

# **Best Practice in Language Immersion and the Issue of Co-located Schools**

## **Final Report**

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### **Introduction**

This report presents the findings of this research project concerning best practice in language immersion and the role that school structure may play within this. Particular attention is given to the possible implications of a co-location model for the siting of a school. The research, commissioned by Comann nam Pàrant (Dùn Èideann & Lodainn) with support from Bòrd na Gàidhlig, aims to inform parents in relation to decisions concerning the future development of secondary Gaelic-medium education (GME) in Edinburgh. It should also be relevant to decision-making concerning Gaelic provision in other areas.

Part 1 of this report addresses issues concerning language immersion in general, with particular attention to the different contexts for delivery. Part 2 focuses on the potential advantages and disadvantages of free-standing schools and a co-location model. Part 3 presents a case study of a Welsh-medium secondary school that shares a site with an English-medium school. Part 4 presents a case study of a Gaelic-medium primary school that shares a site with an English-medium school.

### **Part 1: Best practice in language immersion**

Language teaching using the model of 'immersion' began in Canada in the 1960s and has since spread to many other countries. The general principle is that pupils will be immersed in a 'language bath' (Lambert and Tucker 1972: 225). Instead of simply receiving formal lessons in the language, children experience much wider exposure to the target language as it is used for teaching other subjects and for other kinds of activities and interactions at the school. Myriad studies have shown that language immersion yields significantly better outcomes in terms of language acquisition as compared to conventional teaching models (Baker and Wright 2017; Cummins 2009).

Immersion can be delivered in various different ways, however, and the total amount of exposure to the target language can vary considerably. A common typology is to distinguish between early and late immersion and between full and partial immersion. An early immersion programme might start at or near the beginning of primary education, while a late immersion programme would start at a later stage of

education (possibly as late as age 12). A full immersion programme uses the target language for (almost) all lessons and in (almost) all contexts, while a partial immersion programme also uses the children's first language (L1) for some proportion of the teaching time (often 50%) (Baker and Wright 2017). Research suggests that, broadly speaking, 'the more time spent learning through the [target] language, the higher the level of proficiency attained' (Fortune 2012: 10).

Primary GME in Scotland has developed as an early full immersion programme, with Gaelic used exclusively until the end of primary 3, at which point English is introduced. This approach is formally recommended in the statutory guidance on Gaelic education (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2017: 24). This model is followed fairly consistently across Scotland, although there is then considerable variation in upper primary, with some schools moving towards a 50-50 model by P7 (O'Hanlon, Paterson and McLeod 2012).

The great majority of primary schools which offer GME (53 out of 59) do so using a unit model. In the unit model, one group of pupils in the school receives GME while another (typically the majority) learns through the medium of English (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2019: 3, 13)<sup>1</sup>. In contrast to Ireland and Wales, where pupils in English-medium education all study Irish or Welsh as a subject, English-medium pupils in schools with Gaelic units usually learn little or no Gaelic. Gaelic may thus not just be limited to the school environment, but confined to the Gaelic classroom.

Since the 1990s, parents in several different parts of Scotland have campaigned for free-standing Gaelic schools, generally on the grounds that they believed this structure would provide a more fully immersive environment than the unit model and would provide better outcomes in terms of language acquisition and pupil confidence. The first free-standing GM primary school was opened in Glasgow in 1999 and there are now six Gaelic primary schools in different parts of Scotland, including Edinburgh's Bun-sgoil Taobh na Pàirce, which opened in 2013.

The overall rationale for free-standing schools was explained by Canadian researcher Lesley Doell as follows:

The recipe for successful implementation includes not only actively encouraging the use of [the immersion language] outside of the classroom but also within the school 'so that the language is perceived as an authentic means of communication for a social purpose that goes beyond academic learning and pervades the life of the school' (Doell 2011, quoting Lapkin 1991: 2)).

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<sup>1</sup> Some schools in which some of the pupils are taught through the medium of English are nevertheless designated as Gaelic schools. Such schools are probably best understood as following the unit model, although the overall school ethos may have a stronger Gaelic element than other schools with Gaelic units.

The unit model is relatively rare internationally. In Ireland and Wales, for example, immersion education is usually delivered via free-standing schools, both at primary and secondary level. In Ireland, there are a small number of secondary Irish-medium units, but Gaeloideachas, the lead organisation for the development of Irish-medium education, 'believes that a stand-alone Irish-medium school is preferable to an *aonad* [unit] to effectively implement the immersion education model'. Gaeloideachas also 'believes that every *aonad* patron should aim to develop the *aonad* to become a stand-alone school' (Gaeloideachas 2020: 2). The basis for these beliefs is not articulated in detail, however. In some cases, the level of Irish-medium teaching offered in secondary units has been perceived as inadequate, prompting public campaigns for a dedicated school (*Irish Times* 2019).

The unit system is not used in Wales, but there is considerable diversity in the structure of provision. In 2014-5, there were 23 Welsh-medium secondary schools, 27 bilingual schools, 9 English schools with significant use of Welsh, and 148 English-medium secondary schools. In the bilingual schools, all pupils are partly taught through the medium of Welsh, and the proportion of subjects taught through Welsh exceeds 80% in some cases (Jones 2016: 3). Because attainment in Welsh by English-medium pupils has been perceived as weak, the government is now proposing to abolish the distinction between the first-language and second-language Welsh curricula. This will mean embedding Welsh to a greater degree in all schools, including more bilingual teaching and a greater focus on understanding and using Welsh as a means of oral communication (Lovell 2019).

Although other countries such as Ireland, Wales and the Basque Country have long-established full immersion programmes at secondary level, secondary GME in Scotland is much less extensive than primary. There is currently only one GM secondary school (in Glasgow). In other secondary schools which offer GME (such as James Gillespie's High School in Edinburgh), only a certain proportion of subjects are delivered through the medium of Gaelic, and the proportion of GM teaching tends to drop off sharply in upper secondary. In 2018-19 there were 325 GM pupils in S1 in Scotland but only 112 in S6 (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2019: 6).

The statutory guidance on Gaelic education is worded flexibly to account for different local contexts, stating that 'the GME curriculum from S1 to S3 and into the Senior Phase (S4-S6) remains one based on the principle of immersion in Gaelic' and that 'schools should aim to deliver a sufficient proportion of the secondary curriculum through the medium of Gaelic to enable young people to continue to develop their fluency in Gaelic' (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2017: 25).

It might be assumed that the diminishing intensity of GME at secondary level has negative consequences for the development and consolidation of pupils' language

skills, but there is no research comparing the linguistic abilities of graduates of secondary GME according to varying levels of Gaelic input in secondary school.

While there is very extensive research on the outcomes of bilingual education (Baker and Wright 2017), this work focuses overwhelmingly on the evaluation of different kinds of teaching models (e.g. the duration of the immersion programme or the proportion of teaching delivered through the target language). For example, there have been many studies comparing the outcomes of early v. late immersion programmes in terms of pupils' language skills and confidence (beginning at age 5/6 or 11/12) (e.g. Ó Muircheartaigh and Hickey 2008).

In contrast, there is much less research comparing the outcomes from different kinds of school structures, e.g. comparing linguistic attainment from pupils in free-standing schools with those in units within majority-language schools. Examples include Doell's work from the Canadian context, which found that the transition from a unit to a school model 'had a profound impact on the culture of the school': 'rather than French being only a language of instruction, it is now brought alive outside of the four classroom walls' (Doell 2011).<sup>2</sup>

Gathercole and Thomas (2005) compared the linguistic accuracy of primary pupils' Welsh according to a range of differentiating factors, including school structure. 324 pupils were tested, from six Welsh-medium primary schools and seven bilingual Welsh-English primary schools. Pupils from the Welsh-medium schools outperformed those from the bilingual schools, although the difference between the two school groups was much less than the difference between those pupils who spoke Welsh at home and those who spoke English.

In the Gaelic context, the language policy objectives underpinning GME are not limited to linguistic attainment of the kind measured by conventional testing or assessment. The policy aspiration is that graduates of GME will become active, confident users of the language and remain so after they leave school. Existing research on the graduates of primary GME units suggests that this objective has not been effectively realised (Dunmore 2019). There have been no studies comparing the graduates of units with those of free-standing schools, however.

It should also be noted that international research indicates that pupils who are acquiring a language through immersion at school tend not to use the language in their own group interaction (Macleod et al. 2014: 9–11). This pattern has also been observed in the Gaelic context (NicLeòid 2018: 54). A successful immersion model would aim to address this challenge.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Doell's report did not involve testing of pupils' linguistic attainment.

An important point of variation in relation to immersion programmes is the extent to which the target language is used in pupils' homes and in the community in which the school is located. In many immersion programmes around the world the target language has essentially no role in pupils' lives outside the school: almost none of the pupils speak it at home and it has almost no presence in their community. Elsewhere, the use of the language as a target medium reinforces home or community language use. GME varies in this respect; Gaelic schools and units in the Central Belt are in a much less Gaelic-rich environment than those in the Western Isles. Linguistic attainment and intensity of language use tend to be higher among pupils who speak the language outside the school than those who rarely use it beyond the classroom (Thomas and Roberts 2011). This suggests that ensuring a strong Gaelic environment and ethos may be particularly important for schools in areas where pupils receive little linguistic reinforcement outside the school.

## **Part 2: Issues of school structure**

School co-location refers to two (or occasionally more) schools operating from the same physical site. The schools may share physical infrastructure such as auditoriums, gymnasiums, libraries and social spaces; services such as groundskeeping or security; or both. As discussed below, the extent to which buildings, facilities and services are shared between the schools varies from case to case. The development of a co-located facility thus involves myriad decisions about the physical layout of the site and the ongoing operation of the two schools.

The terminology used in this area is inconsistent and arguably contradictory. The terms 'joint campus', 'shared campus', 'split campus', 'split site' and 'co-location' are all in circulation and it is not clear that these terms have the same meaning in all countries and contexts. This report uses the term 'co-location' but it is important to understand that within the general framework of co-location there can be considerable and significant variation in the relationship between the two schools. In the context of language immersion, the consequences of decisions concerning the physical structure and the operation of the two schools could be profound, as discussed below.

School co-location is not a common practice across the UK, but is notably more common in Northern Ireland and Scotland than in England and Wales. In Scotland around 10% of schools (primary and post-primary) are co-located, and the practice has become more common in the last decade. The vast majority of co-located schools in Scotland comprise a non-denominational school and a Catholic school.

The main reasons for the increased use of the co-location model are financial rather than educational in nature: this model offers the opportunity for cost savings in terms of both construction and operational costs. Some educational or social benefits have also been identified in relation to this model, although it is important to understand

that these are secondary in nature; in effect, the model is adopted for financial reasons and then ways are found to try to make it successful in educational and/or social terms. Social benefits include the reduced carbon footprint that results from linking two schools with shared facilities.

Our research has only found two examples of co-location involving an immersion secondary school and a monolingual majority language school. This example, in Newport, Wales, is considered in detail in Part 3 of this report). However, it should be noted that one of the six GM primary schools in Scotland, Bun-sgoil Ghleann Dail in Glasgow, is co-located with an English-medium school.

Because there appear to be hardly any direct precedents, there is no research comparing the language skills and practices of pupils in co-located immersion schools with those at free-standing immersion schools. However, analogous research comparing free-standing immersion schools with immersion units may be drawn upon. For example, evidence from Ireland suggests that pupils use less Irish in the playground in Irish-medium units than in free-standing Irish medium schools (Ó Duibhir et al. 2017: 100-01). It is possible, however, that a unit in an English-medium school is not closely analogous to a separate Gaelic school sharing facility with a co-located English-medium school.

In relation to the possibility of co-locating a Gaelic-medium and an English-medium school, the fundamental issue can be expressed as follows. The greater the degree of physical separation and distance between the two schools, and the less the interaction between the pupils and staff of the two schools, the better in terms of language acquisition, development and use. However, designing and operating two co-located schools on such a basis might significantly reduce any of the cost savings associated with the co-location model.

Considering the design of the two co-located schools, at one extreme there could be two entirely separate buildings (or sets of buildings), with no shared spaces; at the opposite extreme there could be a single building with a single entrance with considerable use of shared spaces; or there could be something in between.

In terms of the operation of two co-located schools, there could be full separation of functions and staffing or there could be shared use and staffing of common areas such as a reception area and sports facilities and with joint administration and staffing of certain functions such as building maintenance, finance etc. Decisions about the most effective model for a co-located Gaelic school would require a comprehensive and detailed evaluation of all aspects of school life so as to make sure that sharing a particular facility or aspect of operational activity would not have negative consequences. It would not be viable to adopt a pre-existing template or standard model of some kind.

Two contrasting examples in Scotland are Forrester High School/St Augustine's High School in the South Gyle area of Edinburgh and the Port Glasgow High School/St Stephen's High School/Craigmarloch Additional Support Needs School in Inverclyde. In the former, the only shared space is the 'community sports hub', which also functions as a sports centre hosting extracurricular sports clubs not exclusive to children of either school. In the latter, the three co-located schools are physically joined by a shared central space and share a dining hall, library, science classrooms, science and technology resources, music rooms, sports block and drama/performing arts area.

Co-located schools in Scotland and Northern Ireland have tended to promote interaction between the two groups of pupils as an end in itself, as part of a wider policy of breaking down denominational barriers and building community cohesion (O'Sullivan, O'Flynn and Russell 2008; Department of Education 2015). However, in the context of a GM school such an approach would tend to dilute the immersion environment and make the overall experience for the Gaelic-medium pupils closer to that of a unit than a free-standing school.

### **Part 3: Case study of Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed High School, Newport, Wales**

Gwent Is Coed is the first Welsh-medium secondary school in the city of Newport (one of the least Welsh-speaking parts of Wales). It was established in 2016 and in 2018 the school moved to its current site which it shares with an English-medium school, The John Frost School. As the model of a non-English-medium secondary school sharing a site with an English-medium school is so rare, the experience of those involved with the school provides a valuable case study for this project.

The case study involved telephone interviews and email conversations with Gwent Is Coed's headteacher, the chair of governors and a parent governor, in addition to desktop research.

Gwent Is Coed and John Frost are situated in separate buildings. A fence divides the space between the schools, giving each its own playground. The schools have completely different staff and teachers. There is little shared use of facilities between the two schools, and though relations are good and there is some joint project work between the two schools, the separation of arrangements has been a conscious decision by Gwent Is Coed 'in order to protect the linguistic integrity of the school' (according to the Chair of Governors). Entrances to the schools are at opposite sides of the campus, in order to ensure both schools linguistic distinctiveness, and the start and end times at the two schools are different. Use of the recreational grounds are timetabled so that pupils from the two schools do not use them simultaneously.

In the interviews the informants reaffirmed the above making it clear that pains had been taken to ensure that Welsh-medium education not be compromised by the

proximity of the English-medium school. This has been achieved by a deliberate policy of keeping the two groups of pupils apart. The chair of governors noted that:

We as governors were very firm that sharing a site was not an option as it would compromise the language immersion that is essential to language growth in our young people [translation from Welsh].

The headteacher went further, disputing the notion of the 'shared' campus:

We don't actually share a site, it is a split site. We have different homegoing times and different, staggered break and lunch times, though there is a crossover so we try and keep the pupils apart as much as possible. [. . .] There is no way for the pupils other than shouting over the fence to interact with each other at lunchtime and break time.

The result of the organised separation of cohorts, the headteacher claimed, was that the close proximity of the English-medium school had 'very little' impact on the language habits of the Gwent Is Coed pupils: "The language habits of the [co-located English-medium] school don't [. . .] impact on us [. . .]. Next door in John Frost they have something like 25 different languages so they're quite relaxed about language differences. If anything, the Welsh use of the John Frost children has improved because they now know how to ask for their football back through the medium of Welsh when it comes over the fence!" However, the headteacher stressed that any further 'sharing' between the schools, especially in cases of pupils from the two schools occupying the same spaces, would 'not have a positive effect on the children's language habits' and would tend to undermine the goal of immersion education: "I think that [the Gwent Is Coed] model can work. If there was a shared campus with the pupils occupying the same area, I would say that it absolutely wouldn't work, because what would happen then would be that the pupils would revert to the language of the home, of television, the language that they feel comfortable with and the language that the majority of the pupils understand, and therefore they would speak English."

#### **Part 4: Case Study of Glendale Primary School**

The second case study focuses on Sgoil Ghàidhlig Ghleann Dail in Glasgow, which shares a campus with an English-medium primary school, Glendale Primary School. The school shares a campus with an English-medium primary school. The case study involved telephone interviews with a parent, a member of the Gaelic school's senior management and a former teacher who had experience working in other Gaelic-medium primary schools.

Unlike Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed, the senior managers of both co-located schools in this context worked towards the express purpose of creating a shared 'campus



ethos'. The schools run independently and do not share staff or senior management; however, pupils from each school spend break- and lunchtime eating and playing together in the school's shared dining hall and playground. The informants stated that initially some parents had raised concerns that their children's immersion experience would be compromised by their mixing with the English-medium cohort. The former teacher said, 'initially, some [parents] had the opinion that there should be separate break times but the general feeling was that we didn't want to create an *us and them* [situation].' All informants were unanimous in saying that parents' fears had been assuaged following the success of the co-location model. The former teacher said, 'once the decision [over shared break times] was made I never really felt that there was much pushback [from parents]'.

Research by Macleod et al. on standalone Gaelic-medium schools suggests that Gaelic-medium pupils tend to speak English outside the classroom (2014: 41). The parents, teachers and senior management of the school at the centre of this case study are cognisant of this tendency, with the teacher saying, 'it's very well known that children don't speak Gaelic in their break-time or their lunchtime anyway.' Unlike Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Is Coed, however, the response to the children's use of English outside the classroom has not been to impose strict language policies of separation with the aim of enforcing the use of Gaelic. Instead, the priority of the Gaelic-medium school's management has been to maximise the benefits of colocation through shared break and lunchtimes as well as joint activities and cultural days. The senior member of staff made this clear, saying, 'we didn't want it to be one of those schools [...] where the schools have very little interaction with each other but we wanted it to be a positive campus ethos [where] the schools were able to interact.' In saying this he makes a clear departure from the approach of Gwent Is Coed where maximising the immersion experience took ultimate priority.

Notably, the former teacher said that from their experience teaching at Glendale and at a standalone Gaelic school there was no perceptible difference between the level of Gaelic that children acquired in the standalone school compared to Glendale: 'if you're talking about comparing the immersive experience of the children in [a standalone GME school and a shared-campus GME school] then they're all very good. And quite similar.' They attributed this similarity to the fact that, at both schools, children used English with one another outside the classroom. The teacher said that the ideal environment would be a fully immersive setup 'where the support staff, the janitors, the supply teachers all had Gaelic', but said that neither model was currently providing such a comprehensive immersive experience.

Glendale was the second Gaelic school to open in Glasgow. It is notable that both the third school, Cartvale, and the planned fourth school at the former St James Primary will be free-standing schools and will not operate on the co-location model.

## **Conclusion**

Though not definitive, evidence suggests that the ideal model for an immersion school would be a stand-alone institution so as to maximise the immersion experience and to ensure maximum levels of exposure to the language. The Irish organisation emphasises the need to preserve the immersion environment as a 'language sanctuary'. More generally, the international literature on language revitalisation highlights the importance of creating 'breathing spaces' (Fishman 1991) for the minority language – spaces in which there is less pressure for speakers (who are also speakers of the dominant language) to switch languages (see Cenoz and Gorter 2017 for Basque; O'Rourke 2019 for Galician). As such, while this need not imply that a hypothetical co-location model would not be successful, careful planning would be required to ensure that the school remained a 'breathing space' for the immersion language.

No two sets of co-located schools are the same. The extent to which facilities and spaces are shared varies from site to site. This will be an important variable in considering the potential impact of co-location for the Edinburgh GME high school. As Doell observed, 'the recipe for successful implementation includes not only actively encouraging the use of [immersion language] outside of the classroom but also within the school "so that the language is perceived as an authentic means of communication for a social purpose that goes beyond academic learning and pervades the life of the school"' (Doell 2011, quoting Lapkin (1991: 2)).

Given the above, if a co-location option is chosen, we can conclude that a model closer to that of Gwent Is Coed might be more appropriate than that of Gleann Dail. Ultimately the impact will depend on the nature of the space and interaction between the co-located schools. Research literature suggests that separation of the pupil groups is beneficial to the linguistic development of immersion pupils.

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