

RESEARCH BRIEFING

December 2011 | Number 6E

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 point, enhancing the numbers entering GM primary education and facilitating transition to the school learning environment. However, it is essential that GM preschool 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 or large groups to take part in adult-led activities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

We set out to investigate:

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

Our observations were carried out in three Gaelic immersion settings:

- > 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 systematic observations over the course of one school year, recording what children were doing, the resources they were using, their response modes, the language they used with adults and peers and the pedagogic actions of their practitioners. We noted the learning opportunities, 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.



On our sixth visit to each setting we invited children to take part in structured conversations about using Gaelic in the playroom. When we invited children 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. There were few opportunities available in any setting for other group activities which could support language learning such as 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 their *actions and behaviours*. Approached in this way our data suggest 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 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). 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 or to console an unhappy 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 settings 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 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 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 the observations we recorded children’s 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 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 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 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 some curriculum areas pose for children learning in a new language needs to be investigated and taken into account in terms of the outcomes expected from 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 across the GM preschool sector.

Endnotes

- 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>
- 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>
- ⁴ All place names and names of individuals are pseudonyms.

This project was funded by the British Academy



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