Implementation of assessment reform: insights from minority language provision

Sarah MacQuarrie\textsuperscript{a} \textsuperscript{ID}, Fiona Lyon\textsuperscript{b} and Susan Dawson\textsuperscript{a} \textsuperscript{ID}

\textsuperscript{a}Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; \textsuperscript{b}Independent Educational Consultant, Prestwick, UK

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

The introduction of assessment orientated policy in 2016 marks a significant change in Scottish education as it will establish standardised national testing. Teachers in Gaelic medium education are well placed to offer insights as they have had considerable autonomy regarding assessment and this paper is the first to consider the impact of this specific reform in Scotland. Three linked themes emerged from the thematic analysis based on focus group data. Participants were keen to discuss the climate regarding Gaelic medium education linking concerns with the ongoing reform of assessment policy. Policy and practice implications are discussed as well as the anticipated impact the assessments may have on pupils and teaching staff. This paper contributes to the understanding regarding the role of standardised tests in education and feeds into an understanding of policy development through the lens of immersion education highlighting uncertainties held by teachers when reform is underway.

\textbf{Introduction}

The aim of this paper is to consider how reforms in Scottish policy are conceptualised by teachers with a focus on changes to assessment requirements. This paper contributes to a developing literature regarding Gaelic medium education that addresses assessment reform and policy development. Teachers in Gaelic Medium Education have had considerable autonomy regarding how they assess and support pupils, linked to a lack of suitable resources (MacQuarrie and Lyon 2019). A summary of Gaelic medium education is offered followed by an examination of the broader context of educational policies and assessment practices in the UK. Recent developments in the Scottish context are introduced and includes an outline of the programme of assessment reform envisioned for Scottish education. An overview of the study is then offered, prior to evaluation of findings that note teachers developing awareness of policy development and assessment reform.
A brief introduction to Gaelic medium education

The United Kingdom involves four countries, England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. The National curriculum in England formed the basis of the Welsh and Northern Ireland curriculum. In contrast, Scotland has distinct provision that includes a separate curriculum (Education Scotland n.d.b) and notably Gaelic medium education; where pupils complete the same curriculum as their counterparts in English medium schools using the Gaelic language. Children with and without familiarity of the Gaelic language are welcomed GME supported by an immersion model where Gaelic language use is foregrounded at every opportunity. The exception is the teaching of English where the language in use switches from Gaelic to English to ensure that children in GME reach similar proficiency by the upper end of their primary education (for more on this and the different approaches in Scottish GME classrooms regarding dual language use see O'Hanlon, Paterson, and McLeod 2012). A further feature in Scotland relates to the holistic and inclusive approach underpinning educational policy and provision (Education Scotland n.d.a). Where the framing common to many countries is to regard support for learning as ‘special educational needs’ in Scotland the terminology in use refers to additional support needs aiming to recognise that support for children can be driven through labelling and formal diagnoses but also through more individual circumstances that create short- and long-term difficulties (Boyle, MacKay, and Lauchlan 2016).

In bilingual language education, such as GME, a noted consideration is the accurate and informative identification of needs to provide timely and relevant support for learners. Decision making regarding whether support is needed to target language difficulties coupled or separate to general learning difficulties is a hard balance to meet (Lauchlan 2014) including GME where resources are fewer and assessment may need to refer to English language capabilities rather than Gaelic (MacQuarrie and Lyon, 2018; MacLullich 2014). Nevertheless the emphasis across Scottish education referring to supporting every child as a learner is particularly relevant (‘Children and Young People (Scotland) Act’ 2014) as it feeds into considerations regarding policy and practice and teachers’ perspectives on their experiences and expertise in their classrooms that form the focus of the work being reported.

Assessment as an indicator of educational progress

Assessment data can consider improvement at an individual level (Reid 2003) or agglomerated to compare countries (OECD 2017a, 2017b). A commonality across the United Kingdom is the impact of ‘Assessment is for Learning (AfL)’ across policy and practice (Black and Wiliam 1998; Leung and Scott 2009). The impact in Scotland meant teachers considered classroom support techniques and took steps to include pupils in recognising changes in their learning (Hutchinson and Hayward 2005). AfL provides a rubric linked to formative assessment, in contrast summative assessment is characteristically used at the conclusion of a programme of study. Critics have argued assessment focused on knowledge gains is aligned to superficial measurement (Broadfoot et al. 2014) when teachers respond to pressures by manipulating lesson content to support the test to be taken. The accountability and responsibility associated with assessment is known to contribute to teachers’ professional identity (Buchanan 2015); is distinguishable from teachers’ self-efficacy (Lauermann and Karabenick 2013); is a contributing factor linked to reduced job satisfaction.
(Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt, and Vanroelen 2014) and is tied to teacher attrition (Ryan et al. 2017). These themes contributed to the prompts used with focus groups and forms the theoretical basis of the research being reported that seeks to gain insight from teachers regarding the introduction of new policy. Thus, teachers self-perception, their engagement with professional development opportunities, perceived autonomy and responsibilities form key areas of consideration as well as allowing for exploratory insights that may emerge during discussion. Adopting focus group methodology helps to capture knowledge held by teachers; provides a means to consider the interpretation and implications linked with on-coming changes to assessment and related classroom practice. Adoption of this technique ensures perceptions can be captured and interpreted in relation to identified areas and respond to aspects emerging during group discussion.

A synopsis of assessment and education in Scotland

Within the United Kingdom, policy and guidance evolved at the regional level. Pressure from teachers and parents led to adjustments in the Scottish implementation of national testing in 1991 (Clark 1997). By this period divisions between education policies implemented across the United Kingdom were becoming clearer. Scotland opted to develop national guidelines (SOED 1991) whereas across England and Wales (Act 1988) assessment was driven by the national curriculum. Subsequently Scotland developed separate arrangements for pupil evaluation and measurement of progress. By the mid-1990s teachers in Scotland had greater assessment autonomy than their counterparts in England and Wales. Teachers’ judgement of pupil performance was prioritised and evaluation supported by national agglomerated pupil data. Teachers’ judgement has formed a cornerstone of Scottish education, particularly in GME where there are limited assessment resources (Lyon and MacQuarrie, 2014; MacLullich 2014).

Two further chapters can be identified in Scotland’s approaches to assessment. A series of work from 1999 culminated in 2003 (Scottish Government 2003) when Scotland withdrew from an annual assessment process (the final iteration of the Assessment of Achievement Programme AAP occurred in 2004). There was a delineated process to involve stakeholder perspectives and develop plans that would favourably incorporate assessment within classrooms. Between 2005 and 2009, pupils completed tests linked to the 5–14 curriculum - English Language, Social Subjects, Enquiry Skills, Science, Maths and Core Skills- within the Scottish Survey of Achievement (SSA). The second chapter is linked to the change in the curriculum across Scotland. In 2010, the Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) accommodated the introduction of the Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government 2010). Pupils aged 8 (year 4), 9 (year 5) and 13 (year 2 of secondary school) completed an assessment of literacy or numeracy in alternate years (including written and online components) and teacher questionnaires were also sampled. The national SSLN data was supported by stakeholders (Scottish Government 2015). Scottish teachers responded well to having teacher accountability and responsibility integrated within assessment and there was notable surprise when the SSLN was withdrawn (Scotsman 2017; T.E.S 2016).

The 2016 announcement of a national improvement framework (NIF) that includes a national survey of attainment marks a significant policy change. Of concern is that evaluation of pupils’ performance will be complicated. Data from previous years (linked to SSLN) may not support a clear comparison with the national survey of attainment data and suggests
that the ambitions within NIF policy may not be easily realised. As a main objective of the NIF is to use assessment data to arrest any potential weakness in attainment this decision is puzzling. These concerns regarding evaluation of NIF policy are difficult to determine as available NIF policy provides scant detail about the concerns (or gap) it seeks to address. It is difficult to match how assessment data will provide evidence of progress when targets are underspecified. This concern should not be underplayed. Given the assessment timetable within the NIF it may be 5 years (2022–2023) before a pool of relevant data is available.

The NIF aims to establish standardised attainment assessment, with a focus on reading, writing and numeracy (Scottish Government, 2017). Test data will be judged in accordance with expected standards in numeracy and literacy, essentially curriculum for excellence achievement levels, and data from every pupil collected using computer based tests. Teachers and schools will decide the most appropriate time during the school year for testing to commence. At this juncture, it is important to point out these plans are indicative. These details are based on children learning in English medium education where testing commenced in August 2017. For GME, there is a somewhat complicated picture; both in terms of what is to be assessed and what year it should take place. An overview of the testing cycle is offered in Table 1.

The assessment cycle for GME was scheduled for August 2018 – a year later than for other pupils (Scottish Government 2016a). The government emphasises that limiting the evaluation of English literacy in GME is strategic given the immersion model that dictates English is incorporated in classrooms in later years (Education Scotland 2017). In light of earlier research reporting the difficulties experienced by GME teachers when evaluating literacy difficulties, there is considerable room for development in early bilingual education if the NIF is to achieve its objectives in education across Scotland (Lyon and MacQuarrie 2014). Thus, GME teachers may not perceive national standardised assessment as threats to practice, perhaps viewing them as helping to address an identified need for pupils in their care.

### Aims and research questions

Little is documented regarding GME teachers’ perceptions about assessment. The introduction of national annual assessments makes this a pressing issue to consider within a multi-lingual educational context and recent policy developments triggered this investigation. This paper investigates perceptions regarding national assessment policy developments, explores the implications of potential changes for education across Scotland and considers issues specific to GME. This article offers a contribution to knowledge by

| Table 1. National improvement framework timetable in English and Gaelic medium education. |
|-----------------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|---|---|---|---|
|                                   | P1 | P4 | P7 | S3 | P1 | P4 | P7 | S3 |
| Pupil in English medium education 1st cycle August 2017 |     |     |     |     | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |   |
| Pupil in Gaelic medium education 1st cycle August 2018 |     |     |     |     | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |   |

*Linked to teacher judgement.
supporting the contemporary developing literature pertaining to GME, centralising the teacher’s voice as a source of empirical data.

The study

Research was undertaken during the annual conference for GME, An t-Alltan, in September 2016 where in excess of a 100 delegates typically attend including a range of educational professionals representing primary or secondary Gaelic medium education establishments. Recruitment was managed via the conference organiser enabling information letter and consent forms to reach potential participants in advance of the event. A demographic information sheet captured data privately, ensured queries could be addressed prior to participation and facilitated participant allocation to support heterogeneous group composition. Guidelines developed for use included: 7 main questions, accompanied by follow up prompts to develop the discussion if needed and is in line with standards linked to focus group methodology (Krueger and Casey 2014; Morgan 1996). Participants were advised their contribution would only be available to the research team and anonymity preserved. Accordingly numbers are used to identify participants in the findings section.

A total of 31 participants were involved and Table 2 provides an overview. 30 participants completed the demographics information sheet and attended one of two concurrent hour long focus groups. The additional roles noted by 8 individuals included head teacher, primary teacher in training, education officer, researcher, support for learning teacher and two teachers did not offer specifics. Gaelic-specific teacher training permits teachers to work in Gaelic and English medium education. Equally, teachers can opt to move into GME having completed additional training. Thus, participants were asked to record their overall teaching experience and their GME experience. Six teachers reported non-equivalent values. Five of the six had in excess of ten years of experience of which 5–10 years had involved GME. One teacher reported 5–10 years of experience of which 0–5 years had involved GME.

A hybrid approach to thematic analysis was used (Braun and Clarke 2006). The third author generated initial codes and collated content into potential themes. Themes were then reviewed and refined until all data were classified. First and second authors were involved in the appraisal of the analysis including the formation of the thematic maps to consider relationships between categories and any disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Findings

Participants noted the realities of immersion education and emphasised tensions between policy and practice. Such content encompassed perspectives regarding local authorities

| Gender | Status | Position in education | Teaching experience | Gaelic medium teaching experience | Gaelic skill |
|--------|--------|-----------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|
| M 6    | F 24   | FT 28                 | PT 17               | Pri 5                             | Sec 8       |
| T 30   |        |                       |                     |                                  |             |

Table 2. Characteristics of focus group participants.
Language and Education

(macro level), schools (meso level) and classrooms (micro level) that are relevant across the data. Particular issues focused on GME are evidenced across the first theme that importantly sets the context for the introduction of national assessments and is in line with the recommendations regarding the reporting of qualitative research (Levitt et al. 2018).

**Inter-intra perspectives linked to the status of Gaelic Medium Education in Scotland**

This theme acknowledges the perception that the context and unique characteristics bound to GME were not easily grasped by those outside of GME. These perspectives provide a background to help support the meaningful analysis and interpretation of GME perspectives regarding assessment reform.

**GME viewed as a minority concern**

Participants expressed a desire to see enhanced status and greater support of Gaelic nationally. Participants voiced concerns that Gaelic was perceived as ‘constantly an afterthought across the board in Local Authorities and at a national level’ (Participant 7, Group 1) and as something ‘completely marginalised or it’s just not even thought about’ (Participant 3, Group 2). The decision to act on Gaelic assessments a year later than those for English medium education was discussed and doubt expressed as to whether it would be a delay of only a year linked to their experiences in GME.

There’s an issue right there in that, er, the English ones have been done first followed by the Gaelic ones a year afterwards. That doesn’t give the same status, er, to the Gaelic assessments right from the off.

Participant 13

And it’s you’re very lucky if it’s only a year.

Participant 7

You’re very lucky if it’s only a year, yeah.

Participant 13

Exchange recorded in Group 1

There seemed to be a lack of understanding regarding the differences between those who learn Gaelic as a second language (Gaelic learners) and those in the GME context. Participants were hesitant that expertise regarding GME was factored into the development of new policy at local and national levels.

… they were mixing up Gaelic medium education with what the, you know, with Gaelic learners and you’ve got teachers and staff making decisions when they’re not really aware of what the kind of bigger picture is.

Participant 14, Group 2
Resource issues as a reality of immersion education

Participants perceived additional demands on GME teachers compared to those who taught through the medium of English. These demands related to a lack of appropriate resources in Gaelic and the specialist skills required to prepare materials. Both were considered to impact the design and outcomes of Gaelic assessment as expressed by this participant:

I’m seeing more and more Gaelic medium teachers really envious and quite angry at the fact that this whole Gaelic programme is now in place and they don’t you don’t see teachers from the English team having to consolidate materials, having to weekly put videos of their resource structure in place, nice shiny programme.

Participant 10, Group 1

The lack of resources was seen as frustrating and even demotivating. The following participant recounted struggles when sourcing suitable Gaelic resources for literacy.

… for Gaelic it is so much more difficult. I went away and looked at what texts that I could, you know, we apply for funding, what texts that I could order that the children we either didn’t already have or were going to appeal to Primary 3s that weren’t the reading scheme and weren’t too difficult and I would, you know, I couldn’t. I really struggled and I found it actually really quite depressing I have to say (laughs).

Participant 2, Group 2

The lack of resources was also seen as having an impact on pupils who needed additional support. In this excerpt the resources referred to are both material and human.

Like you said, you know your own class, you know the pupils that require extra input or who are struggling and you know what you have to do with them, erm, it’s sometimes getting the resources to do that at times or if it’s the manpower resources it’s very difficult to get.

Participant 7, Group 2

Translation and the role of Gaelic language in materials featured prominently in the discussion. The perceived lack of understanding of immersion contexts was recognised by participants in the way assessments are created and administered. A perception was shared that Local Authorities considered tests suitable and appropriate once translated. A consequence of the lack of Gaelic resources and the subsequent need for teachers to create their own necessitates extra skills on the part of GME teachers in comparison to their colleagues.

There are skills required for teaching Gaelic and Gaelic medium that you wouldn’t have required if you were teaching through the medium of English. Translation (laughter) translation is a skill, a high level order.

Participant 4

You’re not trained for it.

Participant 3

Exchange recorded in Group 1
There were also questions regarding the level of language used by translators, where materials produced for children did not account for the immersion context.

There’s also difficulty with translators and the, er, language levels are way too high. It’s the same difficulty as you have with translating the Harry Potter books into Gaelic. Yes the story might be at such and such a level, the Gaelic is … … many many eons …

Participant 13, Group 1

The lack of consideration for the importance of the language used by the teacher in an immersion context was emphasised for the learning of Gaelic and the English language expectations for GME pupils. One participant explained the detrimental effect of undertaking an assessment in English when there had been relatively little time to establish a Gaelic immersion experience with the young class.

Teachers don’t really put these assessments into place that our Local Authority gives us; assessments that we have to use. For instance, I do I have an infant class and I have to do an assessment with them now. They’ve only just been with me for a few weeks. I recently tested, erm, I’ve spent all my time with them trying to teach them a bit of Gaelic so that they can talk and listen, erm, and this is an English assessment.

Participant 7, Group 2

Home context
For most pupils their home and community language context is not Gaelic and school provides the majority of their exposure to Gaelic (O’Hanlon, Paterson, and McLeod 2012). Home language environment was recognised as influencing the support parents can offer, and invites comparisons with children who experience languages other than English at home.

What we’ve always been told is that lots of our schools have lots of Polish/Spanish children but the difference there is that they’re in an English environment so although they are second language learners or third language learners they actually pick up the language very quickly. Our children are in a very different position.

Participant 2, Group 1

Participants questioned the wisdom of applying equivalent attainment standards to pupils from different backgrounds. How to provide this Gaelic rich environment is a challenge, but was recognised as a possible approach to reduce the attainment gap for GME pupils.

You know, we were talking about, erm, closing the gap particularly in Gaelic medium and the lack of sometimes Gaelic community round about children in terms of their language, you know, and that the Gaelic advice note that came out - how it reads is that we’ve to create these wonderfully rich linguistic environments around our children, you know, but it’s how you do that and I think we all recognise that in terms of, particularly in Gaelic raising attainment, that would be one of the ways of doing it.

Participant 14, Group 2
This section has highlighted nuances of the GME context in Scotland as perceived by participants with particular reference to the status of GME nationally and locally. It has raised some of the realities of the immersion context at the school and community level. The following sections explore participants’ understanding of the assessments and consider potential effects of NIF policy on GME nationally, locally and personally.

**Teachers’ developing awareness regarding the objectives and purposes of assessment**

Teachers were uncertain about the introduction of national assessments and were eager for more detail. Queries regarding the standardisation of the assessment included whether factors linked to the relatively small population—3004 primary GME pupils (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2016). Participants were located in schools across Scotland but collectively appeared to have a rudimentary grasp of the consultation regarding the policy. There was little verbal input to clarify how and in what regard teachers could have participated in the consultation. For assessment to inform practice, the purpose and wider goals of the assessment required clarification and were a particular concern for participants.

It’s that notion of the clarity of purpose of assessment, is it a tool, a diagnostic tool for help and support learning or is it a measuring stick to measure performance and teachers?

Participant 10, Group 2

We’re going to raise attainment by doing assessment and assessment only raises attainment if you do something with what you find.

Participant 10, Group 2

Participants questioned the purpose of national tests and wondered if results would help to improve outcomes for struggling pupils. There was concern how statistics produced from assessment data would reflect on GME. Many teachers work in small schools or one-teacher environments and were apprehensive of how results might be interpreted. Teachers feared public results viewing it as a form of league table. For some, this concern extended to the way in which teaching to the test would impact on teaching practice and teachers’ professional standing.

I’m just so unsure about everything, that the standardisation of the teaching is different and the learning is different in every area in school and this worry of teaching to test and teaching. What will happen if my marks are lower but it’s because I’ve been teaching a different way.

Participant 8, Group 1

Participants noted tensions between classroom practice and standardised assessment. For example, teachers identified differentiation could accommodate a range of learning needs yet, they were less certain how inclusive practice was to feature within the NIF. Uncertainties regarding the nature and format of tests were reported and included concerns
regarding the modality of testing with some teachers noting a preference for paper rather than computer based testing. Participants were hesitant about a prescribed timetable of assessment suggesting this could disadvantage some pupils.

I think that's important in small schools, if you're testing Primary 7, say, one year you might have a Primary 7 of four children, two of them might have special needs and you know that they've actually made a huge improvement in their learning but they're still not at that level two.

Participant 16, Group 2

If I had a choice of ‘would I give that paper to that child’ I would not have done that, you know, even when you think about the old National Testing when it was 5–14 you were only supposed to give it to the child when you felt that they were ready and particularly round-about that level A.

Participant 4, Group 2

**Situating national assessments within a changing landscape**

Having highlighted teachers’ perceived lack of clarity over the purpose and objectives of the assessments in the previous section, we now focus on how teachers understood the relevance of the NIF in Scottish Education. This was framed in three ways: the changes policy might have at a national and local authority level for GME; the possible implications and changes for teachers in their professional role; and the potential impact of the assessments on pupils.

**National assessment and the Scottish GME context**

There was a general consensus the assessments would bring a welcome consistency for GME nationally, as current practice seems to involve an ad-hoc approach, with authorities sharing materials and assessments in an informal way. Variation across the 14 local authorities providing GME was noted.

It’s better that we’re all using the same thing in our Authorities because before that you were getting bits of paper from, you know, obviously from other Authorities ‘I saw this, this is really good could you use this?’

Participant 10, Group 2

A potential benefit of the NIF was based on the expectation that assessments would be designed for GME, written in Gaelic with a language level and content that reflected the reality of the GME context. There was also an expectation those delivering GME would be consulted in this process.

It’s going to be generated specifically in Gaelic rather than something translated and I think that’s really positive, er, you know, that it’s something created specifically with the knowledge from the people that are delivering that.

Participant 10, Group 2
Effect on teachers’ professional practice

A range of responses were noted regarding the potential effect of assessments on teachers’ professional practice. These included teacher workload and responsibility, changes to classroom practice, and the role of teacher professional judgment and moderation in assessment.

Teacher workload and responsibility. Teachers expressed different views regarding their anticipated workload linked to the requirements of the NIF. There was the perception that ready-made and easy to administer assessments might serve to decrease teachers’ workloads.

I suppose it’s a tool that you’ve got in your teaching repertoire that’s given to you that you’re not having to go and create so I suppose in a way it would [be positive]. It depends how you utilise, you know, how it’s used.

Participant 12, Group 2

Some perceived the assessments might increase workloads, particularly if translation was involved. These differing views are perhaps the outcome of a policy that has yet to be implemented in GME and reflect confusion about the role and responsibility of teachers. Demands are being made on teachers in line with increasing attainment, and teachers commented they would require considerable support to fulfil such expectations. This excerpt suggests raising attainment will depend on factors beyond classroom teaching and learning; and identifies accounting for the wider context of GME in Scotland is necessary if teachers are to fulfil the roles and responsibilities expected of them within the NIF.

There seems to be an awful lot of onus on teachers as practitioners supporting not only children but that parental involvement and trying to, some of those, you know when you talk about closing the gap, some of those gaps they’re expecting us as teachers to close where it it’s not really necessarily our gift to give. It needs to be more of a kind of multi-agency approach.

Participant 10, Group 2

Changes to classroom practice to support use of national tests. Teachers anticipated feeling pressurised to manipulate teaching and lessons that then may create misleading predictions regarding the potential of the tests to raise standards. It was recognised pupils would need to be taught exam skills and be given experience of taking tests, so they were prepared for the format, procedures and realities of such assessments.

You have an obligation to make sure that pupils have had that kind of experience beforehand, so it’s not all about the testing content. It’s how you let the children get used to the system of actually sitting tests, pressures that are involved in that as for a while … you do need an element of that kind of cramming preparation.

Participant 1, Group 1

A flexible rather than a prescriptive approach to assessment was suggested; one that allows for teacher agency by giving them the freedom to make choices about how the assessments are used in their own context.

There’s this kind of happy medium where an assessment tool’s there but it’s flexible enough to be able to adapt for your skills and your own context.

Participant 10, Group 2
These statements give an insight into the possible concerns teachers perceive regarding classroom practice linked to the assessment reform underway in Scotland and are valuable when policy implementation is considered. The demands of the assessments and the necessities of preparing pupils for annual assessments are anticipated to be accommodated within class time and become part of regular practice. We anticipate this will initially involve a transition period to provide awareness for pupils completing assessments as such standardised annual testing has not featured extensively in Scotland for some time.

**Role of teacher professional judgement and moderation.** Both professional judgement and moderation form part of current GME practice. The Curriculum for Excellence in Scottish schools requires teachers to take a collegiate approach to the moderation of planning, learning, teaching and assessment at regular intervals throughout the school year at local, regional and national levels (Education Scotland 2016). Teachers described their reliance upon their professional knowledge to interpret pupils’ behaviour and make judgements, and to remove this perspective from the process would be ‘like going backwards’ (Participant 9, Group 1). Teachers questioned the feasibility of guidance in NIF policy and were concerned the important role of teachers within moderation and assessment of pupils would be overlooked. There was general consensus that removal of teacher professional judgement would impact on the validity and reliability of the tests. An over reliance on test results would give only a partial picture of what any individual child might be capable of.

There's a danger of too much focus on the result of the test and not on understanding; it's a snapshot of that child on that day, and that the teacher has a much better view of where they are at.

Participant 5, Group 1

Some teachers voiced concerns the assessments would replace moderation that has served to standardise practices and levels between schools.

The whole idea about moderation was to standardise what was going on between schools not assessment. They’re using assessment now where moderation should have been taking place.

Participant 10, Group 2

An alternative view emphasised how moderation and professional judgement could operate in tandem, particularly in the assessment of skills such as speaking and writing.

We assess four skills so, are you looking at reading and listening and writing and speaking in which case teacher professional judgement will have to come in for at least two of those. There will not be a right and a wrong answer to a piece of writing that you're doing or a presentation talk that you're doing or something along those kind of lines, in which case there won't be any devaluation of the teacher professional judgement and there will have to be moderation involved.

Participant 2, Group 1
In time, student teachers are likely to receive training through their degree programmes but current teaching staff were apprehensive about their workload and undermining of their professional judgement. The possible effects on how these assessments might affect the pupils in their schools and classrooms is considered next.

**Potential impact of assessments on GME pupils**

Much of the discussion was speculative around this theme. Concerns were voiced about whether the results would lead to children being labelled in some way, and the effect this might have on their future choices and options. A concern was whether the stress and anxiety experienced by children undertaking standardised assessment elsewhere in the UK would also occur in Scotland.

There's a really good lesson to be learned from what they did down South and it was all over the news about two months ago, about children crying and pressure and six-year-olds crying and teachers were driving them through it and really I think the delivery model of the assessment has to be: it can’t be a sit down do an exam.

Participant 3, Group 2

**Complexities of assessment and GME pupils.** Teachers were unclear about what would be assessed in Gaelic, at what stage of schooling assessments would occur, and whether the results of GME and EME assessments would be directly comparable.

With regards to what would be tested, one participant asked 'are the four skills going to be assessed in English and in Gaelic?’ (Participant 2, Group 1), whereas another participant suggested testing in both English and Gaelic would mean ‘they’ll have twice as many tests as children in mainstream’ (Participant 13, Group 1). Teachers acknowledged that many children come into school with no Gaelic language and therefore the primary aim is to facilitate language acquisition through immersion, and the focus is on embedding the language rather than teaching content.

Well, ‘cos I'm in with the P1s to P3s it just intimidates me the thought of assessing, especially P1 'cos the focus is supposed to be on their talking and listening skills in Gaelic medium P1, you know, that you’re really getting them conversational, obviously you’re still teaching them maths and all the essentials but, I just think you're assessing them in the wrong way.

Participant 11, Group 1

Children with additional support needs (ASN) were noted as being particularly vulnerable. Participants stressed the importance of teacher judgement, particularly for ASN children. A participant shared their experiences of testing.

A child who had been identified with additional support needs, got the some testing, even after saying to him ‘look don't panic about this, this is have a go’ and this child got highly distressed and I’m saying ‘look shut the paper let’s just leave it.

Participant 4, Group 2

Assessment for GME ought to take account of the intended learning outcomes at different stages of GME as well as the resources available, to ensure GME pupils are not affected adversely by the assessments. There was a general consensus ASN children needed to be
taken into consideration when rolling out standardised assessments across Scotland, and they ought to be assessed in line with their own learning aims. As one participant stated ‘why are we assessing them all in the same way if we’re teaching them in different ways?’ (Participant 11, Group 1).

**Impact of assessments on parents of GME children.** Teachers voiced uncertainty regarding how parents might react to, and interpret assessment results. Participants identified parents’ potential concerns regarding evaluation of schools, evaluation of GME provision, and the evaluation of their children. There was a concern parents would focus on statistics, on the assessment score and what that would mean in relation to their child’s position in class/nationally as opposed to the personal development of their child.

The parents - I had a parent and she said ‘well where are they in the class?’ and I’m saying ‘well do you know they’ve improved and this is where they are in terms of levels?’ ‘No but are they top of the class, are they in the middle, I just want to know’ and you see this is that desire for parents. They want a pigeon hole, that’s the kind of fear, that they read more into [scores].

Participant 10, Group 2

The media was seen to play an important role in how assessments were being viewed by parents.

It is the part that gets the biggest focus from the media because they immediately jump on it and say it’s about creating league tables, it’s about creating ranking schools and it’s not about that at all.

Participant 11, Group 2

Teachers anticipated addressing media messages and expected parents to see them as a point of contact regarding the assessments. Teachers felt they needed support and training in how to advise parents.

There’s an education job in helping them to be able to analyse this because when you put the information out, unless you put all these caveats on it, they’re just going to look at it in black and white and make those assumptions straightaway.

Participant 10, Group 2

The implications from NIF policy and the roll-out of national assessments in Scotland have been considered in relation to GME. Concerns regarding the potential impact of the policy on teachers’ workload and responsibilities have been uncovered. Possible benefits relate to improved consistency in assessment within GME across Scotland. A clear thread in the findings focused on the role of teacher professional judgement and moderation in assessment. Participants’ perceptions regarding the effect of assessments for pupils and how parents might interpret and use statistics produced through the assessments were notable themes.

**Discussion**

This paper provides a contribution to knowledge regarding GME relevant to education in Scotland that is more widely applicable when teachers’ perspectives regarding the
implementation of assessment policy are considered. As this research occurred prior to implementation of NIF policy, teachers’ perspectives help consider how they anticipated accommodating changes to support the goal of assessment reform and policy implementation and were keen to note tensions linked to classroom realities within GME as well as their professional needs. Future research could build on these findings; considering how teachers’ perspectives develop in response to reform changes and explore variables such as teacher autonomy once the assessment framework has been established. This study has outlined the importance for teachers of clear information regarding the nature and purpose of standardised assessments, and the need for support structures that build capacity alongside expectations of performance. Participants were not averse to the assessments, yet, they did request support and professional development; a need noted previously regarding CPD in Scotland (Livingston 2012). Given the insights regarding CPD, there is an opportunity to consider the nature, form and function of professional development relating to the new policy and any particular support provided for GME professionals. Specific themes such as fears of teaching to the test, the effect on pupil attainment and on teacher morale and classroom practice were notable and reflect teachers insights while policy is emerging. Such insights reflect wider themes regarding a perceived lack of fit when policy is related to everyday classroom teaching. Each of these areas are noted as becoming more complex when the impact of policy has been examined (Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus 2003).

Situating these findings within knowledge regarding assessment regimes is crucial to help teachers understand how they can use data from the assessments to inform their planning (Fisher et al., 2006) and to ensure inadvertent weaknesses in practice are avoided (Blazar and Pollard 2017). Thus, there is opportunity from practice to inform the development, application and provision of the assessment framework in Scotland. Developing strategies to support the emotional capacity of pupils may be advantageous when considering the impact of assessment in schools (Putwain et al. 2013). As the policy implementation in Scotland was ongoing at the time of data collection the adoption of focus group methods helped elucidate specifics regarding the application of policy within classroom and school practice. Looking ahead building on this work would be informative using a mixed-methods approach as there are multiple examples of studies that have established quantitative measures linked to instruction and assessment change (e.g. Palermo and Thomson 2019). Areas for future research to consider includes the implementation of policy, the development of teachers’ perceptions and skill regarding assessment data if the planned changes are to be influential on pupil outcomes and achievement. A limitation is recognised as teachers elected to participate based on those available to attend an event. That participants held a range of roles and reported a breadth of experience is helpful to mitigate concerns regarding constraints on generalizability. Similarly, the scope of questions within the discussion aimed to encourage interpretation and considerations of assessment in different contexts. Potential implications noted in this paper are likely part of a wider assessment landscape as the execution of policy is on-going.

**Teachers’ perceptions regarding policy, teaching and national assessment**

This article has focused on the societal and educational contexts into which the NIF is being introduced. A common theme has addressed implementation and what this will mean in
the short-, medium- and long-term. The following section links teacher perspectives with relevant research regarding reform in other countries (but not specifically focused on immersion education). Teachers in GME generally have autonomy as they are responsible for creating environments conducive to learning and this also included assessment, both if and when it was to take place. However, the reform unfolding suggests a stricter approach may follow. Thus, the successful implementation of such assessment associated policy is vital for any intended change to come about and involves teachers at the classroom level working in concert with the hierarchical systems that exist in education. The interpretation of assessment data by schools is difficult to identify and the evaluation encouraged in the NIF may take time to establish when studies of reform elsewhere are considered (O’Brien, McNamara, and O’Hara 2015) and that there are a multitude of nested factors when more than one language is in play (De Backer, Van Avermaet, and Slembrouck 2017). Teachers’ uncertainty ought to be addressed as a lack of appropriate guidance was noted as a weakness within assessment driven policy that led to varied interpretations and implementation of policy (Curry et al. 2016; De Lisle 2015). Implementation that could be considered more successful can be noted in Norway (Hopfenbeck, Flórez Petour, and Tolo 2015) and Singapore (Ratnam-Lim and Tan 2015), both were achieved on a large scale and linked to policy development. An aspect to be considered within the changing landscape of Scottish Education is the discourse the NIF will create generally and also specifically into the GME context where they are recognised. There were clear concerns among teachers that the status of GME would be made vulnerable and questions arise as parents, teachers and other stakeholders in education move towards considering assessment data and its usage at the national, regional, school, class and pupil levels.

Scottish education benefits from regional diversity evident in how schools and their localities approach reform and change (Grek and Ozga 2010; Priestley et al. 2011). However, concerns linked to the lack of guidance regarding partnership and collaborative approaches have been noted (Kennedy and Doherty 2012). Examples of partnership working in England identify provision of support as a barrier to continued engagement (Haynes and Lynch 2013). Concerns raised in the current study are informative and could be revisited once the NIF has been made available for GME. The roll-out of large scale assessment could cause a range of changes for teachers and pupils (Copp 2016; Polesel, Rice, and Dulfer 2014). The next few years will be a pivotal time if the aims of the NIF are to be achieved without drawbacks of such policy encroaching on Scottish education.

**Integrating the assessment framework within a multi-lingual educational context**

In relation to GME there are additional aspects to be considered regarding NIF policy. Literacy in Gaelic and English is a crucial part of GME yet the separation of the testing has received little scrutiny. Perhaps the separate approaches to developing the assessment framework relates to the societal context and the perceived vulnerability of Gaelic or stems from a separate language development perspective. The apparent hesitancy to profile and understand early language acquisition of children within GME is intriguing and appears to clash within the wider Scottish child-centred policy that addresses education as well as other (MacQuarrie and Lyon 2019). Gorter and Cenoz (2017) note a tension regarding assessment focusing on a language when more than one language features in classrooms. Becoming
and being bilingual is noted to involve the use of more than one language to comfortably discuss and exchange ideas (Gort and Pontier 2013) and can be considered a strength of language skill and acquisition. Thus, these points raise the query whether the NIF is sufficiently complex to capture the breadth of students learning and capabilities when only one language at a time is examined.

It is well established that language learning is not straightforward whether children are learning one or more languages. Yet, this is somewhat overlooked despite the immersion model embedded in GME. The influence of bilingualism on primary aged children is linked to variation on language tests and the trajectory of language acquisition needs to be given careful consideration (Altman, Goldstein, and Armon-Lotem 2017; Marinis et al. 2017). GME has a particular advantage as the majority of children in GME have English as their main language at home, followed by Gaelic (O’Hanlon, Paterson, and National Records of Scotland, 2015). We can look at these languages and consider how they are similar and different and what this means for young language learners. The age range of 4–7 is an optimal period to target, address and ameliorate language related concerns (McKean et al. 2015; McKean et al. 2017), yet this period appears to be overlooked in policy. Within this age range children progress from pre-school to primary school and have sufficient exposure to the Gaelic language (via the immersion model) that phonological awareness in Gaelic can be reliably examined from the third year of primary school (Lyon 2012). Targeting this period may help address wider issues regarding the application of educational and related policy and form a crucial step in supporting all children in GME (MacQuarrie and Lyon 2019).

In conclusion, the national improvement framework forms a significant shift in the data collected from schools and the manner in which evaluations are to be conducted. This article has attempted to gather perspectives regarding the framework and consider the implications for pupils, teachers, schools and the wider education context. The NIF will involve a major policy drive across Scotland and teachers are aware of the pressures associated with such tests but are also open to considering the positive outcomes that can stem from assessment orientated mandates.

Notes

1. For example Morgan (2019) neatly covers some history regarding curriculum making
2. A fuller overview of Gaelic medium education can be accessed in MacQuarrie and Lyon (2019).
3. An in-depth account of the background leading to these changes can be accessed in Hutchinson and Hayward (2005).
4. Gàidhlig literacy test examines competence in listening and talking, reading, writing skills and is designed for Gaelic medium education settings.

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ORCID

Sarah MacQuarrie http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0950-3037
Susan Dawson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7021-1837

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