

Local Language, School and Community

Curricular innovation towards closing the achievement gap



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This article presents an overview of a school-university research partnership, funded by the BERA British Curriculum Foundation (BCF) Curriculum Innovation Grant, that sought to investigate whether teaching the Scots Language Award qualification to Scots-speaking pupils boosts their self-esteem and wider achievement within school.

Scots is one of Scotland's three indigenous languages, alongside English and Gaelic, but since the Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 English has been the language of education (Imamura 2003). Scots has been stigmatised, and several of our participants said they thought Scots was 'just slang' or 'bad English', and weren't aware that it was a language, before they took the Scots Language Award.

However, the status of Scots is changing rapidly. The Scots Language Award was launched in 2014 by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA, 2019). Dr Jamie Fairbairn, head of humanities at Banff Academy, was an early adopter of the Award; he teaches Scots in the humanities faculty, rather than in English or modern languages as in other schools. Jamie had gathered anecdotal evidence that teaching Scots boosts self-esteem and wider achievement. Together we received a BCF grant to investigate this, and to further develop Scots-language teaching in Banff as part of a wider initiative to promote the use of Scots and raise the status of the language.

I am a PhD student of ethnology at the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen. My research area is the contemporary use of Scots, particularly among young people; Banff Academy is my main field site. I visited the school weekly over the course of a year, with intense periods of engagement during our Scots Language Week in November 2018, and also in April, when I recorded one-to-one interviews with pupils and staff; I also conducted interviews with Scots-language experts who contributed to the course.

During Scots Language Week we produced artwork for an exhibition; changed the linguistic landscape of the school with huge displays of Scots words; developed a survey, based on earlier sociolinguistic research (Durham, 2014; Macafee & McGarrity, 1999), to gather information about the status of Scots in school; and trained the pupils in research methods. The questionnaire data was used to make a research skills booklet in Scots, which is now used as a teaching resource.

The ethnographic interviews yielded rich qualitative data describing people's attitudes towards Scots, what they think can be done to improve its status and what they believe its future holds. This data is being used to influence language policy within the school. For example, one pupil said he wanted to

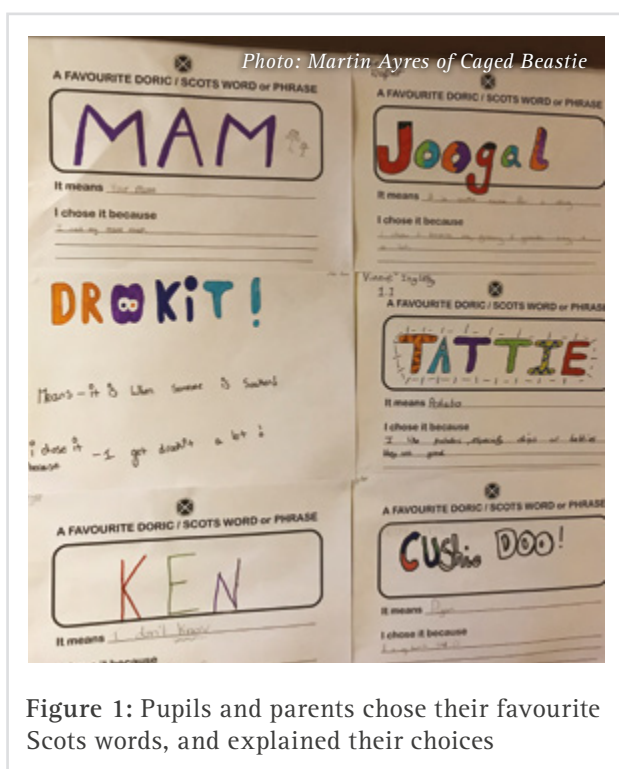


Figure 1: Pupils and parents chose their favourite Scots words, and explained their choices

Image: Martin Ayres of Caged Beastie



lug in:

(v) to eavesdrop

Be careful about luggin in. Ye might hear things ye dinna want tae.

Ashton

Figure 2: Artwork developed as part of Scots Language Week

use Scots across the curriculum, so Jamie has now trialled Scots-medium education, in geography, and informed the SQA about the process.

Scots is very much a living language in Banff Academy: it is the language that the majority of pupils bring to school, and census data confirms that more than 50 per cent of people in northern Aberdeenshire use Scots (NRS, 2011). Some clear findings emerged from our survey results. Interestingly, when asked about writing in Scots, pupils reported that they use Scots more than English when using social media – especially in WhatsApp, Snapchat and texting – whereas adult respondents were less likely to write in Scots (in part because they more frequently write

in formal/professional contexts). So to summarise: most informal online written communication by young people is in Scots, but adults are more likely to write in English, and in more formal contexts.

Our project has succeeded in raising the profile of Scots within the school. One pupil said she is better able to understand her mother and grandmother when they talk to each other, as a result of what she has learned in the Scots language class.

Alan Horberry, headteacher at Banff Academy, said,

'...what's definitely apparent to me from meeting the young people here is that promoting Scots language definitely gives them a sense of identity, builds confidence and builds resilience, because they are proud of their language. As a result of that, they can use those skills in another context, because they are proud of where they come from and the language they speak – that allows them to be more successful than if we hadn't done that. So the link between success and wider achievement is clear to me.'

Through our work we have shone a light on the good practice that is happening inside the Scots language class within Banff Academy. We have raised the profile of Scots as a subject worthy of study, and the kids have learned transferable skills including research techniques, creativity and local studies. By sharing our work widely, to academic and non-academic audiences, we are influencing language policy and working to improve the status of Scots. ■

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