

Pupils' and Teachers' Perceptions and Experiences of Welsh Language Instruction

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Abstract : In 2017, the Welsh Government introduced an ambitious, new strategy to increase the number of Welsh speakers in Wales to 1 million by 2050. The Welsh education system is a vitally important feature of this strategy. All children attending state schools in Wales learn Welsh as a second language until the age of 16 and are assessed at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level. In 2013, a review of Welsh second language instruction in Key Stages 3 and 4 was completed. The report identified considerable gaps in teachers' preparation and training for teaching Welsh; poor Welsh language ethos at many schools; and a general lack of resources to support the instruction of Welsh. Recommendations were made across a number of dimensions including curriculum content, pedagogical practice, and teacher assessment, training, and resources. With a new national curriculum currently in development, this study builds on this review and provides unprecedented detail into pupils' and teachers' perceptions of Welsh language instruction. The current research built on data taken from an existing capacity building research project on Welsh education, the Wales multi-cohort study (WMS). Quantitative data taken from WMS surveys with over 1200 pupils in schools in Wales indicated that Welsh language lessons were the least enjoyable subject among pupils. The current research aimed to unpick pupil experiences in order to add to the policy development context. To achieve this, forty-four pupils and four teachers in three schools from the larger WMS sample participated in focus groups. Participants from years 9, 11 and 13 who had indicated positive, negative and neutral attitudes towards the Welsh language in a previous WMS survey were selected. Questions were based on previous research exploring issues including, but not limited to pedagogy, policy, assessment, engagement and (teacher) training. A thematic analysis of the focus group recordings revealed that the majority of participants held positive views around keeping the language alive but did not want to take on responsibility for its maintenance. These views were almost entirely based on their experiences of learning Welsh at school, especially in relation to their perceived lack of choice and opinions around particular lesson strategies and assessment. Analysis of teacher interviews highlighted a distinct lack of resources (materials and staff alike) compared to modern foreign languages, which had a negative impact on student motivation and attitudes. Both staff and students indicated a need for more practical, oral language instruction which could lead to Welsh being used outside the classroom. The data corroborate many of the review's previous findings, but what makes this research distinctive is the way in which pupils poignantly address generally misguided aims for Welsh language instruction, poor pedagogical practice and a general disconnect between Welsh instruction and its daily use in their lives. These findings emphasize the complexity of incorporating the educational sector in strategies for Welsh language maintenance and the complications arising from pedagogical training, support, and resources, as well as teacher and pupil perceptions of, and attitudes towards, teaching and learning Welsh.

Keywords : bilingual education, language maintenance, language revitalisation, minority languages, Wales

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