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## **Gaelic Education since 1872**

Fiona O'Hanlon and Lindsay Paterson

The *Education (Scotland) Act 1872* aimed to 'provide elementary education in reading, writing and arithmetic' for all children aged 5 to 12,<sup>1</sup> but did not specify the language in which literacy skills should be developed. There was a general assumption that this was to be English.<sup>2</sup> The lack of mention of Gaelic in the Act was perceived to be a 'disastrous omission' by MacLeod which ignored the effective pedagogical uses of Gaelic in the nineteenth century (see Cameron, this volume), both in facilitating Gaelic-speaking pupils' acquisition of English and as an appropriate education for Gaelic-speaking pupils living in the Highlands and Islands.<sup>3</sup> MacLeod's view has been followed by many campaigners for Gaelic in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> However, others such as Withers and Smout present the linguistic provisions in the Act in terms of pupils' geographical destination, rather than pupils' home community, and emphasise the 'widespread assumption that the purpose of education for Highlanders was to facilitate their advancement in an English-speaking world'.<sup>5</sup> Giving priority in education to the state language was the standard practice throughout Europe at the time, on the classic republican grounds of creating common citizenship and what would later be called equal opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

The implementation of the Act in Gaelic-speaking areas thus raised key questions regarding the civic purposes of schooling, the relationship between the school and the local community, and effective practice in second language acquisition – questions that have continued to mark the debates regarding the use of Gaelic in education ever since. This chapter outlines associated ideas and developments from 1872 to the present. It is in two chronological sections, before and after 1980, since around 1980 provision through the medium of Gaelic broadened from being primarily intended for Gaelic-speaking pupils in Highland areas to include pupils whose first language was English from across Scotland. It then also became increasingly a matter of cultural maintenance, seeking to sustain Gaelic not only through ensuring its survival among the now much smaller group of children for whom it was their first language but also through creating new speakers.

### **Gaelic in education (1872-1980): from social mobility to child-centredness**

In 1865, MacKay estimated there to be 300,876 Gaelic speakers living within 135 parishes in the North-West of Scotland. In island areas, he estimated only 2% of the population to be able to speak English.<sup>7</sup> The Gaelic Society of London had approached the Lord Advocate in 1871, during the preparation of the 1872 *Education (Scotland) Act*, to emphasise the 'necessity' of the Act's recognising the Gaelic language as an instrument of school instruction in Gaelic-speaking Highland regions. Despite being sympathetic to the views of the deputation, the Lord Advocate argued that the place of Gaelic in Highland education would be more effectively addressed in regulatory guidance, because of the 'inflexible nature' of legislation.<sup>8</sup> The question of Gaelic in Highland education thus fell to the Board of Education for Scotland, the temporary body charged with facilitating the implementation of the Act, and with

providing advice to the Scotch Education Department on amendments to the Scotch Education Code (the regulatory guidance of which the Lord Advocate spoke). In their 1873 report to the Department, the Board thought it premature to specify ‘the arrangements which would be most suitable for these wild and sparsely-populated districts’, and proposed waiting for a year or two before doing so.<sup>9</sup> MacLeod notes the challenge of making provision for Highland education to be a combination of social, economic and linguistic factors, for example the rural nature of much of the Highlands, the paucity of suitable school buildings and the linguistic demographics of the region.<sup>10</sup> However, in 1873 the Board did propose to restore an entry which had disappeared from the Scotch Code in 1860-61,<sup>11</sup> namely that Gaelic-first language children in the middle primary-school stages (Standards II and III) be asked to explain a passage of English Reading in Gaelic after reading it aloud, to show comprehension of their early English literacy.<sup>12</sup> Durkacz notes that the incorporation of this provision into the Scotch Code of 1873 ‘tacitly admitted the principle that the use of the mother tongue in the early stages [of schooling] was educationally desirable.’<sup>13</sup>

Following petitioning by the Gaelic Society of Inverness and the Gaelic School Society – which argued that teaching Gaelic reading for an hour or two per week to Gaelic-speaking pupils would increase the pupils’ achievements in English reading – the Department distributed a questionnaire to 103 school boards within Gaelic-speaking areas of Argyll, Caithness, Inverness, Perth, Ross and Cromarty and Sutherland in May 1876 to seek their views on the teaching of Gaelic. 90 replies were received, with 65 in favour of providing Gaelic-language teaching, and 50 of these additionally reporting the local availability of suitable teaching staff. Amongst these 50 school boards, the projected take-up of Gaelic provision was at least 14,606 children across 188 public schools, with the potential reach being 16,331 pupils across 208 schools if staffing could be found for the additional 15 interested school boards.<sup>14</sup> The Board of Education was by then also advocating the teaching of Gaelic reading to Gaelic-speaking Highland pupils.<sup>15</sup> However, not all School Inspectors agreed, and some advocated the teaching of Gaelic as a specific subject in upper elementary school, but not at the lower stages, where they felt that the focus should be the acquisition of English. William Jolly, for example – the inspector for Inverness, the Western Isles, Nairn and Elgin who was sympathetic to Gaelic – acknowledged the ‘theoretic grounds for learning to read the native language before a foreign one’ but perceived this to be an ‘idea entertained only by a few enthusiasts’ and believed that Gaelic-speaking pupils ought rather to have the maximum available school-time to develop English-literacy.<sup>16</sup> The Department relaxed the School Code to allow Gaelic to be taught as a subject in 1878, but this was not widely implemented as the Department was not willing to provide funds to employ additional Gaelic-speaking teachers.<sup>17</sup>

The main change in views about Gaelic was provoked by the report in 1884 of the Royal Commission chaired by Lord Napier, the purpose of which was investigating the position of the crofters, in response to the growing political success of the Highland Land League and the Crofters’ Party.<sup>18</sup> The result, as in other areas of policy, was greater state involvement, including greater state funding. To the private chagrin of the Education Department, the Commission strayed beyond its remit to condemn the ‘discouragement and neglect of the native language in the education of Gaelic-speaking children’,<sup>19</sup> and recommended that Gaelic be used in the early education of all Gaelic-speaking pupils, and be offered as a specific subject at the middle and upper elementary school stages, with appropriate centrally

provided funding. Although the Commission had not sought views about Gaelic in education from more than a handful of its witnesses (15 out of 775), and although only a third of these had been favourable to teaching Gaelic, the Scotch Education Department did respond.<sup>20</sup> Henry Craik – a senior examiner in the Department, who became its Secretary in the following year – was sent to the Highlands to investigate educational issues relating to Gaelic. His report of 1884 ‘admitted that some Gaelic teaching is likely to be of great benefit’ to Highland pupils’ acquisition of English. Craik thus recommended that there be Education Department grants to employ Gaelic-speaking pupil-teachers to support Gaelic-speaking pupils’ learning at the infant and early elementary school stages, and that Gaelic also be recognised as a specific subject at the middle and upper elementary school stages in Gaelic-speaking areas.<sup>21</sup> (As explained by Bischof in his chapter in this book, pupil teachers were assistants in training, complementing the main class teacher.) Craik’s report did not, however, accept the Napier Commission’s recommendation that reading be introduced in Gaelic, reporting this to be an ‘extreme view’ for which there was no support amongst the school inspectors, school boards, ministers, teachers and parents with whom he had consulted.<sup>22</sup>

Craik’s recommended provisions were incorporated into the 1886 Scotch Code, but were implementable only in the counties of Inverness, Argyll, Ross, Sutherland, Caithness, Orkney and Shetland.<sup>23</sup> These ‘specified counties’ had been identified as those in which ‘exceptionally large expenditure ... has been or will be incurred in providing efficient education’, and it was acknowledged that ‘benefit would result from additional provision being made for teaching Gaelic in certain of these counties’.<sup>24</sup> The Scotch Education Department thus did not attempt to delineate Gaelic-speaking areas, following Craik’s advice that ‘a Gaelic-speaking district is not easily defined’.<sup>25</sup> However, the restriction of the Gaelic provisions in the 1886 Scotch Code to the ‘specified counties’ meant in practice that Gaelic could be taught as a subject in Shetland – where 12 people (0.04% of the population) reported themselves to be Gaelic speakers in the 1881 census – but not in Perth, an area which had been included in the Department’s 1876 survey of Gaelic-speaking areas and where 14,537 people (11% of the population) reported themselves to be Gaelic speakers in the 1881 census).<sup>26</sup>

The uptake of the Gaelic aspects of the new Code is difficult to ascertain, as no comprehensive county-level information is available. However, in 1901 the SED reported the overall provisions made by 683 schools in the ‘specified counties’ inspected during the first nine months of 1900. 6.4% (1,979) of infant pupils in 503 schools in Argyll, Inverness, Ross and Sutherland were being partly taught by Gaelic-speaking pupil-teachers, but no pupils were receiving such initial Gaelic-medium instruction in Caithness, Orkney or Shetland.<sup>27</sup> National records show 286 pupils to have been examined in Gaelic as a specific subject in 1898-99, compared with 424 for Greek, 2,995 for German and 22,188 for French.<sup>28</sup> Such statistics do not include the use of Gaelic as a medium of instruction by Gaelic-speaking certified teachers in the Highlands, but in 1888 the Scottish Education Inquiry Committee noted there to be ‘scarcely any’ Gaelic-speaking students on teacher training courses because poor levels of education in the Highlands made it difficult for such students to pass the appropriate entrance examination.<sup>29</sup>

Dissatisfaction with Highland School Boards’ progress in implementing the optional provisions for Gaelic within the School Code led An Comunn Gàidhealach

and the Gaelic Society of Inverness to approach Parliament on the issue of Gaelic in Scottish education – in a delegation in 1897, and subsequently in the debate leading to the *1908 Education (Scotland) Act* where An Comunn requested an amendment to the Bill to make Gaelic a compulsory subject in the education of Gaelic-speaking children in day-schools, and in evening continuation classes, in Highland districts. Such a request for compulsion was counter to the long-standing approach of the Department in leaving the School Boards to decide on language provision (see the chapters by Cameron and by McDermid, this volume). An amendment that enabled, but did not compel, School Boards to provide ‘instruction in the Gaelic language and literature’ to students in evening continuation classes in ‘Gaelic-speaking districts’ was incorporated into the 1908 Act, but the analogous provision for day-schools suggested by John Sinclair (the Scottish Secretary) was defeated. The provision was incorporated into the subsequent, 1918, Education Act, however, following further campaigning including a petition organized by An Comunn Gàidhealach, which attracted at least 12,000 signatures.<sup>30</sup> The 1918 Act required education authorities to ensure ‘adequate provision ... of all forms of primary, intermediate and secondary education in day schools (including the adequate provision for teaching Gaelic in Gaelic-speaking areas)’, with the Scottish Secretary accepting compulsion for the School Boards in this regard on account of the precedent for this in Wales,<sup>31</sup> where, for example, the Welsh Board of Education stated in the Education Code of 1907: ‘Provision for the teaching of the Welsh Language and Literature should be made in districts where Welsh is spoken.’<sup>32</sup> However, the Scottish provision was not as strong as its Welsh counterpart, as no additional finance was made available. Moreover, the phrases ‘adequate provision’ and ‘Gaelic-speaking areas’ were not defined in the 1918 Act, and thus the latter presumed still Craik’s definition in the Code of 1886.

The long-term effect of the Act and of other developments since the 1886 Scotch Code – for example the incorporation of Gaelic in the School Leaving Certificate at the Lower Grade in 1905 and at the Higher Grade in 1915 – was measured by An Comunn Gàidhealach in 1935-36 through a survey of Highland schools’ use of Gaelic. The results showed that 7,129 elementary pupils were being taught Gaelic as a subject, within 284 schools in Inverness-shire, Ross, Argyll and Sutherland (approximately 20% of elementary pupils in these areas). This provision was typically for native speakers of the language. At the secondary school stage, the survey found 864 pupils to be studying Gaelic as a subject, for an average of 3.75 hours a week, within 22 schools in Inverness-shire, Ross and Argyll. This was mostly for native speakers of Gaelic, but the County of Argyll additionally made provision for pupils whose parents wished them to learn the language. On the basis of this evidence, An Comunn recommended the extension of the teaching of Gaelic as a subject in primary and secondary schools across Scotland.<sup>33</sup>

Further indication of the generally more sympathetic official view of Gaelic after 1918 may be detected in An Comunn’s finding that Gaelic was ‘very generally’ used as a medium of instruction in the infant department, and as a medium of instruction of subjects such as ‘nature study, geography, gardening, music and history’ in primary schools in which pupils were native Gaelic speakers.<sup>34</sup> This use of Gaelic to provide a link between the child’s home and school environments constituted a form of child-centred education, as had been developing in Scotland since the early 1920s.<sup>35</sup> Thus, as respect for the child continued to grow in policy after 1945, so too did official acceptance of Gaelic as part of some children’s identity. In 1946 the Advisory Council on Education in Scotland – in its generally child-centred report on

primary education – recommended Gaelic lessons for pupils in Gaelic-speaking areas, and in 1947 the Council similarly accepted the cultural value of school-based tuition in Gaelic language and literature at the secondary school stage for Gaelic-speaking pupils in the Highlands, and for pupils of ‘Celtic origin’ living outwith the Highlands.<sup>36</sup> They argued that the study of Gaelic was the ‘best linguistic training that can be offered’ to Gaelic-speaking pupils at secondary school, with Gaelic literature having ‘an intimacy of appeal no other [literature] could rival, since it enshrines the experience of their own race.’<sup>37</sup> That such Gaelic language provision was intended to be a form of child-centred education is underlined by the Council’s rejection of An Comunn Gàidhealach’s recommendation that Gaelic should be offered as a secondary-school subject to all pupils in Scotland. Indeed, the Council argued that for pupils not of Celtic origin, Gaelic was difficult to learn, lacked utility value, and did not have a literature of the ‘sustained greatness’ and the ‘immense range and volume’ of its European counterparts.<sup>38</sup>

Outwith the Highlands, there was the beginning of local interest in teaching Gaelic. The developments were summed up by the SED slightly later, when they noted that demand for Gaelic as a secondary subject had developed in ‘some Lowland towns with a strong Gaelic speaking population’.<sup>39</sup> Two secondary schools in Glasgow began teaching Gaelic to learners in 1946, and in 1958 new provision for teaching Gaelic was made in Greenock and Edinburgh. The rationale for the provision had also begun to anticipate later aims of reviving the language, not just catering in a child-centred way for existing speakers: thus, according to a survey by the Scottish Council for Research in Education in 1959, amongst the 89 first year secondary pupils studying Gaelic within these four lowland secondary schools, 56 pupils reported that neither of their parents spoke Gaelic.<sup>40</sup>

The emergence of such a dual role for Gaelic in education (child-centredness and Gaelic language maintenance) was acknowledged by the SED in its memoranda on Primary and Junior Secondary education (published in 1950 and 1955 respectively). These reports recommended the incorporation of Gaelic language and literature into the education of Gaelic-speaking pupils from Gaelic-speaking areas, and also recommended the use of Gaelic in social subjects (such as local geography and history, music, nature study, rural subjects, homecraft, games, and religious education). The aims of such provision were primarily child-centred – that the curriculum ‘be properly related to the language and culture of the community to which these [Gaelic-speaking] pupils belong’ and in which ‘many pupils ... are likely to remain’. The linguistic aim was ‘to make the pupils completely bilingual.’<sup>41</sup> However, the 1955 report also suggested a role for the school in Gaelic language maintenance, the first SED publication to do so. It noted the role of Gaelic teachers in encouraging pupils ‘to regard their own language with respect, to find its study satisfying and rewarding, and to continue its use in the future’ and the importance of Gaelic-speaking parents ‘co-operating with the schools in their efforts to preserve the language.’<sup>42</sup> The SED’s recommendations were formalised in the 1956 *Schools (Scotland) Code*: ‘In Gaelic-speaking areas ... reasonable provision shall be made in schemes of work for the instruction of Gaelic-speaking pupils in the Gaelic language and literature, and the Gaelic language shall be used where appropriate for instructing Gaelic-speaking pupils in other subjects.’<sup>43</sup>

The effects of these post-war changes were measured by a SCRE survey in 1957 of Argyll, Inverness, Ross and Sutherland. Gaelic was found to be taught as a subject to

4,848 primary pupils within 211 schools (19% of the primary school population in these areas), with 1,257 pupils also being taught other subjects through the medium of Gaelic. 3,829 of the pupils in these areas had Gaelic as a first language – here defined in a rather more child-centred way than in such reports previously (which had normally referred to the language of the home): it was ‘the language in which the child is more at ease and the one which he or she tends to use first in conversation’.<sup>44</sup> At the secondary school stage in 1959, 1,941 pupils (18% of the secondary school population in these districts) were studying Gaelic as a school subject, with 27 pupils presented at the Lower Grade of the Leaving Certificate, and 62 at the Higher Grade.<sup>45</sup>

A Gaelic Education Scheme was launched in the bilingual areas of Inverness-shire in 1960 as a response to the permissive policy context created by the 1956 Schools Code.<sup>46</sup> The scheme proposed a focus on oral immersion in Gaelic at the early primary school stage, the introduction of reading in Gaelic for monolingual Gaelic-speakers, the teaching of Gaelic as a subject through the medium of Gaelic, and the use of Gaelic in history, geography, nature study, physical education, art and scripture. Such a pedagogical approach was informed by research evidence from 1948 on the benefits of postponing the teaching of English to Gaelic-first language primary pupils, and with experience of using Welsh in the education of Welsh-first language pupils in Wales.<sup>47</sup> The aim of the pedagogical approach adopted by the Inverness-shire scheme was to give pupils a ‘reasonable fluency in oral expression, reading and writing [in Gaelic], at the end of the primary school course’.<sup>48</sup>

This scheme also strengthened the emerging theme of using education to help maintain the Gaelic language. This more overtly political purpose was to become the dominant rationale in the development of Gaelic education later in the century. The Inverness-shire scheme claimed that it would contribute to the perpetuation of Gaelic as a spoken language by ‘promoting the prestige of Gaelic as the community language’, as had been recommended by the Welsh Board of Education in relation to Welsh in 1927.<sup>49</sup> Awareness amongst Scottish educationalists that Welsh-medium education had successfully increased both the levels of Welsh language competence amongst children and the prestige of Welsh as a community language is suggested by the attendance by representatives of the Welsh Department of the Ministry of Education at a conference on Gaelic in education in 1956,<sup>50</sup> and by explicit acknowledgement of such success by SCRE in 1961: ‘in Wales ... the schools, backed by the Welsh-speaking communities are being used ... as a conscious instrument for the preservation of the Welsh language ... and the result of all this effort is that the Welsh language is holding its own.’<sup>51</sup>

Such language maintenance rationales came at a time when census figures had shown a decrease in the number of Gaelic speakers from 136,135 in 1931 to 80,978 in 1961, and the study conducted by SCRE in 1958 had shown the proportion of first-language Gaelic speakers in Argyll, Inverness-shire and Ross and Cromarty to decrease from 17.7% of Primary 7 pupils to 13.7% of Primary 1 pupils.<sup>52</sup> Evidence provided by SCRE regarding the linguistic background of the first-year secondary school pupils studying Gaelic as a subject in these counties showed one-third of pupils to report ‘usually’ speaking English at home.<sup>53</sup> One consequence of the emergence of secondary pupils’ studying Gaelic who were not already Gaelic speakers was a need for a properly devised course for Gaelic learners (analogously to other languages). Inspectors’ reports from the mid-1950s noted the different

performance of the two groups of pupils, ‘native speaking candidates’ having ‘a distinct advantage over those whose first language is English’.<sup>54</sup> In 1960 the decision thus was taken to differentiate between the two groups, and to introduce ‘learners’ and ‘native-speakers’ examinations in Gaelic in the Ordinary Grade when it was launched in 1962. A learners Higher Grade examination in Gaelic was introduced in 1968. (We return towards the end of the chapter to the question of Gaelic learners in this sense.)

The culmination of the child-centred developments, and thus the immediate background to the much firmer growth of the language-maintenance rationale, was the Scottish Education Department’s *Primary Education in Scotland* report of 1965 – the ‘Primary Memorandum’ that continued to shape Scottish education in child-centred ways for the next half century.<sup>55</sup> It acknowledged the decline in Gaelic use amongst school-aged children in Gaelic-speaking areas, but did not suggest including first-language English speakers in Gaelic education: the aim was still to meet the needs of Gaelic-first-language pupils by using Gaelic in the initial primary school stages, teaching Gaelic as a subject and also, where resources allowed, using Gaelic as a medium of instruction for other subjects.<sup>56</sup> For the first time in any official report, there was also some recognition of the pedagogical benefits of introducing reading in Gaelic: Gaelic-speaking pupils ‘readily go on to master the mechanics of reading in English, and both languages can be used to support each other in enabling the pupils to understand the content of their reading.’<sup>57</sup> The report additionally reiterated the role of the school in Gaelic language maintenance, first acknowledged by the SED in 1955.<sup>58</sup>

State support for Gaelic educational developments was also evidenced in the SED’s contribution to the funding of the 1975 Bilingual Education Project established by the new all-purpose local authority Comhairle nan Eilean (Western Isles Council). The council covered the outer island areas of the former counties of Ross and Cromarty and Inverness and was the most strongly Gaelic-speaking local government area (with 82% of the population reporting themselves to be Gaelic speakers in the 1971 census). However, there was evidence of a decline in Gaelic speaking amongst the young in the new Council’s area: research conducted in 1974 showed the proportion of fluent Gaelic speaking pupils to decrease from 78% amongst the Primary 7s to 61% amongst the Primary 1s in the 56 primary schools in the Gaelic-speaking areas.<sup>59</sup>

The Bilingual Education Project, like the Inverness-shire scheme, aimed to develop bilingual education for pupils from Gaelic-speaking areas which developed links between the pupils’ community context and the school. Following the Primary Memorandum, the project intended that reading be introduced in Gaelic to Gaelic-speaking pupils, and otherwise, in the words of the project director John Murray, that Gaelic ‘flow across the curriculum’, primarily by bilingual teaching of the multi-disciplinary curricular area Environmental Studies. The project began with the development of bilingual teaching materials for the lower primary school stages of twenty schools in which approximately 90% of pupils and teachers were Gaelic-speakers, and extended throughout the primary school stages of these schools by 1978. By 1981 the scheme was operating within 34 of the authority’s 60 primary schools. The aim was to make all Gaelic-speaking pupils equally fluent and literate in Gaelic and English by the end of primary school and to enable English-speaking pupils in infant classes to learn Gaelic if their parents so wished.<sup>60</sup> However, despite such enthusiasm for Gaelic from the local council, MacLeod noted in 1976 that



attitudes to Gaelic amongst many parents within Gaelic-speaking areas of the Highlands and Islands remained ambivalent,<sup>61</sup> still holding that Gaelic could be an impediment to social mobility.

The Bilingual Education Project was successful in providing a curriculum which related to the local community, and indeed was reported to have gradually overcome parental scepticism (rather in the manner that child-centred education was gradually accepted in Scottish education by the early 1980s<sup>62</sup>). In the second phase of the project (1978-81), it was noted: 'almost all [Gaelic-speaking] parents who choose to speak English in the home wish their children to become skilled in Gaelic through the school. Also, almost all non-Gaelic speaking parents ... are very eager for their children to learn Gaelic in school'.<sup>63</sup> At the end of the SED-funded period of the project (1981), Comhairle nan Eilean thus decided to establish a Bilingual Curriculum Development Unit to continue the work of the Bilingual Education Project at the primary school stage, and to extend the project to the secondary school stage 'in selected schools and involving a restricted range of subjects'.<sup>64</sup> A bilingual secondary pilot project was launched in 1983 in which pupils in two small junior secondaries in Lewis were taught social subjects through Gaelic. The Scottish Office's evaluation of the Bilingual Education Project at the primary school stage, published in 1987, perceived it to be a good example of both child-centred and bilingual education, but expressed reservations about the future efficacy of the bilingual language model in making pupils as competent in Gaelic as they were in English in communities where there was language shift to English.<sup>65</sup>

Such concerns had been voiced by parents, educationalists and language activists since the early 1980s in relation both to the Bilingual Education Project and to a similar scheme that had been launched in five primary schools on Skye, within Highland Region, in 1978.<sup>66</sup> Awareness of research which indicated that the early years were the 'critical period' for language learning,<sup>67</sup> together with knowledge of the efficacy of the early total immersion approach employed in Anglicized areas of Wales (where pupils had their nursery and early primary education entirely through the medium of Welsh), prompted the establishment of four Gaelic-medium playgroups in Edinburgh, Pitlochry, Oban and Sleat (on Skye) in 1980. Like the Welsh-medium playgroups, these would accept pupils from both Celtic-language-speaking and non-Celtic-language-speaking backgrounds. By 1990 there were 76 such Gaelic-medium playgroups with 1,200 children, organized under a national Gaelic playgroup association – Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Àraich.

### **Gaelic in education (1980-2013): child-centred language maintenance**

Parental demand for Gaelic-medium early-total-immersion primary education in the 1980s developed from such Gaelic-immersion playgroups, and was facilitated by a policy context of increased parental choice in education. The 1980 *Education (Scotland) Act* re-iterated the stipulation (established in 1918) that local authorities were to make 'adequate provision' for 'the teaching of Gaelic in Gaelic-speaking areas', and the 1981 *Education (Scotland) Act* extended provision for parental choice in education (established in the 1945 Act) to enable parents to request that their child attend a particular school. Parental choice rapidly became an accepted principle throughout Scottish education (despite the origins of the policy with the increasingly unpopular Conservative government<sup>68</sup>). A study of Gaelic-speaking and English-speaking parents conducted by Grant in 1983 explored the rationales underpinning parental preference for Gaelic-medium primary education, finding it typically to

be associated with a wish to continue a tradition of Gaelic-speaking (at a family, community or national level), and with a wish to realise the advantages of bilingualism, for example, the easier acquisition of subsequent languages.<sup>69</sup> The conversion of such parental views into Gaelic-medium primary provision was supported by recently established local and national administrative structures for Gaelic, such as Highland Regional Council's working party on Gaelic (established in 1982), and Comunn na Gàidhlig [The Gaelic Association], a government-funded national development body charged with co-ordinating pre-school and primary education developments (established in 1984). The first Gaelic-medium primary provision was set up in 1985 within John Maxwell Primary School in Glasgow and Central Primary School in Inverness. Such schools became 'dual-stream' schools, meaning that they provided both Gaelic-medium and English-medium education.

These pioneering developments became the beginnings of a national movement when the Scottish Office was converted to supporting the cause, a means by which the embattled Conservative administration could emphasise its Scottish credentials and could draw upon a political consensus towards Gaelic that has persisted to the present. (It was for similar reasons that the government also invested in Gaelic-medium broadcasting.<sup>70</sup>) The financial mechanism for the new education developments, established in 1986, was the *Grants for Gaelic Language Education (Scotland) Regulations* which enabled local authorities to apply for funding for 'the teaching of the Gaelic language or the teaching in that language of other subjects.' The grant allocated £250,000 in its first year. Crucially, the money was additional to general local-authority grants (attractive at a time of persisting financial stringency) and was ring-fenced (thus enabling language campaigners locally to insist that the money be spent as intended).

The distinguishing feature of Gaelic-medium education, as compared with earlier bilingual education, was the emphasis on immersion in Gaelic. The model used is known in the international bilingual education literature as 'early total immersion', and typically involves 100% immersion in the second language for the first two or three years of primary schooling, with the second language used as the main medium of instruction in middle and upper primary.<sup>71</sup> The model used in the Bilingual Education Project in the Western Isles was an example of 'partial immersion' – where the language is used for up to 50% of curricular instruction throughout primary schooling. The shift towards early total immersion emerged from local experience of the shortcomings of the bilingual education model in fostering equal competence in Gaelic and English, and from the emergence of research from Canada illustrating the effectiveness of early total immersion.<sup>72</sup>

Wider curricular developments in Scotland in the early 1990s enabled an unprecedented degree of standardisation in the definition of Gaelic education. As part of the 5-14 programme – new curricular guidance covering the primary and early secondary school stages – *Gaelic 5-14* was published in 1993, and provided recommendations for both the language model to be used in Gaelic-medium education, and for the teaching of Gaelic as a subject within English-medium education. For Gaelic-medium education, the guidelines recommended an 'initial [Gaelic] immersion phase of at least two years' duration', that literacy be introduced in Gaelic, and that Gaelic remain the 'predominant teaching medium throughout the primary stages'.<sup>73</sup> By this time, a total of 45 Gaelic-medium primary providers, teaching 1,080 pupils existed within 6 local authorities. The Specific Grants allocated

£1.72 million in the 1992-3 academic year.

The growth in Gaelic-medium primary education continued in the 1990s. Studies show parental rationales for choice at this time still to relate to a wish to preserve cultural heritage and to the benefits of bilingualism, but also to relate to a belief that Gaelic-medium education provided a strong pedagogical context for pupils (small class sizes, a good ethos and high-quality teaching).<sup>74</sup> The rationale for the choice of Gaelic-medium education had thus become what might be termed child-centred language maintenance. By 1999, there were a total of 59 Gaelic-medium primary providers, teaching 1,831 pupils within 12 local authorities. However, growth of Gaelic-medium education has slowed since 1999. In the 2013-14 school year, Gaelic-medium primary provision was still available in 59 schools, although the number of pupils taught within these had increased to 2,652. The provision is made across 14 local authorities, with children from 13 of the remaining 18 local authority areas in Scotland able to access Gaelic-medium education through cross-boundary agreements between local authorities.

The lack of increase in the number of Gaelic-medium primary providers between 1999 and 2013, despite policy support for the expansion of such provision in the early years of political devolution in Scotland, is mainly due to a shortage of Gaelic-speaking primary teachers.<sup>75</sup> This shortage is related to the precarious position of the language itself, with only 58,652 speakers (or 1.2% of the Scottish population) at the 2001 Census. Thus, the *Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000*, which required local authorities to report annually on their present and planned provision for Gaelic-medium education, and the *Gaelic (Language) Scotland Act 2005* – which established Bòrd na Gàidhlig as a body charged with promoting Gaelic language, culture, and education – have mostly helped to expand pupil numbers within existing Gaelic-medium primary provision, rather than establish new provision. Such an increase in capacity has been partly enabled by the conversion of three dual-stream schools into free-standing (that is, wholly Gaelic) schools – in Glasgow in 1999, Inverness in 2007 and Edinburgh in 2013. In the 2013-14 school year these urban free-standing schools had an average of 288 Gaelic-medium pupils per school, compared with an average of 32 per dual-stream school.

Such Gaelic-medium primary education is available in a range of community-level linguistic contexts, and is usually associated with a Gaelic-medium nursery (of which there were 58, with 985 pupils, in 2013-14). Figure 1 shows the location of Gaelic-medium primary providers in 2013-14 alongside the population density of Gaelic-speakers (civil parish level) at the 2011 census.

**[Figure 1 here]**

Most of this Gaelic-medium primary education is in the north-west, with Highland Council making provision within 22 schools, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council) in 19 and Argyll and Bute in 6. 10 local authorities in the Lowlands offer Gaelic-medium provision within one school in the authority, whilst Perth and Kinross offer it within two. In total, 0.7% of the Scottish primary-school population is educated in Gaelic-medium education; the proportion of Gaelic-medium pupils within a local authority ranging from 30.9% in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, to 0.12% in Perth and Kinross in 2013-14. Gaelic language use in the community

surrounding Gaelic-medium provision is particularly important in the context of the *Curriculum for Excellence*, a 3-18 curriculum launched in 2010 (see the chapters by Humes and by Paterson in the present book). This follows the early total immersion language model outlined in Gaelic 5-14, but additionally emphasises the importance of pupils using their Gaelic language skills both ‘within and beyond’ their place of learning.<sup>76</sup>

Developments in Gaelic-medium secondary education have been more limited. Only 15 of the 33 secondary schools into which the Gaelic-medium primary schools feed provide any subjects through the medium of Gaelic in addition to Gaelic as a subject for fluent speakers of the language. Four of these 15 secondaries provide six or more subjects through the medium of Gaelic; the other 11 offer an average of three subjects per school (usually including history and geography).<sup>77</sup> There is only one wholly Gaelic-medium secondary school, established in 2006 in Glasgow. The consequence is that, amongst all secondary schools making provision for pupils who have attended Gaelic-medium primary education, the average teaching time conducted through the medium of Gaelic is 17% in the first year of secondary school. This compares with a national average of 70% in the final year of Gaelic-medium primary schooling.<sup>78</sup> Provision reduces further at the middle to upper secondary school stages – with only geography and history provided through the medium of Gaelic in at least 4 secondary schools in Scotland in the third and fourth years of secondary school stages, and only Gaelic as a subject taught through the medium of Gaelic in at least four secondary schools in the fifth and sixth years of secondary school.<sup>79</sup> In the new Scottish national examination system inaugurated in 2014, Gaelic language examinations were available for Gaelic, Geography, History, Modern Studies and Mathematics.

The most apparent reason for such a weak pattern of provision for Gaelic-medium secondary education is in policy. In 1994 – a decade after the appearance of Gaelic-medium primary schooling – Her Majesty’s Inspectors still had doubts about Gaelic-medium secondary education. They noted existing secondary provision to be ‘fragmented and incidental’ because it was determined by the availability of Gaelic-speaking subject specialists who were also literate in Gaelic. The inspectorate expressed concern that small year cohorts of Gaelic-medium pupils could not sustain a varied and stimulating learning environment, and would be isolated from the ‘main school’.<sup>80</sup> The inspectorate concluded that such Gaelic-medium secondary provision was ‘neither desirable nor feasible’ and instead recommended that pupils from Gaelic-medium primary education be offered Gaelic language and literature as a secondary school subject, and a Gaelic-medium course in Gaelic culture – which was to include ‘aspects of Gaelic culture, including elements from History, Geography, Music Art and Drama’.<sup>81</sup> The Scottish Office adopted the inspectorate’s recommendations in April 1996 (announced in the Williamson lecture by Secretary of State for Scotland Michael Forsyth), but revised their position in June 1997, when Brian Wilson MP, Minister of State at the Scottish Office with special responsibility for Gaelic, announced that the Inspectors and Education Department officials had been asked to ‘enter into discussions with local authorities about ways in which [Gaelic-speaking] secondary subject teachers ... might be given additional training to allow them to use [their] Gaelic as the medium of the classroom in S1/S2’.<sup>82</sup> By 2005, in the next official HMI report on Gaelic Education, the inspectorate’s position had shifted from that expressed in 1994. In 2005 they argued ‘a single Gaelic course’ to be ‘insufficient’ to maintain and develop the Gaelic language competencies of

pupils educated in Gaelic-medium primary education, and rather advocated the further development of Gaelic-medium provision at the secondary-school level.<sup>83</sup>

There are also two other explanations for the current situation in secondary-schools. One, noted by the General Teaching Council for Scotland in 1999, and by the inspectors in 2005 and 2011, is shortage of teacher supply.<sup>84</sup> The other reason may be a persistence of the sense among parents – despite the much changed attitudes to Gaelic – that English is of paramount importance for educational success in further and tertiary education, and still the main means of occupational success later.<sup>85</sup> There exist limited opportunities to undertake tertiary education through the medium of Gaelic – with 240 students studying for degrees through the medium of Gaelic in the 2013-14 academic year within the University of the Highlands and Islands (at Sabhal Mor Ostaig on Skye and Lews Castle College in Lewis) – 0.15% of the total undergraduate population in Scotland.<sup>86</sup> Students may also study through the medium of Gaelic as part of degrees in Celtic at the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and as part of initial and post-graduate Gaelic-medium teacher education at the Universities of the Highlands and Islands, Aberdeen, and Strathclyde. Opportunities for Gaelic-medium employment are currently limited, with posts typically within the education, media and public administration sectors.<sup>87</sup>

The two national language plans that have been published for Gaelic by Bòrd na Gàidhlig (2007-12 and 2012-17) both emphasise language acquisition through Celtic-medium pre-school and primary education and the continued development of Gaelic amongst such pupils in adolescence and adulthood as crucial elements of the maintenance of Gaelic. Results from research into the attainment of Gaelic-medium primary pupils conducted using data from 1996-99, and from 2006-2009, showed Primary 7 pupils to be attaining the expected curricular levels in Gaelic for their school stage; indeed Gaelic-medium pupils were doing as well in Gaelic as English-medium pupils do in English, and additionally Gaelic-medium pupils outperform English-medium pupils in English reading, whilst performing as well as their English-medium counterparts in English writing, mathematics and science.<sup>88</sup> Such Gaelic-language attainment is notable, given that a maximum of 17% of Gaelic-medium pupils have Gaelic as their ‘main home language.’<sup>89</sup> The bilingual competencies of Gaelic-medium primary pupils have also recently been shown to be associated with the cognitive benefits of bilingualism.<sup>90</sup> However, if the impact of Gaelic-medium education is measured by the use of Gaelic in everyday communication, the conclusion is much more uncertain, especially after early childhood. For example, it was reported by teachers in a survey in 2011 that, in secondary schools which provide some Gaelic-medium education, only about 12% of Gaelic-speaking pupils actually used Gaelic for more than half the time outwith the classroom even when speaking to each other.<sup>91</sup>

Nevertheless, there is evidence that the growth of Gaelic-medium education may indeed have started to fulfil the policy-makers’ goals of reversing the decline in Gaelic-speaker numbers. The 17% decrease between 1981 and 1991 reduced to 11% between 1991 and 2001 and to 2% between 2001 and 2011. The impact of education on the percentage decrease is suggested by there being an increase in the proportion of 3-4, 5-14 and 15-19 year olds who speak Gaelic in 2011, as compared with 2001, but a decrease in all older age groups.<sup>92</sup>

The final part of the story concerns recent developments in Gaelic for learners, in the sense of Gaelic provided as a subject like any other additional language in the

curriculum. Opportunities for English-medium primary pupils to learn Gaelic as a school subject have developed independently from Gaelic-medium education. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar pledged to offer Gaelic as a school subject to all primary and early secondary school pupils in 1980, and in 2000 a pilot entitled Gaelic Language in the Primary School was undertaken in Argyll and Bute and Highland. The latter provision was similar to that for other languages under the heading of Modern Languages in the Primary School, which had been launched in 1989. The Gaelic provision differs in that it typically starts in the middle, rather than the upper, primary school stages. All such language teaching is provided by the class-teacher, who receives training for this purpose, and the Gaelic scheme is usually provided in addition to its modern foreign languages counterpart. The expansion of Gaelic as a primary school subject is difficult to track as annual figures on the number of pupils studying Gaelic at primary school within English-medium education were only incorporated into the Government's annual reporting in 2005, when 5,019 pupils were reported to be receiving Gaelic learners provision.<sup>93</sup> A study conducted by Bòrd na Gàidhlig in 2009-10 showed there to be 5,500 pupils learning Gaelic in 113 schools within 8 local authority areas.<sup>94</sup> Gaelic as a subject was thus taught to 1.5% of the primary school population, in around 5% of all primary schools in 2009-10. Governmental records from the 2013-14 school year report the number of pupils receiving Gaelic for learners in English-medium education to be 3,389.<sup>95</sup> Gaelic as a subject is also offered to learners of the language in 31 secondary schools, mostly the same as offer Gaelic as a subject for fluent speakers. In 2013-14, Gaelic was taught to 3,431 learner pupils within these secondary schools.<sup>96</sup>

## [Figure 2]

## Conclusions

Attitudes to Gaelic in education since 1872 have been shaped by changes of two quite different kinds. One is the specific instance of Gaelic within the much more general growth of child-centredness in Scottish education. That helps to explain the increasingly favourable official attitudes from the first decade of the century onwards – symbolised most influentially in the Gaelic passages in the 1918 *Education (Scotland) Act*. Even though the main aim still was to render Gaelic-speaking children fluent in English, the new international ideas of the time encouraged policy makers to understand that effective teaching had to pay attention to the child's world. Where that world was still predominantly Gaelic, recognising the language and cultural context of the child's home community was to be inferred from these new pedagogical principles. But alongside this has been the slow growth of a different motive, that education be used to maintain the Gaelic language and culture. This approach emerged alongside the child-centred rationale in the 1950s and continued to run in parallel up to the early 1980s when language-planning aims came to the fore. At this time, there emerged a wish to use Gaelic-medium education both to develop the Gaelic-language abilities of Gaelic-speaking pupils, and to enable the acquisition of Gaelic by English-speaking pupils. The provision of Gaelic as a subject in English-medium education has been shaped by similar influences. Provision made in the Lowlands in the 1940s was recommended only for those of Celtic origin, following a child-centred rationale, and the development of Gaelic in primary education from the 1980s initially focused on Highland regions. Indeed, Gaelic as a subject for learners at the secondary school stage is still predominantly offered within the North-West of Scotland, as Figure 2 highlights.

The main outcome of the history outlined in this chapter is a form of Gaelic-medium education which has been shown to be an effective model of fostering bilingualism and its associated benefits amongst both its Gaelic-first language and English-first language pupils. Provision has also developed for a small proportion of English-medium pupils to learn Gaelic. The immediate challenge facing Gaelic in education is now staffing – particularly for the planned expansion of Gaelic-medium primary education and the extension of such provision to secondary and tertiary education. The next few decades will also reveal whether the development of Gaelic in education since the 1980s does achieve the political goal of safeguarding the future of the language itself.

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