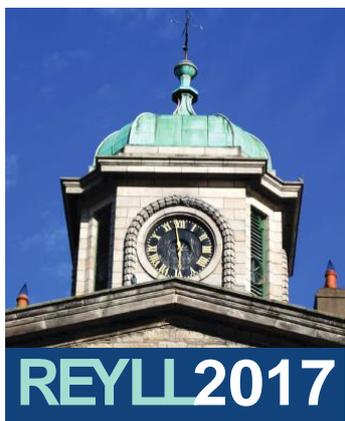


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# Early years' provision for young children in Wales: history, challenges, and the Welsh language

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## **Abstract**

The development of Welsh medium early years' education has been a story of singular success over the last century. With the establishment of the National Assembly in 2000, Wales further forged its own vision for its young children. One of its first priorities, for example, was the Foundation Phase with its radical approach. This paper offers an overview of the historic development of nursery education in Wales, before and post devolution. Welsh language and Wales policies are set in the context of wider influences. Focus will be on Welsh language provision, highlighting the role of Mudiad Meithrin in the language revitalisation process. This paper will consider issues, research and theory relating to early bilingualism and will review approaches to immersion methodology. Thereafter, the challenges of implementing immersion will be explored and set in the landscape of tensions facing the field of early childhood services in Welsh, and in light of current political and policy developments.

**Keywords:** *early childhood; bilingualism; Welsh government policies*

## **1. Early years' provision: a historic case**

For a century and more it had been common practice, particularly in rural Wales, to include young children, from 3 years, in reception classes with children up to 7 years with no provision or curriculum specifically for these young children. School registers for 1901, for example, indicate that 43% of 3-year old children in Wales and England were registered in schools (Cohen 1991). They would be following a formal pedagogy based on numeracy and literacy exercises (Stevens 1996; Mathers et al. 2014).

Parents and educators became increasingly aware that the practice of placing children at such a young age in formal classrooms was not good practice (Pascal, 1990; Schweinhart and

Weikart, 1993; Dahlberg et al., 1999). More informal approaches, those advocated by the Steiner movement and the Montessori schools, were becoming more confidently argued. This included a growing awareness and understanding of the importance of play in children's development and learning. Isaacs' pioneering work on the psycho-social importance of play and its significance lead to her status as an influential advocate of play as children's work (Isaacs 1930; Moyles 1994).

A number of independent reports were published at the start of the 1990, such as *Starting with Quality* (DES 1990) and *Start Right* (Ball 1994) and research from, for example, the *High/Scope Perry Preschool Study* (Schweinhart and Weikart 1993) resulted in evidence pointing to the need for specific educational provision for children under five. This evidence became too substantial to ignore. There was also an increasing awareness of the importance of ensuring young children's care and well-being within what was often viewed as 'educational' provision. For a time, the term '*educare*' was commonly used to ensure that the balance between education/teaching and caring discourses was maintained in provision for young children.

Te Whāriki, the Aotearoa-New Zealand early years' curriculum (Carr and May 1993; Smith 1993), Bredekamp's ideas outlined in *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (1986) together with the emerging appreciation of practice and philosophy underpinning the Reggio Emilia approach to early learning in Italy (Katz 1990; Edwards et al. 1993) became influential in Wales. Bruner (1915–2016) and his psychological theories on the role of the adult as scaffolder of learning and the reinforcing of this thinking by others such as Athey's work on schematic learning (1990) and Moyles on play (1994) underpinned the policy developments with emerging discourses on early learning.

One of the most influential projects on understanding early childhood learning was the *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* project (EPPE). This ambitious longitudinal UK government funded project assessed the learning and development of children 3–7 years focussing on two particular areas: firstly, family characteristics and individual children and secondly, different types of early years' provision and the impact of these on children's attainment. EPPE, together with the further development of understanding of the significance of psycho-educational theories, became influential on early years practice. It became evident, for example, that certain types of early childhood provision were more effective than others

and that the most effective integrated care and education. Additionally, it was becoming evident that high quality provision was marked by warm relationships between adults and children and that the qualification levels of staff were an influential factor in quality. EPPE impacted on the conceptual vocabulary of early childhood, for example 'sustained shared thinking' became common parlance to describe the complex and intricate processes of child-adult dialogue:

Sustained shared thinking' occurs when two or more individuals 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative etc. (Sylva et al. 2004, p. 6.)

Faced with the mounting evidence supporting public investment in early childhood education, the UK government announced the implementation of a voucher system for the 'purchase' of approved provision and so *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education* (SCAA 1996) was published. This was the framework for measuring quality provision for young children in England. The Wales version *Y Canlyniadau Dymunol ar gyfer dysgu plant cyn oedran addysg orfodol/ Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education* (ACAC/QCAW 1998) was published shortly afterwards. It was a radically different document and received a considerably warmer reception than that of the England document. David noted the differences between the two documents:

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 prescribed, more rigid ... than in Wales. (David 1998, p. 61)

One of the differences was that children in Wales, in provision approved for vouchers and inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (OHMCI at that time) would be given experiences of the Welsh language and the *cwricwlwm Cymreig* (the Welsh and Wales aspects of learning):

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. All under-fives can be given opportunities to hear about Wales, about their locality, about

customs, about names, about stories and legends, about people and events. (ACAC 1996, p. 4)

Over the next decade, *Desirable Outcomes* underwent many iterations, whereas the document for Wales saw very few changes until 2004, when the intention to establish the Foundation Phase was announced. The general principles and ethos of *Y Canlyniadau Dymunol* remain the underpinning philosophy of the Foundation Phase.

## **2. Post devolution: The Foundation Phase 3 – 7 years**

1997 saw a change of UK government and one of the first actions of the New Labour government was to abolish the voucher system. Nursery education, as an area of legitimate government concern, became one of its primary priorities. Another of its priorities was a promised referendum on devolution. This resulted in a paradigm shift in the education of young children in Wales:

The establishment of the National Assembly of Wales in 1999 signalled a number of significant differences from England in the way children's services are developed – and also key differences in approaches to children. (Siencyn and Thomas 2007, p. 141)

One immediate result of the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales was the freedom it provided for Wales to develop its own vision for the education and care of young children. Following a period of research and consultation, the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning published *Y Wlad sy'n Dysgu / The Learning Country* (WAG, 2001). It proposed a radical change to provision for children 3–7 years, the proposal which, by 2003, had been clearly articulated as The Foundation Phase with its play based curriculum.

Siencyn (2010) suggests that the Foundation Phase was a result of the failure of previous provision. There had, for example, been considerable concern in Wales, with similar concerns voiced elsewhere, regarding the high levels of literacy difficulties among young people in the justice system (WAG 2003a, p. 11). Similarly an increase in the numbers of children excluded from schools was concerning.

The initial findings of the *Monitoring and Evaluation of Effective Implementation of the Foundation Phase* were encouraging (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2005, p. 3). The report notes, interestingly, that appropriate training of staff is more significant than numbers of staff:

Care should be taken to ensure that improving ratios does not take precedence over high quality training for staff working in schools and settings. Staff qualifications show a stronger relationship to quality of provision than ratios. (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2005, p. 7)

The implication here is that knowledge of childhood development, understanding of children's learning processes and observation skills are more influential factors than the number of adults in the provision.

From the outset, the Foundation Phase was framed within areas of learning (reflecting the six areas outlined in the 'desirable outcomes'): Language, Literacy and Communication skills; Mathematical Development; Personal and Social Development; Knowledge and Understanding of the World; Creative Development, and Physical Development (WAG 2003a). The first version of the Foundation Phase documentation, however, introduced an additional area: Bilingualism and Multiculturalism. This led to debate and confusion, manifested through questions around how bilingualism was defined, as well as around the status of languages in the multiculturalism-oriented discourse.

By 2007, this area of learning was transformed by extending 'personal and social development' to include 'well-being and cultural diversity.' Additionally, Welsh language development was included as an area in its own right, indicating that all children, in the Foundation Phase, had a statutory right to the Welsh language. With the publication of *Iaith Pawb: A National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales* (WAG 2003b) the government of Wales highlighted its intentions to extend bilingualism to all children.

When the Foundation Phase was officially launched, the Minister for Education noted that its aim was 'to help children to learn how to learn; to develop thinking skills; and nurture positive attitudes towards lifelong learning' (WAG 2003a, p.12). This was an acknowledgement of the need for a workforce capable of adapting to new forms of working and that could take their 'thinking skills and positive attitudes' with them to new work.

Central to this new curricular approach is 'personal and social development and well-being' with its implicit emphasis on developing self-confidence, flexibility and resilience. These later became the basis for the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* which identifies 'improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales' as its underpinning principle and as the government of Wales' priority.

The 'radical and far-reaching' recommendations in *Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales*, the report on curriculum reform in Wales (Donaldson 2015), include a curriculum framework that models areas of learning outlined in the Foundation Phase. The influence of the Foundation Phase, therefore, will be seen throughout the school curriculum in Wales.

### **3. Welsh medium education and the development of Mudiad Meithrin**

During the last century, Welsh medium nursery education came to be seen as a key vehicle in both promoting the language and in its preservation (Phillips 1997; Williams 2002). Baker and Prys Jones (2000, p. 117) note that the call for Welsh medium education grew 'from a small acorn planted in 1939 to... a sturdy and mature oak tree'. From the establishment of the first Welsh medium primary school in 1939, small groups of parents would join together to establish voluntary, parent-led *ysgolion meithrin* (nursery schools). The rationale was that these *ysgolion meithrin* would then become feeder links to the Welsh medium primary schools, thus ensuring a consistent stream of children. The first *ysgolion meithrin* were established in Maesteg in 1941 and soon afterwards in Cardiff and beyond (Stevens 1996; Williams 2002; Redknap 2006). Interestingly, none of these areas are considered naturally Welsh speaking areas. By the 1960s, there were 47 well-established *ysgolion meithrin* across Wales (Williams 1969).

The Gittins report, *Primary Education in Wales* (HMSO 1967), prioritised the *ysgolion meithrin* as key to halting the decline in the numbers of Welsh speakers and as effective promoters of bilingualism in Wales. By 1970, there were some 70 *ysgolion meithrin* but there was no systematic link between them (Stevens, 1996). *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* (the Association of Welsh medium playgroups) was established in 1971 to create that united front. From the first, the *Mudiad* (as it was commonly called) was careful to include early years' practitioners and trainers in its planning and was an early proponent of the key role of play in

second language acquisition. *Mudiad* initially saw itself as a temporary lobbying group, as did government in its white paper *Education: A Framework for Expansion* (DES 1972).

One interesting point which emerged from *Mudiad*'s funding submissions was that government was not happy with the use of *ysgolion* (schools) and *ysgol feithrin* (nursery school). Government defined *ysgolion* as statutory educational provision. Although *Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin* remained the title of the organisation, *cylchoedd meithrin* (nurture circles) became more commonly used. By today, *Mudiad* has dropped *ysgolion* from its title.

During this period (1962–75), a number of new national movements emerged. *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (the Welsh Language Society) was established during this period and was immediately involved in non-violent, direct action. Phillips (1998, p. 19) sets the language renewal movements in a wider context of anti-establishment protest. He maintains that it is no coincidence that the emergence of a radical Welsh language movement happened around the same time as '*les événements*' in France in 1968, student free-speech movements on US campuses, and protests against the Vietnam War. An argument could be made that this internationalisation of activism reflects what Bronfenbrenner (1978) came to call the ecology of human development.

Concern remained about the decline in the numbers of Welsh speakers. In his annual report in 1975, the chair of the *Mudiad* said that 1981 was a target for ensuring that all children in Wales could access Welsh medium nursery education. The significance of 1981 was that it was the year of the next census and *Mudiad*'s impact on stemming the tide of decline in numbers of Welsh speakers would be highlighted.

One of the strategic decisions made, when *Mudiad* received government funding to support its work was to encourage extended sessions, that is, *cylchoedd* would need to open for more and longer weekly sessions. This reflected the recommendations of Siencyn's report (1982) following a European funded project on second language methodology in early childhood. The evidence was clear that exposure to language was a key factor in acquisition. (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Krashen 1981)

From the start, *Mudiad* was seen as a pathway from the home to Welsh medium education and there is general agreement (Williams 2002; Aitchison and Carter 2004; Lewis and Gareth

2004; Redknap 2006) that *Mudiad* was instrumental in the process of halting the decline of the language. The numbers of families choosing Welsh medium education continues to increase which has led to concerns relating to planning for this growth. The evaluation report on the *Welsh Language Education Strategy* notes that the evidence suggests that, in many areas, Welsh medium early years' provision is not able to meet the demand. (WG 2016a)

The contribution of *Mudiad Meithrin* remains significant. Over twenty thousand children, from babies to age four, are enrolled in *Mudiad* (MM 2017) provision. Siencyn's report (2004) indicated that 83% of children move onto Welsh medium education from the *cylchoedd*. More recent, informally gathered data, suggests that this percentage has increased.

#### **4. Early bilingualism**

There has been consensus regarding the difficulties and complexities in seeking an agreed definition of bilingualism (Baetens Beardsmore 1986; Cummins 2003; Baker 2006). Siencyn and Richards (2010) precis this through a series of questions: When are those learning a language considered bilingual? Are children acquiring a second language bilingual? What language skills are needed to be classed as bilingual? What does 'being fluent' mean? In spite of the wealth of literature on this topic, the guidance published to support practitioners implementing the Foundation Phase has discounted the complexities. The guidance offers a simple definition:

Bilingualism is the ability to speak, read and write in two languages. (DCELLS 2008, p. 11)

This definition assumes bilingualism to include a range of linguistic and language skills and that biliteracy is a key component of bilingualism. There is no acknowledgement of understanding of language and no recognition of the intricacies of bilingual behaviours.

The case for bilingualism is rigorous (Cummins 1979; Baker 2008; Bialystok 2001) and, in Wales, it has been popularised in a series of publications for parents and families (Siencyn 1989, 1993; *Mudiad Meithrin* 2018). Welsh government has consistently promoted bilingualism through public policy: *Iaith Pawb / Everyone's Language* (WG 2003b) and *Iaith Fyw, Iaith Byw: Strategaeth ar gyfer y Gymraeg/ A living language – a language for living* (WG 2010) reflecting an aspiration for a bilingual Wales.

#### *4.1. Bilingual discourses*

Discussions of early bilingualism can be explored by setting them within differing discourses and scholarly traditions. Baker (2006, p.1) summarises this as follows:

Current international research on bilingual education uses perspectives from sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, philosophy and pedagogy, classroom practice and provision, local and national policy formulation, and, not least, ideology and politics.

Although he refers to bilingual education, it could be advanced that there are some clear links between bilingual education and bilingual children.

Since 1980, there has been an increase in the numbers of studies relating to young children's Welsh language development. Much of this work has centred on descriptions of children's language within linguistics frameworks (Jones 1994, 2004, 2009; Borsley and Jones 2005; Thomas 2007) or psycholinguistics (Gathercole et al. 2001; Thomas 2007; Thomas and Roberts 2011; Thomas et al. 2014). International neurolinguistic research (Peng 1985; Brown and Hargroot 2000; Gopnik 2009) has focused on neurological links between language and the bilingual brain. This is the field (often challenging for non-scientists) of influential pioneers such as Penfield and Roberts (1959) and Lenneberg (1967) relating to the critical age hypothesis. Evidence relating to the plasticity of the brain and understanding of the pathology of the brain is central to the critical age hypothesis. Over-reliance on neurological evidence has been contested by Penn (2005) and others who highlight the impact of socio-cultural influences. The critical age hypothesis is also contested. Bialystok (1991) maintains, as would those involved in *Cymraeg i Oedolion* (Welsh for Adults), that it is perfectly feasible for older children and adults to learn a second (third and fourth) language to a high level of fluency.

Kuhl (2008) argues that processes of first language development and second language development are similar, particularly in relation to the acquisition of phonology:

Phonetic development follows the same principles for two languages that it does a single language. Bilingual infants learn through the exaggerated

acoustic cues provided by infant-directed speech ... as do monolingual infants. (Kuhl 2008, p. 232)

Another area of scholarly research which has focussed on early years' bilingualism is linguistics and language studies. Studies have described young children's bilingualism in the context of phonetics, phonology, semantics, morphology and syntax. Ervin Tripp (1973), for example, offers an insight into the bi-naming behaviours of Spanish-English bilingual children in the USA. These types of studies collate samples of bilingual children's language, mainly concentrating on specific elements such as relative clauses in Spanish-Japanese bilingual children (Flynn 1989), pronoun systems in English-Welsh bilingual children (Siencyn 1985), and gender naming in Welsh-English bilingual children (Thomas 2007). More recently, there has been an interesting merge of linguistics and psycholinguistics and bilingual acquisition processes (Meisel 2007; Goldberg et al. 2008; Rhys and Thomas 2013; Binks and Thomas 2016).

When discussing bilingual education, Baker (2006, p. 1) suggests that 'there is no understanding of bilingual education without contextualizing it within the politics of a nation or region', again acknowledging what Bronfenbrenner (1978) would call ecological influences. All individuals, suggests Bronfenbrenner, have their own particular contextual narrative. This is rooted complex systems of time and social, historic, political and cultural influences which include public policies, social norms, culture and values, communities and governments. In this model, it is evident that Welsh government policies (indeed the existence of the Welsh government itself is an ecological factor) relating to the Welsh language and bilingualism, together with policies relating to young children are key factors.

## **5. The Immersion Method**

From the outset, one of the key factors in *Mudiad*'s success was its commitment to the immersion method of second language acquisition. It has provided its own training for *cylchoedd* staff in immersion methodology which were, the main, a simple set of principles and common practices relating to immersion:

<i>Principle and practice</i>	<i>Rationale</i>
Adults always use of target	Acquisition of language is

language with all children	significantly different from learning language
Adults do not translate from target language to home language	Children do not translate meaning, they formulate meaning from language experiences and from acquired knowledge
Adults always respond, positively and uncritically, to child's use of home language	Maintaining children's well-being and confidence is crucial. Adults in the setting will be confident bilingual speakers of English.
Adults use target language with children outside the <i>cylch</i>	Maintaining distinctive language relationship.
Adults never correct or imply error in a child's use of language	Evidence that correcting children's linguistic 'errors' (in whatever language) is not effective and it can undermine confidence and self-esteem.
Adults offer creative alternatives to a child's perceived errors	Focus on the interaction and acknowledging the communication rather than on grammar and perception of accuracy.
Adults use a range of approaches and pedagogic instruments and devices to support, demonstrate and enhance meaning: music, play, dance, facial expressions, illustrations and so on	Acknowledging and utilising young children's powerful de-coding skills.

*Table 1: Mudiad Training Methodology (Adapted from Siencyn 1987: Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin training material)*

Two fundamental principles underpin the success of the immersion methodology: firstly that adults speak to children in distinctive linguistic registers and styles; and secondly, that children are adept at the acquisition of language/s.

The language register of adults to babies and young children, often referred to as *motherese* or *child-directed speech* is dominated by prosodic cues and other linguistic features (Snow 1977; Trevarthen 1979; Mehler et al. 1988; Saxton 2008). These features include: repetition and recasting, emphatic and exaggerated articulation, visual clues (naming, pointing and exhibiting) and contracted speech units.

The contention that babies and young children are adept language acquirers is well established in both the theoretic and research evidence (Chomsky 1957; Aitchison 1976; Fletcher and MacWhinney 2007). The immersion philosophy is rooted in the link between young children's acquisition skills and adult input. Undocumented observational evidence suggests that adults using Welsh in the *cylchoedd* demonstrate the same range of linguistic features as those employed by adults as described in the literature on child-directed speech: repetition and recasting, emphatic and exaggerated articulation, visual cues, and contracted speech units. Mhic Mhathúna (2008, 2012) in her study of the use of target language stories in *naíonrai* (Irish medium playgroups) makes reference to 'dynamic language scaffolding' in language immersion.

One of the most significant challenges *Mudiad* has faced and continues to face in maintaining the immersion approach is the shortage of fluent Welsh-English bilingual *arweinyddion* (leaders) particularly in the more Anglicised areas of Wales. In 2004, 64.6% of adults in the *cylchoedd* (leaders and support staff) identified as Welsh speakers (Siencyn, 2004). Considering the difficulties relating to defining the immersion method, Estyn (Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales) states:

Local authorities and organisations which manage non-maintained settings should: provide support and training for practitioners on immersion methods of language learning and provide guidance on how language, literacy and communication skills (Welsh) can be developed in a way which is compatible with the philosophy and methodology of the Foundation Phase. (Estyn 2015, p. 8)

Estyn's definition of immersion is similar to that offered by *Mudiad Meithrin* in the 1980s, emphasising reliance on fluent bilingual Welsh speakers to maintain the sole use of the target language. Jones and Wilson (2013) assert, simply:

...Welsh-medium preschools and primary schools are environments in which all pupils in the Foundation Phase (age 3–7) experience all areas of learning through the medium of Welsh. (2013, p. 8)

It is axiomatic to note the importance of exposure to language as essential to its acquisition (Siencyn 1982; Singleton and Lengyel 1995; Muñoz 2013). Estyn notes the obvious:

Where there are no confident Welsh-speaking practitioners in a school or setting, the use of Welsh by staff is usually more limited. This means that children hear less Welsh and have less opportunity to practise it... practitioners cannot sustain using Welsh long enough and use a very limited amount of incidental Welsh with the children... many use Welsh television programmes or DVDs to try to compensate for this, so that children can hear more spoken Welsh. However, this approach does not secure sustained progress in learning. (Estyn 2015, p. 9)

Another issue *Mudiad* has faced from the outset is the challenge of accommodating language stimulation for Welsh first language speakers whilst also enabling the development of the language of children from non-Welsh speaking homes. Although Lewis and Gareth (2004) applaud *Mudiad*'s general success in this area, Hickey and Lewis (2013) suggest that this tension remains challenging particularly as the majority of children in the *cylchoedd* come from non-Welsh speaking homes or from bi-language homes. In 2015-16: 60% of children came from homes where English (or another language) was the sole language, 20% from bi-language families (Welsh–English or another language), and 20% from Welsh speaking homes. (Mudiad Meithrin 2017)

Jones and Wilson (2013, p. 11) highlight the issues:

In mixed preschool classes, it has been shown that there can be a tendency for teachers to focus on the needs of L2 learners at the expense of children who already have some knowledge of the target language ... In addition to the opportunity to support and enrich their language development, L1 children also need support to develop their skills in order to prevent marginalisation and low self-esteem.

It would appear that there is no easy resolution of these challenges nor one simple solution that is suitable for all variations of language environments.

## **6. Types of early bilingualism**

Following his study of the bilingual development of his own daughter, Leopold (1939) introduced the term 'simultaneous bilingualism' to describe the processes of a child acquiring two languages from birth. Harley (1986) refers to this as 'bilingualism as a first language'. Cummins (1990) maintains that simultaneous bilingual children acquire both languages through the same processes as children acquiring only one of the two languages. However, factors such as which parent speaks which language to the child, which parent is the primary caregiver, language status and prestige in the wider community are significant variables.

Following the success of *Mudiad's* activism and the language policies of some local education authorities, Wales came to promote 'sequential bilingualism' (Arnberg 1987; Castilla et al. 2009). This is when young children who have already established exposure to one language begin the process of acquiring a second language, around 2–3 years.

Advocates on behalf of bilingual education and bilingualism as a positive aspiration for young children (Baker 2006, 2008) rarely set it in the context of children's rights and child citizenship. This is the discourse underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular Article 12 which outlines every child's right to a voice and to be heard, together with Article 30, which refers to the right to language and culture. Although these rights are generally assumed to prioritise vulnerable and marginalised children, they have a legitimate significance in the lives of all children. (UNICEF 1990). This presents a paradigm shift insofar as it identifies bilingualism and acquisition of the Welsh language as the right of all children in Wales. Moreover, this right is not dependent on parental choice and is independent of parental rights. Welsh government has, perhaps inadvertently, partly acknowledged this in *Cymraeg 2050: Welsh language strategy* (WG 2017a) by prioritising early childhood as crucial to the ambitious aim of a million speakers of Welsh by 2050.

## **7. Conclusion**

The last decades have provided significant evidence in favour of quality early years' care and education. The same period has simultaneously highlighted the importance of appropriate pedagogy and the nature of early childhood bilingualism. This has been reflected in

government policies and strategies, pre- and post-devolution, relating to both the Welsh language and to early childhood services. The Welsh government's programme for governing *Taking Wales Forward 2016-2021* (WG 2017b), for example, includes the intention to 'create the most generous childcare offer anywhere in the UK: 30 hours free childcare a week for working parents of three and four year olds, 48 weeks of the year'.

This goal will require a substantial increase in the number of appropriately qualified staff, training, suitable settings and so on in order to meet the requirements of Social Care Wales which regulates the sector. Government acknowledged this when launching *Progress for Success ESF programme* (WG 2016), stating that, currently, many childcare workers in Wales do not have appropriate qualifications. In light of the current political landscape in the UK, it is ironic to note that £4.2 million funding for this programme comes from the European Union.

The link between policies relating to increasing early childhood provision, improving the baseline qualifications of entry to childcare staff, and promoting the Welsh language in order to ensure the million speakers target, is evident. *Mudiad Meithrin* has been charged, by government, with establishing an additional 40 *cylchoedd* by 2021 (WG 2016b). These *cylchoedd* will be required to conform to the care standards and ensure appropriately qualified staff. This is a substantial challenge for a third sector organisation already facing social and economic challenges in a time of austerity and wider political uncertainty. However, *Mudiad* is moving rapidly, with a new programme of expansion under the *Clybiau Cwtch* brand and *Cam wrth Gam* its well established training and qualifications division. Wales faces a number of wide-reaching challenges, many of their consequences are not yet fully understood. Leaving the European Union will, it is generally agreed, impact on agriculture, for example, and farming communities have, over generations, been a crucial social mainstay for the Welsh language. Economic austerity, political uncertainties, together with the failure to deal effectively with poverty will impact on children's lives in Wales in the next few years. These are testing times.

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