



Health and Care
Research Wales
Evidence Centre
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Ymchwil Iechyd a
Gofal Cymru

**Transitioning primary to secondary education
during the Covid-19 pandemic: qualitative
study of the experiences of Welsh-medium
pupils and their non-Welsh speaking parents**

August 2023



Study conducted by Aberystwyth University and Bangor University

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Report submitted to the Evidence Centre: July 2023

Final report issued by Evidence Centre: August 2023

This report should be cited as: Health and Care Research Wales Evidence Centre. Transitioning primary to secondary education during the Covid-19 pandemic: qualitative study of the experiences of Welsh-medium pupils and their non-Welsh speaking parents (PR0005)_August 2023

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Transitioning primary to secondary education during the Covid-19 pandemic: qualitative study of the experiences of Welsh-medium pupils and their non-Welsh speaking parents

Report Number: PR0005 (August 2023)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Background / Aim

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant public and personal upheaval, including lockdowns and school closures in March 2020 and January 2021. Some families found access to the Welsh language, in terms of opportunities to use the language, and in terms of broader support, to be challenging during the pandemic. The lack of exposure to the Welsh language during the pandemic was particularly problematic for pupils from non-Welsh speaking households who attended Welsh-medium schools (Welsh Government, 2021; Thomas & Lloyd-Williams *et al.* (2021)). Whilst previous research (Thomas & Lloyd-Williams *et al.*, 2021) identified important recommendations, further qualitative research was needed to capture **families' (pupils and their parents) views on the overall experience of the pandemic and the impact on Welsh language skills.**

This study describes the perceptions and experiences of parent-child pairs in non-Welsh-speaking families¹ whose child(ren) received their education through the medium of Welsh or bilingually. The study captures the experiences of pupils enrolled in Welsh-medium education and their non-Welsh speaking parents², of the **transitional period³ between primary and secondary school during the pandemic.**

Methodology

The timeframe of this study included a preparatory period in November and December of 2022. Data collection and analysis took place between January and June of 2023.

The methodology encompassed a qualitative study design, adopting a non-probability sampling approach, using purposive sampling and recruitment strategies targeting pupils enrolled in Welsh-medium education and their non-Welsh speaking parents.

Semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation methods were used to explore the lived experiences of the contributors. The interviews focused on pupils' experiences of home learning during the pandemic, their experiences of transition from primary to secondary, and the return to school, post lockdown; and parents' experiences whilst supporting their children during the pandemic. They also covered more generic questions relating to general views around their relationship with the Welsh language.

Key Findings and Outputs

Nine child / parent pairs (18 participants) participated.

The quote, below succinctly describes the general experiences of all families interviewed (pupils and parents) and highlights the lack of opportunity to engage actively and use the Welsh language during lockdown:

'In my opinion it (developing Welsh language skills) was a bit on pause... we didn't really use it that much.' (Child 2)

Other key findings include the value of:

- Strengthening the **links between primary and secondary settings** to ease the transition process
- **Assessing pupils' Welsh language skills** between key stages to identify any **support** required e.g. during the transition from primary/secondary.
- Ensuring **effective communication** between home and school e.g. the use of communicative apps such as seesaw, school gateway etc.
- Making effective use of **bilingual communication** e.g. lists of key terminology that would aid parents in accessing and understanding feedback.
- Increasing **opportunities** to use the Welsh language **within and outside of school**.

Policy & Practice Implications

The table below summarises the key implications for policy and practice (the full table can be found in section 5).

IMPLICATIONS	
1. Supporting Policy	Importance of increasing the opportunities to use the Welsh language. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • i.e extra-curricular provision, mediated by schools and other stakeholders.
	Value of supporting parents' Welsh language skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to offer further opportunities for parents to develop their Welsh language skills.
2. Supporting LEAs and schools to assist pupils	Benefits of streamlining transition from primary to secondary <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback and strategies for supporting Welsh language skills could be adopted across school clusters (specifically between the end of KS2/beginning of KS3). • Assessing Welsh language skills.
	Supporting Translanguaging

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pupils' responses suggest that the use of translanguaging strategies would allow the pupil to make use of their full linguistic repertoire.
3. Supporting schools to assist parents	<p>Importance of greater awareness of linguistic nature of the home</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further awareness and consideration to the linguistic nature of the home (which could impact the need for self-sufficient learning), may be beneficial in supporting pupils' wellbeing. • Assigning a key member of staff as a contact point for queries regarding supporting pupils in/with Welsh could aid schools in understanding the linguistic support available for pupils in the home.
	<p>Importance of effective bilingual communication.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A list of key terms within individual subjects should be made available to parents (providing translations of commonly used phrases/key words used in feedback could help parents follow their child's progress). • Schools to explore how they communicate with parents i.e. effective use of social media/messaging apps

Addressing these implications will aid in:

- Informing **WG policy** on supporting pupils' Welsh Language skills.
- Providing **guidance to WM schools** & other stakeholders on further support that could be offered to pupils and parents from non-Welsh speaking homes.
- Supporting and **strengthening pupils' Welsh Language skills during the transition** process (specifically pupils from non-Welsh speaking homes who attend Welsh medium schools, although many of this study's findings are relevant to all pupils).
- **Supporting parents** of pupils who attend Welsh medium education (specifically, but not exclusively, parents where Welsh is not spoken in the home).
- Highlighting the importance of developing **additional opportunities** to use the Welsh language beyond the school context.

Future Research Recommendations

Future research recommendations can be seen in Section 5.4. Specifically, we identify the need for further research in the following areas:

- ***The impact of COVID-19 on the Welsh language skills of younger pupils***
Findings indicate that the language skills of younger children was impacted e.g. 'the youngest [7-year-old sibling] ... due to Covid he doesn't speak as well...' . Older pupils succeeded in progressing self-sufficiently during the primary-secondary transition period as a result of rich prior experiences and progressing through immersive primary systems. Care is needed to ensure younger pupils without these prior experiences

from non-Welsh speaking households can feel confident in continuing with Welsh-medium education.

- ***Support provided by older pupils to younger siblings***

Several families described the support that the pupils often provided to younger siblings during the pandemic, highlighting additional expectations on these pupils, which may not be as noted in Welsh-speaking families. Future research should attempt to explore this issue and identify provision to develop and build the skills of younger pupils, and ensure older pupils are adequately supported to complete their own work, in addition to assisting with the support needs of younger siblings.

- ***Supporting pupils with Additional Learning Needs (ALN)***

As this data set reflects an increased focus on independent learning (especially in secondary school) this also highlights the need to carefully consider the different needs of individual pupils – e.g., some pupils may need more input in oral Welsh whilst others may need more balanced approach where they can access information, at the same level, in both languages. This report has specifically highlighted the need to assess pupils' Welsh language skills and this assessment may be particularly important for pupils with ALN. Schools should continue to be aware that pupils with ALN attending Welsh medium provision may require further resources and support. This could include an increased use of bilingual communication that would allow parents/caregivers to offer further support in the home. Further research, that includes a focus on pupils with ALN would offer further insight into the levels of support required.

- ***Exploring reasons for continued engagement with Welsh-medium education***

Parents noted that the transition process was aided by their child(ren)'s independence and perseverance. However, if pupils are not able to be independent in their learning and, if the levels of bilingual communication/information provided for parents lessens in secondary school (as suggested by the current data set), pupils' and parents' engagement and ongoing commitment to Welsh-medium education may be impacted. We feel further research engaging with pupils and their parents who transitioned to English-medium school after previously attending Welsh medium primary school, could explore ways in which continued engagement with Welsh-medium education, post-transition, could have been achieved.

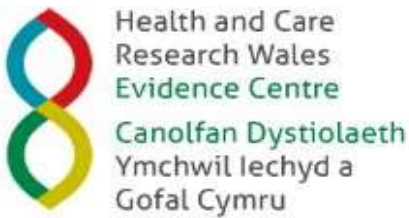
[Read the report in full](#)

¹ We use 'non-Welsh-speaking families' in this context to refer to families that typically use English to communicate with each other, both individually and as a family unit, although members of the family attending Welsh-medium/bilingual school would be able to use Welsh with each other i.e., siblings or extended family if the opportunity or need arose.

² We use 'non-Welsh-speaking parents' in this context to refer to parents who typically use English to communicate with each other, both individually and as a family unit. Given the potential age range of the

parents, it is very likely that those who were themselves educated in Wales would have at least minimal knowledge of Welsh. Information regarding the language abilities of the parents is provided in the Participant sample section. Also, note that parent, carer, or guardian may be encompassed in the term 'parent' in this report.

³ The terms transitional period/transitioning/transitions used within this report refer exclusively to the transition made by pupils when moving from primary to secondary school.



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