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## ABSTRACT

The Western Isles Community Education Project established preschools and community training projects which stimulated the coordinated development of preschool and related community education training structures, leading to an evaluated model of community self-help in the form of a network of playgroups (Guth nam Parant) in the scattered communities of the Western Isles of Scotland, among the most physically isolated in Europe. These communities battled for generations to preserve their distinctive Gaelic linguistic and cultural traditions through periods of radical change to island lifestyles. This book consists of five chapters providing a chronological account of the project, an afterword and an appendix, and a bibliography. Chapter 1 describes the Western Isles Community project and the early beginnings of the project through the 1976-77 Feasibility Study. Chapter 2 describes project foundations and Phase 1 of the project (1978-82). Chapter 3 focuses on preschool children and their families during Phase 2 (1983-86). Chapter 4, "Guth nam Parant," deals with the year 1986-87, discusses the creation of playgroups, and describes establishing a parents' organization and involving schools, and provides vignettes of how the project changed families' lives. Chapter 5 provides conclusions and analyzes the accomplishments of the feasibility study and phases one and two. The afterword describes Guth nam Parant in 1995. The appendix provides Guth nam Parant fieldworkers' job descriptions. A bibliography of 28 items is included. (DR)

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David Mackay

# We did it ourselves – *Sinn Fhein a rinn e*

an account of the Western Isles Community Education Project  
*Proisect Muinntir nan Eilean*  
1977 - 1992

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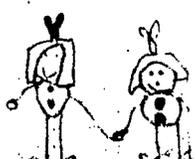
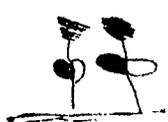
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# **We did it ourselves - *Sinn Fhein a rinn e***

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1977 - 1992

**David Mackay**

**Early Childhood Development:  
Practice and Reflections  
Number 9**



Bernard van Leer Foundation 1996

### **About the series**

The series *Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections* addresses issues of importance to practitioners, policy makers and academics concerned with meeting the educational and developmental needs of disadvantaged children in developing and industrial societies.

The series is a continuation of the Occasional Papers series (numbers 1 to 6) and the numbering starts at No. 7.

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### **About the author**

David Mackay had just finished work on a project in the Caribbean when he was asked to set up a project in the Western Isles of Scotland. He had begun his career as a junior school teacher and subsequently became a Head Master. Following this, he joined a project at University College in London which designed materials to enable children aged five to seven years to use their environment, their language and their ideas in learning to read and write.

### **About the Foundation**

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private institution based in The Netherlands that concentrates its resources on support for early childhood development. The Foundation takes its name from Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist who died in 1958 and gave the entire share capital of his worldwide packaging industry for humanitarian purposes. The Foundation's income is derived from this industry.

The Foundation's central objective is to improve opportunities for young children who live in disadvantaged circumstances. It does this by supporting the development of innovative field-based approaches in early childhood development, and by sharing experiences with as wide an audience as possible in order to influence policy and practice.

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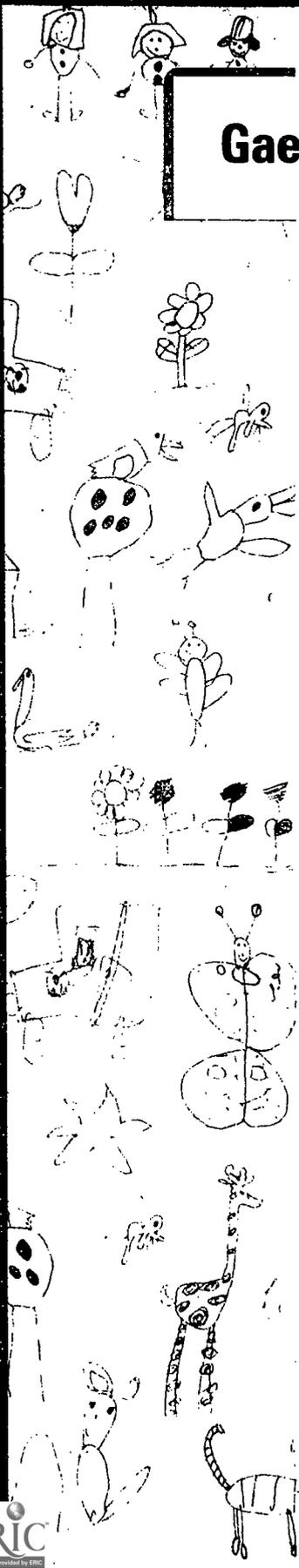
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# Acknowledgements

This account of *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean* – the Western Isles Community Education Project – is based on three reports: the report of the Feasibility Study September 1976–November 1977, the report of Phase 1, and the report on *Guth nam Parant* in Phase 2.

Several people who were involved in the project over the years gave documents and discussed their experiences willingly, especially members of the Project's teams, Dr Finlay Macleod, Dr D. J. Macleod, Ian Minty and Sheila Macleod; members of the Advisory Group, Professor John Nisbet of the Education Department of Aberdeen University and IIM Duncan Kirkpatrick; and John Murray, Director of the BEP, who collaborated with the Feasibility Study team; Agnes Gilles from the Ness Historical Society, *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis*; the fieldworkers Annie MacSween, Morag Macleod, Cailean Maclean, Mairi Macdonald; Shona Fraser, the *Guth nam Parant* coordinator; Dorit Braun, CEDC Assistant Director; Elly Alexander from Young Families Now, the Foundation-supported Early Childhood Education project in Aberdeen; and also people in Ness and the mothers working in *Guth nam Parant* playgroups throughout the islands.



# Gaelic words and pronunciations

*Comunn Na Gaidhlig* (CNAG) [komun nu gàlig] the Gaelic Association

*Croileagan* [krawligan] 'ring of children', ie a playgroup

*Comunn Eachdraidh Nis* (singular) [komun ee-a-tree neesh] Ness Historical Society

*Comuinn Eachdraidh* (plural) Island Association of Historical Societies

*Caidreachas Eachdraidh an Eilean Fhada* [kajrachas ee-a-tree an elan ada] The Island Association of Historical Societies

*Ceilidh* [kaylee] house

*Comhairle nan Eilean* [koo-ar le nan elan] The Western Isles Islands Council

*Dealan De* [jalan je] Butterfly – a women's Gaelic-language radio programme

*lochdar* [ee-uch-gar] a village in South Uist

*Comasach* [komasach] capable (people)

*Muinntir an Eachdraidh* [moyjir an ee-'a-tree] The History Folk (this was the name village people gave the young unemployed who visited their houses, collecting a variety of historical artifacts and recording elderly people's reminiscences)

*Oigrìdh Na Sgìre* [oidree ne skeeri] the group of young people of the township who refurbished the Ness Hall

*Radio nan Gaidheal* [ray-dee-oh nan gayul] local BBC Gaelic Radio programmes broadcast from Stornoway and Inverness

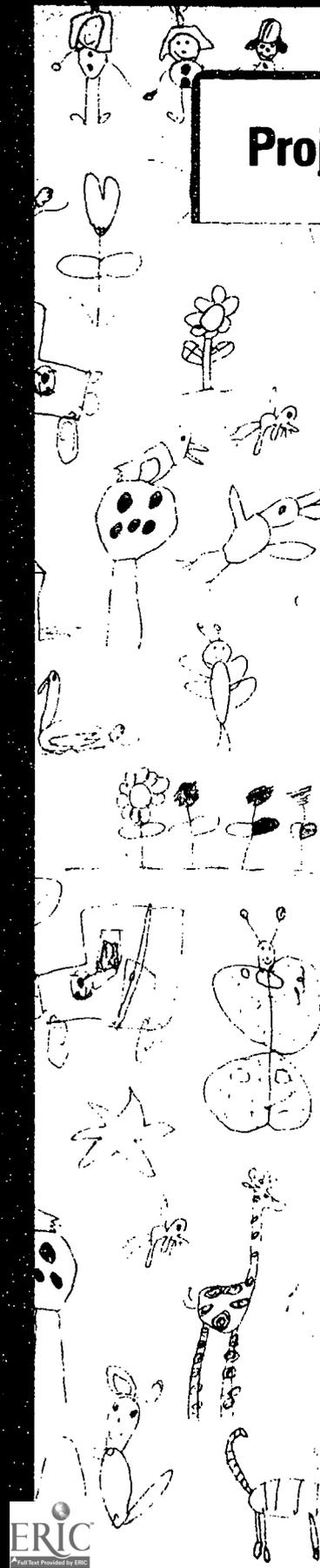
*Proiseact Foghlum Da-Chananach* [proshekt fulum da-chananach] the Bilingual Education Project (BEP)

*Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean* [proshekt moyjir nan elan] Project of the Island folk

Note that in Gaelic, ch, the final sound in loch, is a sound that some English speakers pronounce as /k/ in bank. The Gaelic ch is made with the back of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth, with the vocal cords switched off, and air passes through with friction. In the International Phonetic Alphabet this is written /x/. But /k/, the substituted sound, is a relative of /x/, so it is as correct as English speakers can manage.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

BEF	Bilingual Education Project
CEDC	Community Education Development Centre (Coventry, England)
CEP	Community Education Project
HIIDB	Highlands and Islands Development Board – now HIE
HIE	Highland and Island Enterprise
HM	Her Majesty
HMI	Her Majesty's Inspector
SED	Scottish Education Department



# Project staffing and Advisory Group

## Feasibility study

Dr Finlay Macleod – Coordinator  
Annie Macsween – Fieldworker, seconded from the Nicolson Institute Gaelic Department in 1976  
David Mackay – Fieldworker during the Feasibility Study and then a member of the Advisory Group  
Sheila Macleod – Secretary

## Phase 1, 1978-1982

John Maclean – Director from February 1978 to December 1978  
Dr Donald John Macleod – Director from October 1979 for the remainder of Phase 1 to June 1982  
Christina Maclean – Secretary  
Annie Macsween – Fieldworker in Ness  
Morag Macleod – Fieldworker in Harris  
Cailean Maclean – Fieldworker in Iochdar  
Also various friends who translated the texts of picture story books; pasted the new Gaelic texts over the English; took photographs; wrote verses and stories for young children.

## Phase 2, 1983-1986

Ian Minty – Team Leader from November 1983 and Director from August 1984  
Sheila Macleod – Project Reporter (from December 1984),  
Annie MacGillivray – Uists Fieldworker (May 1984 to October 1985)  
Alice Read – Lewis and Harris Fieldworker (June 1984)  
Maribel MacLean – North Uist Fieldworker (from January 1986)  
Mary Ann MacKay – South Uist Fieldworker (from December 1985)  
Christina MacMillan – Secretary (from December 1984)

## Other appointments

Katie MacDonald – Parent helper Stoneybridge Primary School, South Uist (from January 1985 for 3 months)  
Mairi Morrison – Part-time Community Worker, Lionel Old School, Ness, Isle of Lewis (from March 1985 for six months)  
Shona Fraser – Part-time Parent Fieldworker in Isle of Harris from January 1986 to April 1987. She then became Administrator for *Guth nam Parant* and later its Coordinator

Jane Colledge – Part-time Parent Fieldworker. Isle of Barra, (April 1986 to April 1987)

Ina Maciver – Part-time piloting Gaelic materials in Shawbost, Isle of Lewis (This post was a joint appointment with *Comunn na Gaidhlig*, from December 1986 for 3 months); from January 1986 for one year a 10-place MSc Community Programme producing educational materials in Gaelic and some in English; from January 1987 for one year a 21-place MSc Community Programme producing Gaelic educational materials, plus some in English.

In addition, other people were taken on as occasional crèche workers, and to provide ancillary help for special events, such as parents' seminars, training days and Forum meetings.

### **Advisory Group**

Professor John Nisbet, of the Education Department of Aberdeen University

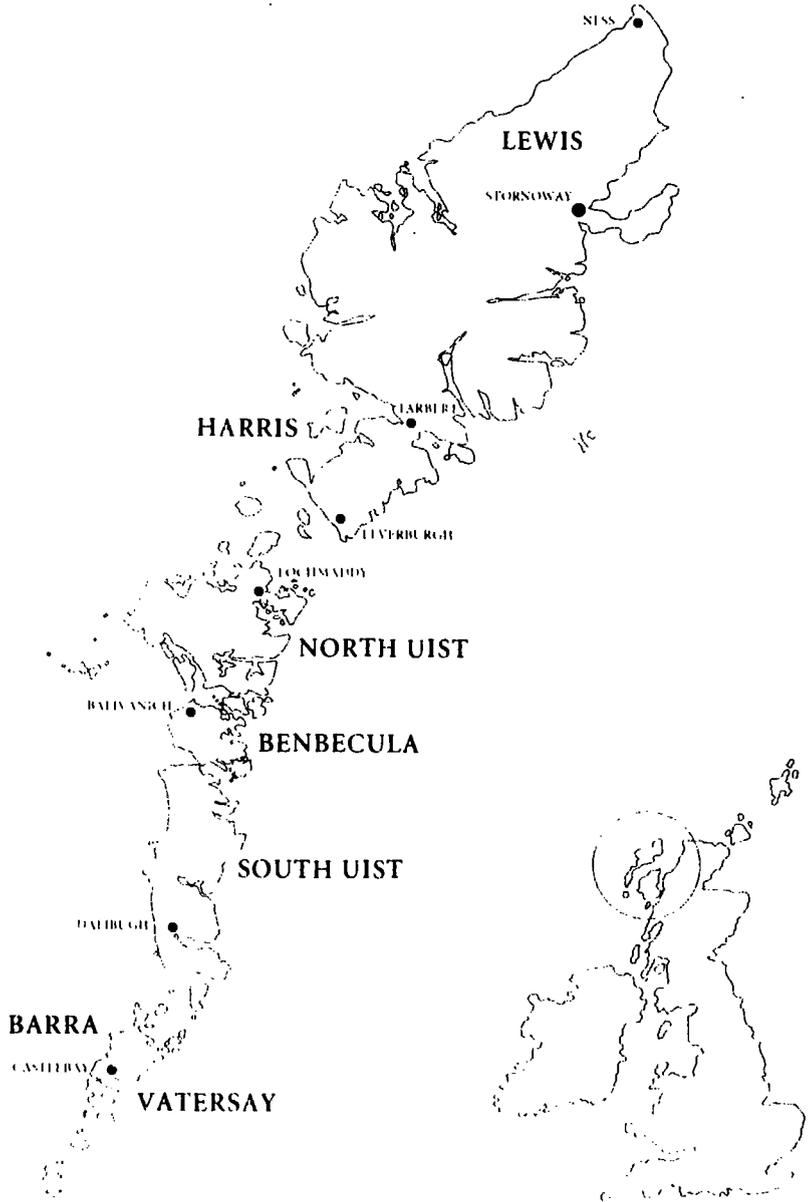
HMI Duncan Kirkpatrick, from the Scottish Department of Education

John Rennie, Director of Community Education Development Centre, Coventry

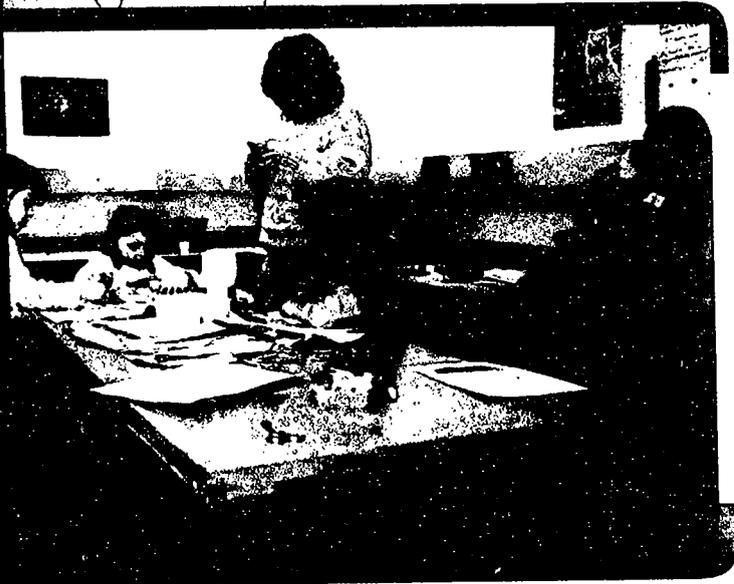
Roy Maciver, then Chief Executive of the Western Isles Islands Council

David Mackay, then Technical Advisor to the Bernard Van Leer Foundation

# Map of the Western Isles



## The Western Isles community project: background



The history of The Western Isles Community Education Project is a history of a group of people who were empowered 'to do things themselves'. Through their renewed awareness of their cultural, linguistic, and psychological strengths, they formulated their own unique solutions to the challenges facing them. Above all, the history of this project is a history of courage and dedication, both on the part of the numerous individuals – the workers – involved with the project and on the part of the target communities, and particularly of the mothers involved. The crowning achievement of this project was the formation of *Guth nam Parant*, an

organisation run by parents in the interest of parents and pre-school children throughout the Western Isles.

The project spanned a substantial period of time and underwent a number of fundamental changes, some self-imposed and some imposed by the fluctuating pressures of social and political circumstances.

The Western Isles Community Education Project, *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean* was funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and was supported by the Western Isles Islands Council from 1976 to 1987. The first year (from September 1976 to November 1977) was given over to a Feasibility Study which took place in the township of Ness, Isle of Lewis.

Phase 1 (1977-1982) was based on some of the wide-ranging findings of the initial Study and was set up in Ness in the Isle of Harris, and in the village of Iochdar in South Uist. There were a number of problems involved in this stage which eventually affected the project's outcome.

Phase 2 (1983-1987) responded to some of the work of Phase 1, and led to the work involving pre-school children and their mothers throughout the Isles. The shift in the Foundation's mandate which

took place during the early 1980s, a shift to early childhood education (particularly the age group 0-7), radically affected the project and the way it approached its tasks. This phase resulted in the linking of all the pre-school resources provided by young mothers and supported by fieldworkers in an elected Management Committee. What emerged was non-formal parent and early childhood education and the establishment of a grassroots organisation – *Guth nam Parant* – which continued to receive Foundation support from 1987 to 1994.

### **Islands beside the Atlantic**

By the very nature of their character, stability and adaptability, these islanders have survived many vicissitudes and will do so again.'

A good map of the Western Isles reveals how the interior of the islands have had many freshwater lochs scoured out of them and the coast has been gashed with sea lochs when the melting ice caps that had twice covered them, brought two Ice Ages to an end. Heather on the moors covers blankets of peat that rest on a base of Archaean Gneiss, rock that is among Europe's hardest and oldest.

The main inhabited islands from North to South are Lewis, Harris, North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist, Eriskay and Barra. The Uists are linked by causeways and the other islands by vehicular ferries and planes.

In the North West of Lewis is the township of Ness. Its population of 2,000 lives in 14 typical Hebridean villages' and constitutes the largest wholly agricultural community anywhere in Northern Europe. At its tip is the automatic lighthouse and at its southern end Lewis joins North Harris, where mountains of great beauty dominate the skyline. The greater part of South Harris is a peninsula that has been described as a moonscape on its eastern side and on the west, like California's Pacific coast – the one rocky and harsh, the other edged with wide golden beaches. Behind them stretches the *muchair*, the coastal peat over which centuries of Atlantic storms have blown shell sand, thus providing the chemical reaction from which rich arable land has been created.

Stornoway is the islands' capital; it has a population of about 8,700. A flight south out of Stornoway in the small short-take-off plane over rugged Harris and North Uist, to Benbecula reveals the mountains of Hecla and Beinn Mhor in the blue distance. As well as revealing the beauty of the place, travelling by air quickly brings home the considerable distances between isolated crofts and villages in these dispersed populations.

At the end of this 130 mile<sup>4</sup> long chain are the last three inhabited islands, Eriskay, Barra and Vatersay. Vatersay was recently poised to become another uninhabited island, but the construction of a vehicular causeway is encouraging families to settle there and is giving this small community a chance of surviving.

Lastly, 40 miles west of Harris is the remote St Kilda group of islands.

The spectacular Atlantic archipelago is not only a nature reserve; it holds the remains of a community whose way of life, unlike anything else in Western Europe, survived almost unchanged for centuries. Therein lies much of its attraction for the present generation. To us it seems impossible that man could defeat that bleak, savage environment; yet man did so for perhaps two thousand years, continuing almost to our own day.'

In 1930, the last 36 St Kildans were evacuated and set up in new homes in Lewis and Argyll, leaving the island as a refuge for thousands of sea birds. Harsh and hostile weather conditions are shared by all the islands.

### The Islanders



A traditional way of life, both cultural and linguistic, still has not died out. Of the islands' population of 30,000, just over 80 per cent speak Gaelic as their mother tongue as well as acquired English. Most live in rural villages scattered around the coast. The houses cling to one or both sides of the main road, with crofts stretching from most of them.

Crofting is the traditional way of life. In Lewis and Harris the small areas of land that constitute most crofts cannot provide an adequate livelihood and this causes people to seek additional employment. This is

commonly the weaving of Harris Tweed and, in certain areas, fishing. Some crofters take jobs in Stornoway and work on the croft at the weekends and in the summer, in the long evenings.

Because of these economic factors, unemployment remains high. Recent set-backs in oil-drilling related steel fabrication, lay-offs in the wool mills as well as the collapse of some large building companies have increased the fragility of the islands' economy. But accompanying this is the emigration of young people who leave the islands at the most energetic time in their lives. This depressing loss of the resourceful young is giving rise to population imbalance and poor economic development and is creating a social climate in which it is hard for initiative and leadership to be supported. It is then too easy to feel that individual effort is not worthwhile.

In the rural villages with their traditional way of life, the family unit is still a relevant entity, where the older generation tends to keep the younger members in check so as not to bring any kind of shame to the family. This authoritarian approach is strengthened by the church which still has considerable influence on people's values and behaviour.

The combination of social and economic pressures has resulted in people feeling that they do not control their own lives in any significant way, and that most decisions are made for them by others in authority. This cannot but lead to the feeling that the individual has little control over his own and his community's destiny.

Schooling in the past was not concerned primarily with validating the experience of youngsters in their own community or with validating the use of their own language; rather, education has tended to be geared to preparing young people to cope with life away from the islands. Since other opportunities have been scarce, islanders have tended to take advantage of this formal schooling, including higher education, and the islands are well-known for exporting teachers, doctors, ministers of religion, and other professional workers.

Community participation tends to be minimal and the leadership in community matters is taken not infrequently by incomers.<sup>7</sup> This trend is seen in the formation of playgroups, for example, where local mothers have tended to leave the initiative to incomers.

Young people in the Western Isles are socialised so as to feel that their own community is rather repressive and static, and that decline rather than development is the norm. It is not surprising that so many of them regard the relative anonymity and freedom of city life as a means through which they may be able to lead fuller and more fruitful lives.

The Western Isles share with many other North Atlantic communities a pattern of 'marginal adaptation'. This involves dependence by

households on a combination of income sources, often seasonal or part-time. The croft is commonly the central component in this combination. Such a pattern is now being recognised as a skilful adaptation to the problems of dispersed settlements in such areas, a pattern which has enabled them to survive long periods of economic depression. There has been a growing appreciation among students from the islands of the significance in social and cultural terms, as well as in economic, of traditional patterns of work and settlement. Recently the failure to take advantage of the main island resource – the sea – has seen fishing provide a type of employment which is psychologically and socially important. It provides stimulating contrast to the longer cycles of agriculture and offers results that can be readily measured.

The picture so far given of social and economic life on these islands should by no means be regarded as gloomy or pessimistic. By the very nature of their character, stability and adaptability, these islanders have survived many vicissitudes and will do so again.

### **Radical changes to island life styles**

Since the 1940s and 1950s, the people of the islands have experienced two radical changes to their way of life: first, the transition from a subsistence economy to a money-based economy has been accelerated by the arrival of the Welfare State. This whole process has led to the arrival of television, improved radio reception, a general ownership of cars and, most importantly, to rising expectations.

A second, equally fundamental, change has been the reorganisation of the local governments of surrounding islands. The Inner Hebrides are now part of the Council for the Highland Region. The Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, all have their own Councils. In 1974, the people of the Islands ceased to be attached to mainland councils.

The creation of *Comhairle nan Eilean*, The Western Isles Islands Council, with its headquarters in Stornoway, endowed the islanders with some control over their own lives. For the first time, they were able to make their own decisions about the way the islands were to be governed. The Council's staffing requirements attracted highly trained, creative people back to the Islands and compensated in a small but significant way for the persistent out-migration of young, resourceful islanders.

Dr Finlay Macleod, Coordinator of the Feasibility Study, was among those returners. In his youth, he himself was an emigrant. After working in a variety of jobs that took him round the world, he returned to Scotland and settled in Aberdeen for 10 years. After

graduating in Psychology at the University of Aberdeen, he based his Doctorate work on a study of bilingual primary school children. He was appointed to the newly formed Department of Education as Primary Schools Adviser and in this role he became involved in the project.

In 1975, two groups – the Scottish Education Department (SED) and the Bernard van Leer Foundation in The Netherlands – were interested in collaborating with the Western Isles Islands Council to set up educational projects, one project involved primary schools, and the other involved island communities.

### **The Bilingual Education Project (BEP)**

The SED supported the Council's aim of bringing Gaelic, the everyday language of most people, into the classroom as the medium of education, and in developing a curriculum that acknowledged the culture, the environment and the life style of the children and their families. Funding for the project's first three-year phase was born jointly by the SED and the Council.

Mr John Murray, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh and Editorial Officer of the Gaelic Books Council, was appointed Director. He was an experienced secondary school teacher and a renowned author of Gaelic short stories.

To begin with, the new project was designed to work with 24 primary schools, beginning with the five year olds, providing them with Gaelic tuition and materials. They would then move up annually until they reached the secondary schools, able to use the Islands' two languages fluently.

### **Western Isles Community Education Project (CEP)**

The second project, a joint collaboration between the Council and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, was to be concerned with the island communities and would, in the words of the proposal submitted to the Foundation in 1976:

Provide a programme for promoting social development by stimulating the people of the Western Isles to perceive their own community more clearly ... an enterprise in adult education.

Since the schools were already involved with the BEP, the CEP proposal was modified to focus on how the resources of education could be used to help people of all ages to perceive their problems clearly and tackle them for themselves.

## The Feasibility Study, 1976-77

The Feasibility Study which laid the groundwork for Phase 1 of *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean* took place from September 1976 to November 1977. Two fieldworkers, a coordinator and a secretary started work in the Parish of Ness in the Isle of Lewis.

Annie Macsween, the project's first fieldworker, was seconded from the Gaelic Department of the Secondary School in Stornoway. Born and brought up in Ness, she both knew the people and the place, and had an extensive network of contacts.

Ness already had a lively Community Association that brought together a cross-section of the community, and was one of the few local groups concerned with improving people's quality of life. Community Associations had been set up in the late 1960s by Lewis Council of Social Services as voluntary bodies to act as mini-governments for each township.

In October 1976, the fieldworkers were invited by the Community Association to talk about the project. Two concerns voiced at that meeting were the under-used, dilapidated village hall and the lack of leisure facilities and activities for both the young and the old. In addition, crofters were keen to know how to apply local resources to help develop cooperatively-produced surplus horticulture.

By January 1977, a new community group *Oigridh Na Sgìre* – The Young People of the Village – was formed, to both renovate Ness Hall and to provide a range of facilities to meet the needs of the community.

The group that was formed set about fulfilling its tasks. The young people refurbished Ness Hall and then had to learn how to provide facilities to meet the community's needs. Two young mothers gathered together 40 more mothers with whom they formed two Gaelic playgroups. A third group was helped by the Social Work Department to start a club for disabled and elderly people. The crofters contacted professional horticulturalists and began to use a new method for producing vegetable seedlings. At a meeting with the Highlands and Islands Development Board in Ness, all the villages combined in setting up the Ness Multi-function Cooperative.

When the first Ness paper was published regularly and the Ness Historical Society (*Comunn Eahidraidh Nis*) had exhibited the richness of its archives, the village communities began to believe in their ability to do things for themselves.

The project had a rewarding collaboration with the Bilingual Education Project in making a variety of materials in Gaelic. These were made available to children in Primary 1 classes and in playgroups.

## Notes and references to chapter 1

1. Annie MacSween translated the project's English title into Gaelic as '*Proiseact Muintir nan Eilean*' - The Project of the Island Folk - and this is how it is now known. For Gaelic speakers, the word *muintir* has a semantic richness ranged around notions of familial relationships and expressed the project's concern for how people of all ages could enhance their quality of life and enlarge the range of choices open to them by working together with common purpose and shared aims.
2. From a submission to the Bernard Van Leer Foundation prepared by Dr Finlay Macleod.
3. The names of Ness villages: South Dell, North Dell, Cross, Forodale, Port Skigersta, Wambost, Habost, Lionel, Foropie, Five Penny, Knockaird, Port of Ness, Adabrock, Skigersta.
4. 130 miles is approximately 200 kilometres.
5. Sked, Phil (see Bibliography) The archipelago is made up of four islands and many rocks and stacks. Hirta is the largest and the only island that was inhabited.
6. Population of the larger islands: Lewis = 20,626; Harris = 2,897; North Uist = 1,794; South Uist = 3,064; Barra = 1,147.
7. 'Incomers sometimes get a bad name for themselves because when they come to the Western Isles, they think they have to change everybody. But you have to remember that you're always a visitor in somebody else's house. You can only start to take liberties when you've proved that you're a good visitor.' Definition of the incomer provided by an incomer from mainland Scotland.
8. Ness Hall was never a favourite meeting place and later it was taken over by the Ness Football Club, which obtained a Job Creation project for building its Social Club. This had a pleasant, comfortable environment that was run by a committee and managed by a full-time Manager. It had a large enthusiastic following. In 1992, Ness Hall was turned into a Sports Centre and is for the first time a success.

## Project foundations

### Phase 1: Working in Harris, lochdar, Uist, and Ness

By September 1977, the original project proposal had been modified. Since the Bilingual Education Project (BEP) had started working in Primary schools, the Community Education Project could concentrate on promoting community development. It did this without prescribing solutions, and emphasised working with groups rather than individuals. As the submission to the Bernard van Leer Foundation stated:

It is within groups that persons gain most of their social experience and skills ... Leadership, which has been so difficult to develop and sustain in the Western Isles, is fostered within well-functioning groups ...

To ensure that the project worked with parts of the Isles other than Lewis, the Education Committee added two new areas quite unlike Ness: the Isle of Harris, with a dispersed population of about 2,000; and in lochdar, a small, South Uist village with a population of 319. Two new fieldworkers who were islanders joined the team: Morag Macleod from the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh and Cailean Maclean who came straight from Durham University.

Although at that stage it seemed sensible to set up the project in this way, practice demonstrated that there was little awareness of the many difficulties that would be created with the population dispersed over such an area. The project staff were themselves dispersed – the Director was in Stornoway in Lewis while the fieldworkers were in Ness in Lewis, in the township of Tarbert in Harris, and in the village of lochdar, in South Uist. In lochdar, social problems brought about by unemployment and poor housing had given rise to stoicism and apathy, whereas in Ness, many



Photo: A playgroup 'product'

people worked in Stornoway and in general the population shared conditions that enabled them to develop a cooperative attitude and work together.

The fieldworkers in Harris and lochdar, although facing different kinds of problems, shared complexities which they found difficult to deal with on their own. With hindsight, it seems obvious that project staff should have worked together so that they had time to get to know each other before they moved out as a team with some shared experience.

### **The fieldworkers**

Morag Macleod worked patiently to kindle interest in various community activities in Harris, but her work was hampered by a number of factors, including the lack of public transport and of buildings for people to meet in. The Director confirmed these difficulties, commenting:

while some of the individual project activities in Harris are very interesting, they are usually too far apart geographically to satisfactorily 'mesh' and by now it is becoming clear that the decision to choose as large and dispersed a community as this was a mistake.

At the end of her three years, Morag resigned and resumed her work in the School of Scottish Studies.

Cailean Maclean made staunch friendships with local people and this enabled him to define his role as lochdar's fieldworker. His conversations with them revealed the problems common to many rural areas throughout the nation: under-utilisation of agricultural land; some heavy drinking; poor housing conditions; a relatively low quality of life; aimlessness of young people; the plight of the aged as dependence was increasingly placed on the State for their support; low service provision; and an unwillingness of people to articulate their problems and to seek their solution. Lack of self-confidence, apathy, and resignation were given as reasons for their reticence.

Cailean sought to approach his tasks creatively. One of his more creative initiatives, for example, was to combine history and orienteering during a trek to Usinish, a significant place in lochdar's history, where evicted crofters were resettled at the time of the Clearances.<sup>7</sup> In addition, he worked with teachers and pupils to turn the gathering of history into dramas, the first of which was a historical play about the Clearances. He also enlivened the Youth Club and set up a variety of employment schemes. Before he left lochdar, he brought fine local talent together to provide a memorable concert.

In the last year of Phase I, Mairi Macdonald, who had been trained in both primary education and early childhood education, came into the project as a fieldworker in Uist. Mairi's discussions with the community dealt with the factors that influenced the quality of a playgroup, its stability and its continuity; the mothers' own needs; and the relationships between local mothers and incomers.

What resulted were discussions with the mothers on the effects of play on their children, and concrete, creative activities during evening workshops. Very wisely, Mairi limited the geographical area she worked in. Although Mairi was unable to complete her work because of maternity leave, her initiatives demonstrated the need for trained fieldworkers who could work alongside all Western Isles playgroup mothers.

### **The Ness Historical Society – *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis***

Annie Macsween's interest in local history began at school and in 1969 she started collecting Gaelic hymns and local poetry from people in North Dell, her village. In 1971-72 she worked some of this material into her University thesis.

Annie's abilities developed markedly when she had the space to work with her community. As a teacher in the Nicolson Institute, she used part of her time to take young people to Stornoway's Home for the Elderly and collect reminiscences of the past. Having learned to ask questions, her pupils began to realise that it was their own history they were discovering.

In June 1977, Annie consulted John Murray (Director of the Bilingual Project), about Ness local history and indicated that she was hoping to find a way of collecting the history of Ness. John Murray suggested that she consider setting up an Historical Society and Annie and two friends sponsored a project and called it *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis* - The Ness Historical Society.

'Job Creation' agreed to fund a project with six young unemployed people. Annie and her colleagues chose them with great care. Five lived in Ness but Agnes Gillies, the leader they wanted, was in Aberdeen. Annie Macsween wrote to Agnes Gillies in October 1977 inviting her to return to Lewis to lead the team to collect materials for the first Ness Historical Archive, and Agnes responded eagerly.

They all knew that most families had old photos, letters and news cuttings stored away in drawers and cupboards, as well as a variety of Gaelic poetry and hymns. But it was the recollections of old folk that would reach back into the 19th century that they considered most precious.

The six recently unemployed young people began to go systematically from house to house collecting materials for the first Ness Historical Archive. Gradually they became confident as a team and as individuals. Instead of being just other faces in the community, they were called *Muimtir an Eachdraidh* – the history folk. When the first six months were over, Annie negotiated a further six-month period.

In 1978, Annie took two members of the team to Edinburgh on a week's study visit to ten agencies' concerned with the study, collection, and management of local history and archival material. The new team of four prepared materials to be shown in schools. They also assembled a set of the best photographs they had collected. One of these collections, 'The Herring Girls', was eventually used in a new publication in 1987.'

Of this work, Agnes Gillies wrote:

... establishing an archive of local history, is also proving to be a means of establishing our identity as a Parish.

The team began to make plans for an exhibition of the Historical Society's findings, beginning with a small exhibition in the Ness Hall to test the responses of people involved with *Proiseact Muimtir nan Eilean*.

The exhibition was a notable event. During the week it attracted over 1,000 visitors and generated interest far and wide. Families came to it from all over the islands – some with three generations – and mingled with overseas visitors and tourists. Those who had once thought it a waste of time to have young folk paid for wandering round Ness with tape recorders soon changed their minds. The exhibition had created interest and goodwill on all sides.

When they saw the old photographs of the businesses and industries that were there before the war, the Ness folk noted how the parish had changed. They realised how much they had lost, with the gradual centralisation of all these services in Stornoway. Now, with the renewal of community identity and confidence, attitudes were changing from a feeling of 'We can't do anything about it', to 'It's our future – it's up to us to make it better ourselves'.

In the following year, Shawbost village started an Historical Society and came to Ness for advice; from there, new Historical Societies sprang up throughout the islands.

## Validating the work of the Historical Societies



The recollections of island life that local History Societies saved from oblivion were, from the beginning, admired by people of all ages, as well as Colleges and Universities associated with the Isles. In the footsteps of *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis* new societies continue to spring up and it is not unusual for local newspapers to report the arrival of another *Comunn Eachdraidh*. Recently the History Society in Uig, a parish on the west coast of Lewis, collected material on the way men from their village were involved in the Boer War in South Africa.

The Island Historical Societies had attracted the attention of Mrs Janet Hunter, an islander who was a mature postgraduate student at Aberdeen University and who was a regular summer visitor to Harris. Her visit to *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis* had encouraged her to visit and investigate the achievements of the first 17 history societies, and from this she prepared an index for each society's work. This became the basis of the dissertation that gained her a Masters Degree with Honours in Celtic Studies.

These academic studies are of great importance to the communities from which they came because they acknowledge the unique richness of the archives. For islanders and outsiders alike, the archives of each Society are now accessible.

Janet Hunter found that the role of the historical societies:

was defined by different people in similar terms: they were providing a resource, primarily for the local community, rather than a tourist attraction.

The people were becoming aware of their heritage and this was:

an antidote to the feeling that Gaelic culture is intrinsically inferior; preservation of songs and poetry in danger of being forgotten as the oral culture disappears, were cited as important reasons for the work of the *Comunn Eachdraidh*.

Drawing attention to the significance of the work, she wrote:

Possibly the most valuable material collected is the audio and video recordings of oral history. These recordings are of linguistic, historical, sociological and artistic importance. In the majority of cases, Gaelic is the language used in the recordings. Thus they preserve a linguistic record of a standard Gaelic which is not the norm among young Gaelic speakers. They also preserve a record of the dialectal variations in all regions of the Western Isles.

It is the elderly folk in each community who have given a first-hand account of events in which they participated, and these are now part of history. They have also described a way of life which is disappearing as the traditional Gaelic culture of the crofting community is eroded by extraneous influences.

Thus three facets of the role of the *Comuinn Eachdraidh* can be defined and identified, those of conserver, disseminator and catalyst. That these roles have been undertaken and successfully fulfilled by most groups can be seen quite clearly by examining the result of the work done.

That the work is of great value is evident both from the large corpus of historical material recorded and from the sense of purpose and optimism it seems to have engendered in so many communities, otherwise disadvantaged by physical remoteness, lack of employment and the resultant outward movement of the young population.

Mrs Hunter is now 'formulating arguments for promoting the work of the *Comuinn Eachdraidh* as a contribution to the future cultural, educational and social wellbeing of island communities'.

The *Comuinn Eachdraidh* movement was the growth phenomenon of the late 1970s and 1980s in the Western Isles and has provided local people with information about their own past. It arose out of a deep seated desire within the native Gaelic-speaking community to preserve the age-old language and culture, which was and is endangered by an encroaching alternative. It has always embodied a strong Gaelic ethos.

The reputation of the islands' Historical Societies has continued to grow and is now acknowledged widely. Recently historical relics have been returned to Ness and two authors, Michael Robson and

John Beatty (see Bibliography), have dedicated their books to *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis*.

The Island Association of Historical Societies – *Caidreachas Eachdraidh an Eilean Fhada* – was formed in October 1990 to promote the development of local Historical Societies in Lewis and Harris, with particular reference to the Gaelic language and culture; to coordinate and promote communication between local history societies; and to collaborate with local authorities and other bodies on their behalf. The Ness Society continues to strengthen the influence of the island societies by the way its achievements are acknowledged beyond the islands.

### **The Western Isles and their bilingual communities**

'Had not *Comunn Eachdraidh Nis* been a Gaelic enterprise from the beginning, nothing would have come of it.'

'As language is the medium by which the culture is transmitted, it is impossible to separate the one from the other.'

'Bilingual children have two windows on the world.'

In the same way that the community wished to preserve its culture, so too did it reveal a deep desire to preserve its language. The issue of language was an aspect of the project present from its very beginnings.

The Western Isles is mainly a bilingual community: 80 per cent of the population at the 1981 census confirmed they spoke Gaelic.<sup>10</sup> Everyone in the Islands now speaks English although many older people feel more confident when they are able to use their mother tongue. It is a common politeness that a group of Gaelic speakers will switch to English when an English speaker joins them.

The steady encroachment of English has threatened the native language and also the island culture. At the end of the 19th Century, the Gaels were treated by the British government in the traditional European manner – as colonial natives. English became the compulsory language in which generations of Gaelic-speaking children were taught, which meant that the only opportunities they had to use their own language were away from the school. What little Gaelic the school provided was treated as though it were a foreign language.

Until funding for specific Gaelic projects was provided by the Scottish Education Department, Gaelic had no official recognition.

Now it may no longer be regarded as a stateless language just because it is only spoken in the Highlands and along the maritime fringes of north west Scotland – and within smaller groups in the urban centres of the Scottish mainland and among the descendants of Islanders who were deported to Canada and Australia in the 19th Century, at the time of the Clearances. Gaelic's minority status has been a cause of frustration for Gaels in all walks of life.

But there are many instances of old folk using Gaelic in ways that acknowledge the traditions of the *cèilidh* house – the discoursing, the storytelling, the poetry and the folk songs that still draw audiences to its contemporary versions.

As the Ness Historical Society revealed, creativity involving the use of Gaelic continues to live in village communities, and is passed on despite the ascendancy of English. For it is not only the elderly who celebrate the inseparability of Gaelic language and culture. To this day, in a Lewis Primary School with a Gaelic-medium class, a Scottish five year old girl and three Gaelic children speak and write Gaelic with a curriculum that reflects their environment and makes room for their personal interests. In this way the children associate Gaelic with the many natural ways in which the language is used. They refer to books and discuss with their teacher and with one another issues that arise from what they are doing – always in Gaelic.

### **Gaelic as a political issue**

Supporting families and young children as native speakers of Gaelic arouses fierce passion and debate. There are strongly conflicting views: from those who confidently predict the demise of Gaelic within the next 10 years, to those who retort that pessimists have been saying that since the 18th century. The old myth that Gaelic restricts educational advancement has been joined by more recent arguments about the virtues of monolingual and bilingual education.

Even among the mothers concerned with early childhood education, Gaelic is an emotive issue, prone to confident assertions about right and wrong ways to produce native speakers. An accusation occasionally lodged against the project was that by employing some non-native team members, its commitment to Gaelic was suspect.

Gaelic was a contentious issue from the very beginning of the project, and is a topic returned to continually, at regional and local levels. Even later stages of the project illustrated the fact that Gaelic had the potential to exacerbate tensions. One of the achievements

of employing a local community worker in Ness was the creation of a Gaelic mother and toddler club. This was in part the result of attempts by some English speaking incomers to reinforce English in what had previously been seen as a bilingual pre-school group. The Gaelic mothers were accused of setting themselves up as 'rivals', and of not consulting other mothers. The project reported that the Gaelic group:

had no intention of sending their children to an English oriented playgroup. They refuted any suggestion that setting up a separate group might cause divisiveness – Ness was a district large enough to support more than one pre-school group (it had two in 1977), even if the language element did not arise. They were indignant as they recalled that doubts had been expressed as to whether the group could function with a Gaelic-speaking leader when there were children in the group without Gaelic. There was no recognition of the fact that a bilingual playgroup leader could deal with both Gaelic and English speaking children, while an English-only leader could not (easily) relate to a Gaelic-speaking child. They resented the implication that having two languages made them less equipped to cope."

The reaction of the group was captured by Sheila Macleod, the Project Reporter, in their remark '*Chaidh sinn air ar casan*', (literally, 'We got on to our feet,' or more idiomatically, 'We'll show them!'). Finlay Macleod wrote:

It has become a political act for Hebridean parents to bring up their children as Gaelic speakers, for almost every move they make has to be against the tide. They require all the skill and resources that an initiative such as the project can offer. Especially so, if the lives of their children are to be as rich and as varied as only a bilingual and bicultural experience can be at its best.

Only within the last decade, since the Council set out its bilingual policy, have the schools been able to make any significant reference to the culture, the environment and the mother tongue of the people. It is therefore ironic that some parents speak in English with their children at home and recent changes aimed at making Gaelic the medium of education have been accompanied by the arrival of English language television broadcasting. The challenge now is how far Gaelic will be threatened by the influence of seductive English TV programmes. It is to be hoped that Government funding of Gaelic Television will redress the balance.

## Support of Gaelic by the project

Since the issue of language was an important factor from the beginning, one of the strategies for empowering the Gael linguistically was by working in Gaelic. The project went about this in a number of different ways. Much of its small group work was in Gaelic: it was not uncommon for meetings to split into two groups; those who spoke Gaelic, and those who only spoke English. They often discussed the same topics, and shared their ideas at the end of the evening. For many Gaelic-speaking women this device was important for they spoke their mother tongue confidently and expressively, something they could not have done in English. All the annual parents' Stornoway Seminars were bilingual events. The moves to create an independent voice for parents out of those meetings identified support for Gaelic as one of the most pressing needs to be addressed by the women who provided playgroups throughout the islands.

The project collaborated with other Gaelic organisations to support the language. In a BBC Highland interview with Dr Donald John Macleod, then Education Officer with *Comunn na Gaidhlig* – the Gaelic Association – the interviewer asked how important was the work that *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean* was doing for CNAG.<sup>1</sup> Dr Macleod said:

The project has been giving a great deal of support to our work for some time. They've held Forums on Gaelic and we have participated with them in this. They have also helped establish Gaelic playgroups, and we feel this is the first step for the cause in any community – they did this in Breasclete (Lewis) and in Barra, and now Breasclete has become the first Gaelic medium school at primary level. We have been working together. They give support to parents; they're good at it, and we are keen to use the experience and skills they have.

## The effect of Gaelic radio

Gaelic language radio stations began broadcasting from Stornoway and Inverness soon after the Western Isles Islands Council was established. Once people throughout the islands began listening regularly to island news with their morning porridge, they became conscious of the differences in pronunciation between Lewis and Uist and the words that Uist used that Lewis had seldom heard. Listening familiarised them to the habits and linguistic behaviour of other Gaelic speakers and broadened their attitude to linguistic variety. It has also validated everyone's speech and encouraged people to talk on the radio with confidence.

Sheila Macleod, Project Reporter, played a key role in empowering the Gael. She was an experienced, accomplished journalist and used the radio to enhance awareness of the project's work. Her output was almost exclusively in Gaelic. As she pointed out:

Access to BBC *Radio nan Eilean* (Stornoway) and *Radio nan Gaidheal* (Inverness) is a valued avenue of publicity for the project ... It would seem that radio coverage in Gaelic is the most productive form of publicity. I am frequently greeted with the question, '*Agus de man a thu na Croileagan?*' ('And how are the playgroups?').

This acknowledgement is slightly tongue-in-cheek, for not only is it an indication that have they heard the programme in which pre-school groups are usually mentioned, but also that they are alert to the connotations of my use of the word, *croileagan*, a Gaelic word of acceptable lineage, meaning 'ring of children', but one never used by my generation in our youth, because there was no such thing as an organised 'ring of children'.

Again, this is an illustration of how language accommodates innovation, and an indication of the infusion of strength which local Gaelic radio is imparting to it through revitalisation of the vocabulary. The process is, in a very real sense, a mutually sustaining one; mothers talking with confidence in their own language about their own and their children's needs are just as surely contributing to the invigoration of Gaelic while expressing their enhanced awareness of themselves within their own culture.

With all these methods of publicity in use, it was disconcerting to hear, half-way through the year, one fieldworker declare, 'I think there is too much publicity for the project. If the work is good, it will speak for itself'.

This refers to tension within the project team, in this instance about publicity, but more fundamentally about language. The team was a microcosm of the Western Isles; some were uncertain and ambivalent in their attitude towards Gaelic and some actively maintained a passion for their mother tongue.

Available educational research showed that, far from holding children back, two languages were a distinct advantage, and it was the manner in which children had been educated in the past. It was their lack of self-confidence – and not Gaelic – which caused difficulties.

One incomer mother said in response to parents who had spoken of children learning Gaelic as a waste of time:

There should be more said about what happens in a Gaelic medium class. Some think it's just about learning a few songs that you can sing at New Year. And it's not about that. It's about taking your life in another direction ...

### **English television and Gaelic speakers**

Before television arrived in the Western Isles, many children went to school speaking Gaelic and they had to learn English before their education proceeded. With the arrival of television, children began to pick up English from TV programmes they had watched and one teacher remembers that the first English word a boy uttered in class was 'Kojak', the name of the main character in a popular crime series. This was the first sign of how TV was influencing viewers.

The power of television to capture the attention of viewers decreases the amount of family talk, something which enables children to learn to use the language. The acquisition of English and the suppression of Gaelic is the loss of one of the two windows on the world that bilingual children have.

In a submission to the Bernard van Leer Foundation, Dr Finlay Macleod wrote:

The effect of English television is becoming ever more pronounced and even young pre-school children are being influenced by it. The periods during which the pre-school child can be expected to be monolingual Gaelic-speaking are becoming shorter and rarer. And this at a time when the young child requires all the skills he can muster in his native language if he is to retain even a rudimentary grasp of it in the face of the imminent influences of the dominant culture.

### **Gaelic materials for the very young**

By the time the Community Education Project feasibility study was in place in 1977, stories written in some Primary classes 1-3 were being collected by the Bilingual Education Project (BEP). The 24 schools in the BEP had to start with a legacy of neglect and a dearth of published children's books in Gaelic – the aftermath of a century of indifference on the part of central and local government and of compulsory English in schools. There was an urgent need for printed Gaelic materials.

When the playgroup parents in Ness wanted stories in Gaelic, the two education projects joined forces to provide picture story books for them by having English texts translated into Gaelic and printed so that they could be pasted over the English.

The BEP was concerned at the barren state of Gaelic publishing<sup>11</sup> and teachers and children, especially at the lower primary stages, were encouraged to devise their own material, developing it through classroom activity. The project provided various kinds of paper, slides and slide viewers, simple cameras and cassette tapes together with ideas as to their most effective use, and teachers and pupils became adept at compiling their own tape-slide programmes, illustrated stories, posters, and so on.

The project team with teacher groups prepared, tested, appraised and refined works for classroom use. As many as forty poems and a dozen stories could be produced on a Saturday for distribution to the schools a few days later. A series of books was eventually published by Acair.<sup>11</sup>

The partnership between the BEP and the Community Education Project led to the production of Gaelic Nursery Rhymes and Songs for children; illustrated nursery rhyme cards; picture story books with Gaelic paste-over texts; and photographic sequences, reflecting the communities in which the children lived. Research indicated that parents wanted to bring up their children to speak Gaelic.

In due course BEP had funding from the then Highlands and Islands Development Board. Early additions to Gaelic books came by way of a procedure known as co-publication, the first example of which involved the Council, Longman Group and the project – the Council paid, Longman published, and the project translated. This enabled a reprint of a series called *The Monster Books (Spàgan in Gaelic)* which used brilliant illustrations with a Gaelic translation of the text prepared by the project (*Spàgan* refers to an affable fantasy creature).

Later, this publishing procedure was spread by means of The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages<sup>12</sup> with which the Western Isles is associated. Eventually, in Phase 2 of CEP, Gaelic educational materials for all primary schools were produced and the project was able to add significantly to the quantity and availability of Gaelic teaching materials.

### **Some other costs of a century of compulsory English**

Compulsory English in schools suppressed Gaelic publishing and bypassed Gaelic literacy for children. Islanders who acquired Gaelic

at home and had very little at school, grew up with little or no experience of writing in Gaelic. For example, a member of the Shawbost Historical Society had to transcribe the old folks' recorded reminiscences into English because she did not know how to spell in her own language. Teachers felt insecure about spelling in Gaelic and thus could not teach children how to do it correctly.

Even University Celtic departments have not published orthographical studies similar to those studies in English orthography produced over the centuries. In recent times, some linguists<sup>10</sup> have given attention to producing studies that have academic validity and are also accessible to primary school teachers.

Since the BEP has enabled five year olds to write in Gaelic about themselves and their homes, it is now more appropriate for the staff of Celtic Departments to collaborate with teachers to prepare classroom materials for primary school teachers and children.

### Summing up

Although Annie Macsween, the fieldworker in Ness, ensured that the Feasibility Study flowed smoothly into its the first phase of the project proper, work was hampered by two factors. First, the delay in appointing a new Director for the project (the first had resigned after a year) meant that fieldworkers were unprepared and sent out to perform their tasks with virtually no guidance. Second, people in the new project areas had very little notion as to why fieldworkers were arriving at all. All of this was exacerbated by the sheer geographical dispersal which prevented the project staff from actually becoming a team.

Despite all the difficulties with coordination and communication, Dr Donald John Macleod, the Director of *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean* from 1979 to 1982, considered that the work during that period undoubtedly influenced the Council (*Comhairle nan Eilean*) in its plans for community education in the Islands. People had rediscovered the self-confidence that extraneous influences had so consistently undermined in the past.

Although work with the Ness Cooperative flourished for a while and then failed, it had brought the whole township together and thus had been worth doing.

The project made good use of the strategic placing of part-time fieldworkers and provided support and sustained parent and child activities through the medium of Gaelic.

The Ness Historical Society had flourished and had exhibited its archives in Ness Hall, an event that had drawn islanders from Barra to the Butt of Lewis, and had attracted tourists as well. In turn, other areas had been inspired to set up their own Historical Societies.

The Ness Horticulturalists had revitalised the idea of surplus production and had realised that they needed more training, especially in marketing and merchandising.

Towards the end of this phase, Annie Macsween explored what it was like being a mother in this part of the world in a series of interviews with playgroup mothers entitled 'Ness Mothers' Concerns'. These interviews, which provided a springboard for the project's later work, articulated how early expectations of motherhood clashed with reality in a Hebridean setting and revealed parents' uneasy relationships with teachers.

Annie was able to move from her office in Stornoway to a new office in the Old Cross School House and this closer geographic contact made it possible for her to become an intermediary between village people and officials and bureaucrats of all kinds. She was thus able to enhance the community's awareness that they could do things for themselves.

Phase 1 had started with the Ness Gaelic playgroup and ended with work leading to a potential Family Centre. The township had come together in ways that would have been unthinkable a generation earlier. The focus had shifted to the women of Ness and their pre-school children. In Phase 2, these women would be given a chance to speak for themselves.

At the end of their contracts, the three fieldworkers, Morag Macleod, Cailean Maclean and Annie Macsween resigned. Tension caused by a dearth of team spirit and a lack of collaboration had exacerbated the daunting nature of the work.

Phase 1 left behind ideas and unfinished work, some of which was taken up in Phase 2. But ordinary people (sometimes referred to as *comasach* 'the capable people') – the playgroup mothers, the young people, the Historical Society teams, and others, were beginning to discover how to deal with their own problems. 'We learned how to do it ourselves', they said.

## Notes and references to Chapter 2

1. The population of the parish of Iochdar in 1978:

0-5	19
5-15	60
16-65	162
65+	78
Total:	319
2. 'During the 19th Century, many crofters in the Highlands and Islands were evicted to make room for sheep farms. Some were given poor land. Many more were taken to Canada and Australia. By the 1870s widespread, organised defiance of the landlords broke out. In 1883, a Royal Commission disclosed "a state of misery, of wrong-doing, and of patient long-suffering, without parallel in the history of our country". This gave rise to the Magna Carta of the Hebrides (and all other crofting counties) – The Crofters Holding Act of 1886. It established a Crofters Commission to take over from the landowners the entire management of their crofting estates with power to fix fair rents.' (Murray, W.H. page 23 – see bibliography)
3. Job Creation was a temporary employment scheme for unemployed youngsters.
4. The Historical Group was in Edinburgh from 2 February to 10 February 1978, and visited the Department of the Environment; Central Excavation Unit; School of Scottish Studies; Department of Celtic, University of Edinburgh; BBC Edinburgh; Ordnance Survey Archaeology Department; Ordnance Survey Reference Unit; Department of Ancient Monuments; National Museum of Antiquities; Countryside Commission; West Register House; and National Library.
5. Macdonald, M. – see bibliography. In the following year *The Herring Girls* won the prize for the best Gaelic book of 1988. Acair is the Western Isles Publishing Company and Agnes Rennie, née Gillies was its first publisher.
6. *Comunn* is the singular form and *comuinn* is the plural.
7. A comment Annie Macsween made at Ness Historical Society's first exhibition of its archives.
8. From Chapter 5 of the Report on Phase 2 written by Ian Minty.
9. From an advertisement for *Comunn Na Gaidhlig is Gaelic is Fun* (see bibliography).
10. Scottish Gaelic is one of the Celtic languages, related closely to Irish and Manx, but not to Welsh and Breton.
11. Sheila Macleod, January 1986.
12. CSAG is the acronym made from *Comunn na Gaidhlig* and *Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Araich* (The Gaelic Playgroup and Nursery Association). The interview took place in April 1986.
13. Murray, I. and Morrison, C. – see bibliography.

14. In December 1977, the new Western Isles publishing company, Acair Ltd, an idea which originated in the B.I.P, became a reality. Its first Gaelic publications were for children and besides its other publications, it still provides Gaelic books for children of all ages.
15. The European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages seeks to preserve and promote the lesser used native languages of the European Communities, together with their associated cultures. The Council of the Bureau has members in Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, United Kingdom, Luxembourg, and Spain.
16. One such study is Richard L. Venezky's, *The Structure of English Orthography*. The Hague, Mouton, 1970.

## Focusing on pre-school children and their families



The second phase of *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean*, under the leadership of Ian Minty, reflected a crucial development – the Foundation's new focus on pre-school children and their families' and on playgroup links with schools; it also coincided with severe budget reductions for the Council and in the education service as a whole.

Phase 2 aimed to foster the concept of education as a life-long process, and to promote education in the Western Isles by developing informal parent-centred groups; to improve the quality of early childhood education, especially work with pre-school children; to develop models of community education which could be monitored and applied to other

locations within the Western Isles and beyond; to enhance the capacity for personal development, both through informal group work and with individuals; to develop and refine management structures which would allow for participation in community education by a wider Island audience and to actively disseminate the lessons learned by the project, throughout the Western Isles and beyond.

Particular attention was focused on developing a capability to influence island families and communities, with children at their centre; the child was to be the 'entry point'.

Because one vital element in effective community development is encouraging groups to determine their own agendas, so that they can move beyond self-help to set their own priorities for action, it was agreed that good use of the project's fieldworker team would help establish an effective parental network, thus enabling the work to be spread throughout the Western Isles.

### Creation of the Islands' pre-school forums

It was now evident that the project was child-oriented but parent-centred and that by establishing Forums for under fives and linking

initiatives to local groups, the project would develop both a local and a regional organisation for parents and children.

The Project Director, Ian Minty, wrote:

... the project was to be closely involved with the Under fives Forum development; and work on themes that would stem from the fieldwork contacts at local and regional level. This would mean that home visiting and home-school links would be approached from a different angle.

The first Western Isles Playgroup Seminar was attended by 65 women, and played a key role in helping to launch the project into a chain of events and activities that dominated not only the project's first year, but its entire lifetime. One crucial outcome was the five geographically-based pre-school Forums. In addition, the seminar also boosted the mothers' morale at a time when the closure of village schools and the Islands' three nurseries made people anxious about their children's education. The project became known as an organisation committed to strengthening parents' confidence not only in Lewis, but throughout the islands. In addition, a basis for effective cooperation with the Social Work Department was established.

By the time advertisements were placed for additional project staff in April 1984, principal areas of work had been defined: the Forum meetings gave substance to the parent network at a local level; parents with pre-school children were supported by home visiting; examples of good practice in home-school relationships had been created by work with sympathetic teachers.

### **Initial home visits**

Two communities were chosen for the initial home visits: Breascleite, a crofting township on the west side of Lewis; and Torlum, a sparsely populated community in Benbecula, where rocky inlets and poor roads make communications difficult.

Breascleite's economic activity revolved around weaving Harris Tweed and fish farming, and a significant number of people worked in Stornoway. Fourteen mothers were visited, all of whom worked on the croft at various times of the year.

Torlum lies on the east side of the island and has no identifiable centre. It is less prosperous as there are fewer employment opportunities in Benbecula than there are in Lewis. Conditions are difficult: public transport is non-existent, services in general are

limited, and some of the families visited lived in caravans. The primary school, which was closed in June 1988 despite local resistance, was old and its facilities primitive. Prior to the project's initiative, the nearest pre-school group was seven miles away in Balivanich.

The two fieldworkers, Alice Read in Lewis and Annie MacGillivray in Benbecula, chronicled the effect of remoteness, isolation and anxiety of the young mothers with babies. In both locations, the primary schools were used as meeting places for the women once a week; women visited one another and provided support that reduced isolation. The two groups developed into school-based mother and toddler clubs; this later gave rise to the network of playgroups that was to become the backbone of *Guth nam Parant*.

### **Pre-school education**

By the time they come to school, all normal children can show skill as thinkers and language-users to a degree which must compel our respect, so long as they are dealing with 'real-life' meaningful situations in which they have purposes and intentions and in which they can recognise and respond to similar purposes and intentions in others ... These human intentions are the matrix in which the child's thinking is embedded. They sustain and direct his thoughts and his speech, just as they sustain and direct the thought and the speech of adults – even intellectually sophisticated adults – most of the time.

The 'real life meaningful situations' Margaret Donaldson speaks of above would only be developed if the project helped parents, teachers and administrators to recognise that the culture and linguistic richness of the Islands was an integral part of the child's pre-school experience.

There were a number of barriers to achieving this: some stemmed from how resistant the Scottish education system was to acknowledging the importance of pre-school education and the educational role that parents could play. Others stemmed from the project's objective to link the educational themes of home and school, and the need to heighten awareness of the educational needs of young children in a bilingual community. Widening support for existing pre-school groups and increasing educational opportunities for mothers complicated an already loaded agenda and made it difficult for the team to decide on priorities.

Discussions about the quality of playgroups often got lost in arguments about what kind of umbrella organisation should be created to embody the interests of mothers and children. Debate was difficult because suggestions for improving playgroup quality were likely to be bound up with the Hebridean attitude to 'incomers' and misinterpreted as an attack on the elements of rural township life. 'What right do you have to come here and tell us how to live our lives' was a sentiment never far from the surface. Even the fact that the project was financed from the Netherlands was enough for some to dismiss it.

One crucial way of enhancing the mothers' understanding of the relational dynamic between adults and children in pre-school groups was teaching mothers to distinguish between **interaction** and **intervention**; this involved making them aware of the difference between knowing what to do and knowing why it was being done – discovering the purpose that lay behind the doing and how the children were affected by learning to do things for themselves.

A mother from North U'ist told the director:

Since I've been coming to Forum meetings I've realised how much easier the time spent with the children is if you're prepared beforehand. None of us used to bother much; it was a case of bundling the kids into the car with our fingers crossed hoping one of us had an idea of what we'd do for two hours.

### **Ness interviews: mothers' and families' needs**

Early in 1982, Annie MacSween held meetings to explain the project's change of emphasis to early childhood education and the family. During an open meeting, where she showed slides of the project's work, the ensuing discussions revealed the intelligence, wit, and strength of the participating mothers. Their responses were varied and interesting.

The mothers clearly understood the difficulties they would have to overcome. The acerbic wit of a Ness playgroup mother sums up reactions to holding playgroup sessions in a hall unsuited to little children:

It's like sitting in the middle of the Sahara, reading a book to the children.

Another mother saw what councils everywhere seem reluctant to acknowledge: that the cause of the pre-school child clearly still needs more political champions:

The playgroup needs to get a place of its own.

Many mothers praised the playgroup and its meetings for providing them with a social occasion; for 'helping to broaden one's interests and one's horizons.

When you're locked in on your own you think you're the only one like this. Then you find out about the others.

You feel more committed to the playgroup if you are on the committee.

When you met anyone else from the committee you felt more part of the community.



Some saw the playgroup as a preparation for school which requires children to 'get some training for it at the playgroup'. Others saw it helping children out of the home to get used to being in a group: 'It gets them into the swing of the education system'.

All the mothers wanted to be able to help their children at home, but because teaching had changed since they were at school, they didn't know how to go about this. They would have liked teachers to explain to them how handwriting, arithmetic, and reading were taught now. It worried them that there were no

school meetings to inform parents about what their children were being taught. They were at the mercy of misunderstandings on both sides:

Having one school/parent meeting a year isn't very satisfactory. If you can't go that night you've missed your chance for a year. Bland, general comments on report cards aren't very helpful in indicating how children are doing.

It became obvious that the mothers were keen to help their children, and dissatisfied with the educational and social resources available to them at that time. What emerged from this was a clear understanding that parents needed to be made partners in the process of education.

Not only were the mothers frank about the environment their children were being educated in, but they were equally frank about themselves as wives and mothers. One wife drew attention to how seldom married couples ever went out together. They acquiesced to traditional male behaviour and agreed that they were taken for granted.

They all needed to get out of the house to escape from daily routines and to meet other women. Lack of public services, even the need for women's and children's requisites and medicines became irritating problems when the nearest chemist's shop was far away.

They clearly articulated the difficulties they confronted daily, difficulties that were never dealt with because, like many other issues, they were never brought into the open. 'It would be interesting to have discussions with other women in similar conditions to one's own, women whose husbands are at sea'.

### Notes and references to Chapter 3

1. In 1982, the Bernard van Leer Foundation altered its mandate and the focus of its work. The Foundation announced: 'Currently the emphasis is on early childhood education and the Foundation's activities are specifically directed to the age group 0-7'. This shift in focus had a radical impact on the work of the project. However, the Director soon saw that bringing together representatives of all the playgroups and letting them contribute to forming an organisation would create an opportunity to develop pre-school resources. The result of this was the remarkable way in which all the pre-school resources provided by young mothers were linked together and supported by fieldworkers and an elected Management Committee. In this way they set up non-formal parent and early childhood education. The project was able to successfully navigate through this change in direction.

2. Donaldson M. (see bibliography), page 21.

## *Guth nam Parant*

'By recognizing the mother as the most influential educator of her children they are returning to women the power which is so often wrested from them by "expert" opinion.'

'The benefits of the Community Playgroup are far-reaching and productive ... The interwoven learning between children and parents can have a profound effect upon the processes of growth within a family. It is striking how much the confidence and happiness of the Mums is increased by their real involvement with playgroups.'

'Guth nam Parant isn't just about playgroups. It's about women as well.'

The 1981 population census showed that the Western Isles had 1,800 children below the age of 5. In 1983 there were 40 pre-school groups in the Islands, based on urban pre-school playgroup models familiar on the mainland.

Critics rightly regarded pre-school groups that ran 'school rooms' with little or no parental involvement as an import from the mainland. Such groups, by providing childminding for mothers working away from home, ignored the Islanders' cultural and linguistic distinctiveness. However, these were only to be found in Stornoway, because in the rest of the islands, mothers who came together to organise a pre-school group in their village did so to provide educational resources for their children, and to enjoy the company of other women with the same objectives. Although small grants were made by the Social

Work Department to registered playgroups, very little practical help, assistance, or encouragement was given to the women.

There was little dialogue between the Education Department and the Social Work Department about pre-school children; local authorities made it clear that parents and early childhood education

Photo. Participants at one of Guth nam Parant's annual general meetings (photo: Stornoway Gazette)

were not important priorities. National governments as well were reluctant to provide for children at this most crucial time in their lives – a time when many children and parents are most vulnerable.

### **Making a Gaelic community playgroup**

The seeds for creating *Guth nam Parant* were present in the project from the very beginning, and its creation was a notable achievement, an achievement attained in the face of the difficult social conditions on the Hebridean Islands and contradictory influences on child care emanating from the mainland.

As Jerome Bruner points out in his book, *Under-Five in Britain*:

The history of child care in Britain since the war is a curious counterpoint of unfulfilled official declarations of intent, and voluntary response filling gaps left by inaction. In 1978, Britain had one of the poorest child care records in Western Europe in the maintained sector, and arguably the best record in the world in the do-it-yourself care of the under-fives.

The formation of a Gaelic Community Playgroup was an indication that the mothers were taking a more active role in their children's education, that they were beginning to 'do things for themselves'. The Playgroup had its roots back in 1977. During the Feasibility Study, project workers heard that a young Ness mother was interested in setting up a Gaelic playgroup, and her resolve to do so was supported by 20 other mothers.

When people undertake such an assignment as this on their own, they start with nothing but their enthusiasm, which is a necessary ingredient for the formidable work facing them. They have to put together the framework that will make it possible for them to run their enterprise and, unlike workplaces, they have no infrastructure provided.

There was no alternative to meeting in Ness Hall. They began fundraising, set up a committee to discuss the aims of the playgroup and to take charge of its organisation, management and financing. They began to order materials and equipment and then planned children's activities and worked out management details in preparation for the first meeting of Ness Community Playgroup.

The enthusiasm of these Ness mothers and their new friendships enhanced their concern 'to learn more about what made their children tick'. The social and intellectual stimulus they received in the process carried them through various difficulties.

Their playgroup was not dominated by any one person, so learning processes were shared and the group was free from internally and externally imposed controls. The children saw their mothers, and each mother her child, in new learning settings which contributed to the growth in self confidence for both; important benchmarks for other Island Community Playgroups had been set.

A year on, the teacher in Cross Primary School said that the children who had been to the playgroup had settled into school with ease. From a school in another part of the islands, it was said that the equivalent teacher found it easy to pick out the playgroup children as they were always asking questions and getting out of their seats to fetch things for themselves and it took a while to get them to sit down and shut up: comments from diametrically opposed educational attitudes.

### **A parent-teacher partnership in Cross Primary School**

In Ness, the fieldworker had gradually enabled a communications network to emerge between the community, the playgroup, parents, teachers, the Bilingual Education Project, the Community Education Service and the Social Work Department. These were now linked to the changing notion of family which, in fluctuating circumstances, needed to evolve new ways for people to relate to one another in associations of caring surrogates for the extended family. The playgroup had an important role to fulfil, especially where young mothers did not have their parents nearby. The health of the playgroup blooms when it has a link with a sympathetic school.

Cross Primary School in Ness is well known for its lively, articulate children, a result of the remarkably open relationship between teachers and children. With little servility and much orderly freedom, there is respect shown by adults and children for one another – a nice mixture of ancient and modern.

The fieldworkers, using a gradualist approach, linked home and school by first listening to parents and teachers and learning about their concerns, attitudes, and needs. In turn, teachers established links with the playgroup.

### **Bringing the playgroup mothers together**

Unlike professionals, the mothers who worked so liberally to provide for playgroups had no avenues for airing their views. Nor were they listened to collectively. As individuals and as local groups remote from one another, they tended to see their problems as the

result of their inadequacies, their ignorance and inexperience, rather than as the failure of society to recognise their abilities and provide for their development.

In the first few months of *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean*, Phase 2, project staff realised they needed to understand what the women thought of pre-school education. Until they were able to engage parents in discussion, there could be no local ownership of the project's aims.

One of the workshops at the first Stornoway Parents' Seminar in 1984 focused on practical activities in pre-school groups. This became an outpouring of problems that women felt were special to them:

I don't think our playgroup works very well. It's probably our fault because we're only mothers. We're not very good at organizing our children. By the time you've got your own kids ready for playgroup, the idea of setting up activities for another 20 is a bit daunting.

At the end of the session women were saying to one another:

Do you have that problem too? I thought it was just me. We thought it was just our group that found things difficult. We never realised that other groups were like that too.

After the second Seminar the following year, the project was able to illustrate how growth and development were taking place, sometimes unexpectedly, as comments from mothers disclosed:

Last year I didn't say a word. This year I couldn't shut up.

A second mother said:

Our group sent six people this year and two of them said they couldn't believe it was them talking.

Bringing parents together regularly brought a flow of ideas and opinions from pre-school groups and made the project aware of the need for sustained dialogue among parents of pre-school children. The Forums' potential for presenting training in specific skills and for reinforcing parents' self confidence were crucial objectives.

### **The Forum Network**

From the outset project staff serviced and resourced the meetings that emerged from the 1984 Parents' Seminar and worked with



women in planning their activities. Between 1984 and 1987, 52 forum meetings were held throughout the islands and each attracted an average of 25 women.

No two meetings were the same, and each reflected the personalities of the women involved and their different environmental and linguistic features. The need to support Gaelic as the mother tongue, featured prominently in most meetings. The meetings enabled ideas to be expressed about working with young children, and they also provided social

opportunities for the women. For those living in dispersed island communities these meetings were invaluable. Gradually, the needs of women in their own right were addressed as were women's health issues.

Thus many women were able to meet frequently, while project staff listened in to their discourse without imposing a 'project view'. They also began to learn from one another about how they dealt with their partners, their children, and how they could express their aspirations. Sharing thoughts and feelings became a strengthening and reassuring experience for everyone.

The fieldworkers assisted women to achieve locally negotiated objectives and these were likely to differ from one forum meeting to another. Some Forums tended to be playgroup oriented, while others pursued wider and more general issues.

The differences among Forums had both strengths and weaknesses. Their diversity gave rise to personal identities. But as moves were made to provide a structure that could survive the project, different interpretations of what the network was about began to create tensions.

The project was in regular touch with groups and individuals who wished to discuss the educational context in which the forum network meetings took place. The state of early childhood education in the Western Isles, the extent of support forthcoming for parents and children from various agencies, and the lack of

practical help in maintaining Gaelic as a mother tongue in the face of the English TV culture of the 1980s, were some of the problems that emerged.

### **Establishing a parents' organisation**

Three-year time spans are common for short-term projects and staff grapple with timetables that are often difficult to adhere to. In this case, the programme of initiation, consolidation and transition was never far from the minds of project staff.

The idea of an independent parent organisation to represent early childhood groups in the Western Isles was first suggested by the Council's principal social worker early in 1984. The need for a group outside the Council's control to raise the profile of pre-school education, to seek support for increasing financial assistance to pre-school education was raised.

During the year women from different pre-school groups, especially in Lewis and Harris, were brought together to discuss how best to consolidate their achievements. In the Spring of 1985, 11 women met in Benbecula to plan the parents' seminar in Stornoway. When asked about the Gaelic name they would give to their 'association', the Harris fieldworker, Shona Fraser, proposed that since mothers had been given a voice, it should be called 'the voice of the parents' - *Guth nam Parant* in Gaelic. A firm commitment emerged to create a separate parents' organisation, with the project acting as 'midwife'.

In February and March, the project organised a series of 'Training the Trainer' courses for key women in pre-school groups. These were run in conjunction with the Open University (Scotland) and the Community Education Development Centre based in Coventry (England). This demonstrated very clearly that until mothers saw themselves as members of individual pre-school groups as well as members of a collective, long-term improvement in the quality of pre-school education and in their own further education would remain distant objectives. In 1986, 70 people attended the Parents' Seminar and gave unanimous support for a parent organisation.

### **Interviewing parents and teachers**

The mothers involved with this project eloquently demonstrated the innate creativity, talent, honesty, and generosity which T. Lovett, a part-time tutor who worked with one group of working class mothers in Liverpool, observed in his work. *Adult Education, Community Development and the Working Class*:

In my opinion after a term's work with them, these women represent a huge pool of scarcely-tapped ability, talent and resourcefulness; their humour, candour, generosity and realism are hard to describe. They are brave, resilient and independent-minded, monuments to the irrelevance of a formal education system in which they failed and were neglected. They are articulate, with the sort of authoritativeness which springs from hard-won experience rather than hard-read theory. The tragedy of their education 'failure' in early life is that they have been left with a kind of humility which is ludicrous when measured against their manifest strength, intelligence and articulateness.

The mothers in the Hebrides embodied that same resourcefulness and innate intelligence, that same ability for profound reflection which Lovett had observed and recorded. The following comments, received by the Director after the termination of the project in 1987, aptly show this.

### **Two mothers are interviewed**

One mother commented on Forum Meetings, pointing out how the participating mothers experienced an enhancement in their self-esteem and confidence:

Women began to come out of their shell as a direct result of the project. At discussion groups and in the Forum meetings you were able to watch women grow and develop.

I think it changed the levels of consciousness within the pre-school groups too. We met with one another regularly, which is something that had never happened before, and we learned how to relate to one another.

Mothers had begun to realise that both they and their children were growing, and that they were becoming more aware and more capable; they began to realise that different children had differing needs, requiring differing approaches:

My own pre-school group was a lot more effective as a result of the mothers attending Forum meetings. We became more aware of the different needs of children in the group whereas before we tended to expect everyone to do the same things at the same time.

I suppose the Forums all had different types of impact because they were all different. The role of women in

Islands' society has been changing slowly, and the Forums played a part in that change. But they depended for their success on how well the project staff knew the women. I think that was part of the secret.

This mother understood the power which Gaelic had to empower parents:

The project helped to increase awareness of Gaelic as an issue amongst parents. I think there's less of a defeatist attitude now.

A second mother commented on the improvements in pre-school education which had occurred as a result of the dedicated work of the project:

I'm certain that the project improved the experience of pre-school education for mothers; I'm less certain that there was an improvement for the children. Those schemes brought some women into contact with new ideas which must have had a knock-on effect on the quality of experience for the children, but it's difficult to be precise.

She, too, noted the increased self-confidence which had resulted:

For other mothers, the project provided a sort of accreditation of their ideas and practice. The project helped to institutionalise those ideas and gave value and validity to them.

The project had a dramatic effect on some women. They began to attend meetings, and to speak at them, something that would not have happened before the project. Friendship is an important factor in reducing isolation. All this helped to improve our collective and individual confidence.

But she also observed and commented upon areas which still needed work, issues which still needed to be refined:

The project should have started the 'hands on' experience work earlier. It got better at it later on, and it was what groups were crying out for. But I think the team lacked the right people; it needed experienced and qualified people to demonstrate good practice to the mothers.

The Forums never had any leaders, which I think was a disadvantage. People were uncertain as to what a Forum

was, even if they had been to one. But it was the worst time to begin this work in the Islands; conditions were too hostile, both at a political and administrative level.<sup>4</sup> What the project did was to listen to parents more than anyone else had ever done before. It responded to what parents were saying and feeling about their language and culture.

### **Involvement of schools**

'Education is a continuous process which happens everywhere. The school is only one of the many contexts in which children learn. The most important context for learning in the early years is the home. To be effective, the work of the school should build on the work of the home.'

'The function of the Primary school is not merely to prepare (the child) for secondary education or to teach him the basic skills, but to begin to prepare him for life. Consequently it must concern itself with the whole child, fashioning its organisation, its curriculum, and its methods in such a way as to cater for every facet of his developing personality ...'

Education, so crucial to a young child's growth and development and to her or his preparation for life, was the key issue addressed by the project. The playgroups were therefore a vehicle for preparing the children for life, and not just for formal schooling. Participating mothers began to value the importance of pre-school education and to appreciate the vital role which they could play in the whole process of their children's education.

Teachers, noting the dramatic changes which had taken place in both mothers and children, commented on how effective their schools' participation in the project had been. As one teacher commented:

There is more awareness now of the importance of pre-school education amongst mothers as a result of the project. The project opened up avenues, more opportunities, for mothers to learn. Those that began coming into this school talked with other mothers in the village and the awareness of what they had picked up in school began to rub off on some of the other women.

I see a difference in the children now, compared to what it was like before they had pre-school experience. They seem better prepared now ... They are better able to listen; they've had the experience of being read to. In this area this has a lot

to do with the fact that now mothers are using more materials at home with their children. Those ideas, I know, came from the project. As teachers we don't have to spend so much time helping the children to get acclimatised to school, because so much of that work has been accomplished by the time the children enter school.

Comments indicated that the teachers were enjoying enhanced relationships and interchanges with the mothers; they felt more positive about the contributions which mothers could make to their children's development and education:

I think that mothers did gain more self confidence as a result of the project. I can think of some who now feel able to come into school any time to ask advice, or to share ideas. I love this close association that has developed, and wish that it had been around earlier in my career. The fact that they feel so at home here – it's almost as if a big barrier had dropped away.

Mothers come into school quite regularly now. I can think of one mother who regularly brings her pre-school child into school to look at books in the library. They chatter away in both English and Gaelic about the pictures and stories. That's the sort of thing that we ought to be encouraging ... I think that there is a duty on us as teachers to encourage parents to come into school and help ... I think that the practical help that the project gave me, the support and the workshops for parents, gave me and the parents a great deal of encouragement.

The school gained a lot from the MISC Materials Scheme [Manpower Services Commission, a body which provided funding for classroom materials], both in terms of materials and in having an extra pair of hands. I saw the people who came to this school on the scheme grow in experience and self confidence.

The project helped to fill a need that has always existed. But until this phase of the project arrived, no one in the Western Isles recognised the need. We have to reach out more to the under fives and their parents, and to see education as part of a continuous process, not something that starts when a child reaches the age of five.

This teacher felt that the project didn't always get the recognition and appreciation that it deserved:

I don't think that the project was very good at making itself known ... It chose a difficult time to come to the Western Isles to begin this work; for many reasons it was not a good time. But for all this the project did have an impact and ought not to be underestimated. I just wish that there had been something like this years ago.

A number of other teachers confirmed the observations made above, and praised the project for the benefits it had brought to the Islands. A second teacher noted:

Certainly children in this village appear to be engaged in more constructive, meaningful play, and the mothers on the playgroup rota seem to have a better understanding of how to develop playgroup activities. We find that the children settle into school more easily and work well together.

A third Primary School teacher eloquently described how the project had succeeded despite the difficulties which it had encountered:

Before the project it seemed to me that a huge divide existed between the school and the playgroup. The project created a bridge for both of us to cross. It helped establish the idea that there were benefits for both teachers and parents in encouraging interaction. By straddling this gap, the project helped to show us how valuable and vital the early childhood years are. It legitimised for us as teachers that it was OK to talk with parents about education in the early years. I think it also helped us as teachers to look more closely at the day to day involvement of parents in the school.

The Western Isles is a very conservative place, and change tends to take a long time here. Change seems to be an especially difficult process in schools, and one of the consequences of that is that 'external projects' are difficult to cope with because they're seen as leading to change. And yet the paradox is that the longer you work in schools here, the more difficult it becomes to organise change from within, so you need these external projects to provide you with encouragement and stimulus.

This teacher too understood that the project had given mothers enhanced confidence to struggle for themselves and for their children:

I know a primary school which is threatened with closure that has a defence committee that is almost entirely made up of women who have been involved with the local playgroup. The project was part of the process that helped those women gain confidence in themselves, which in turn has helped them to resist the proposals to close the school.

### The potential of pre-school experiences



The project team felt that their accomplishments had been significant, but that those achievements had been gained despite severe problems, some of which were physical (geographic and logistical factors), others which had been caused by the shift in focus on the part of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the funding organisation, and still others which had been caused by organisational factors.

Project staff considered that they had failed to transmit to others an entirely clear sense of the project's purpose; despite energetic attempts, project statements about its aims and objectives never resolved this conflict of impressions - the result of a lack of clarity at the outset.

However, this apparently harsh judgement has to be placed alongside a general national ignorance of the role of parents in pre school education. In the Western Isles and in Scotland generally, the idea that pre-school education means preparing children for school is widely held by many administrators and teachers. They do not realise that pre-school education begins to prepare the child for life, that it should be concerned with the whole child.

Falling primary school roles have encouraged local authorities to open classes for the rising fives although the teachers who undertake this work are unlikely to have any training for it. HM Inspectors report that much teaching of four year olds in school in England and Wales is unsuited to their needs. Much work remains to be done to ensure that parents hear about the advantages of pre school experience, which is distinctive because it uses the child's parents and home as its source model, as the alternative to making immature children emulate the first year of statutory schooling.

Experience taught the project that many primary teachers were unfamiliar with parental participation in pre-school education. When teachers were giving advice to groups of playgroup mothers, they assumed that each mother's task was to prepare the children to meet the expectations of the teachers. Some teachers rated pre-school education as little better than a supervised riot. The project faced many obstacles in attempting to get teachers and mothers to talk to each other. The Forum network was often the sole means of increasing women's awareness of the consequence of giving the children stimulating, varied pre-school experience. Mothers in the Western Isles were learning to improve the quality of the children's play activities. Participants in project training courses produced similar evidence from courses that had a positive effect on what they were able to offer pre-school children. As one mother who attended a course in 1987 said:

Since I've been on the course you ran I've had so many more ideas; not just at playgroup, but with my own kids at home.

### **The management of transition from project to Council, May 1986 – April 1987**

The question arose during 1986 as to how the Community Education Project could be institutionalised. Two issues were crucial here: the first concerned the uncertainty facing *Guth nam Parant* and the project staff as to how they were to be sustained financially; the second was how the transition was to be managed. The project team had to make a conceptual leap at this point to accommodate the idea that institutionalisation of its ideas was more sustainable with the parents in the community than with the Islands' Council.

From May 1986 to April 1987, the programme of Forum meetings continued; meetings were held in different places, in recognition of *Guth nam Parant* as the representative of all the islands. A draft constitution was written and a 10-member Executive Committee was elected.

To clarify the support role the Forum meetings network would have to pursue if *Guth nam Parant* were to take over from the project, in November 1986 it organised a course to increase the effectiveness of small groups. Regular Forum meetings continued. Members presented programmes they had prepared and they gained strength individually and collectively.

After eight months of discussions, the Council, which had been negotiating to institutionalise the project's work, broke off

negotiations with the Bernard van Leer Foundation on the grounds that it found the Foundation's requirements for continuity unacceptable. The Foundation continued to accept the importance of supporting parent-run initiatives and immediately entered into discussions with *Guth nam Parant*. This resulted in the signing of an agreement for financial and technical support from the Foundation for a period of three-and-a-half years.

The commitment of all the women who took part in this was remarkable. Most of them spent nights away from home, undertaking arduous journeys in small boats and planes and often in hostile weather. They had to take their children with them, or leave them with partners or relatives.

One of the meetings, in January 1987, involved travel to the small island of Berneray in the Sound of Harris, a mid-way point. For those travelling from Lewis this meant a two hour minibus journey followed by an hour in a motor boat, in each direction. It says much for the relationships forged within the group and with project staff that the women were prepared to embark on such journeys. Some were reminded of how, in the previous September, the Harris group met on a wild and stormy night and 23 women came, including two local primary school teachers. Seven women came from Scalpay, which involved a short sea crossing. As the night became progressively more stormy there was doubt as to whether they would make it home that night. After midnight they did, courtesy of a local fishing boat.

The project was regarded by its sponsors as:

... an experimental pre-school and community training project, stimulating the coordinated development of pre-school and related community education training structures, leading to an evaluated model of community self-help.

*Guth nam Parant* and the parent network represented the most important and the most embracing outcome of Phase 2. While the structure of meetings was designed to reflect the language and the culture of Hebridean families and communities, the approach and the method are applicable in similar locations, some of which might not be rural. But it is expecting too much for such work to be done entirely on a voluntary basis. Successful involvement of large numbers of women owed much to the presence of paid fieldworkers with their own transport, access to a telephone and a back-up office with clerical resources.

### ***Guth nam Parant on its own***

“Those familiar with the immutable difficulties presented by the geography of the area, compounded by inter-island travel, widely-dispersed communities and (in many places) lack of public transport, will accept that, without the personal commitment and dedication to the ideal of self-help demonstrated by the group of 10 mothers who formed its Management Committee, *Guth nam Parant* could not have hoped to survive its first year.”

At the end of their first year's work without the project in the background to help them (1987 - 1988), the Chairperson and the Management Committee produced a Report in which they described *Guth nam Parant* as:

... a voluntary organisation run by parents in the interest of parents and pre-school children throughout the Western Isles. It arose out of the expressed wishes and aspirations of those parents who had been working in close collaboration with *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean*, a community-based initiative in Early Childhood Care and Education, funded and supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation and the Local Authority for the Western Isles.

The Chairperson went on to describe their endeavours and to make proposals concerning what *Guth nam Parant* needed to sustain the quality of its work and improve on it:

In the uncertainty following the cessation of *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean*, it would have been difficult to sustain the momentum generated by parents' involvement with the project's stated aims and objectives, had not the Foundation proved willing to provide financial support and professional guidance.

He iterated an important principle behind the work – that parents needed to learn to empower other parents:

*Guth nam Parant's* strength is based on the premise of parents helping other parents.

He went on to say:

*Guth nam Parant* decided at an early stage that the networking of groups should be based on the Forum concept created by *Proiseact Muinntir Eilean*, whereby the

areas to be covered would be divided into manageable entities. There are three areas in Lewis: East side, West side and Lochs; there is one in Harris covering the entire Island as well as Scalpay; one for North Uist and Benbecula, and the sixth for South Uist, Eriskay and Barra. Forum evening meetings for parents have been attended almost exclusively by mothers, and this is reflected in the choice of topics for the informal training sessions. These have included: demonstrations of art and of crafts; of using baking as a Playgroup activity, of the value of children's recreation and sports, and the intellectual stimulation of books and other creative activities.

Information and discussion on other matters relating to women's and children's health have also featured in these evening programmes. The social content of the evening is an implicit bonus.

It is significant that the highest attendance for a Forum evening (over 60 persons) was drawn by the subject of Gaelic Medium Education.

The need for close collaboration between *Guth nam Parant* and the network of pre-school groups is central to *Guth nam Parant* philosophy.

Training may be divided into two broad-based sections: enabling the management committee to overcome the complexities inherent in an innovative venture such as *Guth nam Parant*, and to enable them to support those who need practical help. The second is concerned with providing learning opportunities for any members of *Guth nam Parant*.

Links with the Open University and the Open College would extend the choices for parent education, with *Guth nam Parant* acting as an intermediary agency.

### ***Guth nam Parant's* first Seminar**

The Seminar held in Benbecula in October 1985 was without doubt the crowning glory of a year's work undertaken by the Management Committee to bring *Guth nam Parant* through its first year without professional back-up. Those present reaffirmed their determination to have the best possible education for their children. A Reporter for the Seminar, Ms Elly Alexander from the Early Childhood Education Project in Aberdeen, wrote the following, confirming that the parents had indeed spoken loud and clear:

Having reluctantly accepted the premature demise of *Proiseact Muinntir nan Eilean*, the Bernard van Leer Foundation gave a direct grant to *Guth nam Parant* which enabled it to continue to meet and to employ a part-time coordinator to support the work of the committee. But the real strength of *Guth nam Parant* was the substantial sacrifice of voluntary time and energy which all the members gave to meet this exciting but personally demanding challenge.

Mothers from each of the six Forum areas came with their children to enjoy the opportunity to meet and talk with each other, to celebrate the achievements of the last year and to look forward to the future. The one disappointment was that no Barra mothers could attend as it clashed with the ferryman's annual holiday – a reminder to visitors from the mainland how different and difficult is life on these islands.

Over 200 women and children attended the one-day seminar and for many it was a three-day outing. The atmosphere was festive, with participants enjoying a rare freedom from having to cook meals. A discussion workshop was led by a local health visitor on women's body image. This set the scene for women learning to grow in self confidence through sharing their own knowledge and experience. Later on, a new committee was elected with representatives from each of the areas; this was done to ensure that *Guth nam Parant* would continue its work. In addition, a constitution was adopted that would give the organisation charitable status and allow it to raise funds to extend the work that it had initiated and supported.

The day didn't just have an impact on the women who attended but, thanks to radio broadcasting, the events had a much wider audience. Elly Alexander reported:

Radio Highland covered the event with two reporters, one from the Gaelic Women's Programme, *Dealán De*, which goes out every Tuesday and Thursday, and one from the News Broadcast which helped to make sure that even women who couldn't make the journey to Lionacleat would be kept in touch.

One outcome of this meeting was that *Guth nam Parant* identified a key issue: that good training needed to be provided for the new committee. By recognising that the mother was the most influential educator of her children, they were returning to women the power which so-called 'expert opinion' fails to recognise.

The experience which the *Guth nam Parant* members gained in the process of planning and running this day far outstrips the learning that could have been gained from any professionally devised training programme.

### ***Guth nam Parant* in 1990 – 1992**

Five *Guth nam Parant* representatives attended a Seminar in 1991 where all projects supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation in Scotland discussed Networking. Networking was reaffirmed as a key dynamic in work with mothers and children, and of vital importance to the work of *Guth nam Parant*.

What is networking? It is a process through which individuals and groups of people interact to gain knowledge, share information and experience in order to improve their circumstances and opportunities. *Guth nam Parant* was part of the Scottish network of projects supported by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, and the knowledge it gained from this network was invaluable:

Networking is about people in contact, well-*kent* face (well known); relationships; and feeling valued.

Networking enabled each project to look at itself from a different perspective, that is, from a networking perspective.

It was an opportunity for all to contribute on an equal footing and so to feel equal partners in the Scottish Network idea. The presentations were very concrete in networking terms, showing networking very much as 'on the ground work'.

A statement from one group summarised the general feelings of all participants:

The Scottish Network projects believe that education is a lifelong process. We value the unique contribution each individual has to offer. Our work is rooted in the community. We aim to work in partnership with all the people in our work; children, parents and professionals – to offer options and choices which enable them to have control in their lives. Through support for communities, within teams and between projects we work towards development and change.

The plans for 1992 involved building up the toy library which had been started in Stornoway, and to set up a toy library service throughout the islands. Training workshops were a major priority;

a two day training course on 'Responding to Child Abuse' had been held – the first in the Western Isles. Participants, and particularly fieldworkers, were concerned that publicity resulting from the event might undermine the trust which had developed between playleader, parents and fieldworkers, but those worries turned out to be unfounded. Other priorities were:

- producing more regular newsletters;
- securing financial support for the future;
- producing easy-to-read booklets/leaflets for members;
- organising a parents' trip to Edinburgh;
- establishing a base in the Uists.

A full-time Coordinator has ensured the achievement of these goals with the exception of establishing a base in Uist; this was difficult because of the high cost of suitable rented accommodation.

Much of the Coordinator's time has been spent on planning for the establishment of the Mobile Toy Library and until the project discovers a funding agency that will provide vehicles for the delivery of the toys, it is using available private cars to reach mothers in areas where they are unable to get to playgroups because of lack of transport. *Guth nam Parant's* work to establish the Mobile Toy Library is powered by concern for the way many of these young mothers are denied services because of where they live and by the failure of much needed resources to reach them. Because these are difficult-to-reach people whose needs are easy to overlook, they are given priority service. As a result, this has become a cause that *Guth nam Parant* is now supporting. They are treating it as a sub-project titled The Rural Parent's Project. This method also gives home visitors an opportunity to tell each mother about *Guth nam Parant*, to give them leaflets and newsletters, and invite them to visit the nearest playgroup.

The 451 registered children from 3 to 5 (1992) in *Guth nam Parant* playgroups comprise 65 per cent of this age group, with a regular attendance of 50 per cent. The 187 children from 0 to 3 registered in mother and toddler groups comprise 18 per cent of those in this age group.

This leaves 1,100 children under five without access to early childhood education and many mothers without the company of others. A variety of influences affect these statistics such as lack of transport, distance, harsh weather, sickness, parental unemployment.

Most fieldworkers find writing their monthly reports a burden, and when they do record their experiences, they often give an inaccurate

impression that all they do is provide playgroups with a materials delivery service. Their work descriptions (given in the Appendix) indicates that this is far from the truth.

### **'How the project changed my life'**

One mother's comments indicate the dramatic and life-changing impact which the project had on her; her feelings summarise the experience of many:

I had one child at the playgroup when Ian Minty, the project director started coming out to visit us. Then he held the project's first Seminar in Stornoway . I went to it and it was marvellous. It was the first time that the mothers had all been together and the director made provision for the children, and for the first time we felt quite important – as if we were somebody. Nobody had ever listened to us before. After that he arranged training courses.

The first new watershed for me was a course that was an absolute revelation to me and I remember coming away from it feeling so much better about everything that I wanted to start reading about how people felt about their parents and about my children's education.

She went on to state that the project had not only helped her with her children, but had helped her to understand her own experience:

That's what the project did for me. It started to unravel the tangled wool of my childhood. That's what it seemed like. So then I was able to approach my own children and their upbringing and it didn't have to be the same as my parents', because I was me and I was different. That was a marvellous experience.

The project had helped parents to gain the courage to go into the schools:

One of the many other good things that came out of the project was when we approached the school to ask if the children could go in before they went to school, at the end of their last year in the playgroup. Though we did it ourselves, the training courses and Seminars and forums encouraged us and we had the support of the project. Eventually permission was granted and that was a breakthrough because it was the first time that the parents got into the school.

And she affirmed that people had come to understand the riches and inner resources which their linguistic and cultural background had given them:

And the Gaelic-medium class had come about because people had become assertive. I really put all that down to the project, although this came a long time after the project finished. I think we really did it ourselves – though nobody does it without help and support – and sometimes you have to have your eyes raised to heaven. That's what the project did. It empowered us.

One of the other good things about the Seminars and the Forums was that we had got to know several mothers and the project enabled us to get to know more. We went to Uist and Barra and that was great too, for you actually saw how people lived and the difficulties they had and how they overcame them. The project wasn't just about playgroups. It was about women as well.

The project started from what you knew and not from what you didn't know. That was really important. It built on our knowledge and gave us confidence.

But this mother also clearly articulated the problems which had arisen and which still remain:

*Guth nam Parant* started out on its own when Ian Minty left to go to his new job. We tried to carry on as the project had done, but all the support was missing. There was no advisory group. There should have been a local advisory group set up straight away. It was a mistake to leave us without that.

Later, the possibility of having a local advisory group was discussed with *Guth nam Parant's* management. They considered that with a Coordinator, a Management Committee and Fieldworkers in place, they had a stable structure, able to represent *Guth nam Parant's* mothers and pre-school children and support the playgroups.

One of the inevitable disadvantages about *Guth nam Parant* is that you have a constantly changing group of mothers. You don't have continuity and you just about get people trained when they leave, for their children go to school and you've lost these mothers. So it's hard to keep going. You need some full time professionals to stabilise everything.

She stressed the key role which good staff play in the success of this and any other project:

But the professionals you choose should be hand-picked. They should be people who have hearts as well as qualifications and you've got to get people with memories. Some professional people (and not just professionals but also mothers) often forget what it was like having a three year old. They forget what it was like when your three year old had pulled out drawers and plastered things all over the wall. You need to have people who remember how demanding children are and what a lot of work it is looking after them. To say that doesn't mean you don't love them and don't want to look after them. It just means you sometimes need a break – the kind of break you get when you take them to the playgroup.

But despite the problems, or perhaps because all the genuine achievements did not come easily but came about through dedication, hard work, profound commitment, and overcoming numerous obstacles, this mother, speaking for many, has no doubt that *Guth nam Parant* was a life-changing, invaluable phenomenon. That it happened at all was remarkable; it enabled change to happen:

Whatever happens to *Guth nam Parant* in the future, it matters that it happened. There's a lot to be learned from it – as we did from the forums and the training sessions the project provided. It's still possible to empower parents – especially women; it's possible that people can take an objective look at their children; it's possible to develop yourself and discover things that you didn't know you could do; and I think it's possible for you to change. I think that's really important – to be able to change. And it's important to listen to people and hear what they want and try to meet their needs. Listening is vital. When they happened, all these things were marvellous and I don't think they should ever be lost.

It's important to get training while you're looking after the children. There's a lot to be gained from that all round; the children gain and you gain. And you can use that in the future. That's what I've found happens. And I'm sure that other mothers have found the same.

And she has paid the most eloquent tribute of all:

But none of it would have happened without the project.

The mothers who are members of *Guth nam Parant* now provide Early Childhood Education for 51 pre-school groups.

#### Notes and references to Chapter 4

1. Ely Alexander of the Young Families Now project in Aberdeen.
2. Jenny Overton, Advisor to Scottish Pre school Playgroups, Glasgow, speaking to mothers in Lewis.
3. Comment by a playgroup mother.
4. At this time, the teachers were having a battle with the government about pay and their Union forbade them from attending any meetings and working after school hours. In addition, arrangements for the project to be taken over by the Council were at the last moment, annulled. This caused disquiet in all the people with whom the project had been working.
5. Woodhead, M. (see bibliography).
6. Scottish Education Department, *Primary Education in Scotland*
7. *Guth nam Parant* Management Committee.
8. Unemployment figures at November 1990 were 13.4 per cent; for November 1991, 17.2 per cent; and for November 1992, 19.3 per cent.

## Conclusions and project analysis

### Accomplishments of feasibility study and phase 1



The Feasibility Study and Phase 1 of the Community Education Project coincided with the concern of the Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) to promote area cooperatives throughout the Western Isles. Village meetings brought the Ness villages together, and this was confirmed by 350 homes who signed the Pledge Forms that were circulated; within a month, a third of the target £15,000 had been collected. Despite approaching redundancies and the loss of 200 jobs, the people of Ness were roused to act with determination in the face of such misfortunes. The feeling was: 'Then we must do something about it ourselves'.

Throughout the Feasibility Study, the communities responded to needs that they thought they could deal with themselves. This came about because fieldworkers kept in the background as catalysts and the playgroup mothers, the Young people of Ness and the Ness Hall, and the Historical Society, and everything else arose from the villages themselves.

One important outcome of these activities was the fieldworkers' contacts with Council officers, especially those from Education, Social Work, and Planning and Development, all of whom provided advice for the project. In the Community Education Project Phase 1, this led directly to the way the Ness Office operated once Annie Macsween was able to move from Stornoway to Ness. A complex network of helpful people in cooperating institutions was in place as long as there was someone for them to respond to and, in turn, the Ness fieldworker was able to reach out to many of the people in Ness.

The way in which the project's aims and objectives were translated into practice demonstrated a subtle dynamic — that mysterious

process dependent on each fieldworker's personal interest in ordinary people; on a strong sense of place and a good nose for what goes on in local communities; on insight into people's needs and on sensitivity in meeting those needs; in large part on experience and part on professional training and the kind of leadership that these attributes give rise to; as well as on persistence in the face of obstacles and strength of character in overcoming them.

At a public meeting in the Ness Hall in February 1978, Professor Alexander, Chairman of the NUBB, paid tribute to the project '... which has come into your midst ... not lavishly handing out money but encouraging you to do things for yourselves'. In a single sentence he had clarified the way the project aimed to work.

By that time, Annie MacSween had been in the project for 18 months; her work in Ness during the Feasibility Study was flowing smoothly into Phase 1 and flourished despite the absence of project direction. Her later work with the NUBB as Field Officer in support of the Ness Cooperative, her attendance at countless evening meetings with a variety of committees, keeping open the lines of communication among the 14 villages, was the experience out of which she forged remarkably effective work styles. In working with the people of Ness in several capacities, she extended her knowledge of them and of the bureaucracies to which they frequently had to apply to for help.

The project's major strategy was to try a variety of approaches; the Historical Society, the Ness Playgroup and similar activities demonstrated a creative dynamic which helped draw Ness people even closer together. These activities revealed the extent to which the fieldworkers' responses to others, and their own personal skills and interests, had positively influenced the project's work.

### **Problems of separated project areas and a dispersed team**

During the project's first phase, the field workers felt thwarted by the way their geographical separation denied them the benefits of being part of a close-knit team, of having face-to-face access to each other to discuss work that was always demanding and frequently difficult; and they regretted their lack of opportunity to work together in each other's area. It might well have been better for all three to have worked in one area for a year – and even for the whole of the first phase. So varied were their interests and skills and their professional backgrounds, that the extent to which they might have benefited from such an opportunity would have enabled them to accomplish more than was achieved by the sum of their divided efforts. Some research would also have been possible with such a

team. This would then have prepared them for working with enhanced capabilities in other areas at a later stage. In a sense, the three fieldworkers were running what amounted to three projects that were only superficially linked.

Many questions which should have been discussed, many areas of disagreement which should have been brought into the open, were left unanalysed because of geographical and organisational constraints. Cailean Maclean, the fieldworker in Lochdar, wrote to John Murray, the Assistant Education Director for Community Education, pointing out the structural difficulties present in the project:

However, I do not think that in the geographically constrained context of our operation we could explore these areas to the full. Only on very rare occasions has our individual expertise been exchanged and we rarely use each other for support. The work in the individual areas has, to an extent, developed independently and in certain respects has been on divergent courses. But which comes first, the independent, divergent development or the poorly developed team? Because we worked for the same project, we took the 'team' approach for granted and there was an assumption that things would blend naturally ... we have all been guilty of paying lip-service to the 'team' while operating as if there wasn't one.

He regretted the opportunities three skilled fieldworkers had missed to clarify their aims and objectives through sustained discussion; they had been without leadership for a large part of their term in office, and had only consulted one another occasionally; they had never worked together and had started without the opportunity to learn from each other and examine the possible strategies they might have applied to their work.

In areas with no public transport, with no convenient meeting places, with severe demographic dispersion, and no contact through an established network, fieldworkers should never be set to work in the anti-social conditions created by team separation.

### **Relationships between projects**

From the fieldworkers' point of view, the over-large Consultative Committee was a bureaucratic requirement that was not set up to deal with the urgent needs they encountered in their day to day work. They reported to it and listened to the to-and-fro of comments from its members, but it was not the place to discuss

crucial issues, or seek a critical review of work with which they might have been dissatisfied, or raise issues that could only be discussed in private.

For this purpose, they required a small group of local professionals, who could hear them out and respond with positive criticism and guidance. Their team meetings were irregular and often given over to discussing work plans for the next stage in the project rather than reflecting on what they were doing. In these circumstances, they became leaders of small, personal, disconnected, area-based projects.

Too little was done to meet interested councillors, to familiarise them with the project's aims and achievements, with its problems and working modes. What the project needed was representatives throughout the islands who were sufficiently well informed to speak out about how the fieldworkers were working to help people do things for themselves. Project staff were so busy with the day to day work that they neglected to inform people about what they were doing. In short they were deficient developers of Public Relations.

### **Accomplishments of phase 2**

"The Community Education Project has, over the last 12 years, contributed enormously to community life in the Western Isles. In particular, it has been a powerful, positive voice in the rural areas, mobilising reserves of local expertise, knowledge and commitment towards the education of pre-school children."

"The nature of *Guth nam Parant* is unique because the group members all work voluntarily, and because of the isolation of the project and the Isles ... It is important to acknowledge the tremendous amount that has been achieved by *Guth nam Parant* already. We remain impressed at the level of commitment we have seen, and at the sophistication of members' understanding of the needs of parents and young children in the Western Isles."

The most important achievement of Phase 2 was the creation of *Guth nam Parant*. This came from the network of local contacts with mothers throughout the Islands. During 1986 and 1987, the project worked to sustain the many smaller groups and to integrate them into *Guth nam Parant* as a demonstration of how feasible a parent-based model of community education was for the Western Isles. The Scottish Education Department, in a report compiled by HM Inspectorate during 1986 and 1987, wrote:

The setting up of this group is a valuable initiative with the potential to play an important part in the development of early childhood education in the Western Isles.

The project attempted the challenging task of changing attitudes to the importance of providing educational resources for pre-school children. The results of such a programme are not always immediately perceived. The project wanted to achieve long-term attitudinal and institutional change that would validate and extend community values as a basis for educational regeneration.

In his report to the project's Phase 1 Consultative Committee in February 1983 HM Duncan Kirkpatrick wrote:

Community Education brings together two different perspectives on change and development; that of the educator who concentrates on the growth of the individuals from whom all change and development must inevitably come, and that of the social improver who concentrates on tangible changes in the community.

The project attempted a synthesis of those two perspectives, bringing together personal and individual growth with evidence of structural change in the formation of *Guth nam Parant*. The ability of women to 'listen and consult' with one another, to share and to learn from one another, and to learn how to learn – these are all legacies of the project. The way in which mature adults learn should not be prescribed, for learning is part of a process of social and intellectual development; it is not necessarily a neat and tidy process. Neither is it one that fits easily into a rigid, formal educational system, especially when people begin to question the basis on which resources are allocated to traditionally under-valued sections of the community.

The project proposed a method of delivering low cost, locally negotiated, informal training programme for mothers of young children, appropriate to their needs. As much as possible, it was tailored to the dispersed communities of the Western Isles. It enabled women to decide for themselves what they wanted from such a programme, and how it should be constructed. A lengthy consultation exercise was complemented by home-grown training programmes and access to professional expertise beyond the Western Isles. These programmes demonstrated the importance of the preparatory work that linked training to participants' readiness. Different schemes took place side by side. The project team worked so that the needs of providers and recipients were addressed simultaneously.

In Scotland at the present time, improving relationships between home and school are not regarded as an educational priority. Nor are teachers' expectations of what children should be like on their first day at school considered of great consequence. This apparent lack of interest in and concern for the state of pre-school children is often not regarded as a failure on the part of professionals.

That these discussions have been taking place nationally for some time with little result, demonstrates that there will be little change until mothers and pre-school children are valued and provided for generously. The project tackled what some teachers still regard as a prickly issue, but it made modest advances.

*Guth nam Parant* demonstrates the value of a family-centred approach which engages those sections of the community often ignored in the institutional, centre-based approach to community education in the UK of the 1980s. The creation of *Guth nam Parant* is one of the project's great successes. It discovered that when sustained by faith in themselves and in their combined efforts to do things for themselves, women-centred groups are an asset of great value to the community and to society as a whole. The Forum network and the existence of *Guth nam Parant* have produced a section of the community with experience, strength, resourcefulness, and self-reliance. They and the playgroups have set aside the notion that home is the only place that provides for the needs of their children and themselves; but the home and not the school is the model for early childhood care and education.

### **The playgroups**

When Ina Maciver was involved as a playgroup mother with Barvas playgroup she saw how good it was to have a peripatetic play leader to help the parents. She saw how effectively a well-trained person could influence playgroup mothers as to how, what and why things should be done.

I've always felt that people who just talk to playgroup mothers – and who put on workshops for them – are not providing anything like the regular hands-on support that is now valued by the playgroups that receive it – largely because this takes away some of the enormous burden that playgroup mothers carry.

When *Guth nam Parant* had to do without Ian Minty and his team, it was like being thrown out without your parents ... But I admire what those women did in the first year of the re-organisation. They were quite remarkable. They had

experienced how good it was and they wanted to keep it like that. But it proved impossible even for that committed group to continue working at that intensity. It was just too much to ask of them.

The tolerance and patience with which many mothers provide early childhood resources are impressive evidence of their concern for their pre-school children's well-being. Despite their four most difficult problems – the almost total lack of public transport; the poor accommodation available to them; the need for constant fund-raising to meet the playgroups' running costs; and the drudgery involved in setting up equipment and packing it away – they turn up and get on with what has to be done.

In October 1989, Dorit Braun visited playgroups in the Lochs area in Lewis. In one she met women who faced considerable difficulties simply getting to the playgroup:

The combination of lack of transport, bad weather and distance, not to mention isolation and the difficulty of joining a group, mean that the fact that a group is running at all is a considerable achievement. The group we visited meet once a week; they have to put out all the equipment and store it at the end of every session; then they have to clean the floor thoroughly. The furniture is unsuitable, but they improvise with imagination, and were providing a good range of experiences for the children. The women running the group worked voluntarily, and had clearly got a system going for planning the sessions' activities and tidying up as they went along, without detriment to the children's enjoyment. This is the pattern across most of the Isles. Under such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that it is difficult to find women to serve on the *Guth nam Parant* Management Committee – just to keep their own playgroup going requires enormous commitment, time and energy.

Now, in addition to her general responsibilities, *Guth Nam Parant's* project Coordinator, Shona Fraser, is planning to give priority to the young parents without transport. *Guth nam Parant* will work with those parents of whom one mother said, 'If you live out of sight of any other house, and are on your own all day, it's as if you were abandoned until your husband comes home from his work'. Not only will Shona Fraser and the other fieldworkers continue to leave toys for the children and information about playgroups from all round the Isles for the mothers, but they also hope to work out some way of getting the mothers and children to the nearest playgroup. They are calling this activity the 'Rural Parents' project'.

In Britain education officially begins at five, and in a few cases at four plus. In life it begins at birth. Despite the research that endorses the educational benefits early childhood education and care bestows, bureaucrats and legislators still hold it in low esteem locally and nationally.

Because of these attitudes, the women who maintain playgroups are, in general, given meagre financial help from local authorities and are often given as little thanks for the generous efforts they unstintingly make in giving many island children this precious bounty.

*Guth nam Parant* holds out helping hands to many families. As one parent put it:

If only the Council could see what a resource *Guth nam Parant* is for them!

### **Notes and references to Chapter 5**

1. Extract from the Western Isles Council's press release of 24 April 1987 (issued when it formally concluded its relationships with the Bernard van Leer Foundation and closed the Project).
2. Douf Braun, Assistant Director, C.I.C., April 1988.

## *Guth nam Parant* in 1995

The Foundation continued its support to *Guth nam Parant* until the end of March 1994. By this time, *Guth nam Parant's* contribution to early childhood development in the Western Isles had been recognised by local, regional and national institutions. It was seen as filling a major gap in provisions for young children and their families.

Following the end of the final phase of project support by the Foundation, *Guth nam Parant* explored possibilities for funding from the European Union under the EU's structural funds initiative, particularly in the areas of training for employment, and education. Despite collaboration with the major Scottish organisations that are concerned with children and with social services, it was unable to secure sufficient money to keep the organisation going.

However, many of the activities continue and most of the groups and projects are still flourishing. The playgroups support one another and have had to become more independent now that *Guth nam Parant* no longer exists to support them. Women running playgroups are able to be trained and assessed in their own environments to become qualified crèche and playgroup workers. They can gain certificates of vocational qualification which are recognised throughout the UK.

There is continuing cooperation between the local Social Services Department, the local Education Department, Community Education and the local Health Board on the one hand and, on the other, the people involved in the different activities set up by *Guth nam Parant*.

Several individuals, spurred on by their experiences in *Guth nam Parant*, are undertaking further education courses; the community newsletter in Harris still appears every fortnight; the Harris cooperative is still going; the historical society is still flourishing.

These varied community activities have become so much a part of the fabric of life in the Western Isles that many people have forgotten the efforts it took to get them started.

## ***Guth nam Parant* fieldworkers' Job Description**

Each fieldworker is expected to:

- make introductory visits to playgroups and initial contact;
- arrange a convenient time to meet with the group so that personal relationships can be established;
- talk and listen to people, and build up trust;
- link all the groups in his/her area to the committee;
- establish what the group's needs are and be ready to lend a helping hand when this does not disrupt the programme;
- share news from one group to another and tell them of good ideas;
- show enthusiastic interest in the children and the group activities;
- get to know what the group's aims are;
- inform the Project Coordinator when there are problems so that she knows someone is attending to them;
- take orders and distribute art and craft materials;
- give information to groups on grants available to them;
- distribute work packs;
- compile project boxes;
- organise exchange visits

Fieldworkers are responsible directly to the Project Coordinator.



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# Foundation Publications

## **We are your children: the Kushanda early childhood education and care dissemination programme, Zimbabwe 1985-1993**

Sally Booker (1993) Practice and Reflections No. 71

The Kushanda Project takes its name from the Shona expression, *Kushandisa chipo*, which means 'to use what is there', or, 'to make what is there work'. This saying not only captures the Project's spirit of self-reliance, but also the fact that for the children of Zimbabwe's rural majority, early childhood services were only likely to become accessible if their parents learned how to use the material and human resources available in the immediate environment to make community-based pre-schools a reality. Kushanda's mission was to show how this could be done.

Published 1993, 186p, 90 6195-036-8

## **A guide to promoting resilience in children: strengthening the human spirit**

Edith Grotberg, Ph.D. (1993) Practice and Reflections No. 81

Resilience is a universal capacity which allows a person, group or community to prevent, minimise or overcome the damaging effects of adversity. Results from 11 countries that participated in the International Resilience Project show that fewer than half of the adults caring for children promote resilience in them. This Guide, based on the findings, will help individuals and programmes to incorporate the promotion of resilience into their work with children.

Published 1993, 186p, 90 6195-038-4

## **Why children matter: investing in early childhood care and development**

Children represent the future. Investing in them and their healthy development has benefits for society as a whole, for parents and families and, of course, for the children themselves. In this publication, the Foundation summarises the evidence and makes the arguments for investing in the early years. Examples of approaches being taken around the world help to explain why investing in early childhood care and development is one of the best ways of building a brighter, better future.

Published 1991, 186p, 90 6195-027-9

## **The environment of the child**

Terezinha Nunes (Occasional Paper No. 5)

This paper outlines models of children's socio-cultural environments and examines two characteristics of many children's environments - poverty and discrimination. It also includes a review of the literature about the environmental factors which influence children's development.

Published 1994, 186p, 90 6195-026-0 (also available in Spanish)

## **Newsletter**

Each issue of the Foundation's quarterly Newsletter explores a theme related to early childhood development. Also included are reports on the work of Foundation-supported projects throughout the world and information on issues related to ECD.

A full list of all the Foundation's publications and videos in English and Spanish is available from the Foundation. Publications are available free of charge in single copies to interested individuals and organisations but charges will be made for multiple copies.

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The scattered communities of the Western Isles of Scotland are among the most physically isolated in Europe. They have also had to battle for generations to preserve their distinctive linguistic and cultural traditions. The Western Isles Community Education Project built on the experience, commitment and resourcefulness of local people, and established an independent voice for young children and their parents in the form of a network of playgroups that continues to flourish. This book relates how, if we persevere, we can do it ourselves.



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