Response to Call for Evidence, Education (Scotland) Bill - Dr. Lindsay Dombrowski

I am providing feedback in relation only to Part 2 of the Bill.

Invitation for Evidence (IoE) Questions: “10a) How significant a change in Gaelic medium primary education will the Bill deliver?

Response: The right of children to access Gaelic Medium Education (GME) should be given due consideration in all areas of Scotland, not just those considered to be “Gaelic-speaking”, as was embedded in previous Education Acts. I agree that, in this regard, the new Bill is more inclusive and supportive of GME. I am concerned that there are few indicators of how Educational Authorities (EAs) will determine whether there is sufficient demand for GMPE, and that the Bill places too much responsibility on parents.

I am very concerned by Sections 5.2a and 5.2b, and the use of the word “and” as indicating that parents requesting GMPE require to fulfill both demands. 5.2a and 5.2b are ultimately contradictory in nature, as the first demands the submitting parent speak only on behalf of his/her child, and the second demands he/she speak on behalf of others’ children. It should not be a parent’s responsibility to demonstrate that other parents in their EA and with children in their child’s year group also have interest in GMPE. It can be very difficult for parents to have networks that include parents of children a similar age to their own prior to their child beginning school. Section 5.2b makes demands on parents that might be easily accomplished after P2, when these networks have been formed, but that would be very challenging prior to P1. We need prevision of GMPE to be present for P1, and so I strongly object to Section 5.2b being included in the Bill preceded by the word “and”, indicating its necessity to parental requests. Section 5.2b should be relocated to Section 5.3.

Section 5.6b and c are worrying as they allow a Scottish Minister (SM) to make undue demands on parents requesting GMPE. It is the SM and EAs (rather than the requesting parent) who should assume responsibility for assessing parental interest in GMPE – indeed this is the purpose of Section 5 of the Bill. SMs should not be allowed to make further provision on parents, although I concede that they might encourage or invite the submission of any additional evidence of demand.

Regarding Section 7.6a and 7.6b, I am concerned about the relevance and appropriateness of these requirements to remote rural areas. In these areas, it would not be unusual to find multi-composite classes, and so I encourage the Bill to acknowledge that reasonable demand could exist where there is evidence of a multi-composite achieving viable numbers over the course of 2 to 3 years. In these instances condition 7.6a may not be met, but 7.6b would be predicted to be met. Therefore, I recommend “and/or” be added at the end of 7.6a.
Section 9.1e is very concerning. There should be no arbitrary cap on timespan between assessing demand by EAs. The period of 2 years between assessments means that the voices and desires of parents will be ignored biyearly and this might discourage parents from voicing demand for GMPE. Parents should be encouraged to voice demand on a yearly basis and a response from EAs provided on a yearly basis. That way, the true extent of demand for GMPE may begin to be seen over the course of a number of years, as parents realise that they have a right to request GMPE.

IoE Question: “10b) Do you agree these provisions should be limited to primary schooling?”

Response: I do not agree the provisions set out on the Bill should be limited to primary. Children may have to cross EA lines in order to access GMPE and it would be reasonable for similar assessments to be made at the secondary level (particularly where there is more fluidity in terms of which classes are accessed by students at different levels of study) and where increasing use is being made of Virtual Learning Environments. Parents whose children have gone through GMPE should have a right to have EAs formally assess the possibility of offering secondary provision.

IoE Questions: 11. What are the most appropriate ways for education authorities, particularly those with low levels of Gaelic usage, to promote and support Gaelic medium education and Gaelic learner education? What impact is this promotional work likely to have on the Gaelic language and the number of Gaelic speakers?

Response: Education authorities should encourage parents to indicate a preference for GMPE on a yearly basis and make a report of the feasibility of providing GMPE (or alternative transportation arrangements to neighbouring EAs, if relevant) publicly available on a yearly basis. The EAs should be forward-thinking and not merely reactive to parental demand.

IoE Questions: 12. Do you agree that the Bill “will establish a clear process for authorities to follow in considering parental requests for an assessment of the need for Gaelic medium primary education”? Do you agree with the thresholds proposed in the Bill in relation to the assessment of parental requests?

Response: I do not agree with this statement. Please see my lines 18-58 as evidence of my concerns about the process outlined in the Bill. I would like to see more proactive and substantive commitments made for the assessment of demand for GMPE by all EAs, with responsibility placed on EAs and not parents. It should not be required that parents become activists or social researchers in order to have a request for GMPE be considered.

IoE Questions: 13. Under existing legislation, education authorities must have regard to Bord na Gaidhlig’s [sic] education guidance when they are
producing their annual statement of improvement objectives. What will the
requirement in this bill add to this?

I hope EAs will see their responsibility is not only to Bòrd na Gàidhlig, but to
the parents of children (and the children themselves) in their constituency.

IoE Question: 14. Overall, to what extent will the Bill help to deliver the
Scottish Government’s commitments to grow and strengthen Gaelic
education?

This Bill, as it presently is written, gives more support to Gaelic education, but
needs to be strengthened and clarified to ensure that EAs cannot bypass the
need to assess feasibility for providing GMPE. Onus should not be placed on
individual parents to demonstrate demand for their district.

With kind regards,

Dr. Lindsay Dombrowski
Lindsay.dombrowski@uws.ac.uk
Lecturer in Education
University of the West of Scotland