

# MSP launches report on status of Scots language in education

## Exclusive

By Cera Murtagh

An MSP launches a report today on the approach to Scots language in schools following concerns about discrimination against speakers within the education system, *Holyrood* magazine has learned.

Dr Bill Wilson, SNP MSP for the West of Scotland and member of Holyrood's Cross-Party Group on the Scots Language, conducted a survey of all local education authorities (LEAs) to investigate whether discrimination against Scots exists in their schools and what they were doing to promote the language through education.

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ago which indicated that teachers were showing inadvertent, subconscious discrimination against Scots-speaking pupils.

To be fair to the teachers, they were completely unaware of this and they were horrified when they found out that that's what they were doing. And from that, this occurred to me, because I've been an active Scots language campaigner for decades and I've yet to meet a Scots language speaker who was not at some point punished in school for using Scots. And the fact that there was still this, perhaps not open punishment, but this kind of subconscious discrimination, was quite worrying to me and I was keen to do some kind of investigation into the issue," Wilson tells *Holyrood*.

The MSP wrote to the Directors of Education at every local authority in Scotland asking them if they were aware of any discrimination towards Scots in their schools and what action they were taking to incorporate the language in education.

The report entitled 'Scots' Richtfu Hame – the Clessruim!' (Scots Belongs in the Classroom!) paints a relatively positive picture of the recognition of Scots in schools. Ten councils were worthy of a special mention - Aberdeenshire, East Lothian, Edinburgh, Dumfries & Galloway, Dundee, Falkirk, Inverclyde & Renfrewshire, Shetland, South Lanarkshire and West Lothian. However, it highlighted much room for improvement and called for more joint working

across local authorities and greater resourcing for the work being done in schools.

For Wilson, the key benefit of teaching Scots in schools is confidence. Scottish youngsters and Scots as a nation are lacking in self-confidence, he believes and a key factor underlying this lack of confidence is the suppression of Scots in education: "One of the main things is that it helps build self-confidence. If as a child you are speaking Scots in school, saying richt and not right, fower and not four and you're being corrected all the time and then you go home and your parents are saying richt and fower, then the effect on you of being told that your parents' speech is incorrect and that your entire background identity is somehow inferior, I mean, I don't think any reasonable human being can deny that that will affect children in many ways in their education and elsewhere. Whereas if somebody is saying to children, 'well, actually, yes, that's ok, you just have two languages' they will then be brought up in the self-confidence of knowing 'this is my culture and I'm confident in it'. And I always emphasise that it's not that a culture is superior or inferior, it's just your culture. And it's important to you.

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from language. It stems from the fact that people have been brought up in Gaelic-speaking areas and Scots-speaking areas 10 or 20 years back to believe their language was genuinely inferior, that it was not fit for use, and that's a massively damaging thing to tell anyone who's young and that they will certainly carry with them. I've no doubt that if we correct that – we're doing it I'm happy to say in the Gaelic-speaking areas and we can do it in the Scots areas – we can build that self-confidence.”

As well as boosting confidence, learning Scots in school also benefits language acquisition and literacy, according to the research.

The report makes a number of recommendations including more collaboration and sharing of best practice on Scots between LEAs and between schools. It also commends the work of Itchy Coo, the imprint for Scots children's books whose outreach officer, Matthew Fitt, works with teachers and pupils across the country to help them engage with the language. The report suggests, however, that the project requires more funding and support. Wilson intends to submit the inquiry to the ongoing Scots Language Audit and send it to all LEAs in the hope that they will act on the recommendations. **HM**

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# The mither tongue

Cera Murtagh examines the changing role of Scotland's minority languages in its education system

Few would question the dominant role of Scots in Scotland's history and literary tradition. At the appropriate times of the year, the words of Burns are recited with great pride and patriotism. But when it comes to its role in the Scotland of today, the picture is less clear. While so keen to celebrate the language of our national bard, the place governments have accorded Scots in the here and now has not been so elevated. Despite an estimated 1.6 million speakers, Scots struggles to gain esteem and recognition as a minority language, leaving it lagging well behind its Gaelic cousin. Recent developments suggest times are changing. But are they changing fast enough?

When it comes to minority languages there are two major battlegrounds for recognition. One is presence in the media. The other is education. In Scotland the most widely spoken minority language has, historically, had a contentious relationship with the education system. For many years it has been handled with hostility in schools, treated not as a minority language in its own right but as an inferior, improper form of English with words like 'aye' and 'ken' provoking scorn from teachers.

This prickly relationship appears to be slowly changing, however. After much lobbying, the SNP Government has taken the step of including Scots in A Curriculum for Excellence, the new schools' curriculum. Teachers are now being encouraged to "value their pupils' home language" and introduce them to Scots texts. For many in the Scots-speaking community this is a welcome move, though long overdue.

So at a time when a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills amongst school leavers is an issue, why is teaching students Scots so important? According to one of the leading lights in Scots language education, author and Scots specialist, Matthew Fitt, the answer is simple: "Confidence. Scottish children lack confidence, linguistic confidence and cultural confidence – they



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just don't have it. About 30 per cent of the population speaks Scots and therefore about 30 per cent of the school population have Scots as their home language. Those children in particular, that speak Scots at home and outside school, they're the ones that come into the classroom and are silent or disruptive because they have this disadvantage that they're being taught in a way that excludes their own culture. And without fixing this, Scottish education is never really going to achieve the levels of confidence it would like to see in its young people.”

As Education & Outreach Officer with Itchy-Coo, the imprint for 31 Scots children's books and author of a number of children's titles in Scots, Fitt has spent the last six years visiting schools across the country to help pupils and teachers engage with the language.

With this work in mind and wary of discrimination towards Scots in schools, Dr Bill Wilson, SNP MSP for the West of Scotland decided to take action on the issue. Wilson wrote to all local education authorities (LEAs) asking them if there was discrimination towards Scots in their schools and what they were doing to promote the language. The MSP has revealed to *Holyrood* magazine that he has now produced a report on his findings which he intends to submit to the ongoing Scots Language Audit and share with the LEAs, in the hope that it will highlight the issue of Scots in education and encourage joint working between authorities and schools to promote it.

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paigner for decades and I've yet to meet a Scots language speaker who was not at some point punished in school for using Scots. And the fact that there was still this, perhaps not open punishment, but this kind of subconscious discrimination was quite worrying to me and I was keen to do some kind of investigation into the issue,” he explains.

For Wilson, teaching Scots in schools is key to improving Scottish youngsters' self-confidence – an issue highlighted in A Curriculum for Excellence with 'confident individuals' one of the four capacities. Advocates argue that learning another language is also proven to improve children's language acquisition and deepen their understanding of linguistics.

Culturally, learning Scots is fundamental for Scottish children to understand who they are and where they come from, according to the Director of the Scots Language Centre, Michael Hance: “In Scotland our culture is suffused with Scots. Our poetry, song and our heritage are all connected to it yet the language has been completely unrecognised in the education setting. An understanding of Scots language gives people a better understanding of themselves, more confidence in their culture and a stronger connection to the place they live.”

So considering this cultural and educational value, what is the Scottish Government doing to promote Scots? Those in the sector generally agree that the approach to Scots has greatly improved under the SNP with inclusion in the curriculum and an audit into the language under way due to report in November. However, the funding to match the enthusiasm has been lacking. Fitt welcomes the increase in profile for Scots on the SNP's watch. “However, the resourcing for Scots remains exactly the same, in fact, the resourcing has diminished slightly since the SNP Government has come into office,” he warns. Two of the major Scots agencies, the Scots Language Centre and Scottish Language Dictionaries currently facing financial uncertainty,

were recently thrown a six-month lifeline after their core funding from the Scottish Arts Council was withdrawn.

In comparison to other minority languages both in Scotland and out with, despite the number of speakers, Scots appears to be the poor relation. "At a European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages conference I attended in Poland recently, it was stated that Scots is a sleeping giant amongst European minority languages because most of them are very small. But also it was suggested that Scots is a laughing stock because of the provision it's given compared to languages like Welsh and Catalan," Fitt says.

But closer to home, the disparity is even more obvious. When viewed alongside Gaelic, which has 60,000 speakers in comparison to the Scots community's estimated 1.6 million, Billy Kay, Scots writer and broadcaster and author of *Scots: The Mither Tongue* believes, "there is an outrageous imbalance." Gaelic has enjoyed a positive presence in the education system with a number of Gaelic schools and schools that provide Gaelic medium education. The language has also secured its own television channel with more than £10m a year from the Scottish Government – a far cry from the Scots experience.

"In a way the curse of Scots is that it's so similar to English that some people don't perceive it as being something importantly different, and some see it as some kind of corrupt form of English. Because of the historic role of the United Kingdom being a major super power in the nineteenth century and then the United States being the super power of the twentieth and twenty-first century, English has had such a role in the world that people in Britain are generally linguistically unaware... And that's one of the major problems," Kay says. Scots is more different to English than Portuguese is to Spanish or Catalan is to Castilano, he argues but because of the dominant role of English in the UK, this is often lost on people.

Likewise Hance, of the Scots Language Centre points to the disparity with Ulster Scots: "The major challenge here is funding. To put this in context, we just need to look at how much money is spent on Ulster Scots. The Ulster Scots Agency receives £3m a year in funding and we get about 5 per cent of that. So there is a huge gap there that needs to be bridged."

But with Scots named as a potentially endangered language by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cul-



tural Organisation, it clearly can't be taken for granted. Neasa Ní Chinneide, President of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, a body that promotes and funds minority languages in Europe, warns that so much of our culture is bound up in our words that if a people's language is lost, they stand to lose a lot more: "The value of minority languages to people is that through them they retain memory, stories, lore, knowl-

edge of people and place and nature... There is a wisdom in culture, even in our [indigenous sayings and expressions]. They were strategies used to cope with circumstances from economic to social problems, right across a range of things. And when you think about it, language is the most basic exposition of what lies within people's minds. Nothing is closer to your brain than language. And when you consider it, even in the most simple

terms like that, you realise it is not a small matter to lose languages."

Minority languages clearly need support and nurturing to survive. The SNP Government has gone some way to recognising the value of Scots and educational initiatives are increasing this recognition. However, it is clear that resources are needed to make this progress meaningful and give the language a legitimate place in a modern Scotland. **HM**