

# Advice on Gaelic Education

**Gaelic Medium Education**

## 4. Gaelic Medium Education

### Key messages:

- Gaelic Medium Education is based on the principles of immersion with children accruing all the benefits of bilingualism.
- The early stage of learning through the medium of Gaelic, and where no other language is used, is referred to as 'total immersion'. This is followed by an 'immersion phase' up to and including the senior phase.
- Children and young people need to be equally confident in the use of Gaelic and English and able to use both languages in a full range of situations within and outwith school.
- All Gaelic Medium Education provisions, whether in free-standing provision known as Gaelic schools or Gaelic Medium schools or when delivered alongside English medium, have as an underlying foundation the principles of immersion.

**4.1** Gaelic Medium Education, based on the principles of immersion with its resultant fluency, is recognised as the best way of achieving a sustainable future for the Gaelic language. Children in Gaelic Medium Education accrue all the benefits of bilingualism. For some, acquiring fluency in Gaelic begins in the home with children benefitting from hearing and using Gaelic as part of their family life and upbringing. For others, they are dependent on learning situations being created for them to

develop their fluency. This may be through attendance at 0-3 play provision, for example. Gaelic Medium Education begins in early learning and childcare settings and progresses through primary and secondary school. Learning in this way is available to all children and young people in 14 of Scotland's 32 local authorities. There are also some partnership arrangements between neighbouring authorities which increases access to Gaelic Medium Education. Learners do not have to be from homes where Gaelic is spoken. They begin to learn through the medium of Gaelic, preferably in early learning and childcare settings or in P1. Children and young people also have opportunities to use and develop their language skills in a range of contexts beyond learning in school, and to continue having their learning and achievement recognised with awards and qualifications.

**4.2** The HMI report *Gaelic Education: Building on the successes, addressing the barriers (2011)* defined **two outcomes for Gaelic Medium Education 3-18**. These are that children and young people:

- are equally confident in the use of Gaelic and English; and
- are able to use both Gaelic and English in a full range of situations within and outwith school.

**4.3** As children and young people work towards these outcomes, they need recognition of their progress and achievement through:

- on-going use of assessment;
- monitoring and tracking of progress and achievement by teachers; and
- accreditation such as awards and qualifications which span all aspects of the curriculum.

**4.4** Typically, **most children now entering Gaelic Medium Education do not speak Gaelic as their first language**. As a result, staff in schools and other settings have a key responsibility for developing learners' fluency in Gaelic. However, they cannot do this on their

own. In best practice, they are supported by fluent speakers, other schools, colleges, community learning and development, families and Gaelic organisations. This makes Gaelic Medium Education a responsibility for all, and recognises that learning does not take place only in the classroom. However, children and young people do spend a substantial proportion of their time learning in schools. During this time, they have an entitlement to receive high-quality experiences as part of Gaelic Medium Education. Central to this experience is children's and young people's learning in Gaelic Medium Education being based on the **principles of language immersion**.

**4.5** The early stage of learning through the medium of Gaelic, and where no other language is used, is referred to as '**total immersion**'. Total immersion is developed within the context of The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 where immersion is taken forward in a caring and nurturing environment. The exceptions to the total use of Gaelic includes comforting a child who is distressed, for an emergency situation or for explaining issues connected to health, safety and wellbeing. For some children, their learning in Gaelic Medium Education is alongside English medium provision. For others, the context is a free-standing Gaelic Medium early learning and childcare setting or school. In the former, total immersion is more challenging to achieve outwith the classroom although this should not prevent schools in striving for this. Learning in the total immersion classroom is enhanced by opportunities to hear and use Gaelic in contexts outwith the classroom.

**4.6** The next stage of learning in Gaelic Medium Education is the '**immersion phase**'. In this phase, the curriculum in its entirety continues to be taught through the medium of Gaelic across all four aspects of learning, as defined in *Building the Curriculum 3*. Teachers' monitoring and tracking of progress and achievement should confirm that children now have a secure base in Gaelic language which they can transfer to developing reading and writing skills in English language. English is taught through medium of Gaelic. The immersion phase starts in P3/P4, as evidenced by teachers' monitoring and tracking of progress and achievement, and continues into secondary school. During the immersion phase, there will be occasions when children and young people return to total immersion experiences. This will be to address lapses in fluency and to ensure challenge, breadth and depth in learning.

**4.7** Those schools who are not able to comply fully with these approaches to immersion as part of Gaelic Medium Education, due to shortages of staffing for example, need to be able to show that they are working towards its implementation. Total immersion leads to total fluency.

**Alternative models lead to the dilution of fluency** and are as such non-compatible with the development of strong and sustained Gaelic Medium Education. Some schools and local authorities refer to the phase after total immersion as a bilingual stage and allow English to be too dominant in the learning process. This results in children not being as fluent as they can be. There needs to be a clear understanding that bilingualism is an outcome of Gaelic Medium Education and not a learning and teaching approach. The total use of Gaelic as part of immersion helps achieve the benefits of bilingualism. These benefits and expected outcomes need to be kept to the forefront in the promotion and debates about the development of Gaelic Medium Education. A few schools talk about their approach as being that of partial immersion. There is a substantial and convincing body of evidence from inspection that partial immersion is not effective in developing fluency.

**4.8** Gaelic Medium Education can be delivered in free-standing provision known as **Gaelic schools or Gaelic Medium schools**. In other cases, Gaelic Medium provision is delivered **alongside English medium provision under the leadership of the same headteacher**. In some of these schools, the majority of children are learning through Gaelic rather than in English. Following consultation with parents, these schools have been designated as Gaelic schools that will also retain English medium provision as long as there is a requirement for it. The advice in this document about Gaelic schools or Gaelic Medium schools also applies to

these schools which are designated as having the status of being Gaelic schools but offering English medium too.

**4.9** All types of Gaelic Medium Education provision have as an underlying foundation the principles of immersion. They strive for the appointment of high-quality practitioners and speakers of the Gaelic language to a full range of posts within the school. Such staffing is essential if children and young people are to develop high-quality fluency in Gaelic. Non-teaching staff also play an important role in Gaelic Medium schools and their contribution to developing the fluency of children's language is also valuable. Ensuring adequate levels of staff able to speak Gaelic is very challenging, especially at the secondary stages and in promoted posts. Where learning in GME is alongside English medium provision, total immersion is more challenging to achieve outwith the classroom. However, this should not prevent schools from striving for this. In best practice, children in English medium provision have opportunities to learn Gaelic using the Curriculum for Excellence Experiences and Outcomes for Gaelic (Learners) as their first or second additional language. They also have an opportunity to develop their understanding and knowledge of Gaelic language and culture as part of Scotland's identity. Such an approach to the learning of Gaelic by all children means that the Gaelic language can be used and integrated across the school by staff and children. This gives relevance to the learning of Gaelic and assists in creating an ethos that is centred on Gaelic.

**4.10** In some cases, particularly in rural areas of Scotland, children benefit **from learning Gaelic in early learning and childcare centres**. Others enjoy exposure to Gaelic in the home or the community. In best practice, children's prior learning is taken into account when they move on to the primary stages, whether into Gaelic Medium or Learner Education, so that they can make continued progress in developing fluency.

**4.11** Throughout this Advice on Gaelic Education all references to planning children's and young people's learning needs to take account of meeting the needs of groups of learners throughout the 3-18 curriculum. As children embark on Gaelic Medium Education some children may have begun to acquire **fluency from home and be able to converse in the language**. Learning in the playroom and the classroom should now add to their fluency by extending their use of Gaelic to wider contexts, for example, those connected to school. These children will still need to be totally immersed in the language but will be able to use Gaelic across the curricular areas and contexts at a brisker pace than those who are complete beginners. They will also be able to begin to develop skills in reading and writing Gaelic sooner. This is also a stage in learning where those who embark on the early level of Curriculum for Excellence with some fluency will, if necessary, increase their accuracy of spoken Gaelic and add depth to their learning by hearing authentic and idiomatic Gaelic. The experiences and outcomes of Curriculum for Excellence should be used to plan learning which is suitably challenging.

**4.12** Children in the Gaelic Medium playroom and classroom also begin to develop skills for learning, life and work within total immersion. Those children who have acquired some fluency from home should also have opportunities to develop such skills. Tasks set for learning should, for example, **encourage independence and taking more responsibility in learning**. However, using this group of learners too often as "teachers" for other children may lead to learning which is lacking in challenge. In some cases, based on teachers' monitoring and tracking of progress and achievement, it may be that this group of learners join those at the immersion stage for some of their learning. Some parents show a commendable commitment to supporting their children's fluency in Gaelic. Schools need to value this commitment by ensuring that they too are developing children's skills in Gaelic in a progressive way.

