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## **‘Everything we do revolves around the exam’: What are secondary school students’ perceptions and experiences of learning Welsh as second language in Wales?**

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*‘Everything we do revolves around the exam’:  
What are secondary school students’ perceptions  
and experiences of learning Welsh as a second  
language in Wales?*

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ACADEMIC ABSTRACT

In 2017, the Welsh Government introduced *Cymraeg 2050*, an ambitious strategy to increase the number of Welsh speakers in Wales (Welsh Government, 2017). The Welsh education system is a vitally important feature of this strategy. In 2013, a review of Welsh language instruction in Key Stages 3 and 4 (Davies, 2013) identified considerable gaps in teachers’ preparation and training for teaching Welsh as a Second Language, a poor Welsh language ethos at many schools, and a general lack of resources to support the instruction of *Cymraeg* (or Welsh). Recommendations included several dimensions including curriculum content, pedagogical practice, and teacher assessment, training, and resources. With the advent of a new, national curricular framework (Welsh Government, 2015), this study builds on the Davies (2013) review and provides unprecedented detail into student perceptions of Welsh language instruction. Data produced through focus groups with students were analysed in consideration of Dörnyei’s group dynamics theory, providing a poignant critique of the aims for Welsh language instruction, teachers’ pedagogical practice, and what students suggest is a general disconnect between Welsh language instruction and its use in their everyday lives.

## PRACTICAL ABSTRACT

The Welsh Government aim to increase the number of Welsh speakers to one million by 2050 and the Welsh education system is a key feature of their strategy. This article provides an insight into the experiences of secondary school children in Wales learning Welsh as a second language. The study took a closer look at the teaching of Welsh as a second language, as well as what students thought about the lessons, and the Welsh language itself. Focus group data highlighted that students felt there was a disconnect between the Welsh lessons they were receiving at school and their experience of Welsh in everyday life. With a new curriculum currently in development, this research provides an insight into current student perceptions.

**Keywords:** Minority languages, bilingual education, Wales, Language maintenance, Language revitalisation

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### *Introduction*

In 2017, the Welsh Government (WG) released the current Welsh medium strategy: *Cymraeg 2050*, to reach a million Welsh speakers by 2050. The documentation states that by 2050, 70% of students in English medium schools will leave compulsory education fluent in Welsh (Welsh Government, 2017; Duggan and Thomas, 2017). The last 20 years have seen a steady increase in the demand for Welsh-medium education, especially in the early years (Lewis, 2008). However, the teaching of Welsh as a Second Language (WaSL) continues to face considerable challenges (Estyn, 2018; Lewis, 2016). A lack of resources, attention, staff competency, and skills has led to a severe decline in the number of students being put forward for assessment (Lewis, 2010). According to WG, the goal of teaching WaSL is to ensure all children educated through the state school system in Wales develop as bilingual citizens (Welsh Government, 2012; 2003). However, teaching and assessment practices, coupled with a strict qualification regime (Davies, 2013) and approaches not expressly situated within bilingual teaching methods, undermine the efficacy of this vision.

As this study demonstrates, pedagogical approaches for teaching Welsh can also be extraordinarily underdeveloped and pedestrian. If the aims of

*Cymraeg 2050* are to be realised, then high-quality research evidence is needed to guide and inform national policy. This study provides crucial evidence detailing the generally ineffective mechanisms of WaSL instruction and its inability to support the development of a more Welsh-speaking, bilingual Wales.

The 2011 census noted a decrease in the percentage of people with some skill in Welsh (reading, writing, and speaking) from 21% in 2001 to 19% in 2011. The number of 16–19-year-olds who indicated they could speak Welsh in 2011 stood at 27% (down 0.6% from the 2001 census) and the only cohort of age groups showing a rise in speakers since 2001 were children aged 3–4 (which rose from 18.8% in 2001 to 23.3% in 2011) (ONS, 2012). These shifts were among many factors leading to the current Welsh language strategy and reflect a difficult history of policy development promoting Welsh language use and national bilingualism.

The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure (2011) saw further legislation for Welsh language use and services, including the creation of a Welsh language commissioner. These measures aimed to provide public sector services through the medium of Welsh so that those able to speak the language could use it in their daily lives. *Cymraeg 2050* extends this aim through an emphasis on increasing the number of Welsh speakers, increasing the use of Welsh, and creating favourable conditions for the language to thrive (Welsh Government, 2017; Duggan and Thomas, 2017).

There are 171,277 students in secondary education across Wales with 76% of them learning WaSL through the medium of English (Stats Wales, 2019). Most children in Wales are learning WaSL in English medium schools and even within Welsh-medium education, most students learning through the medium of Welsh come from non-Welsh speaking homes (Stats Wales, 2019). Thus, securing a successful and engaging method of language transmission is a key issue for both the teaching of WaSL and the provision of education through the minority language (Jones and Martin-Jones, 2004; Lewis, 2008; Jones et al., 2009).

The Welsh education system over-emphasises assessment which has an impact on pedagogy (Sinnema, Nieveen and Priestley, 2020). WaSL is a prime example of the impact of assessment on students' language development, as indicated in the decline in the percentage of students entered for the 'long course' GCSE qualification (Davies, 2013). Although Welsh is a compulsory subject for students in school, students are not required to choose Welsh as a GCSE option (National Assembly for Wales, 2016). There are, however, compulsory assessments in key stages 2,3 and 4 (Lewis,

2010). The subject content was re-developed in 2009 by the Wales Joint Examination Committee (WJEC) and was again re-developed for the start of the new academic year in 2017, with the first set of new assessments due in 2019. According to WJEC, the new GCSE qualification for WaSL reflects the recommendations from the Davies review (2013) to provide a language continuum with a clear emphasis on oral skills (WJEC, 2019).

In its 2010 policy documentation on teaching WaSL, the WG highlighted a continued commitment to developing teaching and learning resources. However, there is no specific training for teachers of WaSL within secondary schools. Aspects of some unique teaching methods are covered through initial teacher training (ITT) for teachers in English medium schools (National Assembly for Wales, 2010) and further guidance and training on curriculum delivery are provided through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses (WJEC, 2019), but there is no CPD on second language teaching methods.

Estyn (the education and training inspectorate for Wales) considers whether ‘... pupils [are] confident and competent in using Welsh in a range of situations beyond their Welsh lessons’ (Estyn, 2017; p. 4). Estyn has indicated current standards of teaching WaSL are unsatisfactory, stating ‘standards in WaSL are poorer than standards in any other National Curriculum subject’ (Estyn, 2004, p. 3). These findings are based on the declining percentage of students attaining A\*–C or even being entered for the Welsh second language GCSE qualification (Lewis, 2010). There is also a lack of specialist teachers with evidence suggesting that WaSL teachers are usually specialists in other subjects whose remaining teaching time is allocated to other non-core subjects (National Assembly for Wales, 2010).

The ‘One language for all’ report (Davies, 2013) revealed many difficulties policymakers and teachers face in delivering high-quality WaSL instruction for students. The introduction of *Cymraeg 2050* and the decision to develop a new, national curriculum based on evidence presented in the *Successful Futures* report (Welsh Government, 2015) exacerbated challenges facing WaSL instruction (Lewis, 2016). The new curriculum for Wales is guided by four ‘purposes’ and organised through six ‘areas of learning and experience’ (AoLE); Expressive arts, Health and well-being, Humanities, Languages, literacy and communication, Mathematics and numeracy, and Science and technology. A discussion of these purposes and areas of learning is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that they are organisational categories without firm boundaries as part of an integrated curriculum framework. In other words, curricular

content and goals are organised into broad faculties of skills, experiences, and knowledge rather than discrete subject groups.

Welsh language instruction primarily falls under but is not limited to, the 'languages, literacy, and communication' area, providing a flexible, integrated, and embedded approach to learning Welsh that can potentially support Welsh language instruction outside of Welsh language lessons (Davies 2013).

The new curriculum framework represents a dramatic departure from existing instructional techniques and pedagogical considerations of how students learn languages, including Welsh. Equally important, the curricular transition from discrete subjects to an integrated approach highlights the need for high-quality training and resources necessary to teach Welsh within the new curriculum framework. Teachers and other curriculum-workers must now consider how they will transition from an overly prescribed and outdated curriculum to a new, flexible, and less-directed approach to teaching Welsh that benefits, rather than disadvantages, their students (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018; Power and Taylor, 2020; Newton 2020).

### *Second language acquisition*

Many children from minority language backgrounds are taught English as a second language which enables them to integrate into mainstream society (Baker, 2011). However, recently, many children from majority language backgrounds are being immersed in a second language which might have a connection to their heritage, country of residence, or home language (Baker, 2011; Garcia, 2009).

Learning a second language is based on a multitude of factors which impact on an individuals' success (for a comprehensive review, see Cook, 2003), but generally, students' success depends on their exposure to the language they're studying. Unfortunately, this tends to decline as they progress through life (Lightbrown and Spada, 2013; Garcia, 2009; Cook, 2016; Hakuta, Bialystok and Wiley, 2003). Thus, being exposed to another language at school can prove beneficial to second language success (Carlson and Meltzoff, 2008; Baker and Hornberger, 2001; Rhys and Thomas, 2013).

A child's first language can aid the development of a second language, especially if the first language is similar in structure and syntax. However, errors can also be transferred from one language to the other (Lightbrown

and Spada, 2013; Cook, 2016). A variety of input methods are needed for successful language acquisition (e.g., reading, instruction, interaction with other speakers) and the education system plays an essential role in second language acquisition (SLA) globally (Lightbrown and Spada, 2013; Garcia, 2009; Saville-Troike, 1985).

The process of learning a second language is ever-changing as the learner goes through stages of intertwining new aspects into their existing knowledge. These new aspects often cause linguistic regression, rather than development, as the student processes additions and makes errors. Still, these are normal aspects of learning a new language and, when combined with a variety of other factors, contribute to learning a second language (Lightbrown and Spada, 2013; Bialystok, 2009).

### *Bilingual Education*

Exposure to Cymraeg is sometimes solely dependent on the education system (Lewis, 2010). In English medium schools, students might only receive a few hours of instruction a week and with often very limited previous knowledge of the language (National Assembly for Wales, 2010). Unfortunately, a drip-feed approach does not produce advanced speakers and creates frustration amongst its' learners (Lightbrown and Spada, 2013).

The Basque model is often hailed as a success because the percentage of children attending Basque medium education has increased dramatically over the past 30 years (Gardner, 2002; Cenoz, 2008; Baker, 2011; Gorter and Cenoz, 2011). The number of students studying through the medium of Spanish and learning Basque as a second language has decreased, and the onus is on the educational system to favour model D (Basque medium education) as a model for the revitalization of the Basque language (Cenoz, 2008; Valades, Etxeberria and Intxausti, 2014).

The Irish language in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) is also part of the compulsory schooling system. Like Wales, opportunities to study are provided through the minority language, but the majority of students attend English medium education where they learn Irish as a core subject from the ages of 5–18 (Mercator, 2008; Kennedy, 2012; Romaine, 2006; Garland, 2008). However, the number of hours spent on teaching Irish as a second language is currently between 2.5 and 3.5 hours a week which has a significant impact on the level of achievement in English medium primary schools (Hickey and Stenson, 2016).



*Motivation and second language learning*

Evidence suggests motivation is the strongest indicator of success in second language learning (Baker, 2011; Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2010; Cenoz, 2009). Dörnyei (2009) notes many aspects contribute to motivation as a concept, for example, attitudes, linguistic self-confidence, and contact with L2 speakers. Despite the difficulties in studying attitudes, it is understood they are 'a fundamental part of what is learned through human socialization' (Garret et al., 2003; p. 5) and include three main components; cognition, affect, and behaviour (Garret et al., 2003). Additionally, Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017) theorise three sources of motivation for learning a second language: social pressures, the learners' internal pressures, and the actual learning experience.

Dörnyei (2009) proposes a 'self' based approach for second language learning based on the psychological concepts of self-determination and goal setting. It incorporates ideas around the 'self' and 'future selves' that relate to three sources of motivation for L2 learning: social and internal pressures and the learning experience. The 'L2 motivational self-system' argues we all have an 'ideal self' and an 'ought-to self,' or ideas of what we *might* become and what *we would like* to become, and that these ideas can shape how an individual moves from present to future can fuel our motivation for learning a second language.

The largest-ever L2 motivation survey, conducted over twenty years with Hungarian teenagers, indicated that motivation is the most important aspect of language learning (Dörnyei et al., 2006). Hungarian students were motivated by two consistent factors; 'the learning milieu surrounding them' and 'their linguistic confidence' (Dörnyei et al., 2006; p. 143). Dörnyei argues successful language learners have a 'superordinate vision' that keeps them motivated, as language learning can be a tedious process with many ups and downs (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009; p. 25).

Dörnyei and his colleagues highlight that the ubiquitous presence of English means individuals are developing a 'bicultural identity' and are partly rooted in both their local and global cultures, which may impact on an individual's motivation to continue learning a second language (Dörnyei et al., 2006). However, the more contact individuals have with other cultures, the more positive their attitudes towards other languages within their home country (Dörnyei et al., 2006).

*Language Attitudes*

Historically, individual attitudes towards Cymraeg have been positive overall (Welsh Government, 2018). However, there are high rates of language learning failure worldwide accompanied by a general lack of commitment and enthusiasm towards language learning (Dörnyei, 2005; Sallabank, 2013). Attitudes towards bilingualism can have an impact on minority language maintenance, e.g., an individual's proficiency in a second language might be held back by their feelings about being bilingual (Gibbons and Ramirez, 2004; Mukhuma, 2005; Sallabank, 2013).

Language attitudes can be formed when a child is as young as 3–4 years old (Garret et al., 2003; Thomas, Apolloni and Lewis, 2014). As children develop into teenagers, their attitude and motivation for learning a second language can change. Students learning a second language can gain a 'second culture' which is motivation for continuous learning in that language (Mukhuba, 2005) but this pivotal time can have an enormous impact on attitudes and motivation towards continuing to learn a second language (Gibbons and Ramirez, 2004).

Adolescents may develop far more positive attitudes towards the majority language through peer influences and group interactions (Garret et al., 2003; Siebenhütter, 2020). Bartram (2006) indicated peer pressure plays a part in impacting student's motivation in SLA. Dutch secondary school students studying German perceived achievement in the language as uncool and elitist despite efforts by teachers and parents. Garret et al. (2003) argue teachers and students had similar attitudes towards perceptions of Welshness but differed in attitudes towards the language and culture. They note that Welsh identity remained very important for students despite varying attitudes towards Cymraeg (Garret et al., 2003).

Clearly, when thinking about a second language classroom environment, it is important to consider factors relating to a student's attitude formation (Garret et al., 2003; Baker, 2011) e.g., the teacher and their teaching, the learning environment, resources, but also other students, and what impact they might have on individual motivation.

*Theoretical Framework*

'Group dynamics,' or the affective and behavioural characteristics of a 'group,' can have an impact on the productivity of language learning

(Dörnyei and Maldarez, 1997). According to Dörnyei, motivation ebbs and flows depending on many factors, and how a learner feels about past learning achievements has a significant impact on their attitudes towards current learning challenges or goals (Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie, 2017). The third branch of the L2 motivational self-system – the L2 learning experience, indicates how important group dynamics are for success in a L2 learning classroom:

... for some language learners, the initial motivation to learn a language does not come from internally or externally generated self-images but rather from successful engagement with the actual language learning process. (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2009; p. 29)

Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) note a significant correlation between practitioners' motivational practices and learners' engagement behaviours. Further studies highlight that practitioners have little influence over learners' intrinsic motivation, but factors which contribute positively can include a supportive and stimulating classroom environment, the encouragement of goal setting and materials or activities that are relevant and age appropriate (Lightbrown and Spada, 2013; Dörnyei and Maldarez, 1997).

### *The Research*

#### *WISERDEducation Multicohort Study (WMCS) Survey*

The data discussed in this paper is from the WMCS, a longitudinal, multi-cohort study launched in 2012 involving primary and secondary students in Wales. The WMCS utilised a form of cluster and purposeful sampling in an attempt to generate a geographical representation of students in Wales and at the time of writing, continues to generate quantitative and qualitative data through regular, annual sweeps.

The participants in the WMCS were organised into the following four cohorts based on their age and year in school: Cohort A (Year 2, aged 5–6 years), Cohort B (Year 6, aged 10–11 years), Cohort C (Year 8, aged 12–13 years) and Cohort D (Year 10, aged 14–15 years). In total, researchers visited 13 secondary schools and 16 primary schools, gathering quantitative data through self-completion surveys distributed on tablet computers and some paper-based surveys to just over 1500 students.

All participants in the WMCS were asked 'How much do you like the following subjects in school?', followed by a list of school subjects including

**Table I. Focus Groups**

	School A		School B		School C	
<b>Location</b>	Semirural, North West Wales		Rural, Mid Wales		Urban, South East Wales	
<b>Language of Instruction</b>	English Medium and Bilingual		English Medium and Welsh Language Stream		English Medium	
<b>Focus Groups</b>	Group I	Group II	Group III	Group IV	Group V	Group VI
<b>Participants</b>	(2) Year 7 (1) Year 8 (2) Year 9 (1) Year 10 (1) Year 11	(1) Year 7 (2) Year 8 (1) Year 9 (2) Year 10	(2) Year 9 (2) Year 10 (1) Year 11	(3) Year 7 (2) Year 8	(2) Year 7 (2) Year 8 (4) Year 9	(2) Year 8 (1) Year 9 (2) Year 10
<b>Participants per School</b>	13		10		13	
<b>Total Participants</b>	36					

WaSL lessons. Due to the wide age range of participants in the WMCS, the responses available to students were 'A lot', 'a bit', and 'not at all', with the rationale being that both older and younger students could understand and appropriately respond to the question. The initial sweep of data presented here included 325 responses from Cohort B, 403 from Cohort C, and 428 from Cohort D. The subsequent sweep, conducted two years later, included 325 responses from Cohort B and 333 in Cohort C. Unfortunately, students from Cohort D were not asked this question again in subsequent sweeps.

Frequency and cross-tabulation analyses were conducted on the quantitative data from Cohorts B and C using statistical analysis software. The results of these analyses suggested changes in cohorts liking/disliking of WaSL lessons as they progressed through school were statistically significant. A decision was made to further investigate these differences through qualitative methods, with the statistical data providing a baseline from which we could conduct focus groups about students' experiences learning Welsh as a second language.

#### *Student Focus Groups*

Qualitative data were generated through six focus groups involving a total of 36 students from three schools participating in the WMCS. Purposeful sampling was used to include schools with English-medium and various levels of bilingual instruction (Welsh Government, 2007) and to generate a generally representative sample reflecting the geographic, socio-economic, and ethnic diversity of schooling in Wales. Focus groups lasted approximately 40–50 minutes each and were comprised of male and female students from Cohort B, C, and D. These were mixed-ability focus groups with students exhibiting a range of fluency/oracy in Welsh.

#### *Qualitative Data Analysis*

A six-phase approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the focus group data. After establishing a familiarisation with the data, we then undertook an iterative process of generating codes that enabled us to organise students' responses into meaningful themes that we felt best represented the views and experiences conveyed to us by the

students. These codes were then organised into potential themes. Finally, both the codes and themes were reviewed, modified and, in some cases, reconstructed, resulting in the themes presented below.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The research in both this study and the WMCS follow the ethical considerations published in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA 2018). Information about the WMCS and informed consent procedures were carried out during the initial recruitment process and these were reiterated to participating schools throughout each sweep of the study. These procedures were repeated to recruit participants for this research.

### *Results*

The presentation of data below represents both the quantitative, longitudinal data from the WMCS survey and the qualitative data generated through our focus groups. Crosstab analysis of the survey data revealed statistically significant differences between students' liking and disliking of Welsh lessons the further they progressed through school. To simplify our comparisons, we only present students' 'A Lot' and 'Not at All' responses to the survey question.

### *WMCS Survey*

**Table II: Longitudinal Comparison – How much do you like the following subjects at school: Welsh Lessons?**

<b>Cohort</b>	<b>Initial Sweep: A Lot</b>	<b>Subsequent Sweep: A Lot</b>	<b>Initial Sweep: Not at All</b>	<b>Subsequent Sweep: Not at All</b>
B (Year 6, n=325)	20.9%	20.6%	33.2%	30.5
C (Year 8, n=403)	35.2%	23.1	22.6%	36.9
D (Year 10, n=428)	21.1%	–	41.7%	–

The table above presents the percentage of students who liked WaSL lessons 'A Lot' and those who liked them 'Not at All' for each data sweep. As demonstrated above, there were few differences between Cohort B responses, with the most notable results being a small decrease in the percentage of pupils who said they didn't like WaSL lesson at all. However, there are considerable differences between Cohort C's responses in each sweep. For these students, there is a drastic decrease in the percentage of students saying they like WaSL lessons 'A Lot' and an even greater increase in those who don't like WaSL lessons at all. Equally important, the responses from Cohort D also indicate a strong disliking of Welsh lessons, with over 40% of those students indicating they do not like WaSL lessons at all.

Chi-square analyses of data from the initial and subsequent sweep for Cohort B ( $\chi^2$  (4, N = 227) = 19.391,  $p = .001$ ) and Cohort C ( $\chi^2$  (6, N = 273) = 6.835,  $p = .000$ ) suggest there is a statistically significant association between these students' progression through school and their liking and disliking of Welsh lessons. In other words, as these students progressed further in school, their liking of WaSL lessons *decreased*, and their disliking of lessons *increased* considerably.

Although these results are concerning, there is no indication as to why students may feel this way and, of course, there are many factors to consider when seeking to understand the affective dimensions of students' learning experiences. Therefore, we considered these results as an introductory step for a more in-depth investigation of students' attitudes towards WaSL. This included conducting six focus groups with 36 pupils from three schools participating in the WMCS, and we present the results of this work below.

### *Focus Group Responses*

As mentioned previously, focus group data were thematically analysed through a six-phase process. The themes produced through this analysis are presented below, with excerpts from the data we believe best represent the views and experiences of the students involved.

#### *Benefits of studying Welsh*

Focus group members were asked what they felt were the reasons for studying Welsh at school. Overwhelmingly, students believed it was an

essential aspect of Welsh culture, but this did not necessarily mean they had to speak the language to ‘be Welsh’ or to possess ‘Welshness’:

Part of being Welsh is having our own language, so we learn Welsh at school because it’s part of Welsh culture.

Other students mentioned the economic benefits often associated with speaking Welsh in Wales:

It helps you get a job – looks good on your CV. Some jobs ask for Welsh GCSEs like my mum is applying for a job that requires Welsh on your CV.

It was clear, however, that throughout all focus groups, students’ perceptions of the purpose of Welsh as a compulsory subject was for the conservation and promotion of the language:

The Welsh Government is just trying to keep it alive; they’re trying to push people to use it because it’s dying out.

Without Welsh lessons, it would die out. No one could speak it. If you look at the history, it was an all Welsh-speaking country, but now everyone speaks English.

### *Pupil Choice*

The compulsory nature of WaSL was a recurring theme. Students believed learner motivation and in-class behaviour would improve if Welsh were an optional, rather than a compulsory, subject:

If it was a choice, the students who choose to learn Welsh will learn a lot more Welsh and will enjoy lessons more because they will be learning it with other people who want to learn it. The lessons won’t be disrupted by people who don’t care or don’t want to be there.

Focus group preferences for optional Welsh lessons weren’t limited to learner motivations and behaviour. Overall, students seem eager for more subject choices at school:

Welsh should be an optional thing to do for GCSE, we could choose more valuable things than Welsh. It limits our options. This isn’t just Welsh, I just think if we have to have a language at all, it should be optional.

While the idea of optional Welsh lessons was popular across all focus groups, students were also cognisant of the relationship between Welsh as a compulsory subject at school and its potential, positive effect on the conservation and promotion of the language:



GCSE compulsory Welsh is a good idea, and if we don't do that, the number of speakers will go down. If we don't keep a Welsh GCSE, we will lose it completely. If you do GCSE Welsh, you're more likely to take it at A level, which may lead to you engaging with it more in real life.

### *Future Aspirations*

Some participants noted their intention to continue studying in Welsh for higher education was thwarted because their school did not offer these choices at post-16 level. Others mentioned how the lack of Welsh language provision undermined their confidence in speaking Welsh, which in turn could impact their future career options. Others noted how it would be nice to have the continuation into post-16 education as they felt they had forgotten all their Welsh language skills after GCSE:

I had thought about studying in Welsh at uni, but without taking it in A levels, I don't think I could do it.

I thought I could get into loads of jobs speaking Welsh, but now since I can't do Welsh in A level, so I'm not confident going into work speaking Welsh.

### *Primary and Secondary Experiences*

Generally, when students commented on the differences between their experiences of learning Cymraeg at primary and secondary school, they spoke positively about their primary school experiences:

In primary, we spoke a lot of Welsh. Not all the time, but it was everywhere. The teachers would speak English and Welsh to us and it was, like, just part of what we did – part of being at school. Now, we only speak Welsh in Welsh lessons, but it's not like it was in primary.

### *Student Preferences*

We also asked students about what they would like to have happened during Welsh lessons. The responses focused on more speaking opportunities in lessons and throughout school-life in general, lesson content concentrating on 'conversational Welsh', and less of an emphasis on qualifications for Welsh:

We should do things that are more conversation, like we should have actual conversations and not just copying out of books. I don't feel like I'm working at all, I'm just copying words into a book.

Learning Welsh is very difficult, I've learned a lot of stuff that I'm never going to use in future life, like different words and topics that have no relevance to me at all. If it was more relevant to me and my life, then I might be able to use it. More basic everyday Welsh is the kind of stuff that is useful.

We just write recipes, menus and letters and that. We copy things from the book, but sometimes we make up our own stuff.

Speaking more would be useful because we are just writing a lot and we don't go through it much. The teacher just gives us a workbook and lets us do it, but we're just filling in blanks. Speaking more often would help. I like the idea of learning of Welsh, but don't like the lessons.

### *Teaching to the Test*

A perceived over-emphasis on exam preparation and results featured more than any other topic in each of our focus groups. Students articulated at length, and with great detail, their thoughts and feelings about what they felt was an 'obsession' in WaSL lessons with exam preparations and results. These included activities such as 'passing papers', transcribing scripts, and a lack of discussion around the importance and benefit of learning WaSL beyond exam results and future qualifications. In short, most students felt WaSL lessons were too focused on exams and did not provide enough emphasis on language acquisition, proficiency, or even appreciation, which they assumed were the primary aims of learning Welsh at school:

I think it's complete waste of time. There's no point to it. We don't do anything in the lessons, everything gets pushed back and we never catch up. We just did a speaking assessment and we had to remember all of the Welsh work first, so it wasn't a speaking assessment it was a memory assessment, so where's the logic in that? There's no use to it at all.

There's no point to take Welsh lessons to just to pass exams. Having a GCSE in Welsh might help me get a job, but it won't help me speak Welsh while doing it.

They are teaching us to pass the exams. All we do is pass papers. They're just trying to get us ready for the exam. You're not going to take exams for the rest of your life. If you're taking Welsh at school then you want to learn Welsh rather than just prepare to take an exam.

Everything we do revolves around the exam— all the questions are exam style. Other subjects move away from just concentrating on exam content.

### *Discussion*

The quality of teaching WaSL has faced prolonged criticism from Estyn (2018) who note that not enough students use the language in their lessons, which then impacts on the number of students put forward for GCSE assessment in the subject.

In this study, many students expressed a genuine interest in learning Welsh and spoke of their desire for more practical elements within their lessons. However, they also stated that the pressures they felt to pass the GCSE qualification seriously undermined their ability to not only learn the language, but to do so in a way that could benefit them throughout their lives as a means of cultural identity, participation, and expression.

Beard's research (2020) noted that secondary school students were provided some opportunities to work together in a meaningful way to develop their language skills (Dörnyei, 2009), however, most student lessons were 'teacher-focused' (Beard, 2020; p. 13) and provided little practical experience for conversions in Welsh between students and did not result in students developing useful language skills.

These responses align to Dörnyei's group dynamics theory which emphasises opportunities for students to interact and take part in group activities as an approach to enhance the motivational aspects of the second language classroom (Dörnyei and Maldarez, 1997).

Results from this study corroborate and build-upon previous findings regarding student dissatisfaction with learning Cymraeg, demonstrating that students' positive attitudes towards Welsh lessons decrease as they progress through their school experience. Additionally, this study highlights the voices of the students themselves, who desire a more meaningful and practical approach to learning Welsh. Dörnyei and Maldarez (1997) highlight the importance of recognising how learners' feelings about previous learning achievements can influence their attitudes towards current learning challenges or goals. Students' responses in this study indicate they believe in the benefits of learning a language as young children, noting they enjoyed Welsh lessons in primary, found Cymraeg more 'embedded' in the primary curriculum, and that these experiences can build a stronger foundation for more advanced engagements learning Welsh in secondary school.

Additionally, the students noted they would have preferred more Welsh lessons at primary school so they can develop a basic understanding early

on as they aim to become fluent, which they understood was impossible on their current intake of approximately one lesson a week.

The authentic student experiences highlighted in this paper assert students both want and need more exposure to Cymraeg if they are to become fluent speakers. These findings are supported by an abundance of related research (Carlson and Metztoff, 2008; National Assembly for Wales, 2010; Thomas and Webb-Davies, 2017). For example, Cattani et al. (2014) found that bilingual toddlers performed as well as a monolingual control group on vocabulary tests when exposed to English for 60% of the time; ‘a child who is exposed to English above 60% of the time can acquire a lexical competence in English equal to that of a monolingual child, alongside a lexical competence in the additional language which is more unpredictable’ (Cattani et al., 2014; p. 30).

The results of this study resonate with existing data suggesting that if the aims of *Cymraeg 2050* are to be achieved then students in Wales require more consistent, frequent, and engaging learning experiences through their primary and secondary school careers for them to gain the knowledge, understanding, and confidence necessary for them to use Welsh in their current and future lives.

A rapid review of effective second language teaching approaches and methods highlights a significant shift in the way Welsh Government is now planning and eventually implementing language learning for children aged 3–16 for the near future within the framework of a new curriculum (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). It notes that language learning must be seen as an integral part of the curriculum in English medium schools if the Government is to reach its 2050 target, but it must also consider the failings of the current system to produce individuals who are confident to use Welsh outside the classroom walls.

One of the aims of *Cymraeg 2050* is to have 70% of school leavers reporting they can speak Welsh by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2017). But recently published research on the subject states that the current ‘WaSL’ curriculum is not working; there is disparity between Welsh Government’s policy aims for *Cymraeg 2050* and current practices in English medium schools which need urgent attention (Lovell, 2018). More work needs to be done to iron out pedagogical practices in WaSL lessons in English medium schools, where a focus on use, rather than passing assessments is key.

Welsh Government’s ‘Language, Literacy and Communication’ document for the new curriculum advocates that students will learn through a

'multilingual approach' (Welsh Government, 2019; p. 3) that will encompass Welsh, English, and a range of international languages.

The draft guidance for Wales's new curriculum indicates a 'principles of progression' ladder with which to measure language learning outcomes. These learning outcomes are relevant on a cross-curricular basis and draw on a learner's language experiences both at home and at school (Welsh Government, 2019). Welsh Government have developed draft progression points for achievement outcomes in Welsh at English medium schools (in both writing and speaking) but state that they will be reviewed as the curriculum develops 'on the ground' and students begin to progress through the school system (Welsh Government, 2019; p. 33).

Most of the students involved in this study felt they were being forced into learning WaSL. They felt that the compulsory nature of the lessons developed already negative attitudes towards the language even further because they felt the lessons were hard, boring, and too infrequent for them to become fluent in the language. Dunmore (2014) highlights a similar situation in Scotland with Gaelic Medium Education (GME).

Taking a more holistic approach where students have greater agency over their learning in the L2 classroom, exercised through the conscious deliberation between teachers and students, may contribute to the pedagogical conditions necessary for students to succeed in learning a second language (Dörnyei and Maldarez, 1997). Dörnyei and Maldarez (1997) also highlight how important it is for practitioners to have an awareness of their classroom's group dynamics as developing a classroom community may benefit L2 teaching practice.

It was clear that students in this study understood the economic advantage of learning Welsh, but this was overridden by their mostly negative attitudes towards the language. Dunmore (2014) notes how respondents who stated they used Gaelic in their daily lives did so because of their jobs, and that the more they used the language, the more their confidence grew in their abilities to use the language. Newcome (2007) also highlights how adult learners of Welsh were more motivated to learn Welsh when it linked up with opportunities to use the language at work. Fitzpatrick et al., (2018) emphasise that positive classroom approaches to learning a language go a very long way in engaging learners in progressing past basic second language skills if motivational strategies are put in place to support students in the correct way (e.g., through translanguaging, Cenoz and Gorter 2017). Newcome (2007) supports the idea that second language learners need positive experiences within the classroom so that they can match

their expectations of progress with reality, which will in turn reduce anxiety around *using* the language and increase their confidence. Lovell (2018) indicates strategies such as making links between the classroom and the outside world, exposing students to more of the language, and supporting new ways of teaching a second language provide support for students to develop their reading, writing, and speaking strategies within the classroom.

Students in this study recognized teachers' pedagogical proficiency greatly influenced their affective experiences learning Welsh. Additionally, most students wanted more incidental Welsh both in and out of school, so that there was a purpose to the lessons and an opportunity for them to practice outside of the classroom.

Fitzpatrick et al. (2018) support the continued use of Welsh from primary to secondary settings but highlight a need for Welsh Government to commit to effective training and development for teachers, 'Teacher expertise was a more influential variable than teaching approach' (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018; p. 32). Lovell (2018) also suggests that a significant increase in the training for teachers of WaSL should be a key consideration in working towards Welsh Government's *Cymraeg 2050* goal.

Focusing efforts on providing training for teachers to implement changes is nothing new when considering WG policy changes. Guilfoyle (2008) states that, as well as an increase in teachers who can effectively teach through the medium of Welsh, and more suitable resources for the teaching of WaSL, there is a dire need to provide effective training. Similar issues were highlighted with the last major educational reform to hit Wales, the Foundation Phase. Results from that evaluation highlighted that teachers who had completed more training modules had a deeper knowledge of how to implement the Foundation Phase effectively (Taylor et al., 2015) but Foundation Phase training courses were not compulsory and were dependant on adequate practitioner cover and support from senior leaders to attend which led to some teachers completing the whole course, and others only completing a few modules.

Research by Lovell (2018) suggests that CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is a method which could aide secondary schools to develop their learners' fluency in Welsh, as it integrates Welsh with content in a variety of subjects and is not solely the focus of language lessons alone. Fitzpatrick et al. (2018) note that students who follow CLIL tend to have a higher receptive vocabulary than students who do not, which might aide language *use* for students learning WaSL.

They conclude that one of the main aims for WaSL is to increase exposure and that models like CLIL support this aim as it focuses on delivering the Welsh language across multiple subject areas plus an increase in incidental Welsh around the school, thus increasing contact hours with the language (Fitzpatrick et al., 2018). Increased exposure to a language develops language output (Carlson and Metztoff, 2008; Baker and Hornberger, 2001; Rhys and Thomas, 2013; Eaton, 2011), and using CLIL can provide an increase in opportunities for students to engage with their second language (Artieda, Roquet and Nicolas-Conesa, 2017).

These suggestions would align well with current curriculum proposals from Donaldson (Welsh Government, 2015) and adhere to student voice concerns that Welsh needs to be embedded throughout the curriculum, not solely as a subject in one lesson (Guilfoyle, 2008; Griffiths et al., 2020). Current WG curriculum documentation for the new curriculum indicates that 'WaSL' is no longer a subject, but a skill for all teachers to transfer through areas of learning (Welsh Government, 2019).

### *Limitations*

The data discussed in this paper are the result of a focused interest on students' experiences of, and attitudes towards, WaSL lessons. This research was part of the larger WMCS project and, as a result, our options for data generation and analytical options were somewhat limited. While the survey data presented here was brief, and descriptive statistics have limited function, they were useful in identifying differences in students' attitudes towards WaSL and informed the next steps of our investigation, operating as a 'baseline' from which we could conduct our focus groups with the students. The data generated through the focus groups revealed an uncanny similarity of experience among our 36 participants in their respective schools. It also revealed the sophisticated perspectives of students and the nature of their experiences learning Welsh in schools in Wales. However, we recognise the data are not representative of all children's experience learning Welsh in school.

### *Conclusion*

Davies's 2013 report identified numerous policy and pedagogical issues regarding the quality of instruction for WaSL in schools across Wales. In consideration of those findings and recommendations, these findings support and highlight Davies' conclusions. Additionally, it introduces additional considerations that can help to ameliorate the educational quality of Welsh as a second language instruction.

Developing a sustainable model for the teaching of WaSL is imperative for the success of *Cymraeg 2050*. Without a positive teaching environment, with relevant and plentiful resources, and authentic assessments which reflect language use, teachers cannot inspire lifelong learners. For this to become a reality, teachers need up to date training on the most effective pedagogical methods of teaching a second language, which students can engage within, and most importantly, outside the classroom. Without investing in training for teachers, there is no hope of developing a population that might want to consider joining the teaching workforce as a second language teacher themselves, and without an increase in WaSL teachers, Welsh Government goals will never amount to anything. Welsh Government need to realise the importance of providing fit for purpose training to the aims and objectives of their policies and commit to a long-term investment in the future of Cymraeg as we know it.

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