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Minority language education: Reconciling the tensions of language revitalisation and the benefits of bilingualism

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Abstract

Research has highlighted the significance of the family and community in minority language revitalisation, whilst raising concern for efforts solely focused at the school level. This article draws upon research with children in Gaelic Medium Education, in Scotland, to explore their experiences and perceptions of their language use. The findings illustrate the dominance of English language across multiple aspects of children's lives and highlight the opportunities/threats of recent revitalisation efforts to push the bilingual benefits of language learning. The findings suggest the need for a more considered approach, such as translanguaging pedagogies, in order to effectively revitalise Gaelic language.

KEYWORDS
bilingual education, child bilingualism, minority language education, minority languages, translanguaging

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the value of school education in minority language revitalisation. There are calls from academics to acknowledge school education cannot act alone in reversing language shift (RLS) efforts, particularly in the Scottish Gaelic context (Baker, 2000, 2011; Dunmore, 2018; NicLeòid et al., 2020; Giollagáin et al., 2020; Smith-Christmas & Armstrong, 2014). There are

concerns that without a wide, overarching support for revitalisation efforts, alongside tackling negative ideologies surrounding Gaelic in wider society, Gaelic language revitalisation efforts will not meet their intended aims (Dunmore, 2017; Giollagáin et al., 2020).

In particular, this article explores minority language use with a primary focus on how and where children use their minority language. Data have been gathered from children concerning their experiences of attending Gaelic Medium Education (GME—a form of immersion education) in a Scottish primary school and is analysed to explore their educational encounters, with their linguistic experiences outside of the classroom, in an ever-globalising world. These findings are framed amongst recent literature to discuss the implications of current practices for Scottish Gaelic revitalisation efforts and how policy-makers and practitioners would benefit from listening and engaging more with children regarding these matters in order to ensure the revitalisation of Gaelic language (see also NicLeòid, 2015). Whilst this article focuses on the Scottish context in relation to Gaelic, the findings and implications should be of interest to those working with, and for, children in other minority language contexts.

MINORITY LANGUAGE REVITALISATION, IMMERSION EDUCATION AND THE POTENTIAL OF TRANSLANGUAGING: AN OVERVIEW

Liddicoat and Bryant (2001) define language revival as the diverse range of language planning efforts which seek to encourage use, and develop new uses, for languages with a decreasing number of speakers. Therefore, language revitalisation efforts seek to prevent this shift from worsening—and, ultimately, aim to reverse this shift. Edwards (2007) argues that language declines and shifts are frequently a result of power dynamics and tensions between groups of differing statuses in society. He comments that 'one cannot maintain a language by dealing with language alone' (Edwards, 2007, p.104) reminding us that languages are used, and situated, in diverse socioeconomic and sociopolitical contexts. For example, Cenoz and Gorter (2017) highlight the importance of contextualisation in their article exploring the Basque language and how changes in economic, social and political factors have led to the increased use of Basque language.

Concerning efforts to revitalise languages, immersion education (where at least half of the subject matter in the school setting is taught using the minority language) is often adopted in order to reverse language shifts (García, 2005) with bilingual education viewed as playing a crucial role in the production of new speakers (Baker, 2007). However, academics argue that in education settings it is important to move beyond diglossic ideologies which keep languages distinct and separated, with Conteh (2018) and Blackledge and Creese (2010) arguing for the potential of translanguaging pedagogies.

Translanguaging pedagogies

García and Wei (2014) define translanguaging as:

> '...not simply to a shift or a shuttle between two languages, but to the speakers' construction and use of original and complex interrelated discursive practices that cannot be easily assigned to one or another traditional definition of a language, but that make up the speakers' complete language repertoire'. (p. 22)

Translanguaging enables bilinguals to draw upon their full range of communicative potential and in the process break down traditional linguistic barriers. This encourages a dynamic and interactive process between languages resulting in an 'integrated system' (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401). In particular, Blackledge and Creese (2010) argue that connecting languages, as with translanguaging, can aid the construction of identity which is instrumental in the learning process. Indeed, translanguaging found its first use in the work of Williams (1994) who explored the potential benefits of switching language mode within the classroom setting. This work has been further developed in the Welsh context (Jones, 2017), but it has also been applied to a range of geographical locations including: New Zealand with te reo Māori and Samoan communities (Seals & Olsen-Reeder, 2020); the US concerning Mandarin English (Zheng, 2021); the Basque country (Leonet et al., 2017); and, Panjabi complementary schooling in England (Creese & Blackledge, 2015).

Baker (2011) argues that translanguaging has four potential key benefits which include: developing deeper understandings of the language; aiding the development of the weaker language; facilitating home-school links and co-operation; and, helping the integration of fluent speakers with early learners. Further, translanguaging raises important questions surrounding social justice and the place of minority languages in society. For example, Blackledge et al. (2014) argue translanguaging challenges traditional conceptual ideas surrounding bilingualism and language hierarchies. Whilst Flores and Rosa (2015) view translanguaging as a political act which can be used to question, and reverse, monoglossic and diglossic ideals in schools and societies.

In the Scottish Gaelic context, translanguaging pedagogies would include the systematic use of English and Gaelic across GME. McPake et al. (2017), in their report on the potential of translanguaging as a classroom pedagogy for GME, argue the need to preserve a safe space for Gaelic. Indeed, data collected from their participants suggest: 'there is a risk that once English enters the GME classroom, it takes over, and the impetus to use Gaelic at all times is lost' (ibid, p. 47). Further, their data suggest a belief that the current GME model in Scotland effectively achieves its goals, and, therefore, any amendments to policy and/or practice are not warranted. The next section provides further contextualisation of the Scottish Gaelic context.

MINORITY LANGUAGE REVITALISATION IN THE SCOTTISH CONTEXT

In the Scottish context, Gaelic, a Celtic language, has a long history of decline with regards to language use. However, in 2005, the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act, gave Gaelic language an official status in Scotland. This coincided with the establishment of a Gaelic Language Board, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, responsible for promoting Gaelic and advising Scottish Parliament on issues relating to Gaelic. However, GME in Scotland has a slightly longer history as it was established in 1985 (McLeod, 2014). Frequently, GME consists of learning and teaching through immersion in Gaelic through the first 3 years of primary education, moving to the gradual introduction of English through the remaining primary school years (a further four years) with Gaelic remaining the predominant language of the classroom (Scottish Government et al., 2010). However, there is often wide variation in GME provision with the language models differing between schools and across school subjects (O'Hanlon, 2010). In recent years, GME has begun to cater more for non-native Gaelic speakers as parents recognise the bilingual benefits of learning another language (Garraffa et al., 2020; McLeod & O'Rourke, 2015; McPake & Stephen, 2016). In the most recent Pupil Census (Scottish Government, 2020) 4,846 children and young people were enrolled in GME. This equates to just under 1% of the Scottish school student population.

Dunmore (2018) comments on the overall decline of Gaelic language speakers living in Scotland in the 2011 census, but an increase amongst those speakers aged under 20 years. Therefore, there is a belief GME is working to revitalise the Gaelic language, but care must be taken in interpreting this data. For example, other recent research has highlighted the absence of Gaelic language use outside of the classroom—which limits the revitalisation efforts of Gaelic. In particular, Smith-Christmas (2017) notes a lack of desire amongst young people to use Gaelic out with educational settings. Thus, language planning lacks the necessary links to convert the potential of language learning to the production of language speakers (Baker, 2011). Indeed, Dunmore's (2018) research warns how adults who attended GME do not necessarily use Gaelic post-schooling—limiting Gaelic language revitalisation efforts.

Also, considering the wider Scottish context, there are concerns that the focus on GME is localised with GME common in the vernacular communities of the Western Isles and in Scotland's largest urban cities. However, outside of these areas Gaelic language learning, whilst on offer, has a very limited uptake. Despite this, the learning of languages is supported by national level policy, namely *Language Learning Scotland*: *A 1+2 approach*—a policy designed to provide every child in Scotland with the opportunity to learn two modern languages across their primary education (Education Scotland, 2020). However, this policy has been critiqued as teachers are often not suitably qualified, or supported, to teach languages other than English (O'Hanlon et al., 2016). Phipps and Fassetta (2015) argue that this policy approach does not lead to language proficiency for children in the selected modern languages. Further, the majority of Scottish schools focus their language teaching around modern, popular foreign languages, such as French, German and Spanish (Hancock, 2014). Thus, Gaelic remains hidden in the wider Scottish national curriculum.

METHODS

This article draws upon a broader mixed method study exploring children's experiences of, and perspectives on, their own bilingualism (see Peace-Hughes et al., 2021, for further information on the study methodology) in two case study primary schools. Both schools were selected due to their high proportions of heritage language speakers (one with a high number of indigenous language speakers, Gaelic, and another school with a high number of ethnic and religious heritage language speakers). This article focuses on the data gathered from the school with a high proportion of Gaelic language speakers. Data for the study were collected over a 3-month period in 2018, in a primary school located in the Western Isles of Scotland, and this article will report on data gathered from qualitative methods, including: observations, individual interviews with children; and, group work with children. In the next section, the context of the local community in which the research was conducted will be outlined.

Local context

The case study site was a primary school (which covers schooling for ages 5 to 12 years), Lochview Primary School. Children who participated in the study were in the upper levels of primary school (P5-7) and were aged between 9 and 12 years old. This age group was selected as they were able to provide reflective data on their childhood, as well as on their current experiences of bilingualism. All names (primary school and children) are pseudonyms.

Lochview Primary is located in the Western Isles of Scotland with a pupil roll of under 500 pupils. The school is a dual stream primary school, with children and their families opting to be taught in the medium of English or Gaelic. All of the children from Lochview who took part in this research were in Gaelic Medium Education (GME).

The population of the Western Isles is 27 684—equating to nine people per square kilometre. Drawing upon the 2011 census data, and in relation to the national Scottish context, the use of Gaelic is most extensive in the Western Isles local authority area with 61% of the population reporting some level of Gaelic language ability and 52% reporting speaking Gaelic (National Records of Scotland, 2015a). In comparison, the Scottish national figures are 1.7% and 1.1%, respectively (National Records of Scotland, 2015b).

Methods

During the initial stage of data collection, in June 2018, observations were used to enable the researcher to become a familiar adult to the children. Additionally, the observations offered an insight into their daily school activities and aided the development of task-based activities and interview guides (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). Interview and group discussions were activity oriented (Colucci, 2007) which offered alternative ways for children to contribute to discussions and encouraged participation amongst those with less confident in talking in groups and/ or to the researcher. Further, the use of activities often led to discussions being guided by the children with conversations arising which may not have been captured if activities were led by researcher informed questions (O'Kane, 2008). The range of activities included: craft representations of self (Nomakhwezi Mayaba et al., 2015); life history timelines (Bagnoli, 2009); postcard to future self (van Gelder et al., 2013); and, vignette discussion (Crivello, 2013).

All children who were in GME (and were aged 9–12 years) were invited to take part in the study, with 22 children, and their parents/carers, providing consent. During data collection, 12 of these children participated in the study to varying degrees, with seven taking part in all task-based activities and an individual interview. These 12 children were selected using purposive sampling which helped to provide a diverse range of experiences across the sample (based on characteristics such as sex, age, from birth speakers of Gaelic, whether Gaelic was spoken by family/at home). The selection was discussed with the wider research team to allow for the consideration of any biases in the selection of participants. Table 1 provides a brief overview of key characteristics of each of the 12 children.

All interactions with the children were audio-recorded and transcribed. The transcripts, artefacts from task-based activities (Prasad, 2020) and researcher field notes were then coded and analysed using NVivo. Analysing both artefacts and transcripts allowed for children's accompanying narratives to emerge without imposition of adult/researcher understandings of the drawings (Brooks, 2005). Utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, all data were open-coded with initial codes formed followed by a review to search for emerging themes. Data were coded to capture use of Gaelic inside the schools; use of Gaelic outside of the school including with peers, family, wider community and popular culture; and, children's perceptions of Gaelic and bilingualism.

The research and researcher respected ethical requirements, including following BERA (2018) ethical guidelines and gaining the necessary institutional approvals. Of particular importance for this study was the need to negotiate both children's and parents' consents to participate, to respect children's privacy and confidentiality alongside protection of their rights, and due sensitivity to identities, languages and cultural contexts.

TABLE 1 Overview of characteristics of children taking part in the study

Name	Spoken HCL from birth	Spoken English from birth	Born in Western Isles	Sibling(s)	HCL main home language	Speakers of HCL at home	Non-speakers of HCL at home	Participation in community activities related to HCL	Speaker of HCL with friends	Research activities
Adam		X		X		Mother, Father, 1 sibling		X	X	All
Ava		X	X	X		Mother	Father		X	All
Boris	X		X	X	X	Mother, Father, 1 sibling		X	X	All
Charlotte		X		X		Mother, Father, 1 sibling			X	All
Heather	X		X	X	X	Mother, Father, 2 siblings		X	X	All
Niamh		X	X	X		-	Mother, Father, 1 sibling		X	All
Sam		X	X	X		Mother, 1 sibling	Father		X	All
Josie		X	X	X		2 siblings	Mother, Father		X	Task-based activities
David		X		X		Mother, Father, 1 sibling			X	Task-based activities
Laura		X		X		Mother, Father, 2 siblings			X	Task-based activities
Philip		X	X			Mother, Father			X	Task-based activities
Cara		X	X	X		1 sibling	Mother, Father		X	Task-based activities

(Continues)

Additionally, it is pertinent to note that all research activities were conducted in English as this was the shared language of the children and researcher. In considering the influence this may have had on the children, Spyrou (2011) highlights that child-centred researchers need to adopt a critical and reflexive approach to their research in order to account for the wider contexts and power imbalances that shape children's voices and experiences. For example, using English as the language of the research activities may have encouraged children to reflect more on their use of English rather than that of Gaelic. However, it is crucial not to position children's views and experiences as less authentic or untruthful, but instead position their views as multi-layered (Spyrou, 2011). Further, the concern of bias can be somewhat alleviated by the utilisation of multiple methods which has allowed for the triangulation of the multidimensional understandings of children's experiences (Ibrahim et al., 2021).

AN IMMERSIVE GAELIC EDUCATION VERSUS THE DOMINANCE OF THE ENGLISH

The children in the study were in the last 3 years of their primary school education (aged between 9 and 12 years). During these years of primary education, English is introduced into the classroom, but Gaelic should remain the predominant language (Scottish Government et al., 2010). During observations and discussions with the children, clear English was a predominant part of their educational life. For example, during a group activity with children in their final 2 years of primary education, they told of how English seeped into their everyday classroom use.

> The children mention how they probably speak more English than Gaelic in the classroom these days. The teacher quite often speaks in Gaelic, but they [the children] reply in English.
>
> Researcher fieldnotes, group activity with P6/7 children

This observation is a concern for the immersive element of GME, but it may also show the predominance of English in the children's everyday lives. This section, and the following sub-section, explores the centrality of English to the everyday. Then, I explore the use of Gaelic language learning as a steppingstone to wider benefits—as perceived by the children in the study (see also NicLeòid, 2015).

The dominance of English

In an earlier paper, Peace-Hughes et al. (2021) highlighted how the children in our study were attached to their Gaelic language and culture through strong familial and intergenerational ties. There was a strong sense of pride and belonging to their Gaelic language identity. However, in line with other recent findings, which will be explored further in this section and in the late Discussion section, children's experiences with language were dominated by English. Even in the school setting, English tended to be the language of choice when the children had the freedom to pick, for example, in the playground at break/lunch times.

> Gaelic—speaking and learning—seems to be solely a classroom activity for most. Charlotte spoke about speaking some Gaelic with her mum or brother whereas Boris

and Ava said it was mainly English they spoke at home. They all agreed they revert to English in the playground (even when speaking to those in GME).

Researcher fieldnotes, group activity with P6/7 children

The findings surrounding the dominance of English in the GME—and wider minority language immersion school—playground are well-known—with authors noting how the issues facing languages of the playground carry forward into the adult lives of children in GME (Armstrong, 2018; Smith-Christmas, 2017). However, the excerpt below explains further the reasoning behind one child's use of English in the playground with his school peers.

Researcher: Okay, so you've got quite a big group of friends from very different places. Okay, and do you speak Gaelic with any of your friends or...?
Boris: Mainly English.
Researcher: Do any of them speak Gaelic?
Boris: [Responds non-verbally 'Yes']
Researcher: But you use English? Why do you think that is?
Boris: Because we all speak English a bit more than Gaelic.

Boris, individual interview

Boris's statement of 'we all speak English a bit more than Gaelic' is a recurrent theme in this section—amongst those children who use Gaelic at home and/or solely at school. There are a variety of reasons for why English is spoken more than Gaelic, but they frequently tend to be linked to language ability and popular culture terminology. Therefore, English was not simply predominant in the playground, but English also remained the dominant language of use in other key aspects of children's lives: for example, when engaging with popular culture (music, television, film), with peers (outside of the school setting) and for communication with family members. Heather and Ava attend dance classes alongside other students from Lochview—including those from both the English and Gaelic streams—and, as a result, their friendship group consists of both English and Gaelic medium educated children who they socialise with at school break times and outside of school. Due to this, Heather and Ava's use of Gaelic within their larger friendship group is limited with English being the predominant language. Below, an excerpt from Heather's interview, a child who has spoken Gaelic from birth, highlights her need to speak English with peers.

Researcher: Okay, and do you speak English or Gaelic with your friends?
Heather: English, because most of my friends are in the English, or it's just that some words that they won't really understand because I'm more fluent than most of my friends, because most of my friends that speak Gaelic, they don't speak it at their house, they only speak it in school.
Researcher: Okay. Is that sometimes annoying for you or are you happy to speak...?
Heather: Yes, because sometimes people don't know any - like, our teacher asks us, who knows this word, and only a few people put their hands up. Boris puts his hand up, I might put my hand up and two more people or none. So, it's myself and Boris that have been speaking Gaelic, we speak Gaelic more since both our families are all fluent.

Heather, individual interview

The discussion with Heather highlights the language ability divide facing children in GME—with those more likely to be speaking Gaelic at home (with both Heather and Boris having spoken Gaelic from birth) viewing their selves as more able than those who do not speak it outside of the school setting (see Morris, 2014, for a discussion of similar findings in the Welsh medium education context). If these views from the children are correct, and there is a language ability divide, this is a primary concern for GME and policy-makers when a growing number of non-Gaelic speaking parents are opting into GME for their children (McPake & Stephen, 2016; O'Hanlon, 2015). This issue of Gaelic language ability was also found in familial relationships. For example, in immediate family households English tended to predominate unless all family members were users of Gaelic. If one parent and/or a sibling used Gaelic, but another parent and/or sibling did not then English would be the language of choice in the household.

Researcher: What about your brother? And Mum [speaking Gaelic]?
Sam: They speak Gaelic, too. But, we don't speak Gaelic together. Probably because my dad doesn't know any much.

                                                                        Sam, individual interview

This was also found amongst wider family. For example, Adam's cousins also attend GME, but they often do not communicate in Gaelic when together due to differentiation in language ability which affects comprehension. Additionally, their popular culture interests restrict their use of Gaelic as they deem it easier to speak about these in English. As a result, English has become the primary language of communication.

Researcher: Why do you think you speak English with your cousins and not Gaelic?
Adam: I don't really know, because they don't - probably because they don't know as much as I do and they probably wouldn't understand some stuff and there's some stuff that my cousin likes to talk about but there isn't a word in Gaelic that will explain what it is. But if it's homework it's in Gaelic so it makes sense to speak in Gaelic. Otherwise it gets complicated!
Researcher: That makes sense! What sort of stuff doesn't have a word in Gaelic?
Adam: Well, one of my cousins, he likes to talk a lot about Nerf guns and Minecraft.

                                                                        Adam, individual interview

The predominance of English in popular culture was recurring across the children's experiences. In a friendship group consisting of Josie, Niamh and two other girls, English was their language of communication outside of school despite all of them attending GME. During a group activity, Josie and Niamh informed me of their music group with their two friends. In Niamh's interview, she told me further of how they write original songs and enjoy meeting up to work on their song writing and other creative endeavours related to their imagined, future music careers. However, the majority of these songs are sung in English—and Niamh spoke of how the primary language in their friendship group is English.

Researcher: Do you tend to speak in English or Gaelic [with friends]?
Niamh: Probably English more.
Researcher: Okay, do you know why that is?

Niamh: I think we also watch a lot of YouTube and listen to music and a lot of that is in English so it then makes sense to talk in English about it and stuff.

Niamh, individual interview

Niamh's reasoning for using English with friends is similar to Adam's reasoning for using English with his cousins—if speaking about English popular culture, it 'makes sense' to use English. However, Niamh also highlights an interesting point concerning how song writing and spending time with friends occurs outside of the classroom/school and therefore English is almost seen as the accepted norm.

Researcher: Do you always write songs in English or do you ever write songs in Gaelic?
Niamh: Mostly English because we do it outside of school - well, we do it in school, but we never do it in class at all.

Niamh, individual interview

Both of these points—the dominance of English popular culture and Gaelic being associated with the language of education—are discussed further in the section below and in the Discussion section, with pertinent implications for Gaelic revitalisation efforts. In the subsequent section on Gaelic as a localised steppingstone to wider bilingual benefits, I explore the notion of Gaelic sounding 'foreign' in order to legitimise Gaelic use and the desire of the children in this study to learn other languages beyond Gaelic.

Gaelic: A localised steppingstone

Despite Gaelic use primarily being limited to certain spheres of the children's lives, there were many positive aspects of learning Gaelic for the children in this study. Children have a sense of attachment to Gaelic and discuss the importance of Gaelic for children's sense of creativity alongside developing opportunities for greater self-expression and social connection (see Peace-Hughes et al., 2021). Further, Gaelic was frequently used in secret in order to protect the conversations between children and their peers/family.

Researcher: Okay, so if someone was like to you that you have to pick to speak English forevermore or Gaelic forevermore, which one would you pick?
Sam: Gaelic.
Researcher: Okay, why is that?
Sam: Because some people when they hear you, if they don't have Gaelic - once my teacher said, they'll be hearing, blah, blah, and wouldn't have a clue.

Sam, individual interview

Although these perceptions were always spoken of in a positive light by children, there is concern that practice subordinates the status of Gaelic, in a wider societal context dominated by English, to one which places Gaelic as a private and exclusionary language (see Peace-Hughes et al., 2021, for further discussion). Further, as a result of keeping conversations between Gaelic

peers, Gaelic remains a language associated with schooling and education—limiting the impact of revitalisation efforts.

However, looking beyond Gaelic use and towards the perceived benefits of Gaelic language learning, children spoke of the wider benefits of learning a language such as Gaelic, with many children commenting that they had a desire to learn other languages in the future. Some children noted they may be able to learn another language more easily if they already have two languages (English and Gaelic). For example, below, Charlotte highlights her desire to learn French for this reason, but also hints towards the benefits of bilingualism more generally.

Charlotte: Yes, because I think children can learn loads of different languages, just because they went through one line...like because we know Gaelic but also English other languages might be, will be, easier to learn.
Researcher: Yes, okay, cool. That makes sense. Are there any languages you want to learn?
Charlotte: French because it's quite a big language, lots of people speak it.

<div align="right">Charlotte, individual interview</div>

The cognitive benefits of bilingualism and a bilingual education are well-researched and well-known (Bialystok, 2001; Lauchlan et al., 2013), with one of these commonly being that there is a positive effect between bilingualism and further language learning (Cenoz, 2003). Above, Charlotte, identifies the potential benefit of bilingualism in learning other languages, whilst, below, Ava subtly hints towards these benefits but also notes a further reason for language learning.

Researcher: Okay, and what do you think is I suppose, good about learning a language [other than English]?
Ava: ...because in the future, you'll have more opportunities for jobs as you're bilingual and it's just, handy...I'd like to learn more German because I tried learning some and it's very like Gaelic and it makes it a lot easier.

<div align="right">Ava, individual interview</div>

Ava believes her bilingual skills will provide greater employment prospects. Further, the desire of children to speak more commonly spoken foreign languages hint towards a potential danger of framing Gaelic revitalisation efforts under the umbrella of the benefits of being bilingual. On the one hand, the discussion with Ava—and others who spoke of learning other, more widely languages—were seen in a positive light with potential benefits for them in their future life. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that languages do not become a commodity—one good for the advantages that it brings the national and global economy (Phipps & Fassetta, 2015; Smala et al., 2013). With the risk of commodification, comes the potential diminishment of the language's cultural and the social bonds and ties that this creates—with these connections important to GME children (Peace-Hughes et al., 2021). In other words, the language becomes a language for language's sake.

However, it is also worth noting that the benefits of bilingualism may be one which is regularly shared with children, through parents/family/schooling, as recent pushes to increase GME uptake have focused on highlighting the general benefits of bilingualism (for example,

see Education Scotland, 2021)—and many parents opt in to GME for these benefits (McPake & Stephen, 2016; O'Hanlon, 2015). This focus on bilingualism in the GME context was one I noted in my pre-data collection visit to the local community.

> ...important to reflect back to what both the Headteacher and my contact at the local authority said when I met them on the pre-fieldwork visit. They spoke about how they make a concerted effort to tell parents about the benefits of bilingualism from the early years to encourage GME uptake. Therefore, their parents are opting for GME based on the bilingual benefits, rather than the desire to retain a heritage language and culture.
>
> Researcher fieldnotes, Reflections on data collection

On the one hand, framing GME under the umbrella of the benefits of bilingualism appears to have helped to increase the number of parents opting into GME. However, it raises concerns about the longevity of Gaelic revitalisation if the desire to retain the language and culture are not fundamental to parental/familial choice when choosing GME. These two opposing arguments are considered by Armstrong (2018) who discusses the conflicting purposes of GME. He asks whether GME is packaged to revitalise Gaelic language in order to ensure future generations of Gaelic speakers or whether it aids better educational experiences for children through the bilingual benefits GME provides. He queries whether these two purposes can ever be reconciled and this appears to be an ongoing struggle—as illustrated in this article which highlights children's experiences of Gaelic language use and the predominance of English language.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Limiting aspect of Gaelic in the future—will it be revitalised?

The dominance of English in the school setting, and in particular with peers and in the playground, is unsurprising (Armstrong, 2018; Giollagáin et al., 2020; Smith-Christmas, 2017). However, as noted earlier, this dominance of the English language has a limiting impact on the revitalisation of Gaelic and has the capacity to limit the use of Gaelic as children move into adolescence and adulthood. For example, Dunmore (2019) warns, in his research with adults who had previously attended GME, that Gaelic use is limited by former GME students and that policy developments need to be focused on both the provision of GME and in creating spaces for Gaelic language use in home, local community and in the wider Scottish context. This view is supported by earlier work by Smith-Christmas and Armstrong (2014) who call for a complementary approach to Gaelic language revitalisation whereby adult and childhood education are treated equally in policy objectives in order to encourage intergenerational transmission in the home and community. Even in current households where children feel able to speak Gaelic and do so regularly, like Boris and Heather who live in fluent Gaelic households, it cannot be assumed that ability will lead to use (Stephen et al., 2011)—especially in later life.

Steppingstone to the global: Bilingual benefits or linguistic commodity

Additionally, in the discussion regarding Gaelic as a localised steppingstone to the wider benefits of bilingualism I acknowledge the dangerous nature of framing Gaelic in such a manner. On the

one hand, the discussions surrounding bilingualism with the children were seen in a positive light with potential benefits for them, but care needs to be taken to ensure that languages do not become a commodity whereby the cultural and social ties connected to languages become diminished (Phipps & Fassetta, 2015; Smala et al., 2013). Jaffe (2007) warns that the cultural, political, social and ideological values that are inscribed in minority languages and cultures are left out of these globalised discourses surrounding bilingual skills. Jaffe further notes that treating bilingualism as a bounded entity good for the economy, business and future worth, may not support the legitimacy of minority language revitalisation nor the bilingual benefits.

However, in the next and final sub-section of this article I will highlight how framing Gaelic as a localised steppingstone to the global may assist with revitalisation efforts if a critical approach is taken by those working in Gaelic language policy and practice.

Insularity, compartmentalisation and translanguaging

Foremost, it is important to note that the data collected in this study was from GME children living in the Western Isles, an area which has a substantial proportion of Gaelic speakers compared to the Scottish average. In the vernacular community, Gaelic is more present and the opportunities available for individuals to partake in Gaelic culture and language learning are more considerable compared to other communities in Scotland. Therefore, if English dominates in such a context where Gaelic has a large amount of support, there are questions to be raised about the value of GME—and its outcomes—in more urban settings of mainland Scotland. The recent research by Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020) on the Gaelic crisis facing the vernacular communities of the Western Isles further highlights the construction of Gaelic as the language of education.

This divide, and tension between, the use of Gaelic and English in different contexts and the contradictions in revitalisation efforts and promotion of bilingual benefits can easily be seen as a worrying one. However, Wei (2018) argues that the compartmentalisation of languages and the desire to keep pure forms of language is an over-simplistic and inadequate reality for bilingualism in the 21st century. In an ever-globalising world, with ever-growing diversity (including linguistic diversity), he argues that approaches, such as the one undertaken in Scotland to revitalise Gaelic, are outdated. Indeed, Cenoz and Gorter (2019) suggest the isolation of languages in order to preserve and revive minority languages can be counterproductive. They believe translanguaging—as long as it critically and sensitively considers the local and wider context of a minority language—can lead to reverses in language shifts and promote revitalisation.

Research surrounding the potential and value of translanguaging pedagogies in GME has been limited, but McPake et al. (2017) do argue against the implementation of such pedagogies in order to preserve a safe space for Gaelic. However, the wider academic literature and data drawn upon in this article highlight that the current immersion model in Scotland is not working as effectively as it could be. Therefore, it can be argued that more recent conceptualisations of translanguaging which define it as an 'integrated system' (Canagarajah, 2011, p. 401) where speakers can draw upon their full linguistic repertoire without adhering to social and political boundaries of named languages (Otheguy et al., 2015) would be beneficial to GME. English is already a predominant aspect of children's lives, but earlier findings from the wider research study (Peace-Hughes et al., 2021) highlight how Gaelic is a fundamental, interwoven aspect of GME children's present and future sense of self and identity. Therefore, removing strict boundaries and allowing for more fluid movement between English and Gaelic may encourage greater flexibility in the use of the language inside and outside of the classroom. Further research would

be beneficial in this area to explore not only policy-makers and practitioners' views on the further potential of translanguaging, but also with those in local communities such as parents, children and young people and key stakeholders. It is pertinent for children, often framed as the key to revitalisation, to be involved in discussions and inform future policy making.

Additionally, translanguaging offers potential for those in the Gaelic community to work more closely with other minority language communities in Scotland. Scotland has an ever-growing population of religious and ethnic minority languages, and whilst these do not hold official status like Gaelic, they have strong grassroots community groups which encourage and sustain the languages. In their recent book, Ó Giollagáin et al. (2020) suggest the need for bottom-up, community led, approaches to Gaelic revitalisation which are networked and embedded in the local community in order to allow for the sharing of knowledge and experience. However, their strategic policy priorities are focused on Gaelic communities in the vernacular communities, but further research should consider the extension of networking and the sharing of knowledge and experiences across minority language groups, and across Scotland. This may assist in bringing together a revitalised Gaelic community, and language, alongside the benefits of bilingualism, which, at present, appears to be impossible to reconcile through Scottish GME.

FINAL REMARKS

This research seeks to offer an original contribution to minority language revitalisation through immersion education by highlighting children's experiences of GME in Scotland. The opportunities and threats that these experiences call attention have been discussed to show potential ways forward for both research and policy making in ensuring the effective revitalisation of the Gaelic language. For example, children tend to engage with English language popular culture outside of school, which limits their use of Gaelic. However, there are opportunities to be explored in relation to encouraging children's creative and cultural interests, such as music, in order to further strengthen the use of the minority language. Additionally, the current policy focus to promote the bilingual benefits of Gaelic appears to be working in terms of numbers of children entering GME. However, there are concerns that such an approach limits the potential revitalisation of Gaelic language and culture. Therefore, concerted efforts need to support children and young people to provide them with opportunities to learn, and embed, themselves in the minority language and culture.

Whilst these findings focus on the Gaelic community and language in Scotland, the analysis and conclusions presented in this article will be valuable for other minority language contexts which use immersion education in attempts to revitalise their language. The findings, discussion and implications also highlight directions for future research. Indeed, there is a need to further explore the potential of translanguaging pedagogies and a need for greater co-operative working with other minority languages in Scotland, with all stakeholders' views and voices important in these discussions, including those of children and young people. Further, there is greater need for research into the experiences of GME children and young people living outside of vernacular communities in order to understand their experiences in communities where English will dominate even more so than in the communities of the Western Isles (for example, see the work of NicLeòid, 2015). This will be important for understanding how to revitalise Gaelic in the longer term and for effective policy planning in ensuring the sustained use of Gaelic beyond GME schooling.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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