

<http://www.clickonwales.org/2014/11/the-trouble-with-bilingual-education-the-ever-increasing-gap-between-research-policy-and-practice/>

The trouble with bilingual education: The ever increasing gap between research, policy and practice.

Mirain Rhys looks at the issues around Welsh medium education for children where Welsh isn't spoken at home.

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The ever-present argument that children from non-Welsh speaking backgrounds can't reach their full potential in Welsh medium education has yet again come to the fore. [Recent statistics obtained by the BBC](#) under a Freedom of Information Act indicate that children who are taught through the medium of Welsh but don't speak Welsh at home are less likely to overachieve by the time they reach the end of their primary schooling (i.e. obtaining a 'Level 5' or higher at key stage 2 (KS2) in the core subjects of English, Welsh First Language, Mathematics and Science).

Despite this, the statistics also indicate that the majority of children from non-Welsh speaking homes (over 90%) reach the expected 'Level 4' outcome in all core subjects by the end of KS2, and these results are very similar for children who are from Welsh speaking homes, as well as children in English medium schools.

In recent years, the Welsh Government has been keen to project their continued support for the future of the Welsh language, illustrated in the current Welsh language policy document '[A Living Language, a Language for Living](#)'. Welsh medium education plays a vital part in Welsh language development and maintenance, where the goal is to develop children into bilingual individuals, whatever their home language – but is this happening?

The benefits of bilingualism have been investigated worldwide (E. Bialystok, O. Garcia, J. Cummins, V. Cook etc.) and recent research from Wales has indicated that children who don't speak Welsh at home performed within the expected norms when assessed in Welsh for vocabulary and reading. They also performed on par with children from English medium schools when assessed in English for vocabulary and reading (Rhys & Thomas, 2013). Despite this, the research also indicated how their home language was the language in which children were strongest, be that Welsh or English, indicating that although they might become proficient in both languages through school, the use of their stronger language was, however, preferred outside the classroom.

Although the current governmental statistics are not surprising, they fail to highlight this evident gap between the increasing number of children receiving their education through Welsh, and the levels at which the language is used outside the classroom – arguably the real issue facing the future of the Welsh language. Of course, there will always be a small percentage of individuals who live their lives through the medium of Welsh, and who are lucky enough to be able to use it daily. But for the majority of children learning through Welsh, this is not a reality.

We already know that there are [more children from homes where Welsh isn't spoken](#) than there are from homes where it is spoken who attend Welsh medium education. Research also suggests that Welsh language transmission within the home is at a critical point, with the likelihood of a child using Welsh diminishing if one adult does not speak the language.

Despite an overwhelming level of support from non-Welsh speaking parents/carers for the continuation of Welsh medium education, many often have valid reservations and concerns about their child(ren) being educated in a language they don't speak. These include concerns regarding their capacity to support their child with their homework, the level of immersion in the Welsh language and the extent to which learning through the medium of Welsh might stunt their overall academic development and well as their English language proficiency and development, to name just a few.

The store of research supporting bilingual education is broad, and this may go far in dispelling many worries parents/carers may have. In addition, the Welsh Government has put in place policies to encourage the use of Welsh language services and there is, in addition, a small, but existing number of organizations tasked with increasing awareness of the Welsh language as a tool (e.g. [RhAG](#), [Mentrau Iaith](#), [Twf](#)). Despite this, the reality is that many still feel like they have nowhere to turn for support relating to their child's minority language education.

Professor Colin Baker has often argued that a minority language cannot survive without efforts made to maintain the language within the three realms of society; education, the community and the home. Despite the current statistics indicating that by the end of Key Stage 2, the vast majority of children attending Welsh medium education are fully bilingual individuals, it seems that the development of informative, attractive initiatives for using the language outside the classroom need further development and promotion.

Funding for the Welsh language is always under threat, and re-visiting this long and trodden road cannot be the only solution. The Welsh language is a part of every Welsh citizen's life in one way or another, and its survival depends on each individual's attitude towards it. Everyone can be responsible for its future, from the odd 'Bore Da' on the bus or wearing the orange 'I can speak Welsh' badge to indeed making that decision to send your child(ren) to a Welsh medium school. As with most things in life, it is in our hands – and with better links between research, policy and practice the future for the Welsh language could be a bright one for all.

Tags: [bilingualism](#), [Education](#), [IWA](#), [Welsh](#), [welsh medium](#)

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