



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

Learning in the community

Gaelic takes centre stage as education switches language in the classrooms

By Katie Macleod

A resurgence in Gaelic education is underway in the Western Isles, with Gaelic School status being applied to six primary schools across the authority this autumn.

The change will also be accompanied by a Gaelic funding boost from the Scottish Government, totalling £500,000.

This additional half a million in capital from the Scottish Government will be of enormous benefit to Gaelic education in the islands, helping not just the new Gaelic Schools but all Gaelic Medium departments.

Bernera School, Breasclete School, Castlebay School, Lochdar School, Leverhulme Memorial School, and Sgoil an Taobh Siar will all become designated Gaelic Schools.

Historically, Gaelic schools have offered no subjects taught in English, but the Comhairle and Scottish Government have decided that these new Gaelic schools will continue to offer English Medium Education. This is in contrast to the current status quo, where majority English-speaking schools provide Gaelic Medium Education.

It was a decision made following 'Community Conversations' held with ten communities in the Western Isles this summer to gauge interest in the introduction of Gaelic Schools. Parents welcomed the idea of Gaelic School status, but wanted to retain the option of English Medium provision, so as not to force children out of their communities to attend schools elsewhere in the islands in order to access English-speaking classrooms.

"The Comhairle is firmly of the view that the model proposed is the one which best suits all of our communities," says Chair of Education and Children's Services Committee, Councillor Catriona Stewart. "Centralising Gaelic Medium Education in specialist schools, as happens at present in urban environments, would not suit the geography of the communities of the Western Isles. We wish to have primary children educated in their own communities in Gaelic, enhancing their own knowledge of local history and culture and strengthening community ties."

The new Gaelic school ethos is one where more than 50 per cent of enrolment is in Gaelic Medium: the school is designated as a Gaelic school not to the exclusion of English, but in an effort to raise the promotion and use of Gaelic, for both English as well as Gaelic medium pupils.

In doing this, the Comhairle is sending a message about the



Nicolson students taking part in a Harris Tweed workshop delivered in Gaelic by designer Sandra Murray

language of the islands, and recognising the importance of local culture. Parents have been positive about these choices - choices that are now being reflected in the introduction of Gaelic School status, and the fact that 20 out of 24 primary schools in the Western Isles offer Gaelic Medium Education.

These changes are taking place in a context of continued success and achievement across the board in Gaelic education, from secondary schools to nurseries, and classrooms to choir practices. The Nicolson Institute currently has its highest intake ever in Gaelic Medium, with 43 fluent speakers currently in Secondary 1. Seven

Partnership aims to boost use of Gaelic outside classrooms

By Katie Macleod

To complement the growth in Gaelic Medium Education, a partnership programme has been developed by Comunn na Gàidhlig (CnaG) to help support young people and their parents as they progress through the Gaelic education system in the Western Isles

Funded by Bòrd na Gàidhlig and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the project aims to create opportunities for young people to use Gaelic outside the classroom. As Development Director Calum Iain Macleod says, they hope to help "normalise the language" among young people.

Since 2009, Community and Youth Officers have been present in Ness and the West Side, and South Uist and Eriskay; it was in 2012 that a Community Officer was introduced to The Nicolson Institute. The project now involves six Community Officers based in schools and communities throughout the Western Isles, including Sir E Scott, Leverhulme Memorial, Sgoil Lionacleit, Castlebay, and the Broadbay area. All are involved in a wide range of projects with young people that encourage them to use Gaelic in an informal setting.

Community and Youth Officer Mairi MacLennan is one of them, and from her base in The Nicolson Institute she is responsible for putting various activities together for pupils outside the classroom. Because

she has a dedicated base in the school, pupils know where to find her if they're looking for Gaelic assistance - or simply want a chat in the language. "It's a less formal setting, so they're using it more naturally," she explains.

The projects have been developed with input from the students themselves, and range from after school homework clubs and melodeon classes, to conversational clubs and a Gaelic Forum. The latter involved 56 pupils meeting once a week to discuss different Gaelic activity ideas; a coffee morning and ceilidh are now in the works. As Mairi says, "they feel like they're a part of it."

In the junior phase, a number of second year Gaelic Medium pupils have been creating a promotional DVD for the Callanish Visitor Centre, which features a Gaelic song they wrote with the help of a music teacher. It will be going live in the coming weeks, and even Visit Scotland has shown an interest.

A week-long residential was held in Scaladale recently, where pupils attending were required to speak entirely in Gaelic as they interacted with each other. It's a similar story at Cuach na Cloinne, a Gaelic football league for primary pupils that is run solely in Gaelic.

Elsewhere in the islands, the CnaG Community Officers are working on a variety of projects, including bringing young people together with older members of the community. Intergenerational transmission like this is beneficial not only culturally, but linguistically,

as the older generation - who have the strongest Gaelic skills - can help pass some of these skills on to school pupils. In Ness and the West Side, for example, this has been taking place in collaboration with Comunn Eachdraidh an Taobh Siar.

In Sir E Scott, one example of the activities underway is the organisation of a 1949-1964 reunion in Harris, where 5th and 6th year pupils are working using Gaelic to collect memorabilia, old photos, and information from old school magazines to be used at the event. Pupils from South Uist, Eriskay, and Sgoil Lionacleit have been involved in video projects and fishing trips, and in Castlebay Community School, a bilingual Christmas pantomime is being organised, among other activities.

The Comhairle is also working with CnaG, The Highland Council, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, on Cuach na Cloinne, a national football competition which is held entirely in Gaelic. Another venture is the Students Summer Placement Scheme, where Gaelic-speaking undergraduates are given the chance to undertake a 10 week placement with businesses where Gaelic is the predominant language of the workplace.

"We try to get young people speaking Gaelic in everyday situations, which helps develop their language skills instead of being restricted to the classroom," explains Mairi of the partnership. "If they only use it in the classroom, it won't really develop later on in life."



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FilmG Awards

subjects are taught in Gaelic Medium, and in others, teachers who have conversational Gaelic are using it to converse with pupils.

What's more, a Gaelic ethos is being encouraged, where pupils are seeing Gaelic as a living language - spoken in corridors and social areas by both pupils and staff - rather than one that belongs in the confines of a classroom.

Working in partnership with community agencies such as Comunn na Gàidhlig (CnaG), Bòrd na Gàidhlig, MG Alba, Pròiseact nan Ealan, and Radio nan Gàidheal, The Nicolson Institute is helping students see that Gaelic, and bilingualism more generally, is hugely beneficial in reaching positive destinations post-school.

Not only is it refreshing for pupils, but having visits from real-world professionals allows students to see that Gaelic has a credibility outside the classroom. An instance of this was a two-day workshop held for students studying the National Progression Award in Harris Tweed and led by Lewis-born fashion designer Sandra Murray. Delivered entirely in Gaelic, the workshop allowed pupils to use the

language freely, and showed that Gaelic has cultural and economic as well as educational benefits. Sandra, who was responsible for designing the outfits worn at Disney's premiere for the film Brave, was a living example of this for students.

Gaelic education at secondary level is expanding in Sir E Scott in Harris too, where secondary subjects - Religious and Moral Education and History - are being taught through the medium of Gaelic for the very first time.

As Head Teacher Aileen MacSween explains, the main reason for this development is that there are now members of staff qualified to teach these subjects who also have a fluency in Gaelic. The courses, which started in August, are being offered to pupils who have come through Gaelic Medium Education in both Sir E Scott and Leverhulme Memorial primary schools, and all seem to be enjoying it so far.

Aileen says the school is "delighted" to be able to offer this opportunity to pupils. "It allows them to have the opportunity to be taught in Gaelic and to speak in Gaelic, and provides another

opportunity for these children to develop their language skills and their vocabulary through these courses."

While the Gaelic Medium class numbers at secondary level are still small, at Sir E Scott primary school all seven Primary 1 pupils are enrolled in Gaelic Medium, with 10 of 11 pupils in Primary 2 in Gaelic Medium - figures which bode well for the future.

In Uist and Barra, where there is a high percentage of Gaelic speakers, most of the schools have a majority of their enrolments in Gaelic Medium Education. In Castlebay Community School and Sgoil Bhaile a Mhanaich, Gaelic is becoming an integral part of school life, both inside and outside the classroom. "The Head Teachers are really proactive in making Gaelic part of school life," say Quality Improvement Officer Uilleam Macdonald about the achievements and activities taking place.

Both schools are involved in Crofting Connections, which is being delivered in Gaelic and English by members of the community, and Castlebay is working on offering the John Muir Award, an environmental award scheme focused on wild places, through the medium of Gaelic.

It's not simply at secondary level that Gaelic is being encouraged, but also at the earliest stages of a child's education. If parents wish, their children can be educated entirely in Gaelic from the age of three, thanks to the language provision available in Early Years Education. A majority of nurseries in the Western Isles are Gaelic nurseries, and 40 per cent of childminders in the region work through the medium of Gaelic.

With complete Gaelic immersion in nurseries, children get a good grasp of the language from their earliest years. "The Gaelic Medium nurseries are very well received," says Early Years Services Manager Becky Maclean.

While some parents who speak only English can be initially nervous to send children to Gaelic nurseries, the numbers in Gaelic Medium nurseries and education are increasing, and a strong support network, both online and in person, helps parents to overcome their fears, assist their children, and even pick up a bit of Gaelic themselves along the way.

"We try and do as much promotion as possible," says Becky, who explains that Early Years staff attend parents evenings and school open days with CnaG to speak about the benefits of bilingualism and explain how the classes are run. Evidence shows that bilingualism is beneficial for children's development and their future, making them more aware of other cultures, other people, and other points of view, not to mention better at multitasking and focusing their attention.

As Catriona Stewart explains, "Significant progress has been made regarding the Comhairle's aspiration to have Gaelic as the principal language of instruction in all our primary schools... Research clearly identifies the benefits of bilingualism and trilingualism and we wish to make sure that all our children and parents are aware of the benefits and advantages of Gaelic Medium Education."

From nurseries to new Gaelic schools, there really is a resurgence in Gaelic Medium Education in the Western Isles, and given the developmental, educational, and cultural benefits of bilingualism, it looks like a trend that is set to continue.



Sradagan



Cuach na Cloinne