and a temporary project at Braes raised the level of engagement in science activities. The children in these three settings were seldom observed taking part in activities related to three areas of the curriculum: religious and moral understanding; social science and technology. While the focus on expressive arts and language is not surprising, the lack of engagement with technology is unexpected but may reflect the availability and attractiveness of the technologies in the playroom compared to the more traditional resources. On this basis it appears that children in these playrooms may not be experiencing the full range of curricular areas anticipated for the Early Level, or at least not in their regular, day by day choices in the playroom.

An alternative way of looking at how the children spend their time in the playroom is to focus on the actions and behaviours in which they were engaged. Approached in this way our data suggests that at each setting children spent more time in what can be summarised as tidying and transition than any other actions. In Table 1 we have listed the most commonly observed actions at each setting

⁴ All place names and names of individuals are pseudonyms.

Young Children Learning in Gaelic

along with the proportion of all observations at that setting accounted for by each action type. Activities recorded on less than 5% of the observation episodes were not included in this table.

Table 1 Actions frequently observed in the playrooms

Newton		Braes		Highfields	
Tidying/transitions	35%	Tidying/transitions	15%	Tidying/transitions	28%
Dramatic play/role play	9%	Singing in Gaelic	13%	Number	11%
Singing in Gaelic	7%	Sand	12%	Drawing/writing/painting	9%
Construction	6%	Chatting	8%	Physical play	9%
Computer/technologies	6%	Science	7%	Listen to story in Gaelic	7%
		Craft	7%	Singing in Gaelic	6%
		Dramatic play/role play	6%	Small world play	5%
		Computer/technologies	6%	Construction	5%

Two things are striking about these figures. The first is the dominance of time spent in tidying or transitions between phases of the day (e.g. waiting for all to gather into one group, getting dressed to go outside), although the proportions do vary across settings. The second is the variability across settings. For instance, singing in Gaelic was noted on 13% of the observations at Braes but only 7% and 6% at the other settings. Physical play accounts for 9% at one setting but less than 5% elsewhere, and while children at Newton were observed engaging in dramatic play on 9% of observations this dropped to 6% at Braes and less than 5% at Highfields. Among the least frequently observed activities were small group discussions with an adult, looking at books and playing music.

What language do children hear and use in the playroom?

Although each of the settings aimed to offer an immersion experience it is clear that English intrudes. In just over half the observation episodes across all the settings the language that children were hearing was Gaelic. Children were hearing English in 27-37% of the total number of observations. Practitioners used English to talk to visitors and to parents. They were heard to re-phrase in English to aid understanding and to console and reassure an unhappy or distressed child.

Table 2 Language spoken by children in the playroom

	Speaking English	Speaking Gaelic	Not speaking
Braes	65%	20%	15%
Newton	62%	8%	31%
Highfields	53%	13%	34%

Table 2 shows the proportion of observations episodes across the school year when the target children were noted to be speaking English, Gaelic or not speaking at all. In these setting children spoke in English much more often than they spoke in Gaelic but for beginning learners this may be what can be expected and it does not necessarily reflect what they can understand in Gaelic. However, the differences between settings warrant further investigation. For instance, what

Young Children Learning in Gaelic

practices can be shared to ensure that all children in GM settings achieve the higher levels of use of Gaelic presented in Table 2?

It is clear from our evidence that the children speak to each other in English. With very few children coming from homes where Gaelic is spoken the language which they share is English and it is unsurprising that in a child-led learning environment, where children often engage in activities with peers and without an adult present, English will be used. One to one time with a practitioner was unusual (varying across settings from 1-4% of the total number of observations) but children were more likely to experience small group discussions, games and activities led by an adult. At Braes and Newton this kind of interaction occurred on 21% of the observation episodes but at Highfields it was only 13%. However, there was no adult involved in the activities of most children during the majority of observations (ranging from 61-70% of the total across the settings). These findings reflect the consensus on appropriate preschool practice in Scotland and the adult:child ratios in the playrooms. But they raise questions about whether what is considered appropriate in English-medium provision is best suited to immersion settings where children depend on practitioners for access to the language they are learning and through which they are learning.

When children were heard using Gaelic this was overwhelmingly in the context of adult-led story time or singing. They were also recorded responding correctly in Gaelic about the name of the day or month, rote counting or using familiar phrases such as ‘thank you’, asking to go to the toilet or ‘tidy-up time’ (expressions typically found on the ‘target’ language target lists of the settings) . Some children were able to name activities in Gaelic (e.g. sand or water). While this use of Gaelic may be a helpful preparation for progression to the routines of primary school it does not seem to equip the children with conversational or personally meaningful language at this stage.



Are the children engaged?

Regardless of the activity in which they are engaged children are more likely to learn when they are intensely engaged. These experiences are satisfying too and enhance children's self-esteem and disposition to learn. During each observation episode for each target child we noted their level of engagement using a four-point scale developed in previous studies: disengaged; engaged but easily distracted; engaged but distractible; intensely engaged. Typical levels of engagement varied across the settings. At Newton there were more than twice as many episodes when children were disengaged and only about two thirds as many where they were intensely engaged as at the other two settings.

Across the three settings we found that when children were hearing Gaelic the most frequently observed level of engagement was 'engaged but easily distracted'. When English was being used some were 'engaged but easily distracted' but others were more likely to be engaged and less readily distracted. It is interesting to note that when children were alone or alongside others but not in conversation the most frequently observed level of engagement was 'intensely engaged'. While these periods of intense engagement are welcome positive indicators for learning they are also times when no Gaelic is being experienced. Developing practice so that children in all settings move towards more periods of intense engagement and are more intensely engaged when listening to and responding to Gaelic should support their attainment across all learning outcomes and their acquisition of Gaelic.



Challenges for Gaelic-medium preschool provision

Deciding on priorities and expectations

- Developing practice means considering the purposes of provision, deciding on priorities and finding ways of addressing the particular explicit and implicit tensions which arise with

Young Children Learning in Gaelic

Gaelic-medium preschool. For instance, should there be a focus on distinctive cultural forms and practices? What should be 'imported' from English-medium provision and resources? Should families be expected to learn Gaelic along with their children?

Training and recruiting practitioners

- High quality Gaelic immersion provision demands practitioners who have: (i) a developed understanding of practices which support young children as they learn about and through a language which they do not encounter at home or in their community; (ii) are confident and fluent Gaelic speakers, able to respond quickly to children's spontaneous requests, be creative and talk about a broad range of topics; and (iii) understand and implement up-to-date guidance on good preschool practices. The predominantly English-medium initial and professional education currently available, the lack of targeted continuing professional development and the limited pool of Gaelic speakers from which to recruit means that it is difficult to ensure that practitioners in all settings meet these criteria. The quality of GM preschool provision would be enhanced by articulating a body of professional expertise about Gaelic immersion provision in the early years and ensuring that all practitioners can share in this knowledge.

Achieving learning outcomes

- GM preschools offer a broad range of activity types and encourage children's development of an appropriate range of behavioural responses but our evidence suggests that they may not be covering all aspects of the curriculum. They may therefore be experiencing a different range of learning opportunities from their peers in English-medium provision. Whether this is an inevitable consequence of immersion education, balanced by the benefit of learning another language, or a matter for concern should be debated and acknowledged in planning and evaluation. The cognitive challenge content areas pose for children learning in a new language needs to be investigated and taken into account in terms of learning outcomes for GM provision. Some behaviours which contribute to learning may not require language (e.g. mastering fine motor skills) or are likely to be most highly developed in English (e.g. role play). Encouraging these behaviours will have to be balanced with concerns about maximising children's exposure to Gaelic.

Developing pedagogy

- In immersion settings where children depend on adults for access to the language of learning direct scaffolding from practitioners who engage in multi-modal interactions (e.g. gestures, demonstrations, visual clues) is critical. However, our data indicates that the 1:1 or small group activities with an adult that foster this approach did not happen often. While the pedagogic importance of interactions with adults is acknowledged in current guidance on appropriate practice children in preschool settings are also expected to learn as they engage with peers or explore, act or practise alone. Posing extending questions, encouraging sustained shared thinking and asking children to solve problems are valuable pedagogic strategies but may be less useful when they have limited access to the language of the playroom. It is necessary to consider whether staffing ratios and expectations about pedagogy can be transferred from English-medium to Gaelic-medium provision.

Supporting engagement

- Learning is fostered by periods of intense engagement. The challenge for Gaelic-medium provision is to ensure that children experience high levels of engagement in activities that involve using or hearing Gaelic. Children are more likely to be engaged when they are able to choose what to be involved with and when the activities on offer are clearly linked to authentic experiences. Technology offers the prospect of engaging with resources that children find motivating and which can contribute to the scaffolding which expert practitioners provide. However, the technological resources available in the settings involved in this study were limited in their appeal and potential for supporting learning. New technologies such as ipads will have more to offer and, along with commonly available items like digital cameras, will be familiar to children and open possibilities for creating and communicating in Gaelic. Balancing the possibly contradictory demands of (i) free play and language learning methods and (ii) authentic, contemporary activities and access to Gaelic culture requires development work that will draw on perspectives and views on the purposes of GM provision that go beyond any one setting.



Reflection 1

Young Children and Gaelic: A Language Planning Perspective

Dr Wilson McLeod, University of Edinburgh

The following discussion endeavours to sketch out some of the key issues in terms of sociolinguistics and language planning that arise in connection with current Gaelic-medium provision for 3-5 year olds in Scotland. There are necessarily some overlaps with the issues that arise in relation to provision for younger children (0-3), for whom less in the way of structured Gaelic input is currently available, and for those who have begun primary school (aged 5 and older), for whom considerably more is available.

The presentation is intended simply as a road map that identifies a range of key challenges and ‘flash points’ that have arisen in connection with these initiatives and that may be inherent in early years provision in the context of minority language revitalisation initiatives. The presentation aims to flag up issues; it is not conceived as a comprehensive presentation backed up with robust and academically reliable evidence, and it does not draw directly on the data gathered in the course of the current project.

Some of the issues noted here are inherently sensitive and ‘touchy’, to use Joshua Fishman’s phrase (1991); they deal with personal and intimate matters about people’s identities and domestic lives. Sensitive matters of this kind tend to be skirted around rather than tackled head on, and even matters that are obvious are sometimes not spelled out for fear of causing offence or discomfort.

Early years pedagogy and language immersion: a fundamental tension?

Our earlier research highlighted a fundamental tension that arises when young children are placed in an early years setting as part of a language learning/revitalisation programme. It is inherent in such situations that the children will understand only some of the language used around them, may struggle to express themselves in the target language, and may well remain silent for relatively protracted stages as they become familiar and comfortable with the new language. This process is familiar and unproblematic from the standpoint of language teaching, learning and acquisition. In contrast, early years pedagogy assumes that children will have sufficient richness and depth of language to express themselves adequately in dealing with quantities, shapes, number, classifications and so on, and to interact meaningfully with their peers. The differences between these two approaches and sets of assumptions are by no means insuperable, but careful planning and constant attention is required to make sure that there is an effective balance.

Heritage language education and ‘immersion’

The term ‘immersion’ in the context of language teaching can be used in different ways and can have broad and narrower definitions. In its original and strictest sense, ‘immersion’ education means immersion in a ‘foreign’ language, such as French in English-speaking parts of Canada or English in Spain. The assumption underpinning such programmes, which may be articulated in different ways though perhaps not at all, is that the participating children will have no family or ‘ethnic’ link to the

target 'foreign' language, and that they will have no real contact with the language outwith the educational setting, e.g. in social interactions in their families and home communities.

Gaelic-medium education in Scotland can broadly be placed under the rubric of what is known in North America as 'heritage language' education. The motivation that underpins the creation of such programmes and encourages parents to participate is typically instrumental, but only obliquely 'political'. Spanish parents may want their children to acquire English to improve their economic prospects and 'cultural capital', but are unlikely to expect or hope that the children will also acquire an 'English' identity, become active members of the 'English community', and help strengthen the socio-political status of the English language. Immersion education in Gaelic and other declining minority languages may well involve motivations and expectations of this kind; research data on the motives of parents choosing Gaelic-medium education, including our own earlier study (Stephen et al. 2010; see also O'Hanlon, McLeod and Paterson 2010), repeatedly notes such aspirations.

Initiatives to promote minority languages in education, as with Māori or Gaelic, often arise in the of failing intergenerational transmission, i.e. when children from the relevant linguistic or cultural group are no longer acquiring an effective command of the language through family and community use. Fishman (1991) uses the term 'intergenerational disruption'; in a crude sense such situations could be described as sociolinguistically pathological. Against this background, immersion initiatives involving minority languages are very often political in their motivation to some extent, driven in part by the desire to alter the socio-political situation of the language. (Of course, those designing and delivering such programmes are keen to ensure they are of high quality in educational terms, and a key argument underpinning these initiatives is that they offer special or additional benefits to those who participate).

The progress of language shift, and its principal mechanism, non-transmission to young children, is an inherently political process, and in many cases there are complex, sensitive and even painful socio-psychological factors involved. Speakers of declining languages may have tangled and conflicting feelings of shame and pride concerning the language, sometimes manifested in a split between the head (pushing them towards the dominant language) and the heart (connecting them to the language of their early life and their perceived heritage). These conflicts may sometimes be dealt with through denial and avoidance, with the tacit agreement that some issues should not be brought to the fore, should be quietly ignored and brushed aside, for fear of bringing tensions and conflicts to the surface. Added to this dynamic is the fact that, irrespective of any language issues, child-rearing is inherently a sensitive and intimate matter. Stressed parents dealing with demanding young children rarely welcome heavy-handed advice from outsiders, whether that be relatives or social professionals. The additional suggestion that parents who do not transmit their 'heritage language' to their children are somehow betraying their culture and their own ancestors could be explosive.

Rationalisations and avoidance strategies

Because non-transmission of minority languages to young children is typically such a sensitive or even painful matter, as explained above, different kinds of rationalisations, excuses and avoidance strategies may be proffered, but given the sensitivities are rarely interrogated. One version here might be that using Gaelic with one's children doesn't seem 'natural' or 'comfortable' because it wasn't the language of one's own childhood. However, language shift always involves such

dislocations. Anyone whose parents or forebears was raised in a minority language but ended up using the dominant language with their own children will have gone through this same process – perhaps feeling uncomfortable or awkward, but doing so all the same. Immigrants, or indeed learners of heritage languages who have gone on to successfully transmit their acquired language, will also have undergone this experience.

There is evidence, albeit typically anecdotal, that in language revitalisation contexts some parents may avoid these difficulties through a strategy of leaving the task of minority language transmission to the school (or nursery). This may satisfy the desire that the children acquire the minority language without requiring awkward changes in one's private life or domestic arrangements. Of course, such a strategy is unlikely to bring complete and confident language acquisition on the part of the children. Conversely, in the Irish context, where Irish-medium education is very strongly institutionalised in the officially designated Gaeltacht areas, there is evidence that some parents proactively use English in the home because they lack confidence that the schools will ensure the effective acquisition of English (Ó hÍfearnáin 2007). In the Gaelic context, it cannot be stated strongly enough that the desire for effective acquisition of English was the overwhelming goal of successive generations of Gaelic-speaking parents throughout the Highlands and Islands, and that the great majority of parents saw the acquisition of Gaelic as secondary or even unnecessary or irrelevant.

Background to Gaelic early years provision

Current Gaelic-medium education initiatives, including early years initiatives, have their roots in the 1970s, when it became increasingly apparent that Gaelic language transmission was faltering in 'Gaelic heartland' areas such as Skye and the Western Isles. Dr Finlay MacLeod, the principal intellectual architect of Gaelic-medium education in this period, observed that by the 1970s 'it ha[d] become a political act for Hebridean parents to bring up their children as Gaelic speakers, for almost every move they make has to be against the tide' (Mackay 1996: 27). A key early years initiative during this period was the so-called 'Van Leer project' in the Western Isles (actually a series of community initiatives sponsored by the Bernard van Leer Foundation in the Netherlands), which involved setting up the first structured pre-school playgroups in the islands, but brought to the fore conflicts between a minority of parents who were resolute that their children should acquire Gaelic and a majority of English monoglots (who also often carried different cultural values). Based on this experience and especially the bilingual project in the islands' primary schools (1975-82), 'bilingual' provision continues to be a disfavoured concept and term in the context of Gaelic education; the general view is that children need a stronger dose of Gaelic if they are to acquire the language effectively. Balancing the interests of L1 speakers – children who are developing and reinforcing the Gaelic they get at home – and L2 speakers – who have no real contact with Gaelic outside the setting – has been an ongoing issue. In rural areas, there is the additional complication that the low numbers of children precludes the diversity of provision available in urban areas, and this a tendency for parents to choose Gaelic early years options for reasons of convenience or even necessity rather than linguistic commitment.

Gaelic education: conceptual problems in sociolinguistic definitions

Understanding the sociolinguistic context for Gaelic-medium education has been complicated by the use of imprecise analytical categories, and in particular the use of the fundamental terms 'speak' and 'speaker'. It is axiomatic that non-transmission of a language almost invariably occurs when

parents who have the ability to speak the language do not in fact do so. Therefore, ability cannot simply be assumed to lead to use. There are actually no hard data on Gaelic language use in Scotland as a whole, or more specifically in relation to the numbers and proportions of young children who use Gaelic at home. However, the data that is available is certainly sobering. For example, the well-known annual government report *Pupils in Scotland, 2010* found a total of 606 primary/secondary pupils in all of Scotland for whom Gaelic was identified as their main home language. This would suggest a figure under 50 for each of the thirteen primary and secondary year cohorts. Using very different methodology, in 1998 William Lamb was only able to find 20 Gaelic-speaking 3-5 year olds in the Uists (population c. 5000), while in 2006 there were only six pre-school children in North Uist who spoke Gaelic in the home (Lamb 2008: 44). In our earlier research (Stephen et al. 2010), we found that only 12% of early years settings had 50% or more Gaelic-speaking children.

Crucially, though, all these data are likely to be optimistic, or to state maximal numbers. There is evidence that many parents who speak Gaelic with their children do not actually do so very much, or do so less than they think. As such, many 'Gaelic-speaking' children may actually be strongly English-dominant. The number of Gaelic-dominant children will likely be much smaller, and Gaelic monoglot children of nursery age almost unknown.

Different language competences

Even if only a small proportion of children use Gaelic at home, the fact that Gaelic-medium education, including nursery provision, caters for both L1 and L2 speakers gives rise to a number of important issues. In 'ideal' immersion, as with English in Spain, it can be assumed that all the children are L2 speakers of the target language and have comparable linguistic inputs, typically confined to those offered within the setting itself and various books/media products. In the Gaelic context, there may be much more variation: some of the children will hear or use Gaelic in their homes and communities (to varying degrees) while others may have no more input than the Spanish child learning English in Spain.

There is thus an important challenge of ensuring that the needs of both L1 and L2 children are addressed. Irish researcher Tina Hickey reported that:

L1 speakers of the minority language may experience both official and unofficial immersion: official immersion in the target language used consistently by the group leader (aiming to support their mother tongue development) and unofficial immersion in the majority language used by their peers (Hickey 2001).

In such circumstances, it might be questioned whether the L1 children actually recognise the 'Gaelic' setting as a 'Gaelic' environment. It may be the case that staff assume that all the children will be competent and comfortable in the dominant language, and there may even be a risk that L1 children regress linguistically because of the dominance of the L2 children rather than progress through structured, relevant support from the staff. Against such a background, it is possible that some strongly Gaelic parents will lack confidence in the system and choose not to place their own children in it.

An unfortunate paradox here is that with advance of language shift from Gaelic to English, and the steady decline in the numbers and proportions of children acquiring Gaelic at home, this problem

becomes easier to manage. This trend has become clearer in relation to Gaelic education in the 21st century, as language shift becomes more manifest even in the strongest Gaelic areas.

Current structural problems with early years provision and input

The current structure of Gaelic early years provision in Scotland gives rise to a number of specific difficulties that have important sociolinguistic ramifications. Because the offer of Gaelic-medium early years provision is so limited in terms of the contact hours offered, most children receive mixed language input in the structured settings that they attend; the Gaelic setting will be only one slice of a mix of settings experienced in a typical week. For example, Gaelic nursery provision for 3-4 year olds is offered (by local authorities) typically for only 12.5 hours a week (although depending on availability additional slots over and above the 12.5 hour entitlement can be purchased). Other provision, especially private nurseries, will almost always be English-only. It is effectively impossible for working parents to arrange full-time or nearly full-time cover (30+ hours per week) that is even predominantly Gaelic.

Provision for 0-3s is even less satisfactory: 'Gaelic' settings (such as parent and toddler groups) typically meet for only a few (under 5) hours a week, and in many cases involve very little Gaelic input, partly because by their nature they place heavy reliance on input from parents who rarely speak Gaelic themselves. Unfortunately, the 0-3 stage is critical for language acquisition, and children who do not begin their acquisition of Gaelic until age 3 will already have consolidated English as their mother tongue. In Fishman's (contested) view, acquisition of a minority language as a mother tongue is essential to minority language revitalisation.

The downside of inclusiveness

Another complex and sensitive problem arises from the fact that Gaelic education in Scotland is promoted to all, irrespective of family background or linguistic heritage. This inclusiveness is a key message and a central tenet of the current system. But inclusiveness may have its downsides. First, there may be variations in the nature of parental motivations and the extent of their commitment. Some parents may choose Gaelic education for its perceived intellectual and educational benefits but have relatively little engagement with the language and the language community themselves (O'Hanlon, McLeod and Paterson 2010). Such parents will probably have little in common with parents who have a strong personal or even ideological commitment to Gaelic. Second, there may be a range of operational difficulties. For example, parents with a relatively superficial commitment may choose to exit the Gaelic system at key stages (e.g. P1 or S1), and they will be unlikely to engage with initiatives like family learning opportunities. More generally, there may be a risk that the constant push to expand Gaelic education and increase the numbers of children enrolled may mean tending to court the marginally committed.

Different windows on the world?

From its inception Gaelic education has tended to present a cultural offer and not a merely linguistic one; children are given the opportunity to engage with 'Gaelic culture'. The meaning of the terms 'culture' generally and 'Gaelic culture' more specifically is rarely explored, however. A minimal understanding of culture – the ordinary sense of the word as used in the media, for example – relates to distinctive forms of artistic or intellectual activities: music, art, theatre, dance, literature

and so on. A broader, more anthropological definition looks to the totality of a group's mental, social and material culture. Significantly, many education programmes to promote indigenous languages (such as Māori and Navajo) tend to place strong emphasis on group-specific social practices, norms, values and 'ways of knowing'. In contrast to indigenous contexts, cultural issues have been relatively little debated in Gaelic education context, partly because of the extent of assimilation/approximation of Gaelic and mainstream Scottish/British culture, if 'culture' is taken its broad sense. As such, the 'Gaelic culture' (or, to use another common phrase, 'Gaelic ethos') of Gaelic education tends to focus on the artistic aspects of culture, especially song and music. Here too the issue of inclusiveness arises; an education programme that aims to impart the cultural worldview, lifestyles and 'ways of knowing' associated with a particular social group is not aimed at and probably cannot be aimed at children who do not belong to that group. Gaelic education has not taken this approach, but there has been little explicit debate concerning these issues, in sharp contrast to the many indigenous language contexts.

In the context of Gaelic early years provision, cultural arguments tend to lose their appeal or force as more parents are attracted to the system who have little connection to or affinity with the target culture. In addition, the extent to which Gaelic culture even in its narrow sense is presented in early years provision is debatable; for example, a very large proportion of books and television programmes for this age group are translated, almost always from English. Similarly, Gaelic nurseries are very likely to mark the same seasonal festivals and events as English-medium nurseries, even when a traditional Gaelic festival falls at much the same point in the year. For example, 'Là Naomh Bhailentin', a linguistic and cultural translation of the English St Valentine's Day, will be marked in February while Là Fhèill Brìghde (St Bridget's Day/Candlemas), formerly a major event in the Gaelic year will go uncelebrated, and Halloween will be celebrated instead of the traditional Samhain.

However, given the extent of cultural dislocation and assimilation in today's Gaelic community, would it be appropriate to impose an idealised version of older Gaelic culture, even those children with strongly Gaelic family backgrounds? Echoing a scene familiar also from Gaelic Scotland, in the Irish novel *Caisleán Óir* (1924), a young boy is punished on his first day in school for failing to respond to the name 'James Gallagher', protesting that his name is Séimí Phádraig Duibh, the patronymic used in his community and the only name he had ever known. But as one commentator observed, it is equally disruptive and inappropriate to tell a young English-speaking James Gallagher 'Séamus Ó Gallchóir is ainm duit'.

Conclusion

These general reflections have aimed to bring to the fore some of the key sociolinguistic issues that arise in Gaelic early years education. Many of these issues are rarely acknowledged, let alone addressed, precisely because they are uncomfortable and sensitive. Quite probably, however, it makes more sense to bear these problems in mind and to engage with them critically and carefully rather than encourage probing research or explicit discussion in a way that could jeopardise goodwill or instil demoralisation or discomfort.

References

Fishman, Joshua A. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Hickey, Tina (2001). Mixing Beginners and Native Speakers in Minority Language Immersion: Who Is Immersing Whom? *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 57, 443-74.

Lamb, William (2008). *Scottish Gaelic Speech and Writing: Register Variation in an Endangered Language*. Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona.

Mackay, David (1996). *We did it ourselves – Sinn Fhèin a rinn e: an account of the Western Isles Community Education Project Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean 1977-1992*. The Hague: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Ó hlfearnáin, Tadhg (2007): Raising children to be bilingual in the Gaeltacht: language preference and practice. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 10, 510-28.

O'Hanlon, Fiona, McLeod, Wilson and Paterson, Lindsay (2010). *Gaelic Medium Education in Scotland: Choice and Attainment at the Primary and Early Secondary School Stages*. Inverness: Bòrd na Gàidhlig.

©Wilson McLeod, 2012.

Reflection 2

Starting out in Gaelic: learning (in) a new language

Joanna McPake, University of Strathclyde

Early language learning

Starting to learn a second language at an early age is widely considered to be beneficial for those offered the opportunity. Evidence suggests that young learners can take advantage of certain neural features which facilitate language acquisition in young children but which deteriorate in later childhood, adolescence and adulthood. For example, the ability to acquire a phonologically accurate representation of a language (i.e. what is often described as a 'native accent') is one which, many researchers argue, declines from a young age. (See Birdsong, 1999, and Moyer, 2004, for detailed discussions of the research into 'critical period hypothesis' which seeks to identify the advantages of an early start.) Moreover, those who start young and continue to study the same language on a regular basis throughout their school years will, by the age of 18, have chalked up many years of study and use. Research has shown that the most critical feature in learning a language to a high standard is the amount of time the learner is able to dedicate to this task (Edelenbos & Johnstone, 1996).

The opportunity to give their children an early start in learning another language and effectively to become bilingual, is one key reason why parents opt for Gaelic medium education. Some parents are specifically committed to Gaelic for family reasons: if not Gaelic speakers themselves, they may be aware of a historical family connection to the language, once spoken by grandparents or great grandparents. They may choose the language for cultural or political reasons: living in Scotland, they may wish themselves and their children to identify with and participate in the Celtic tradition, and contribute to the revitalisation of the language. Others may choose Gaelic medium education because it is the only form of sustained early language education available in Scotland. These parents are motivated by an awareness that their children will have the opportunity to acquire a high level of competence in a second language and access to another culture and worldview. They are also influenced by evidence that early bilingualism brings with it a number of other advantages, such as enhanced cognitive skills, greater mental flexibility and creativity, and, as a result, improved educational performance.

Growing recognition around the world of the benefits of bilingualism and an early start to language learning has meant that greater attention has been paid in recent years to methods for teaching languages to young children. These reflect broader trends in the teaching of second or subsequent languages, away from the formal 'grammar-translation' methods which dominated during the first half of the 20th century and building on 'communicative' methods which took over in the second half, to approaches which now include a cultural focus and intercultural awareness as key features. Thus teaching methods aimed specifically at young children veer away from formal presentations of grammatical matters such as gender or tense, or from asking children to translate from one language to the other, promoting instead a *naturalistic* language learning environment where children have extensive opportunities to hear the language in use, in ways which reflect the kinds of

settings in which they might encounter it if they were growing up as native speakers. This means starting with the language as it is used in daily life – eating, working, learning, playing and taking part in routine domestic activities – and ensuring that appropriate cultural activities, such as story-telling, music, dance, drama, or arts and crafts, are presented as opportunities for experiencing and participating in the language. Moreover, and particularly where the second language represents a demonstrably different culture and worldview from that of the first language, learners are encouraged explicitly to notice and make comparisons between different ways of thinking, acting and expressing oneself.

This *immersion* approach has a number of advantages over more formal language lessons, in terms of the amount of time children have to hear and absorb the language, and of the wide range of contexts in which they encounter the language in use and the consequent opportunities to pursue their own interests through the language. Nevertheless, language learning in an immersion setting does not simply happen:

Children's enjoyment, their openness towards other languages and cultures and their linguistic development must all be worked for and not simply left to chance. (Edelenbos et al. 2006: 13)

Practitioners need to be alert to *input* (the language they themselves are using or are making available – through books, recordings, games, performances, encounters with other speakers of the language) and to opportunities provided to the children for *output* (the chances they have to participate in spoken language activities ranging from the regular use of every day phrases, to singing, story-telling and drama, and also early literacy activities). In addition, particularly as children educated in immersion playrooms and classrooms are expected to become bilingual over time, from the outset practitioners need to draw their attention to differences and connections between the two languages they are encountering, the cultures they represent and the worldviews expressed through culture and language.

Language rich environment

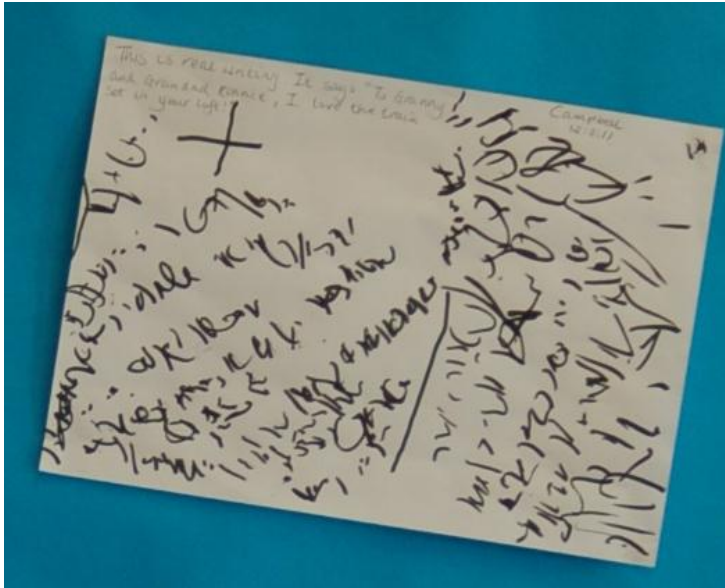
Our study shows that practitioners in GM classrooms take seriously the need to ensure that an immersion playroom is a 'language rich environment' (Krashen, 1981). Most obviously, they strive to ensure that Gaelic is the dominant or only language in use. Though this would seem self-evident, and perhaps unproblematic, given that practitioners are, in most cases, very fluent speakers of Gaelic, the fact that English is found, to a greater or lesser extent, in each of the playrooms we have studied, demonstrates that maintaining a Gaelic-only environment is in fact a challenge requiring a high level of preparation and vigilance. Practitioners need to devise a systematic approach to points at which English intrudes – for example when a parent who does not speak Gaelic or a colleague from the English-language nursery next door comes to visit, when safety concerns require that instructions which the child will instantly understand are shouted out, when a child is upset and needs to be comforted – to ensure that English is being used only when necessary, so that these 'entry points' do not allow the language to creep further into the environment. Given that all practitioners are themselves bilingual, and that Gaelic speakers habitually operate in a bilingual environment where switching between the two languages is commonplace and unremarked, this requires a degree of focus and conscious control.

The fact that very few (sometimes none) of the children in the playroom have had any exposure to Gaelic before starting in the GM setting means, clearly, that practitioners are working with learners at the very start of their Gaelic-learning careers and that therefore, at least to begin with, the only linguistic resource at the children's disposal is – in most cases – English. In a more formal classroom setting, beginner language learners would not be expected to say anything at all beyond set phrases taught by the language teacher: typically, in the early stages, learners would learn phrases such as 'My name is Shona', 'I'm 4 years old', 'I live in Glasgow', 'I have two sisters and one brother' and so on. But in the immersion model, where children are expected to acquire the language naturalistically, the words and phrases children initially acquire are different. We noted that children in the playrooms we observed can typically produce organisational phrases such as *sgiobladh suas* (tidy up) or *suidh sìos* (sit down) and single words which relate to the play activities they enjoy, such as *uisge* (water), *carraichean* (cars) or *gainmheach* (sand). These may seem limited, perhaps more limited than the kinds of phrases the formal approach would produce over a shorter time. But it is well-established that the immersion model requires a *silent period* similar to the early months of a baby's life when s/he does not speak but is absorbing the language, learning to understand how it is used before producing simple utterances. In this kind of naturalistic language learning model, learners' comprehension develops first and to a more sophisticated level than is the case in the formal language classroom, where learners can quite quickly learn to produce target language phrases but understand little or nothing of the replies they might receive in response to these utterances and therefore have difficulty in sustaining conversations.

For these reasons, establishing a Gaelic rich environment is challenged not just by the external or momentary English intrusions but also by the fact that the children will be using mainly or exclusively English to talk to each other and in their responses to the practitioners. This is a situation that requires nuanced handling. For the wide range of developmental, social and pedagogical reasons discussed elsewhere, it is important that the children can express themselves, explore their environment, make friends and learn through the use of the linguistic tools they already have. It would therefore be inappropriate, and indeed counterproductive, to prevent them from using English. At the same time, practitioners need to move children gently towards using more Gaelic, as they become able to do so. To do this effectively requires detailed observation of children's growing competence in Gaelic, which will initially be manifest mainly through their growing understanding of the language, and a scaffolded approach to linguistic production.

Pre-school practitioners are already skilled in scaffolding practice as this is a key feature of early years pedagogy. However, they may need support or encouragement to apply this generic pedagogic approach to the children's language learning. Though we saw many examples of practitioners modeling and rephrasing their own Gaelic speech to make it easy for children to understand what they were saying, scaffolding of production of the language was less common. Mostly, this occurred in the context of group activities involving singing or story-telling, which lend themselves to the practice of set phrases in the course of enjoyable activities. But we saw very few examples of this kind of work in relation to other kinds of playroom activities – for example exploration of the natural world or of science, support for role-play in which children had spontaneously engaged, or in discussions around the children's early literacy activities, which are usually in the form of drawings to which the practitioners attach captions, as a way of enabling young children to understand that

symbolic representation (writing and drawing) can record and preserve meanings over time. Almost all the captions we observed in this context were in English.



Cultural focus and intercultural awareness

It has long been established that language learning incorporates or relates to the study of culture or cultures. In some interpretations, *culture* is understood as referring to literature and other 'high' cultural artefacts such as art, music and dance. In this context, we might expect children in GM pre-schools to be introduced to songs and stories from the Gaelic tradition, in formats suitable for their age and understanding. However, our observations suggest this is relatively rare: most of the songs children sing, the stories they hear and retell, and the books available to them in the nursery have been translated from English. This may reflect a view that both Gaelic and English speakers in Scotland share the same culture, across two languages, but we think that the near absence of original Gaelic cultural resources in pre-school playrooms needs to be more explicitly addressed.

An alternative interpretation of *culture*, in the context of language learning, refers to everyday experiences, or 'the way we do things here': the clothes we wear, the food we eat, leisure activities, work routines, conversational practices and so on. Some of these everyday cultural phenomena are embodied in the language itself: for example, in Gaelic, as in many other European languages – but not in English – a distinction is made between a singular and plural 'you' form, with the plural form also used as a polite term of address. Thus Gaelic speakers need first to notice whether the 'you' being addressed is one or many and adopt the correct form, but then also to decide whether any individual to whom they are speaking should be referred to as *thu* (familiar) or *sibh* (polite). These distinctions are difficult for English speakers to learn and operate as they do not exist in English and need to be understood as cultural differences between the two languages and the social worlds they represent, as well as grammatical differences.

With sufficient exposure, young children in GM playrooms and classrooms may learn to make these cultural distinctions in the ways they use Gaelic and English, without being taught them explicitly. However, current thinking concerning language learning indicates that it is important not only for learners to learn appropriate cultural behaviour in relation to the language in question but also to be aware of how behaviours and practices differ from one linguistic culture to another. Thus children who have the opportunity to grow up bilingual in English and Gaelic should understand and be able to articulate the differences between the two: this would include, for example, a focus on the different ways in which one behaves politely in each language, different counting systems and what these tell us about different ways of thinking about number, surname practices and the ways these connect to perspectives on family, ways of singing and the musical and social traditions these are related to, and so on. Developing intercultural awareness in this way supports children's developing bilingualism and enables them to take full advantage of the established benefits, such as cognitive gains (which are linked to understanding that words are symbols which can operate differently in different languages) or enhanced creativity (which derives in part from having a wider cultural repertoire on which to draw and from being able to synthesise different traditions). Furthermore, the ability to move freely between the two languages requires learners to be able to anticipate, identify and act at points where linguistic practices diverge.

Need for professional development of GM practitioners as language educators

Currently, for pre-school practitioners in GM settings, there is limited initial education or professional development which specifically addresses their role as language educators. As already noted, most practitioners receive their initial education in English, for English-medium settings, and almost all professional development is similarly designed. These arrangements mean that GM practitioners rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to address issues relevant to early language learning, such as those discussed here: creating a language rich environment, ensuring the highest levels of input, scaffolding children's linguistic output, building the cultural dimension and developing intercultural awareness.

We recommend that professional development focusing on these issues is made available to GM pre-school practitioners in formats that are accessible across Scotland: this is likely to entail a mixture of face-to-face and distance learning. Bodies such as Bòrd na Gàidhlig, Education Scotland, Stòrlann (the Gaelic educational resource centre), the Universities of Strathclyde and Aberdeen (which offer early years initial education for Gaelic-medium settings) and the University of Stirling (which offers a specialism in early language education) could be tasked with developing and disseminating this provision. Work to develop early years language learning elsewhere in Europe, such as the review of early language learning conducted by the European Commission (Edelenbos et al., 2006), the British Council's work in developing bilingual Spanish-English provision from kindergarten through to the end of the secondary phase in Spain (evaluated by Johnstone et al., 2010) or the Italian Dinocrocs project (Taeschner & Simeoni, 2005) which embodies a specific pedagogy (*narrative format*) for foreign language learning for children of pre-school age, should also be reviewed and lessons learned incorporated into professional development and the production of appropriate resources.

References

- Birdsong, D. (ed.) (1999). *Second Language Acquisition and the Critical Period Hypothesis*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum
- Edelenbos, P. & Johnstone, R. (1996). *Researching Languages at Primary Schools: Some European Perspectives*. CILT: London.
- Edelenbos, P., Johnstone, R. & Kubanek, A. (2006). *The main pedagogical principles underlying the teaching of languages to very young learners*. European Commission: Brussels. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/lang/doc/young_en.pdf (accessed 23 February 2012).
- Johnstone, R., Pérez Murillo, M.D. & Dobson, A. (2010). *Bilingual Project Spain: Evaluation Report*. British Council/ Ministerio de Educación: Madrid.
- Krashen, S. (1981). *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Pergamon Press: New York.
- Moyer, A. (2004). *Age, Accent and Experience: An integrated approach to critical period inquiry*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Taeschner, T. & Simeoni, M. (2005). *The Magic Teacher: Learning a foreign language at nursery school*. London: CILT.

Reflection 3

Learning in another language: pedagogy in Gaelic-medium preschool

Dr Christine Stephen, University of Stirling

Expectations and Influences

Creating the kind of high quality learning environments that are necessary if children are to experience the benefits of preschool education⁵ and the language-rich settings that nurture language and literacy is a challenging task that requires specific guidance and professional development. In addition, there are other specific pedagogic challenges which arise in some settings where a small number of children who speak Gaelic as their first language are being educated in an environment where most of their peers are Gaelic learners and the dominant language among the children is English. What practitioners do is influenced by policy, guidance, the practices developed in their setting and local authority and their initial and continuing professional education. However, the initial and continuing professional education available to practitioners working in Gaelic-medium (GM) preschool is in English and is tailored for English-medium settings. The theory and practice guidance which practitioners are exposed to in their training, and continue to draw on in their practice, has been developed in the context of children being educated in their first language which for the overwhelming majority of preschoolers in Scotland is English.

Pedagogy in preschool settings, including Gaelic-medium provision, in Scotland is characterised by a commitment to:

- active, experiential learning
- following children's interests and motivations
- 'play' as an important medium for learning
- holistic perspectives on development, encompassing cognitive, emotional, social, physical and expressive and aesthetic aspects of development
- learning as a process of construction not transmission
- valuing process as well as product.

This approach to preschool education was evident in the settings taking part in our study. The playroom environments facilitated free choice and opportunities to move around activities. Children were expected to make their own choices from what was prepared for them and to initiate and conclude activities as they wished, although there were points when adults shaped the schedule. For example, practitioners put small groups of children together for brief periods to work on a task or a game led by an adult and on other occasions gathered all the children together for singing or story reading. However, these shifts between phases in each session, often designed to provide opportunities to hear and respond to Gaelic, contributed to the substantial proportion of observation episodes (ranging from 15% to 35% of all activities at a setting) when children were recorded as tidying or in transition.

⁵ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project*. Oxford: Routledge.

Preschool pedagogy is influenced by ideas about learning drawn largely from Piaget and Vygotsky. However, these approaches are not necessarily ones which would be adopted by those concerned primarily with language learning and some of the ideas about pedagogic practices drawn from these theorists can be seen as problematic in an immersion context. For instance, if following ideas about how children learn derived from the Piagetian tradition, children are expected to explore a richly-resourced learning environment. However, the activities and resources with which they engage will have to be carefully designed if the young learners are to use Gaelic, rather than the dominant language, as they construct their understandings. This is likely to be a particular challenge when the children are not interacting directly with an adult as happened during the majority of the observations in our study (ranging from 61% to 70% of the total number of observation episodes). Similarly, if following Vygotskian thinking, children's learning is being developed through opportunities to act out roles they experience in their everyday lives then the language of enactment is likely to be English.

The Role of Practitioners

We saw practitioners in GM settings fulfilling each of the key roles which adults in preschool playrooms in Scotland typically undertake in order to offer good quality provision (Stephen, Brown and Cope, 2001)⁶. They cared for children and managed their behaviour as well as acting as providers and planners, facilitators and observers and assessors of children's progress.

Planning and Providing

Practitioners in Gaelic-medium settings have a responsibility for the production of materials which goes beyond that needed in English-medium provision. Sourcing resources across the curriculum is perceived as more difficult in Gaelic-medium settings than in English-medium. We found practitioners spending time translating stories and songs and producing posters and display materials because nothing appropriate was available for purchase in Gaelic. They also spent time translating information into the appropriate language for parents and assembling packs containing the words of songs that the children were learning or the vocabulary which was being targeted in the playroom.

In Gaelic medium, as elsewhere, practitioners plan with the traditional areas of the curriculum in mind and now take account of the Early Level learning outcomes and experiences too. During any one session at any setting there are likely to be several activities related to language, literacy and numeracy development, role play (perhaps a travel agent or hospital), fine motor skills, small world play (perhaps a train set or townscape), dressing up clothes, painting, collage, writing and science or nature. However, it is not just providing a range of experiences over the areas of knowledge or development that supports learning. In order to engage and extend all the children in their setting practitioners need to ensure a range of 'response modes' are encouraged too; for instance, construction, dance, storytelling, painting, talking or manipulating objects to classify and sequence. A project or topic might be approached through a variety of activities. At one setting a science project

⁶ Stephen C., Brown, S. & Cope P. (2001) Alternative Perspectives on Early Years Education. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 9, 3, pp. 193-205.

about rockets provided opportunities for learning formal knowledge about planets, creative activities making and decorating rockets, imaginative play about space travel and an introduction to the operation of telescopes.

Given the large number of possibilities in any one playroom the low frequency of use of some resources and activities in the GM playroom is to be expected. Earlier work has demonstrated that if providers want to ensure satisfactory experiences for all children then they need to be able to respond to a wide range of interests and desires (Stephen, 2003)⁷ Nevertheless, providing a substantial and varying range of learning activities within the constraints of finite space and the standard adult:child ratios is a demanding task for who are also considering how these experiences can be used to support learning Gaelic. The relatively low frequency with which we observed children engaged in number and science activities is not unusual in English- or Gaelic-medium preschools but it is possible that supporting development in these areas is experienced as more difficult still through the medium of Gaelic because these areas are perceived to involve more cognitive and linguistic challenges for children and practitioners. In these circumstances providing resources alone, without adult engagement, is unlikely to result in language or conceptual development.

We saw relatively little use of technology in these GM playrooms and most of the episodes observed involved using computers. Many of the computer activities invited children to practice skills that could be achieved in other more active ways. While playing a computer game is motivating for some children there are other technologies such as digital cameras and ipads and activities with digital media (e.g. sending and receiving photographs and using webcams) which offer a more stimulating entry point to learning with technologies and which facilitate creativity and communication.

Facilitating Learning

A central feature of the facilitator part of the practitioner role is to scaffold children as they play and learn (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976⁸; Plowman, Stephen and McPake, 2010⁹). To enhance children's encounters with learning resources in the playroom scaffolding needs to be both distal (actions that do not involve direct interaction with children) and proximal (face to face interactions). Distal actions include making decisions about staff deployment, selecting appropriate resources and arranging to monitor and review children's use of particular response modes or progress with tasks. Proximal scaffolding needs to be multi-modal, including demonstrating, sharing pleasure or anxiety, modelling, gesturing, giving feedback and physical guidance. In our observations we have examples of practitioners acting to scaffolding actions in face- to- face interactions e.g. modelling actions, posing extending questions, sharing interests, using gestures to enhance understanding and adding visual clues to spoken words. But we did not see adult:child interactions frequently. Across the settings there was no adult interacting with the child on 60% of the observations of the

⁷ Stephen C. (2003) What Makes All-Day Provision Satisfactory for Three and Four Year Olds? *Early Child Development and Care*. 173, 6, 577-588.

⁸ Wood D., Bruner J. & Ross G. (1976) The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 17,2, pp. 89-100.

⁹ Plowman L., Stephen C. & McPake J. (2010) *Growing up with technology*. Abingdon: Routledge.

target children. During between 13-20% of observations a small group of children were engaged with a practitioner and on only 1-4% of observations was there 1:1 interaction between practitioner and child.

When adults have to be 'shared out' amongst children designing the task itself to scaffold learning is a helpful alternative, but this takes time and is an area which will benefit from opportunities to share successful approaches during continuing professional development sessions. There are two additional challenges to facilitating learning in the Gaelic-medium playroom. Firstly, using extending questions and moving children's thinking into their zone of proximal development is challenging when they are not fluent in the language of the playroom and secondly, it is difficult to avoid children perceiving the adult's involvement, particularly in role play, as monitoring the language in use or requiring a shift to Gaelic, either of which will reduce the social and cognitive learning potential of the 'acting out' experiences.

Ensuring Engagement in Learning

Intense engagement and cognitive challenge support learning, stimulating changes in children's thinking or understanding. In addition, higher levels of engagement are emotionally satisfying and support positive self esteem. We found instances of intense engagement across response modes and curriculum or knowledge areas e.g. when children were drawing, cutting, digging, using construction materials, cycling. However, there are questions about the language content of these activities. When children were intensely engaged they were usually involved in activities which they had chosen themselves and, if there was language being used, then it was much more likely to be English than Gaelic. In general, activities mediated through Gaelic provoked lower levels of engagement and there were examples of passivity, 'turning off' from learning and bored or disengaged behaviour. Our data suggests that these lower levels of engagement are related to children being expected to be involved in adult-led activities, waiting or in transition (this was noted in a relatively high proportion of observations) or being one of a large group of children.

Children's engagement in learning activities is enhanced when they are able to respond in ways that they enjoy and find satisfying. The guidance which accompanies the curriculum for the Early Level argues that learning will be facilitated when children engage in active ways, for example, by manipulating materials or acting out roles. However, for the target children observed in this study the most common form of response invited was to listen to an adult. While this may be helpful in a context where children rely on practitioners for their exposure to the language which they are learning, there are questions about the value of the listening mode for children's construction of understandings across the curriculum, for creativity and problem solving. Widening the forms of response possible would facilitate more active engagement. For instance, placing appropriate puppets alongside the listening area would support children's retelling of a story and creative activities can add further dimensions to children's experience of learning a new song.

Engagement is further enhanced when children initiate activities and inquiries and when the play experiences are clearly linked to authentic events, problems and interests in their lives. The research literature and the curriculum guidance argue for both activity and authenticity

in learning opportunities in the early years playroom. Our observations suggest that there would be value in looking again at the extent to which GM playroom activities relate to children's everyday lives and at the scope offered for children and adults to follow spontaneously what have been described as 'lines of flight' (Olsson, 2009¹⁰). Modelling problem-solving activities in Gaelic is another role for practitioners in GM immersion settings. But responding spontaneously requires practitioners to be confident and fluent speakers of Gaelic who are able to access appropriate materials and resources quickly and who feel empowered to take up and explore children's interests as they arise, rather than relying on longer term plans for language learning or systematic exposure to particular aspects of language over the school year. In addition, children too need to know that they are welcome to pose questions or raise problems and in the Gaelic-medium playroom it is necessary to consider whether children who do not use Gaelic at home have enough fluency to talk about the things that puzzle or fascinate them and to explore these issues with others.

Gaelic-medium education offers children who do not come from Gaelic-speaking homes opportunities to explore a second language system. However, although the children we talked to were willing to offer the Gaelic word or phrase for aspects of playroom life and activity, there were no indications that they were beginning to develop metalinguistic awareness and there were few explicit references to the use of alternative language or vocabulary amongst the children or practitioners. Engaging children in meta-level conversations which draw their attention to particular features of language and making these features evident through guided exposure to variation and difference will enhance their understanding of the concepts underpinning communication and language and allow them to talk about the language they are learning and their first language.¹¹

Most children learning in GM preschool settings in Scotland will have to navigate moving between the language environment of their home and community and the educational setting on a daily basis, and there are cultural as well as linguistic differences involved in this transition. In order to ensure that children benefit from the learning opportunities these transitions offer and to enhance the authenticity of their learning experiences GM preschool practitioners and those responsible for this provision should consider the extent to which playroom resources and activities incorporate contemporary culture as well as exposure to the cultural forms of expression, values and ways of being in the world that characterise the Gaelic tradition.

©Christine Stephen, 2012

¹⁰ Olsson L. M. (2009) *Movement and Experimentation in Young Children's Learning*. Abingdon: Routledge.

¹¹ Sommer, D., Pramling Samuelsson, I. & Hundeide, K. (2010) *Child Perspectives and Children's Perspectives in Theory and Practice*. Dordrecht: Springer.