Ensuring high quality learning opportunities in Gaelic-medium preschool: challenges and opportunities

Christine Stephen, Joanna McPake and Wilson McLeod
Three Studies

• 2008-9: *Review of Gaelic Medium Early Education and Childcare* (Scottish Government & Bòrd na Gàidhlig)
• 2010-11: *Young Children Learning in Gaelic* (British Academy)
• 2012: *Ar Stòiridh* (Scottish Funding Council & Stòrlann)

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Aims

Review
• To map the current extent of GM provision for early years education and childcare

Young Children
• To investigate the everyday experiences of children attending GM preschool settings

Ar Stòiridh
• To explore the potential of an iPad app to increase preschool children’s opportunities to develop spoken Gaelic and early literacy
Key Questions

• How effective is Gaelic-medium pre-school provision at
  – meeting needs and stimulating demand
  – providing children with high quality preschool education, meeting all the expectations of *Curriculum for Excellence*?
  – ensuring that children are developing competence in the spoken language and early stages of literacy, enabling them to progress to GM primary education?

• How might current provision be enhanced?
Review Findings (1)

• 127 providers of preschool education & childcare (2009)
• More educational provision than childcare
• Provision clustered in particular areas
• Most children come from English speaking homes
Review findings (2)

• Use of Gaelic varies considerably between settings
• Recruiting staff is difficult
• Gaelic-medium preschool resources limited
• No initial & continuing professional education in Gaelic for early years or preschool immersion provision
• If demand for Gaelic-medium provision is to be increased need national promotion strategy
Young Children Findings (1)

• *Language children hear*
  – Gaelic in just over half of observations

• *Language children use*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>No speech</th>
<th>Gaelic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>65%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<td>62%</td>
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<td>8%</td>
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<td>52%</td>
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Use of Gaelic in the playroom

• Singing and story time most common engagement with Gaelic
• Child to child talk – English
• Common requests, polite phrases and language for routines understood in Gaelic and sometimes embedded in English
• Limited productive vocabulary
• Little evidence of metalinguistic awareness
Young Children Findings (2)

Learning experiences in Gaelic-medium playrooms

• Some areas of learning seldom observed
• Problem solving, exploring, questioning difficult for children learning Gaelic in the playroom
• Engagement varies with type of activity and language use
• When adults lead activities in Gaelic children often passive and easily distracted
• Talk is the dominant response mode in Gaelic-medium
• Planning driven by language targets as well as children’s interests
Ar Stòiridh Findings

• The iPad can be a useful and highly flexible tool in Gaelic-medium playrooms
• Children enjoyed using it
• The app has potential to support the development of children’s Gaelic language and early literacy skills
• Practitioners would benefit from professional development opportunities both to develop technical skills and devise ways of using the app effectively
Enhancing current provision

• Challenges
  – Language learning and teaching in preschool
  – Early Years pedagogy in Gaelic medium

• Strategies for blending language learning and early years pedagogies
Language education challenges

- What models of language learning and teaching are suitable for early years Gaelic-medium settings?
- How can we best support early literacy in Gaelic?
- What does it mean to be becoming bilingual at the age of 3 or 4 and how can practitioners support this?
- What cultural and identity issues are raised in the process of becoming a Gaelic speaker and how can these be explored in the playroom?
- What impact do – or should - language revitalisation policy goals have on pre-school practice?
Pedagogical challenges

How can we

• balance child-initiated and adult-initiated activities?
• provide opportunities to explore, problem solve, negotiate and reflect with responsive adults and peers in Gaelic-medium provision?
• create a playroom environment where language learning is authentic, responds to children’s interests and their preferred ways of responding or interacting?
Blending pedagogies for Gaelic-medium preschool

- Tailor curriculum to reflect Gaelic culture and immersion learning experiences
- Use projects to capitalise on motivation and curiosity
- Find ways of ensuring more time is spent with adults and small groups of children
- Reflect with children about language learning and differences between languages
- Use technologies familiar to the children to extend the amount of Gaelic heard and vary response modes
Ensuring high quality in Gaelic-medium preschool

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