

Education and Lifelong Learning Committee

Policy Review of the Welsh Language in Education

The Response of Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin

1. Background Information

- 1.1. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin is a voluntary organisation which establishes and supports the provision of Welsh-medium early years care and education in the voluntary sector. It is widely recognised that Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin has been primarily responsible for the recent growth in the numbers of young Welsh speakers (3-15) reported in the Census returns of 1981 and 1991 through its work in establishing and supporting Cylchoedd Ti a Fi (Welsh-medium parent/carer and child groups) and Cylchoedd Meithrin (Welsh-medium playgroups). The largest increase has been achieved in areas such as south-east Wales and north-east Wales, where only a minority of the population currently speaks Welsh.
- 1.2. The success of Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin stems from several factors, such as providing choice for parents, establishing provision at a local level, teaching language through the immersion method, providing intensive support for groups and parents, and using effective methods of marketing and publicity.

2. The current situation

- 2.1. In June 2001, there were 403 Cylchoedd Ti a Fi and 578 Cylchoedd Meithrin affiliated to Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin, and it is estimated that these cylchoedd provide a service for approximately 13,367 children (and their parents) on a daily basis.
- 2.2. Every Cylch Meithrin is a registered charity, and is managed by a committee of parents and associates. They are supported by a national network of professional Development Officers, who provide pastoral care and advice, and who also monitor quality in the groups
- 2.3. All the cylchoedd are firmly rooted in the local community, and they serve that community, as well as marketing the advantages of becoming bilingual and attending Welsh-medium education, to parents and prospective parents.
- 2.4. More often than not Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin's cylchoedd provide non-Welsh speaking parents with their first introduction to the Welsh language, and because of this, the cylchoedd have a key role in ensuring that these parents are provided with information and extended support, and are encouraged to persevere with their children's Welsh-medium education. The cylchoedd have a pro-active role in campaigning for the establishment of Welsh-medium primary schools where there is no progression provided within a reasonable distance, and in a form that is acceptable to the parents

3. The Policy Review's Remit

- 3.1. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin has noted the remit of the policy review, but wishes to concentrate its response on those elements that are relevant to its work. It should be noted, however that the nature of the support that the Mudiad provides for its groups and members means that its interests are very wide-ranging.
- 3.2. It is widely recognised that very young children acquire more than one language very easily, and that proactive measures taken in the early years are extremely effective in that task of ensuring fluency in more than one language. Providing additional financial resources for language acquisition in the early years would prove extremely effective, and would in fact lessen the need for second language teaching in later years. We firmly believe that increased opportunities should be provided for very early language immersion. Such an approach would ensure increased respect for both languages, and allow parents to make an informed choice about the language of their child's education.
- 3.3. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin's success is based on the immersion method of language teaching, and we would suggest that this method would prove very effective if it were to be used more widely. An in-depth study of the success of this method in other countries could be beneficial in enabling us to develop an appropriate strategy in Wales.

4. Specific Matters

Pre-school education/ Educare

- 4.1. As it may be inappropriate for Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin to offer observations on some specific areas, such as funding, we shall confine our response to more general comments with regard to our vision for the future
- 4.2. We feel that the following should be considered in depth when planning towards the goal of a bilingual Wales
 - 4.2.1 Ensuring an educational and linguistic continuum from the time a child is born is essential to the success of such a strategy. Opportunities should be provided locally for new parents and their children to meet in a welcoming and informal atmosphere from soon after the child is born in order to raise awareness of the benefits of being bilingual, and to provide opportunities for parents to discuss Welsh-medium education as an option with other parents as well as specialists in the field.
 - 4.2.2 Opportunities should be provided for parents to observe their children's progress in a Welsh-medium setting before he/she reaches compulsory school age. It can take time for parents to come to a decision regarding the medium of instruction of their child's education, and so it is important that parents have the opportunity to see their child benefiting from enriching Welsh-medium pre-school experiences.

4.2.3 We should strive for a situation where every parent can make a choice about the medium of instruction of their children's education based on full and balanced information. So that each parent may make this choice, it is imperative that there is equality of opportunity regarding access. The following factors should be considered :

- Accessibility of the provision
- Cost of the provision
- Quality of the provision

At present, the opportunities available do not reflect equal opportunity in all parts of Wales. We note specifically that the Welsh-medium schools of the south-east are not community based schools – rather, that they serve a much wider catchment area. The tendency of L.E.As to fund early years education in the maintained sector only means that parents must either pay for their child to attend Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin's provision locally, or to transport their child to the nearest Welsh-medium school. This is clearly against the principle of equality of opportunity, and is clearly even more discriminatory if the family is from a disadvantaged background. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin believes that equality of opportunity should be at the heart of future language planning.

4.2.4 Additionally, we believe firmly in the principle of learning through structured play as a means of ensuring opportunities for children to enjoy learning a language, and in order to establish communication patterns outside the formal learning situation. Firm monitoring structures should be established as a way of ensuring the quality, the form, and the effectiveness of language teaching.

4.2.5 On the subject of monitoring the language development of children attending Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin groups, Professor Colin Baker from Bangor University has just completed research into this very subject. The results will be published shortly, and we hope that the research will not only prove the effectiveness of the immersion method of teaching in our cylchoedd, but also provide clear guidance on methods of monitoring language development in the future.

4.2.6 So that children may be given the best opportunity to develop educationally and linguistically, parents should be encouraged to participate in, and support their children's education from the start. Very often, parents will be very interested in helping their children, and the fullest support should be provided to allow this to happen.

4.2.7 There is a great scarcity of Welsh-medium full day care places, and substantial investment in this area is required in all parts of Wales. One difficulty is that European structural funds tend to support the establishment of full day care facilities by large businesses, whereas investment is required for stand-alone provision which would assist several smaller businesses in a particular community. The importance of Welsh-medium holiday playschemes cannot be

over-emphasised, so that children may have the opportunity to use their Welsh in leisure situations outside structured learning opportunities. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin is also concerned about the lack of Welsh-medium out of school clubs, and the type of support available to them, and we wish to urge the Assembly to ensure that establishing more of these clubs is a priority for Clybiau Plant Cymru, so that this type of provision contributes to the holistic development of Welsh-medium education.

- 4.2.8 Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin welcomes the Assembly's wish that Integrated Centres should be set up in each county – centres that will provide a wide range of services for young children and their families, It is vital that the same range of opportunities is available in all parts of Wales through the Welsh language for those who wish it, and that the immersion method of language teaching is used in as many such centres as possible.
- 4.2.9 It is quite possible that an increase in maintained sector provision will occur as a result of the intention to ensure a part time place for three year olds. From the perspective of the Welsh language, it is imperative that this does not happen at the expense of current provision for two and a half year olds, so that there is no gap in the educational and linguistic continuum, Referring back to the issue raised in 4.2.3, that Welsh-medium schools in areas of lower density of Welsh speakers are not community schools, it is important to ensure that opportunities to attend provision locally is available to all parents who choose Welsh-medium education for their children. Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin wishes to urge the Assembly to establish clear and unambiguous responsibilities on Local Authorities to ensure that funding is available for Welsh-medium early years provision at a local and accessible level to parents.
- 4.2.10 The present practice of clustering cylchoedd with their local Welsh school should continue, so that consistency of teaching methods, planning of provision and establishment of early links with parents of the youngest children may be developed further . We wish to note also that high levels of progression from the Cylch Ti a Fi to the Cylch Meithrin, and from the Cylch Meithrin to the primary school is as important for the future of the language as is ensuring progression from the primary to the secondary school.
- 4.2.11 It is also essential that full and comprehensive information about Welsh-medium children's services is widely available throughout Wales in a form that reaches all parents irrespective of their backgrounds. Ideally, a consistent and holistic image should be adopted throughout Wales so that parents and prospective parents may recognise the resources easily, and identify with the messages contained in them

5 Special Educational Needs

- Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin believes strongly that children with Special Educational Needs should have the same opportunity as every other child to learn the language, and to become bilingual
- 5.1 Additional funding within the education for three year old budget should be found in order to support children with Special Educational Needs who wish to benefit from Welsh-medium education.
 - 5.2 Safeguarding the educational and linguistic continuum that starts when a child is born is vital in order to identify Special Educational Needs early, and to provide appropriate intervention as quickly as possible
 - 5.2.1 Providing opportunities for assessing children with Special Educational Needs in a Welsh-medium setting before they attain compulsory school age is essential so that the appropriate provision may be made for them
 - 5.2.2 Weurge the Assembly to ensure that it establishes measures that will ensure that a complete range of specialists who can work through the medium of Welsh is available in Wales
 - 5.2.3 The establishment of a Welsh-medium resource centre for therapies would facilitate the sharing of resources and good practice that currently happens in the field of Special Educational Needs, and would enrich a field that is especially bereft of specifically and professionally produced resources.
 - 5.2.4 A review of opportunities currently available to enable children with Special Educational Needs to benefit from the same opportunities as their peers should be commissioned, focussing particularly on holiday playschemes, out of school childcare, and wrap-around care.
 - 5.2.5 It should be ensured that the proposed Children's Information Services database should include information about assisted opportunities available locally for children with Special Educational Needs, with special reference to those opportunities provided through the medium of Welsh.

6 Training and Professional Development

- 6.1 Sufficient funding should be made available to ensure opportunities for In-service training for all who work in the Welsh-medium Early Years field so that they have the necessary skills to extend and enrich the Welsh language skills of children. The establishment of refresher language courses, and Nursery Welsh courses would facilitate this
- 6.2 The appointment local/county language advisers working to facilitate training and to support educators in the workplace would ensure a high standard of language teaching across all sectors.

7 Educational Resources and Materials

- 7.1 There is a paucity of Welsh-medium Early Years educational resources and materials. An agency with expertise in this field should be commissioned to produce and develop original materials in Welsh that would promote the Desirable Outcomes and promote bilingualism amongst very young children

Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin
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