

**0448**

## **Welsh Medium Schools and the Education Market**

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### **Background**

This paper examines the presence of Welsh Medium schools within the context of school choice and education markets. The education market in Wales is quite distinct from that of England. For example, there are no specialist schools or Academies in Wales, and there are only two Foundation schools in Wales. Wales also has a comparatively smaller independent fee-paying school sector to that of England. Although Wales has many faith schools, similar to England, it is unique in the presence of schools that offer instruction in at least the foundation subjects of the National Curriculum through the medium of Welsh and/or English. Furthermore, since devolution in Wales the Welsh Assembly Government has been very keen to expand the number of schools and school places in the medium of Welsh in response to the apparent demand amongst parents for Welsh-medium provision. Consequently the number of pupils studying in officially designated Welsh Medium schools has increased from 27,897 in 1997 to 40,702 in 2006 (WAG 2009); an increase of 46% in just under ten years. The Welsh Assembly Government is currently preparing a new Welsh-medium education strategy that is likely to encourage further expansion of this school sector.

To parents this presents a unique set of choices, largely based on language, but that also reflect cultural and historic ties. It is also the case that pupils attending Welsh medium schools have tended to achieve higher examination scores than their counterparts in neighbouring English medium schools (WLB 2007). This may also help explain the growing demand for places in such schools.

Although there have been some very small-scale studies that have examined the choice of Welsh medium schools (e.g. Evans 1993) and the socio-cultural and socio-political significance of a bilingual education system more generally (e.g. Jones 2006, The Welsh Language Board, Coupland et al 2005) there is very little known about the provision and distribution of Welsh medium schools across Wales and how this relates to school choice and the education market.

### **Research Questions**

The paper aims to develop our understanding of Welsh medium education in Wales and begin to establish how this particular form of school diversity in the education market relates to school choice. Due to the paucity of evidence on the provision of Welsh medium education the paper begins by providing a basic overview on the provision and distribution of Welsh medium schools and the characteristics of their pupil intakes. This recognises the heterogeneous nature of both designated English-medium and Welsh-medium schools in terms of the linguistic skills of the children attending the schools. The paper argues that any analysis of Welsh-medium provision is limited if it assumes a binary divide. Instead the paper presents a more suitable framework in which to examine Welsh medium education in the context of the education market based on the actual linguistic skills and characteristics of the pupil intakes. Finally the paper examines the socio-economic distribution of pupils between schools with different linguistic characteristics in order to explore the potential consequence of a bilingual education system on social segregation, in schools and for the future population of Wales.

### **Methods**

The paper is based on administrative data for all secondary schools and secondary school-aged pupils in 2008. Using the Welsh National Pupil Database provides the opportunity to analyse actual school intakes statistically and geographically. It also allows us to model changes in school intakes under different circumstances, e.g. without the possibility of open enrolment, or congruent catchment areas for all schools not just Community schools. The paper further exploits the use Geographical

Information Systems (GIS) to analyse the distribution of school intakes across different schools in Wales.

### **Frame**

The paper encompasses critical policy analysis and reflects a developing literature and conceptual understanding of participation and segregation in the state education system (Gorard et al 2003). Specifically it contributes towards a spatial understanding of education (Gulson and Symes 2007) and highlights the usefulness of spatial tools in policy analysis (Taylor 2007).

### **Research findings**

There are four main sets of findings outlined in this paper. First, it demonstrates that pupils eligible for free school meals are less likely (although not statistically significant) to attend Welsh-medium schools – indeed, they are twice as likely to attend English-medium schools. However, the socio-economic composition of Welsh-medium schools versus English-medium schools is problematic as it may simply reflect differences in the geography of the Welsh language (amongst parents and the rest of the population) and the geography of Welsh-medium schools. A further problem with this analysis is the fact that there is significant variation in the nature of both English and Welsh medium schools across Wales. Therefore, the second set of findings presents a new framework for comparing schools in Wales based on the linguistic (English versus Welsh) characteristics of the pupil intakes. This framework is then used to undertake a cluster analysis of school intakes. This creates 8 different ‘types’ of secondary schools in Wales, based on the level of English and Welsh language amongst the school intakes, with multiple contrasts that are explored further. Of most importance here is the overlap between the 8 ‘types’ of schools and the official designation of Welsh- and English-medium schools. The third set of findings, then, compare and contrast the socio-economic intake composition of these different types of schools and further considers local levels of socio-economic segregation that exists between these schools. This points to conclusion that the presence of the Welsh language in the education system in Wales may result in greater socio-economic segregation between schools, and then possibly the linguistic skills of the wider population. The final set of findings consider further research is required to further advance our understanding of Welsh-medium education and explore the implications of this analysis.