

Putting Gaelic on the

Inverness Gaelic School – ‘Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Inbhir Nis’ – offers a community hub and learning centre for Gaels. Kerry Thomson finds out more 



which we teach as part of the curriculum, we're totally immersing the pupils in the Gaelic medium and education is delivered through the language."

CATCHING UP WITH EUROPE

Perhaps surprisingly, Janet says most of the children who attend the school come from non-Gaelic speaking homes, although often their parents are second or third generation Gaels. "Parents are extremely supportive of what we're working to achieve. We have a strong emphasis on inclusion and on recognising and celebrating cultural differences. It's an ethos we couldn't fully promote if we didn't have the support of the parents", she says.

With first-hand experience of learning a language at a young age, Janet was brought up on the Isle of Skye and spoke entirely Gaelic until the age of five when she started learning English at school. She says many of the parents see Gaelic not only as an important part of their child's heritage

'An nì chì na big, 's e nì na big' – 'what the little ones see, the little ones do' – or so the Gaelic proverb goes. Whilst the saying is old, the sentiment is as true today as it ever was. In fact it couldn't be truer of Scotland's first purpose-built Gaelic medium primary school, where pupils and their parents are gaining a greater understanding of the Gaelic language and culture.

Inverness Gaelic School, or 'Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Inbhir Nis', the full Gaelic name, opened its doors last August and has already attracted more than 100 pupils. With seven

classrooms, a multi-purpose gym hall and a recording studio, the new facilities are putting Gaelic on the map in more ways than one. Headteacher Janet McLeod explains how the new school building is about so much more than bricks and mortar:

"The phrase 'purpose-built' is so important in the context of our school. Over £4m has been invested to make sure we are fit for purpose. We have facilities which are not just first class, they're world class. I think that says a great deal about the part Gaelic has to play not just on Scotland's educational agenda, but on our cultural agenda too. Here, Gaelic is not just a unit



First Minister Alex Salmond is put through his paces

map

and education but also as a useful tool in their cognitive development. "Many parents recognise the lifelong benefits of a bilingual or even multilingual education. It's no secret that in Scotland we are well behind many of our European counterparts in this respect. Many children in Europe start to learn a second language from a very young age and for them it's the norm to be able to converse easily in more than one language," she says. Janet describes one young pupil who has a Basque father, a Spanish mother, speaks English at home and learns Gaelic at school!

INTEGRATED APPROACH

Pupils are taught solely in Gaelic from P1 until English is introduced by the end of P3, and from P4 most pupils are speaking dual languages right up until they finish in P7. Janet emphasises the importance of total immersion in the Gaelic medium – every member of the school community speaks Gaelic, from the headteacher to the cook and the janitor. Many children attend the school's nursery and breakfast club, where Gaelic is also the main language. In fact, Janet says that of the 100 pupils, 58 are three and four-year-olds who have been introduced to the school via the nursery.

And it's not just pupils who are reaping the rewards – Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Inbhir Nis is fast establishing itself as a focus for the whole community. The school has a dedicated parents' room which incorporates a study area and hosts adult classes in tandem with 'Cli', a Gaelic Learners Association. For parents, a new method of learning languages that calls on techniques used to teach Welsh and Hebrew is being put into practice, called the Ulpan method.

We're so much more than just a school; we're a hub for the Gaelic medium



Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Inbhir-Nis was purpose-built to keep Gaelic culture alive

With an emphasis on listening and speaking, the adult classes have proved popular and Janet says they're indicative of the school's fully integrated approach: "From toddlers to children, parents and even grandparents, we're keen to nurture and support Gaelic learners and give them every opportunity to put their language skills into action.

"We're so much more than just a school; we're a hub for the Gaelic medium. As the school develops and grows we want it to become a resource for the local community and indeed for the wider Highlands area." Local drama and choral groups use the school hall for their rehearsals and performances, and 'Tional', an annual family-orientated Gaelic language gathering, was held at the school, attracting Gaelic speakers from all over Scotland.

OLD TONGUE, NEW APPROACH

While Gaelic is one of the oldest languages in Europe, spoken in Scotland since at least the 6th century AD, the facilities at Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Inbhir Nis are brand new. "There's not a piece of chalk in sight," laughs Janet as she describes the way in which interactive whiteboards, MP3 players and laptops are all incorporated into the learning process. The school's very own recording studio has given pupils the chance to participate in live broadcasts for *Children In Need* and Gaelic children's programme, *De a-Nis?*. Janet adds: "It's a real boon for the children to be able to use state-of-the-art technology as part of their learning. These sorts of facilities offer tremendous opportunities and help ensure

the Gaelic medium is kept up to date."

And it's not only in Scotland that the school is attracting interest. Janet is preparing for a visit from a delegation of Sami people, one of the largest indigenous groups in Europe, who are travelling from Norway and Sweden to learn from the school's ethos and share best practice.

With a capacity for 175 students and a growing pupil roster, a new and confident generation of Gaelic speakers is emerging at Bun-sgoil Ghàidhlig Inbhir Nis. And with pupils learning by example and the wider community participating, it seems that old proverb really is as relevant today as ever.

FACTS AND FIGURES

A total of 58,652 people in Scotland can speak Gaelic (according to the 2001 Census)

There are over 46 million minority language speakers in Europe

There are 3,086 pupils in Gaelic Medium Education

A total of 3,641 pupils take Gaelic as a subject in secondary education

More people with Gaelic language ability live in the Western Isles (18,420), Highland (18,360) and Argyll and Bute (6,520) than in any other local authority areas (Census 2001)