

# It's a shore thing

Whether they are catching lobster, learning about lambing or building a remote-control car, Endeavour projects are leaving pupils inspired. The independent learning scheme from Massachusetts is being piloted in schools across Islay and Jura with great success, as **Julia Horton** discovers

**S**tacking up creels on the shore, ignoring the biting wind whipping across the sea, Connor Jamieson looks as though he has been fishing for lobster for years. And although he is still only 11, he has.

After starting to help his fisherman father when he was just 5, Connor not only has his own boat, he has already got through two and is now on to his third.

His outlook is changing, though, because now – for the first time – it is Connor who is in charge of what he learns, and consciously developing new skills for his future education and career.

He is among the P6 and 7 pupils at Port Ellen Primary taking part in a new independent learning project

being piloted in schools across Islay, and neighbouring Jura. Called Endeavour, it was inspired by an unusual scheme to engage high school pupils in America by letting them devise their own curriculum.

With help from specialists, teenagers in a small town in Massachusetts launched The Independent Project, creating a “school within a school”, which included a “personal endeavour” to learn about something which interested them, from how to become a chef to writing a novel.

Supporters firmly believe that the key to the scheme's success lies in giving young people more control over what and how they study. While pupils came up with a range of different ambitions, they were all rooted in the same core skills for life and work.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Hebrides seem a world away from America. But in the tough global economic climate where a job for life is no longer guaranteed, teachers believe that children here need the same kind of independence to prepare them for the future.

Their version of Endeavour has clear criteria to fit the Curriculum for Excellence approach. Each project must stretch a pupil's abilities through “challenging” new learning, showing “breadth and depth”, which promotes key skills such as critical thinking.

Each pupil sets his or her own short, medium and long-term aims, with help, finishing with a presentation where they will share their learning with their classmates.

Pupils at Port Ellen Primary spend

**POTLUCK:**  
For his Endeavour project, Connor Jamieson learned how to catch lobster.





one afternoon per week here on the project, with the bulk of the work done outside school. The last Endeavour homework they had was to produce something for the colourful new display board in their classroom. For his project – running a fishing business – Connor has drawn a simple three-step flow diagram in pencil, entitled “How to catch a lobster”. As well as explaining the process of putting bait in a creel to throw it into the sea, he has written: “Being organised is an important skill.”

Sitting with a laptop at his desk, he says: “I’ve been helping my dad for years, but for my project I am learning things I didn’t know before, like how to keep a record of your catch using mini-spreadsheets, which is what my dad does but I never knew how to use them before.”

“I am also extending my project by researching different types of boats, seeing how much catch they can hold.”

Emily Logan, 11, is learning the accordion and plans to film herself dancing – something she already excels at – to the tune she is practising.

Like Connor, Eilidh McMillan, also 11, has been inspired by her family business although, instead of replicating it, she is producing a documentary about lambing. Standing at her parents’ farm, she is clearly in her element as she orders her dog to round up the sheep.

She says: “The best thing about this project is that you can learn the way you want to. You don’t have to write if you don’t want to.”

With so much emphasis on work outside school, parental support is crucial.

Eilidh’s father, Stuart, welcomes the project. He says: “It’s good. Helping with the lambing is something she loves doing anyway.”

## ‘Choice underpins good learning’

“We need young people to be far better at independent learning by the time they leave the system at 18, so we are trying to get that started far earlier.”

Quality improvement officer Matthew Boyle is chairing a working group at Argyll and Bute Council, set up to explore new ways of achieving that aim.

He was researching new approaches when he first read about The Independent Project at Monument Mountain Regional High School in Massachusetts, and pupils’ personal endeavours – giving them freedom to choose something to learn, provided they met clear objectives to develop core

underlying skills. He says: “We pretty much stole the Endeavour idea. Our remit was to try and move education closer to the spirit of Curriculum for Excellence and to find something that would work across the transition years.”

“We don’t know that it will work, but we believe personalisation and choice underpin good learning.”

The Endeavour pilot here involves every primary on Islay and Jura, as well as Kilmodan on the mainland, sharing ideas through the Glow intranet system.

Joyce Hawkins, headteacher of Kilmodan on the Cowal peninsula, says parents there are also very supportive.

She adds: “I found the pupils’ ideas were very broad at first; one boy just wanted

to learn about New Zealand. He is from a farming family, so we narrowed it down to comparing farming practices. “The pupils are also learning to record the source of their research logs, which is something we found initially they were not good at.”

At Islay High, Stephen Harrison says: “In terms of transition, I think this fits really well.”

“Many pupils may have only got halfway through their projects, so seeing that secondary school is allowing them to continue these projects will bridge a lot of difficulties for the children.”

The council is providing a few hundred pounds per school for buying any useful project equipment. [www.theindependentproject.org](http://www.theindependentproject.org)



**LIFE LESSONS:**  
Scott Kinloch, far left, learned how to build a house, while Emily Logan mastered the accordion.

“She has started videoing the tups which are just out now [in the fields] and by the end of the term they will have lambed, so she will see the full cycle.”

Judging by the turnout in October for the first meeting about the project, most families are keen, too, with the parents of 15 out of the 19 P6 and 7 children at Port Ellen turning up to find out more.

Their teacher Jo Clark says: “Parents were really enthusiastic, which is very important. This project will not work without that community support.”

“We don’t have access to all the things which mainland schools have, but we have a very strong, close community and the children are interested in many things which people here can help them with, which may help them in the future if they want to stay on the island.”

Every pupil here has written to people who they think can offer them assistance and expertise. As a result, Scottish Football Association community coach and Argyll and Bute football development officer Martin

Rae is coming to give 10-year-old Alicia Johnson guidance on how to teach her favourite sport to her peers.

Scott Kinloch, 11, admits he was not expecting the advice he received from a retired architect whom he contacted to ask how to build a house.

He says: “He wrote back telling me that the first stage is finding out about the family, which surprised me.”

“But when I thought about it more, I thought, ‘Yeah, that is what you would need to do’.”

“I want to be an architect and my uncle is building a new place which I am visiting every week. I started thinking he would need a place for his dog, and a garage for the car.”

“I have been researching geothermal heating too, because my uncle is installing that.”

His cousin Craig MacAffer, a joiner working on the property who gives Scott progress reports, says: “I didn’t have anything like this project when I was at school. It’s a really good idea to give children an insight into a career they think

they are interested in at an early age.”

Back at Port Ellen, Mrs Clark says Endeavour is also helping her own professional development.

“To me this is my ideal way of teaching, to allow control to pass to the children who have ownership of their learning while I act more as a mentor or coach, allowing them to fail and celebrating their success, which is very much their success.”

“The children all have different levels of ability but I think they are all able to see what’s ambitious for them and they are all really motivated.”

“It’s not so much about what they learn, but how they learn and that they are aware of the skills that they are learning. We are not doing Endeavour for the same reasons that the school in Massachusetts did it, but our reasons are just as valid and I think any creative idea for teaching is going to work across the board.”

One of the most technically advanced projects is to build a remote-control car,

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something Jason Baker, 10, will receive help for from a science teacher at Islay High, where pupils can develop their projects further when they move up next year.

Port Ellen Primary’s headteacher, Maureen Macdonald, regards Endeavour as the “most truly CFE thing” the school has done, and she believes the initiative could be extended to younger pupils in future.

She says: “Projects where pupils do their own research are not new, but they tend to be governed by a topic in class. This is much more ambitious and open. I think we could filter it down to P5s and even P1s, who are already doing wee mini-topics on nocturnal animals where they have to do some research at home.”

It is far too soon to say whether the project will work long-term, but as Alicia puts her classmates through a sports circuit in the school hall, receiving and requesting feedback with humour and tact, it looks as though this new style of learning is already making a difference.