

IDENTIFYING AND MANAGING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT NEEDS IN GAELIC MEDIUM EDUCATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is important that any serious difficulties being experienced by children in Gaelic medium education should be identified and the staged approach followed to ensure action is taken at as early a stage as possible.

Parents should be kept informed of any such difficulties and should be fully involved in discussion of the action to be taken, at all stages.

2. PRE-SCHOOL

2.1 Early Warning

Close observation of children in the nursery setting will usually provide a forewarning of difficulties, whether these are specific to language or of a general nature. If potential problems are indicated at this stage, more detailed assessment should take place administered in the language in which the child appears to be most comfortable. If the difficulty relates specifically to language, the problem should be fully investigated, usually in the home language, by an appropriate professional. Where a number of agencies have been involved in assessing a child, it is important that their assessments are drawn together.

2.2 Support

In some cases, depending on age and maturity and assuming parental consent, it may be in a child's best interests to defer entry to primary school for a year to allow for maturation of skills.

On transition from nursery to P1 arrangements should be set in place for the transfer of information to relevant school staff. In cases of significant additional need, arrangements may need to be made to ensure the child receives appropriate additional support in P1. This may entail extra resources (such as a classroom assistant or learning support staff time) or a reorganisation of existing resources and personnel within the school or classroom.

This support will cover the areas of need identified by the assessments; developing an understanding of Gaelic will usually be a key focus.

3. PRIMARY ONE/TWO

3.1 Term 2 Assessment

The end of the second (Spring) term in P1 is a crucial stage in the Gaelic immersion process. It is expected that most pupils will achieve an understanding of Gaelic by this stage equivalent to the Immersion Stage of the oral language schedule and that they will have begun to use Gaelic in a productive way (as distinct from repeating set expressions). This level of understanding is a pre-requisite to starting reading in Gaelic.

Where there is some doubt as to whether a pupil has achieved the appropriate level of understanding of Gaelic, this should be confirmed using the Council's oral language tests. Support for learning staff, or specialist Quality Development Officer can assist in this process. Adaptations of standard screening tests may also be helpful at this stage and earlier, to help identify difficulties of a general nature.

Reading in Gaelic should be postponed if the pupil has not achieved the desired level in oral Gaelic and the situation should be kept under review.

3.2 Support/Review

The additional oral language reinforcement and other support should continue, and if possible should be increased, during the remainder of P1. The situation should be reviewed formally towards the end of P1. This may involve support for learning staff, a Specialist Quality Development Officer, parents and, in some instances, an educational psychologist.

The conclusion may be that it is simply a matter of lack of maturity or confidence but equally it may be that there is a specific or general learning difficulty, which is likely to manifest itself in other ways also.

The review may result in an individualised education programme being agreed for the child, which will indicate the support to be given and a timetable for expected progress (this will usually include beginning to read at the beginning of P2 at the latest). If a group within the class are at the same stage, targets should be set for the group within class planning.

Special Cases

From time to time, situations may arise where it is concluded that, the options outlined above having been exhausted, it is unlikely that a pupil will attain enough competence in Gaelic to allow him/her to function adequately in a Gaelic medium setting and that therefore continuation in Gaelic medium education may not be in the child's best interests.

This decision will have taken into account:

- Assessments of the child's progress over a period of years.
- The nature of the difficulty – difficulties relating to the production of language being especially significant.
- The child's home/community language background.
- Whether the authority and the other agencies involved are in a position to provide the support required in the medium of Gaelic. The decision-making process will involve teachers and other appropriate professionals. Parents will be kept fully informed throughout the process and every effort will be made to take their wishes into account.

It is expected, as a general rule-of-thumb, that this will apply only to a very small minority of children, usually less than 1 per cent of the total.

4. PRIMARY THREE/FOUR

4.1 General

The other important juncture in assessing additional support needs in Gaelic medium education is P3/4, when pupils start reading and writing in English as well as Gaelic. Additional needs which were not considered as serious hitherto can become accentuated at this stage.

4.2 English Reading

The yardstick for moving on to English reading is that the pupil should be a competent and independent reader in Gaelic. In 5-14 terms, pupils should be 'working at level A' in Gaelic reading. New reading tests are now available in Gaelic which, although not fully standardised, should provide a more objective measure of pupils' reading ability.

Most pupils start reading in English sometime in P3: this usually happens midway through the year (although a few schools now postpone it until later to ensure that pupils have a good grounding in Gaelic reading).

If a pupil has not reached the appropriate stage in reading Gaelic by mid P3 s/he should continue to read (and write) in Gaelic to the end of P3, receiving additional support. The situation should be monitored closely.

4.3 Testing in Oral Language Competence

The pupil's progress in understanding and speaking Gaelic should also be assessed at this stage against the oral language schedule, using appropriate tests. Most pupils are

expected to be able to *actively use* all of the language in the Immersion Stage by the end of P3. If a pupil has still not achieved this level by the end of P3, this can be taken as additional evidence that s/he is likely to continue to have difficulty with reading and especially with writing Gaelic.

4.4 Starting English Reading

If the situation is still the same as the end of P3 approaches, there should be a meeting involving all interested parties on the best course of action for the pupil, and parents should be fully involved in this process. Usually, the pupil will begin to read in English at the beginning of P4, with support.

4.5 Reading: balance of the languages

The balance of the languages in such cases is a matter for the judgement of the class teacher, in consultation with other professionals and parents, and is likely to vary from child to child.

In some cases, the child may be able to continue reading to a broadly equal extent in both languages. It is more likely, however, that s/he will fare better if able to concentrate on reading in one language for a period. This may be either Gaelic or English at this stage.

If the pupil is still experiencing significant difficulties as the end of P4 approaches, the balance will usually change in favour of reading in English (if this was not already the case). The child should continue to read in Gaelic also, possibly with support from taped books, a classroom assistant or older pupils.

It should be possible for the pupil to resume reading the second language more fully once s/he has gained confidence in reading.

4.6 Writing

A similar decision may have to be taken at this stage regarding writing.

If the pupil has had serious difficulty with writing in Gaelic and especially if assessments have also shown a weak grasp of spoken Gaelic, the teacher – after the appropriate consultation – may decide that his/her writing should be developed in one language only. This may be Gaelic or English but is more likely to be English. Writing in the other language should be discontinued for the time being, although there is an expectation that it will be resumed at a later date.

Gaelic will continue to be the only language spoken by the teacher in all such cases.

4.7 Implications

A decision to develop the reading and writing of a pupil in Gaelic Medium largely (or wholly) in English has implications for classroom management and for the pupils themselves, especially when they move on to secondary school: such factors need to be taken into account when making such a decision.

It is a choice, therefore, that should be considered only when other options have been tried and found wanting.

4.8 Extraction

Extraction from Gaelic medium education at this stage in the primary school is highly undesirable. It may need to be considered as an option in very exceptional circumstances but the expectation is that any such decision will have been taken at an earlier stage, as outlined above.

If such a decision is taken, a special transfer programme should be set in place for the child, to allow gradual phasing into English medium education over a period of time.

5. **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PLANNING OF GAELIC MEDIUM EDUCATION**

A broadly *inclusive* approach to children with additional support needs has a number of implications for the planning and development of Gaelic medium education. In particular, the following are regarded as key targets.

An adequate supply of Gaelic speaking support for learning staff, both teachers and auxiliaries, with the appropriate training.

- Ideally, access to Gaelic speaking professionals, such as educational psychologists and speech therapists or, where this is not yet feasible, induction training for such professionals on immersion methodology.
- Specialised support for learning resources, screening and assessment materials in Gaelic.
- Teaching materials reflecting the needs of pupils with additional support needs.