

*Bilingualism in the early years: a study of the
training and implementation of Welsh as an area of
learning in the Foundation Phase 3–7 years*

SIÂN WYN SIENCYN
Trinity College Carmarthen

THEA CAMERON-FAULKNER
Swansea University

GLENDA TINNEY
Trinity College Carmarthen

ALISON MURPHY
Swansea University

Background

The implementation of the Government of Wales Act in 1999 has resulted in what is, in many respects, a self governing Wales, particularly when it comes to education policy and more general frameworks in services for young children and families. By 2003, Wales was advancing its own radical proposals for an early years curriculum which proposed a play-centred approach to promoting the learning of children up to 7 years (WAG, 2003). It is anticipated that this drive toward further devolution will be significantly advanced by the Government of Wales Act 2006.

‘The Desirable Learning Outcomes for Children’s Learning under Compulsory School Age’ (ACAC, 1996) introduced as the framework for early years, highlighted differences, both pedagogic and ideological, between Wales and England. With its focus on the learning child, its robust celebration of the value of play in children’s learning and its opening with two lines

of an *awdl*, the Desirable Outcomes in Wales was warmly welcomed. The same was not true of the 'Desirable Outcomes For Children's Learning On Entering Compulsory Education' (SCAA, 1996). Indeed, David (1998) said when comparing the 'Desirable Outcomes' document for England and the 'Desirable Outcomes' for children in Wales:

What are we to make of the stark contrast in the approach reflected in the two sets of documentation? ... Is it that national expectations, in other words the constructions of childhood are different ... It would seem that being under five in England is to be less joyful, less celebrated, less imaginative, less romantic, more pressurized, more rigid ... than in Wales. (David, 1998: 61)

The 'Desirable Outcomes' document in Wales made reference to Welsh language provision and the expectation that all children would have some experience of Welsh during their time in provision for under fives:

Experiencing Welsh at an early age, when language acquisition skills are at their most effective can be a valuable preparation for the child's learning of Welsh at school. (ACAC 1996: 4)

'The Learning Country: Foundation Phase 3–7 years' (WAG, 2003) signals a further distinctiveness for Wales, not only in the organization of the curriculum but also in the ethos and principles that underpin that curriculum. The Foundation Phase is based very firmly in the tradition of learning through play and in understanding the holistic nature of young children's learning.

The main focus of the Foundation Phase in Wales is the child's wellbeing; personal, social development and well-being are placed at the centre of the curriculum and are viewed as fundamental to young children's learning. The original Desirable Outcomes document (ACAC, 1996) had 6 areas of learning: language, literacy, and communication; mathematical development; personal and social development; knowledge and understanding of the world; creative development, and physical development. At the outset, the Foundation Phase document added another area of learning: bilingualism and multi-cultural awareness which was subsequently replaced as an area of learning by Welsh language development. The pilot stage was based in forty one settings throughout Wales. The first report of the 'Monitoring and Evaluation of the Effective Implementation of the Foundation Phase' (MEEIFP) Project in February 2006 made encouraging reading with areas of strength identified clearly. But the MEEIFP report concludes that 'bilingualism and multicultural understanding has been particularly difficult to introduce' (Siraj-Blatchford, et al., 2006: 6). The report also highlights the

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difficulties some settings have experienced in recruiting staff who can work bilingually, particularly in the English sector. Despite the growth of Welsh medium education in early years settings, there is a lack of bilingual staff to support this (Roberts and Baker, 2003; Siencyn, 2004).

In relation to early years' practice, *Iaith Pawb: A National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales* (WAG, 2003a) is very clear. Although it takes a broad sweep, from economic and community regeneration to cultural activities, a particular emphasis is placed on increasing the proportion of children receiving Welsh medium pre-school education by 2011. The inclusion of Welsh language development as an area of learning in the Foundation Phase integrates the early learning experiences of young children with the political and social vision of *Iaith Pawb*. However, this is proving to be more challenging than was perhaps originally anticipated.

Defining bilingualism has always been challenging, so it is interesting to note that the Foundation Phase framework for Welsh language development provides us with a definition of bilingualism that is both simplistic and detailed at the same time: 'Bilingualism is the ability to speak, read and write in two languages' (WAG, 2008: 7). No mention is made of the ability to understand or of other complexities of bilingual behaviours. That being said, the case for early bilingualism is clearly becoming overwhelming (Shaffer, 1999; Bialystok, 2001).

Research questions

The initial research, undertaken with WERN bursaries, sought to identify some of the key questions relating to this area. There were a number of questions that interested the group, for example:

- what are the attitudes and expectations of teachers and early years professionals involved in Foundation Phase provision?
- what are the second language skills of early years professionals and their perceptions of their own skills?
- what are the opportunities for training in the Welsh language development area of learning?
- who designs this training and how does it link to the Foundation Phase in general?
- how do adults with limited L2 skills implement the Welsh language development area of learning requirements?

These questions and others were discussed and refined in order to focus the research into an exploration of the issues impacting on the successful implementation of the Welsh language development area of learning in the Foundation Phase. The proposal is to investigate the attitudes of teachers and other early years practitioners to the delivery of this curriculum area.

Methodology

The research would involve mixed methods: questionnaires, interviews, observations, and self-evaluation of second language skills. The literature in this area is, not unsurprisingly, heavily weighted towards the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as an Additional Language (EAL), methodology frameworks (Cohen, 1996; Oxford, 1990). Few standardised tools are available with particular reference to lesser used languages or indigenous languages. Three groups of Foundation Phase staff and provision would be identified: teachers, Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) (main-tained provision) and daycare / sessional workers (non maintained provision).

The research would identify training opportunities provided through local authorities and other agencies. Self-assessment tool/s would be designed and piloted to establish their value as a method of assessing the impact of that training on: (a) practice in settings, (b) Welsh use in settings generally, and (c) children's use of the second language. These are ambitious aims and are in the process of being further clarified and refined. The main thrust of the research would remain the introduction of Welsh as an area of learning in the Foundation Phase 3–7 years. However, the group is also interested in the secondary research and the subtext relating to adults accessing learning and training.

The WERN experience

Involvement in WERN has been challenging. As the areas of expertise and experience of the group are diverse, we are not, in many respects, a cohesive group of academics. We do not come from the same research traditions or from the same academic disciplines. Two of us are bilingual (one with a PhD in bio-sciences) and work comfortably in both languages, one is from a teaching background and the other a linguistics research academic. Getting to know one another has been a rich and rewarding experience. We would not have worked together, however briefly, were it not for the WERN.

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We were particularly encouraged by recent indications that the traditional publicly funded research grant bodies are moving, or are being moved, towards acknowledging the need to increase research capacity. Furthermore, the democratisation of research to include those potential researchers with extensive practical experience was a welcome encouragement for us to engage with WERN.

The interdisciplinary profile of the WERN bursary group team and project, the fact that several of the team were very new to this area of research and thus did not have a strong portfolio of academic publications, and the strong focus on practice within the proposed project suggested to the team that ESRC funding may not be the most suitable funding avenue. Therefore, as part of the WERN project, we researched possible avenues of funding which would provide support for the work we are interested in pursuing. Two possible funding bodies are being targeted – the Leverhulme Trust and the Esmee Fairburn Foundation – as they are interested in projects which are likely to enhance language, literacy and numeracy skills and that develop a flexible and skilled schools' workforce to meet changing educational needs. These key areas are also very pertinent to the WERN bursary group's aims, both in terms of research and ideology, of providing bilingual skills and confidence to the workforce delivering the Foundation Phase in Wales.

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