

TOWARDS THE LIGHT/ TUA'R GOLEUNI: WELSH MEDIUM EDUCATION FOR THE NON-WELSH SPEAKING IN SOUTH WALES: A PARENT'S CHOICE

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Abstract. The Welsh-medium education system has long been seen as an effective tool of Welsh language production in Wales. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of Welsh medium education in one south Wales Valley, 'Cwm Rhymini / Rhymini Valley'. The main reasoning behind the primary research is to focus on the reasons why non-Welsh speaking parents chose Welsh medium education for their children. The research focuses on education but recognises the overlapping nature of the main language transmission spheres within Welsh language planning, i.e. family, community and workplace. This study adopts a mainly qualitative research strategy by administering 60 unstructured interviews to parents who chose Welsh medium nursery, primary and secondary schools for their children. However, as a secondary methodological tool, a semi-structured questionnaire was given out prior to the interviews and the interview sample was then drawn from these. Moreover, Welsh language resurgence within Anglicized areas of South Wales is a fairly unexplored field, this study is hoped to be a catalyst for many more future studies in this field and attempts to address the existing lacunae.

Keywords: Welsh-medium education, language planning, educational incentives, language transmission, sociology of language

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the Welsh-medium education system in one south Wales valley, 'Cwm Rhymini' or the Rhymini Valley in the county of Caerffili. Having previously studied Welsh language use among past pupils of the Welsh medium system within Cwm Rhymini (Hodges 2006, Hodges 2009), the present study focuses on the perspective of parents and their opinions of this particular educational system. The main essence

of the paper is to establish the most prominent reasons why parents send their children through the Welsh medium education system, so especially since a high proportion of the parents are non-Welsh-speaking themselves. A subsequent aim is to place these findings within a wider corpus of research fields such as family language transmission, the construction and maintenance of social networks and the status of the Welsh language within the workplace.

Parental incentives for choosing Welsh- medium education in south east Wales is still a relatively unexplored field of research and therefore this study aims to address these existing lacunae. Studies of education and the Welsh language are often conducted in the Welsh language ‘heartlands’ of Gwynedd, Anglesey and Carmarthenshire. This research differs from the current body of research due to its geographical focus on the Rhymni Valley. Previous studies, by and large, have essentially ignored the Rhymni Valley’s significant contribution to Welsh-medium education in south Wales. It has often been overlooked in favour of higher profile Valley regions, such as the Rhondda Valleys or ultimately Wales’ capital city, Cardiff. However, notable studies in this research field in south Wales include research by Roberts, Williams and Isaac (1978) in the Rhondda, Bush (1979, 1981) in Gwent, and Aitchison and Carter (1988), and, Packer and Campbell (1997) in Cardiff. Moreover, Cwm Rhymni has also been a research location for sociolinguistic research by Williams (1992) and historical educational research by Jones and Richards (2003 in Wyn Williams 2003).

The aims of this paper cannot be achieved without providing a historic and current linguistic background to the Welsh language in Wales, the macro, and the Welsh language in Caerffili, the micro.

2. Historical context

Historically the Welsh language has endured periods of ebb and flow in its long existence (Smallwood in Edwards 2003:121). Historically, The Union Act of 1536 made Wales officially a part of England which affected any uniquely ‘Welsh’ aspects in Wales, including the Welsh language. During the 1800s, the Welsh language was seen as the language of the private sphere of the home and of the public sphere of the chapel. However, the damning 1870 Report deemed ‘The Treason of the Blue Books’ condemned

the Welsh language as one that kept its speakers in a constant state of poverty and it stated that English was the only language needed to accrue social mobility (Morgan 1991). English was therefore the dominant language of the education system in Wales. Anyone caught speaking Welsh would have to wear the 'Welsh Not' (a piece of wood around their necks) and would essentially be physically and psychologically punished for speaking, what was for the majority, their first language and mother tongue.

Despite such historical atrocities, today the Welsh language is experiencing a current resurgence, and therefore, according to Aitchison and Carter (2000: viii), "The Welsh language is clearly at a critical juncture in its long history." Indeed, this 'critical juncture' is very apparent. There exists a clear paradox between the historic atrocities of the Treason of the Blue Books and the current resurgence of the Welsh language which is typified through the Welsh-medium educational sector. However, this 'critical juncture' strikes a note of caution and warns of the potential to become complacent during this current period of resurgence.

Presently, we are entering a challenging yet stimulating time in the world of social policy in Wales, firstly since the establishment of The Welsh Language Act 1993, and the National Assembly of Wales in 1999, with language strategies such as 'Iaith Pawb' ('Everyone's Language') (2003) emphasising the value and prestige of the Welsh language within Wales. The National Assembly's commitment to the Welsh language is underlined in its support for Bwrdd yr Iaith Gymraeg (The Welsh Language Board) and its stated desire to make Welsh an 'accessible everyday language' in every field, including education.

According to the 2001 Census, 582,400 people in Wales speak Welsh; a percentage of 20.8% of the population, an increase of 2% since 1991, especially prominent is the increase in young speakers (ONS 2004). The South Wales Valleys crucially boast the largest increase in the percentage of young Welsh speakers according to Williams and Morris (2000) and C.H. Williams (2000). It is generally held that this increase can be attributed to the establishment and development of Welsh-medium education in south Wales which is the specific focus of this paper. Indeed, according to Baker (2004: i), education is viewed as a "major plank in language revitalisation and language reversal".

3. Study location

The location of the present study is Cwm Rhymini, in the county of Caerffili. There has been a substantial increase in the numbers of Welsh speakers in the Caerffili area as the 1991 Census states a mere 6% or a little over 9,700 people stated they could speak Welsh during this period. These figures have increased to 11.2% and 18,986 people, in 2001 respectively. Although the percentage of Welsh speakers in Caerffili is low compared to the ‘Welsh language heartlands’ of north and west Wales, where some 60% of the population are Welsh speakers, nonetheless within the South Wales valleys, the numbers of speakers are comparatively high according to the 2001 Census figures collated by Aitchison and Carter 2004:

Caerffili (total Population 169,519)	Number of People within county who:-	Percentage of county population
Speak Welsh Fluently	18,986	11.2%
Knowledge of Welsh	27,802	16.4%

The Welsh-medium education system is primarily responsible for the increase of young Welsh speakers in the south Wales valleys, and some might also argue the present reversal of language shift (Fishman 1991). Indeed, recent figures provided by Caerffili County Borough Council (2009:11) state that 12.7% of primary school pupils and 10.6% of secondary school pupils receive their education through the medium of Welsh. What might sound low percentages is in fact high in terms of general numbers of people.

4. The Cwm Rhymini study

The purpose of this study on Cwm Rhymini is to suggest some of the main reasons why parents, in an increasingly Anglicised area, choose Welsh education for their children as opposed to the ever-present, multitude of English-medium schools available to them locally, the schools, they themselves attended as children no doubt.

Hypothesis

- 1) It is expected that non-Welsh speaking parents primarily chose Welsh medium education for their children because of economic reasons, mainly the social mobility implications of this choice which reflects research by Williams et al (1978) in the Rhondda. By being bilingual in Wales, there are increased occupation opportunities and the National Assembly for Wales (NAW) is at the forefront of these developments. It is these increased opportunities which make the prospect of Welsh-medium education such an attractive and purposeful choice for parents in this valley and countless other valleys throughout south Wales.
- 2) Welsh medium education is also sought by non-Welsh speaking parents because of the high standard of education, not only in terms of academic achievements (Reynolds et al 1998) but also in terms of pastoral care and the range of extra curricular activities traditionally on offer at these schools (Bush 1979, 1981).
- 3) Parents chose Welsh-medium education for their children within an increasingly anglicised area because of a heightened cultural awareness (Thomas 2007) regarding the Welsh language and therefore a positive correlation with Welsh national identity are possible reasons behind this educational choice.

5. Methodology

Methodological triangulation was achieved by incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods within this study for increased reliability and validity respectively. Firstly 400 semi-structured questionnaires were distributed amongst parents of the nursery or 'meithrin' sector, the primary and the secondary Welsh medium sector respectively. Subsequently, contact information gleaned from the questionnaires was used to create a sample of 60 participants for the in-depth interviews which was the main research method.

6. Main primary research methods

Primary research data was collated on the four main language transmission spheres in Wales, which are the family, the community, the education sector and the workplace, in order to provide an overview of the value, status and general usage of the Welsh language in Cwm Rhymni. However, the main focus of the study was the primary research results within the educational sector and an overview of the main thematic patterns regarding the reasons why parents chose Welsh education for their children is provided below.

7. Cultural reasons

The main reasons why parents chose Welsh medium education for their children in Cwm Rhymni were cultural reasons. This immediately disproves the first hypothesis based on research by Williams et al (1978) on the Rhondda which highlighted economic reasons as the main incentive to choose bilingual education. However, this result confirms research by Thomas (2007) on Welsh-medium education in south Wales that acknowledges the prominence of reasons based on cultural identity. Incorporated within these reasons was a sense of the intrinsic value of the Welsh language and the pride associated with learning the mother tongue of Wales, “we are proud to be Welsh and have our own language” (Interview 4:14). Parents clearly stated the importance of national identity and belonging. A crucial aspect of the cultural reasons behind this education choice was the significance of their children taking part in traditional elements of Welsh culture, such as the ‘Eisteddfod’ (Welsh-medium music, art and drama youth festival). One of the most prominent cultural reasons was the concept of the lost generation. Indeed, the Welsh language had skipped at least two generations in Cwm Rhymni and therefore parents were eager for their children to learn their mother tongue, an opportunity not granted to them personally. There was a deep sense of loss and regret and parents felt their Welsh identity was somewhat “incomplete and inadequate” (Interview 52: 67) without them possessing the Welsh language. Moreover, they adamantly wanted the Welsh language to have an equal status to the English language which could argue the influence of the Welsh Language Act 1993 which

called for an equal status for the two languages respectively (HMSO 1993). The following quotation epitomises parents who chose Welsh medium education for cultural reasons:

“We both believe it is important for our children to learn their own language, they are born in Wales, they are Welsh, and have the opportunity to learn, speak and use Welsh” (Interview 4: 99–101).

8. Educational reasons

Educational reasons were the second most prominent reason for choosing Welsh-medium education. The following themes were prominent within the educational reasons given by parents in the Cwm Rhymni study. It was apparent that Welsh-medium schools achieved high academic success; their results were equal to, if not higher, than local English-medium schools which corroborate Reynolds et al's research (1998). The good reputation of the schools was a major factor in choosing this educational sector, which supports Bush et al's research (1981) and Welsh medium success were reported by word of mouth within the communities of Cwm Rhymni. A significant number of respondents thought that Welsh-medium education simply provided a better education than English-medium education. Moreover, a small minority chose a Welsh-medium school for their children because it was similar in ethos to a private school:

“It is almost like having a public school education in the national system the way that the teachers behave with children and their expectations....” (Interview 33: 135).

Such comments are reminiscent of Bourdieu's (1991: 167) “cultural capital” and how the education system is a microcosm of upper class cultural and educational norms and values therefore favouring pupils from higher social economic backgrounds rather than pupils from lower socio economic backgrounds

The culture which unifies is also the culture which separates and which legitimates distinctions by forcing all other cultures to define themselves by their distance from the dominant culture.

Parents commented on the range of extra-curricular activities available and the emphasis on pastoral care was a clear selling point which in turn supports research by Thomas (2007). Parents described Welsh-medium schools as being family orientated and personal institutions where teachers knew each pupil and worked hard on their behalves. Other reasons given were the sense of discipline reminiscent of the old grammar school system and the expectation placed on the pupils which again, was not too dissimilar to a public education system. A number of respondents chose Welsh education because of the clear advantages of being bilingual in Wales.

9. Economic reasons

Respondents from Cwm Rhymini chose economic reasons as the third most popular reason to chose Welsh-medium education. They stated that they hoped their children would have “better occupations and extended opportunities” (Interview 12: 233) having attended a Welsh-medium school, which supports research by Williams et al (1978) . A significant number of parents said they chose Welsh-medium education for their children because of the National Assembly for Wales’ vision to create a full bilingual Wales and that they would have better opportunities to ‘do well’ for themselves in a bilingual country if they could speak Welsh. Respondents stated that bilinguals have considerable advantages over monolinguals and they placed these advantages within the current economic climate of recession. Parents were mainly ‘Burghers’ (Watson 1964) who placed high value and prestige on Welsh medium education because they saw their children’s futures in Wales. They would stay in Wales and be employed in Wales therefore the ability to speak Welsh would be essential. This confirms Williams et al (1978) study on the Rhondda. Parents in the Cwm Rhymini Study were aware of Welsh language prestige within the workplace, especially the public sector and chose Welsh-medium education for their children accordingly.

10. Personal reasons

A small percentage of Cwm Rhymini parents chose this particular educational system for their children due to personal rea-

sons. A select few stated their friends' children attended Welsh-medium schools and they simply followed their choices. Certain respondents noted the influence of extended families and partners like the following father:

“My wife has been educated all the way through in Welsh medium education. She was the driving force behind sending the children through Welsh medium education, I supported that, and I'm a passionate Welsh man.” (Interview 20: 100–102)

If the partner or extended families spoke Welsh they were more likely to choose Welsh-medium education for their children. Respondents chose the educational system if they thought the system would suit their child's particular educational and individual needs.

11. Conclusions

Evidently, parents from Cwm Rhymni chose Welsh-medium education for their children due to a plethora of reasons which supports Packer and Campbell's research (2007). What is evident is that the Welsh-medium education sector is a highly respected and very successful tool in terms of language production in Cwm Rhymni itself, and indeed throughout south Wales. The resurgence of the Welsh language in recent years can most definitely be attributed to the success of Welsh medium education in the south Wales valleys and this success is largely because of the blind faith shown by non-Welsh speakers in the system. What is promising in terms of future language development and reversal of language shift (Fishman 1991) is that the majority of parents chose the educational sector due to cultural reasons, not economic or educational reasons stated in the original hypothesis. This primary research finding suggests that parents have a heightened awareness of the implications of their educational choices on the future of the Welsh language itself. However, is choosing Welsh medium education due to academic and economic reasons, reason enough to secure the future of the Welsh language? Moreover, the educational sector by itself cannot sustain the Welsh language and further initiatives from the National Assembly for Wales through the guise of the Welsh

Language Board and Community Language Initiatives such as 'Mentrau Iaith' are much needed in order to increase the profile and prestige of the Welsh language in all language transmission spheres such as the family, the community, education and the workplace. When the Welsh language has a higher profile in these sectors its future will be more secure for future generations living in Cwm Rhymni.

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Kokkuvõte. Rhian Siân Hodges: Valguse suunas. Kõmrikeelne haridus kõmri keelt mitterääkijatele Lõuna-Walesis – lapsevanema valik. Kõmrikeelset haridust on juba pikka aega nähtud tõhusa vahendina kõmri keele produtseerimiseks Walesis. Käesoleva artikli eesmärk on anda ülevaade kõmrikeelsest haridusest ühes Lõuna-Walesi orus (Rhymni orus). Uurimus keskendub põhjustele, miks kõmri keelt mitterääkivad vanemad valivad kõmrikeelse hariduse oma lastele. Uurimus käsitleb küll haridust, kuid vaatleb ka kattuvaid keele leviku sfääre: perekond, kogukond ja töökoht. Uurimus lähtub peamiselt kvalitatiivsest analüüsist ning põhineb 60 spontaansel intervjuul, mis on tehtud vanematega, kes valivad kõmrikeelse eel-, põhi- ja keskkooli oma lastele. Enne nimetatud intervjuusid anti küsitletutele siiski ka küsimustik, mille põhjal koostati hiljem intervjuude valim. Kõmri keel Lõuna-Walesis on üsnagi uurimata ala, seetõttu on käesolev uurimus loodetavasti tõukeks tulevastele uurimustele ja püüab olemasolevaid lünki täita.

Märksõnad: kõmrikeelne haridus, keele planeerimine, hariduslikud stiimulid, keele levik, keele sotsioloogia