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# *Language Learning and Childcare Choice in Wales*

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## ABSTRACT

While there is increasing evidence that children who learn Welsh before they start formal education have higher levels of fluency, few parents choose Welsh-medium or bilingual early childhood education and care. This paper reports on the findings and policy implications of a mixed-method study that examined Welsh parents' childcare choices and asked to what extent those choices are influenced by language. Using Bourdieusian theory it was found that attitudes and practices within the childcare field differ according to parent's habitus and perceived capital value of the Welsh language. Where Welsh is widely spoken, both Welsh and non-Welsh speaking parents chose Welsh-medium early childhood services intuitively and in recognition of the extent to which bilingualism forms valuable social and cultural capital that is convertible to future economic capital. In non-Welsh speaking areas, without such intuition or recognition of the transferable value of language as redeemable capital, parents did not form the habitus that might dispose them to choose Welsh-medium or bilingual pre-school experiences. As a consequence, the supply of Welsh language provision does not develop in response to demand, limiting opportunities for bilingualism to take root in many areas. These findings are important in the context of Welsh Government's policy target of a million Welsh speakers by 2050.

**Key words:** Welsh language; bilingualism; early years; childcare

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## *Introduction*

With increasing evidence of the developmental importance of the early years and the cognitive advantages of high quality early childhood education and care<sup>1</sup> (e.g. Sylva et al., 2004), in Wales it is important to further consider the role of pre-school provision in language acquisition. According to Edwards and Newcombe (2005) language reproduction in the early years is an area which receives less attention than formal education, reflected by the extent to which in Wales, language policy has been concentrated on Welsh medium and bilingual schooling (Murphy, 2014: 188). In his work on ‘Reversing Language Shift’, Fishman (1991: 161) argues that success in the kind of language-loss-reversal experienced in Wales should not gravitate prematurely towards a focus on language acquisition through compulsory education, but must be founded on the attainment of a home-family-neighbourhood-community processes in which the language becomes self-regulating. Gathercole and Thomas’ (2007) study of transmitting the Welsh language in bilingual families suggests that the choice of language spoken within the home is an intuitive rather than a conscious decision. However, this inherent decision is affected by factors such as the adult's language of upbringing, the adult's own language experiences, the language spoken with friends, as well as the community networks surrounding them.

With children often receiving a mixture of *formal* and *informal* non-parental care the pre-school years would seem to be key in facilitating the kind of home-family-neighbourhood environment in which Welsh can flourish and ultimately increase the

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘Early Childhood Education and Care’ (ECEC) is terminology often used in academic literature and internationally by organisations such as the OECD, who define it as “...all educational and care arrangements for children from birth to compulsory schooling, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours, or programme content.” In Wales, and in the UK more widely, the terms ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’ are most commonly used separately in official texts.

number of confident Welsh speakers. Some success has been had with schemes such as the Welsh Government funded ‘Twf’ programme, which promoted early bilingualism in the home environment (Edwards and Newcombe, 2005), and Welsh-medium playgroups offered in many areas by the ‘Mudiad Meithrin’ organisation (Baker, 2003). Nonetheless, it is arguable whether this is a sufficient contribution to creating a complete home-family-neighbourhood approach that Fishman argues is needed to encourage the kind of ‘natural’ language practices necessary in ‘reversing language-shift’ (Fishman, 1991: 162). Schemes such as ‘Twf’ and part-time, volunteer-led *cylchoedd meithrin*<sup>2</sup> exist in a world where increased participation by women in the labour market and the decline of the male breadwinner-model of family economics (Kremer, 2007) results in young children spending increasing time in non-parental childcare – either *formally* in pre-schools, day nurseries and childminders – or *informally* with family or friends. Most parents in Wales must therefore make choices about childcare and work, and in choosing childcare, language may be a factor.

As in the rest of the UK, *formal* childcare in Wales is delivered by a mixed-economy of public, private and voluntary services. These are subject to a patch-work of regulations and standards (Graham, 2014) which do not require providers to deliver Welsh-medium or bilingual services but only to ‘take into account the language needs’ of children (Welsh Government, 2012: 18). The principle of the UK’s marketised ECEC system is that it provides choice and is responsive to demand, yet according to a number of commentators (e.g. Lloyd and Penn, 2012; La Valle, Payne, Lloyd and Potter, 2014; Moss, 2012; Penn, 2011) it is a failed market that provides little choice or diversity and struggles to provide quality provision - including Welsh-medium and bilingual

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<sup>2</sup> It was announced in 2017 that the ‘Twf’ scheme would be replaced by a Welsh for Children project (Cymraeg i Blant) reducing the funding that encourages language transmission within the family, while The Mudiad Meithrin’s Annual Report 2014-2015 suggests that attracting more children to the ‘cylchoedd’ (groups) is becoming more challenging as the part-time Mudiad provision is no longer in line with parental choices on childcare (Welsh Language Commissioner 2016: 108).

experiences. While there is no definitive evidence of the number of Welsh-medium or bilingual settings, a large survey of childcare workers found that only a third are employed in provision where Welsh is spoken widely (BMG Research / Care Council for Wales, 2014).

*Informal* childcare, mainly provided by grandparents, is used by over a half of families in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015c) either on its own, or in conjunction with formal provision. As only around 15% of adults aged 45 and over speak Welsh (ONS, 2011), it is likely that only a small proportion of young children receiving care from relatives and friends will be exposed to Welsh language.

Despite the advantages that can be gained by early exposure to Welsh language most pre-school children miss out on any significant experiences before they start formal education. Recent research shows that only 11 per cent of all Welsh speakers learnt the language in pre-school settings, however, they had a fluency rate of 50 per cent –significantly higher than the levels of fluency amongst those learning the language at primary school, secondary school or in other non-home environments (Welsh Language Commissioner, 2015). The extent to which this situation is created or sustained by parents who are *unwilling* to choose Welsh medium childcare arrangements or are *unable* to choose, because of constraints such as cost or the inaccessibility of provision, is unclear and is an investigative focus of this paper.

#### *Welsh language policy*

Since Welsh became a core subject of the national curriculum in Wales in 1988, it is widely accepted that education policy has, and continues to have a key role in the revival of the Welsh language (Murphy, 2014: 194). This is supported by research jointly commissioned by the Welsh Language Commissioner and the Welsh Government showing that the majority of Welsh speakers now learn Welsh at school

rather than in the home (Welsh Language Commissioner, 2015: 15). According to the research, one in five Welsh speakers aged 3–15 has mainly learnt Welsh at home, whilst around 80 per cent have learnt to speak Welsh at school (2015: 95).

Current Welsh language education policy is set out in the national ‘Welsh Medium Education Strategy’ (Welsh Government, 2010) subsequently updated by the 2016 ‘Welsh-medium Education Strategy: next steps’ (Welsh Government, 2016b). The initial strategy set out to develop effective Welsh medium provision from pre-school through to secondary, further and higher education. The strategy does not work in isolation. It has led to the development of policies designed to support the delivery of Welsh-medium education, policies which have existed alongside other initiatives, aimed at 'raising standards of attainment and improving the education experiences of learners in Wales' (2016b: 11).

Its first strategic objective is to expect local authorities to plan effectively for Welsh medium provision. Every local authority is expected to produce Welsh in Education Strategic Plans (WESPS) to the Welsh Government to demonstrate how they aim to achieve the outcomes and targets set in the Welsh Medium Education Strategy.

During its evaluation (Welsh Government, 2015a) the Welsh Medium Education Strategy was actively criticised by teachers and pressure groups (e.g. RHAG<sup>3</sup>), for not reaching its proposed targets and further, that the Welsh Medium Education sector does not at present give learners sufficient opportunities to practice their spoken skills within formal and informal contexts (2015a: 78). The final evaluation included twenty-one recommendations for Welsh Government and its stakeholders. In addition, the WESPS have also been criticised for not aligning well enough with the Welsh Government's

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<sup>3</sup> Parents for Welsh Medium Education (RhAG). RhAG works to improve Welsh-medium education for pupils the length and breadth of Wales.

vision for Welsh Medium Education and that their targets have been too 'weak.' (Estyn, 2016, p.11)

Support for language in the early years has mainly focused on Mudiad Meithrin with limited support for childcare and other forms of early years' activities. A report on childcare for Welsh Government in 2014 found gaps in Welsh medium childcare provision in all 22 local authorities (Cordis Bright, 2014).

In 2011, the broader Welsh Language strategy 'A living language: a language for living,' was published with a vision to 'see the Welsh language thriving in Wales' (Welsh Government, 2011) promoting a more holistic approach to language learning and transmission. It aimed to encourage and support the use of Welsh language within families and increasing the provision of Welsh medium activities for children and young people outside of formal education. Yet the cornerstone of the policy remained language learning in schools. A consultation to update this strategy took place in 2016 in support of the First Ministers' stated aspiration to nearly double the number of Welsh speakers to a million by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2016a). While it is recognised that this is an ambitious target, reliance on the statutory education system to respond to the challenge and create advanced generations of Welsh speakers is likely to require an increased focus on family and community transmission, particularly in the early years (Welsh Language Commissioner, 2016).

#### *Language and childcare choice*

The small amount of previous research surrounding this issue suggests that language may be a factor in parental choice of childcare in Wales, but with different drivers amongst diverse population cohorts. In *Minority Language Socialization Within the Family* Morris and Jones (2007) investigated practice amongst Welsh-speaking families, focusing on the importance of family in the 'inter-generational transmission'

of Welsh. In their study of the practices of twelve families with babies and young children aged 0-2 years, they found that where families had made a conscious decision to socialise their children in Welsh, this resolution impacted on their choice of childcare. For Welsh-speaking parents, this resulted in a strong preference for *informal* care with Welsh-speaking relatives. This was found to be the case whether or not Welsh-medium childcare was available locally. They also found that grandparents, and particularly the maternal grandmother, had a significant effect on the language socialisation of children, and in two-thirds of the cases, the maternal grandmother was the second carer after the mother (2007: 497).

While Morris and Jones' (2007) study seems to indicate that Welsh-speaking parents will choose informal childcare primarily to ensure language transmission, Hodges' (2012) study of Welsh-medium education and parental choice in the Rhymney Valley focused on non-Welsh-speaking families, some of whom also positively chose Welsh-medium childcare. Although this was often in preparation for subsequent Welsh-medium schooling she found that that parental choices are complex and multi-layered based not only on economics, but on cultural issues including language, but also identity, nationality and belonging (Hodges, 2012). These studies both suggest that there is a relationship between language and childcare choice and suggest further research is needed to understand such dynamics.

#### *Aims and objectives*

This paper draws from broader research examining the childcare field in Wales and within it, the choices that families make. In particular, the choices that parents make between work and care, and between formal and informal childcare. In order to achieve this, the childcare practices of families were assessed using data from the Welsh Government's *National Survey for Wales* (2015c). In addition, opinions and



perceptions were gathered through 45 biographical interviews with parents in the three areas of Wrexham, Blaenau Gwent and Ceredigion. The areas were chosen to reflect localities in which it was known that there were different levels of childcare use and provision, but also as areas that are linguistically, geographically, economically and socially diverse. The research was able to identify common characteristics of families that use childcare; identify distinctive features of childcare; and assess the importance of language and childcare choice in a country where the native language is spoken by only a minority yet where bilingualism is a stated aspiration.

### *Theoretical context*

This paper utilises Bourdieu's distinctive approach of 'field theory' and, in particular, his concept of habitus as a conceptual tool for understanding the interplay of choice and necessity that may be experienced and made sense of by parents when making choices related to language and childcare. The term habitus is central in Bourdieu's work and is at the heart of his views on the development of social practice as part of his suite of 'thinking tools'. That Bourdieu's theories have been used widely to examine the central issues of childcare choice by, among others, Braun et al. (2008) Ball et al. (2004), Vincent et al. (2008), Autto (2015), Reay (2004) and Brown & Baker (2011) provides support for the adoption of this theoretical approach and enables new data and concepts to be compared and contrasted with previous work. Bourdieu himself wrote about the importance of childhood as a stage where cultural and social repertoires are learnt from parents and wider social networks and form identities and create advantages long before children are exposed to the public sphere of formal education (Bourdieu, 1977: 78).

In *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984: 101), Bourdieu sets out his conceptual framework as a formula: '(Habitus x Capital) + Field = Practice'. The equation describes how behaviour (practice) is the result of 'an unconscious relationship'

(Bourdieu, 1993: 126) between one's dispositions (*habitus*) and one's position (*capital*) within the current status of a specific social arena (*field*). Childcare is clearly a field within which parents *practice*, displaying particular behaviours evident in the choices they make. These choices are not linear but multi-layered. For mothers, a primary choice is often whether or not to work outside the home following the birth of a child and whether therefore, to use childcare at all (Parera-Nicolau and Mumford, 2005: 33). Further choices are made between the sub-fields of formal and informal care and within the sub-fields, choices are made between differing types of provision (e.g. childminder, day nursery) and the characteristics of each childcare provider (Kensinger Rose and Elicker, 2008). These may include aspects such as opening times, costs, quality of care and the language of the setting. Yet not all choices are available to all parents with choice restricted by structural factors such as the availability of care types as well as parents' configurations of economic, social and cultural capital. The literature on childcare choice (e.g. Forry et al., 2013; Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004; Hansen, Joshi and Verropoulou, 2005; Duncan and Irwin, 2004) is also clear that subjective dispositions such as beliefs about family roles and structure, attitudes towards work and language are all related to childcare preferences, highlighting the part that *habitus* has to play in childcare *practice*.

### *Methodology*

Adopting a Bourdieusian approach to analysing the field of practice makes the traditional dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research methods less important and indeed, mixed methods are desirable (Grenfell, 2014). Analysis of data from the 2015 National Survey Wales (NSW)<sup>4</sup> provided the quantitative element to this research allowing measurement and collation of participants' characteristics such as the

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<sup>4</sup> The 2015 survey data is the fourth release but is the only wave to have contained questions about childcare.

cultural and economic capital they have accumulated which, alongside habitus, positions them within the field.

The NSW covers a wide range of topics, allowing for cross-analysis with a range of social and demographic variables. These include questions around Welsh language which were absent in previous childcare surveys in Wales (e.g. Smith et al., 2009). The data were downloaded from the UK Data Service and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, version 22) using recommended weights (Welsh Government, 2015d). Analysis utilised dependent variables against which a range of other factors are tested. The dependent variables were based on two questions from the NSW. The first asked respondents: “Do you ever need to arrange for [child] to be looked after so you can work, study or go on training?” This question enables the propensity of childcare ‘need’ amongst households with children (aged 0 to 14) in Wales to be measured. However, it is known from other research (Smith et al., 2009; Huskinson et al., 2014, 2016; Hinds and Park, 2000) that the most significant influence on childcare need and subsequent use, is the employment status within the household. The NSW enables a distinction to be made between those households where all adults are in work (or are looking for work, or in training), and those that are not. This variable was used to filter results and therefore examine both households that need childcare because parents are working (or looking for work or training), and those households where childcare may be used for other reasons, for example to support child development. There is, however, opportunity for ambiguity within this question. Whether parents<sup>5</sup> ‘need’ to use childcare does not necessarily mean that they actually use it. The follow-up question in the NSW allows for some clarity by asking ‘IF YES:

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<sup>5</sup> Based on Census data (ONS 2011) relating to household composition, it is known that the great majority of children in Wales are in households where they are being cared for by one or more parents. There is justification, therefore, in using the term ‘parent’ when referring to the adult respondent of the childcare module within the NSW survey.

Who looks after [child]?’ with a ‘*no-one*’ option for respondents. This second question was used as the other main dependent variable, as it distinguishes between childcare types. Filtering responses enabled three cohorts to be identified from within this variable; all households that use all types of childcare; households that use formal childcare; and households that use informal childcare. The characteristics of these three groups were then compared when a range of independent variables – such as parents’ Welsh language ability - and tested for association.

The qualitative research consisted of narrative interviews with parents using both formal and informal childcare in each of the three locality areas (Blaenau Gwent, Ceredigion and Wrexham), with participants chosen from a screening survey that was distributed to parents with young children via Family Information Services, Genesis Projects and Integrated Children’s Centres. All of the screening surveys were completed and returned by mothers. While this was not an objective of the research, it reflects other studies (Arpino, Pronzato et al. 2010; Doucet 1995; Beaujot 1997) showing that mothers are most often the primary carers and overwhelmingly take responsibility for childcare arrangements. Subjects were then chosen to reflect the local variety of family structures, employment arrangements, language and childcare arrangements. A series of interviews with 15 mothers in each of the three case study areas was undertaken through their language of choice. Interviews focused on individuals’ experiences of growing up, having children, using childcare and their relationship with other fields such as family, community and the world of work. Parents were asked about language and whether it had any influence over their choice of childcare – whether formal or informal, or Welsh, English or bilingual. In some cases, future choice of education language medium was also discussed. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and a quarter, were recorded, transcribed and anonymised. Parents’ narratives were then linked to a wider

theoretical exploration and to an assessment of policy through the deployment of a thematic analysis to the examination of the ethnographic data (Davies, 2008). The themes that emerged from parents' stories were pieced together to form a picture of their collective experience. This provided the basis for analytical reflection where the themes were used to explain life trajectories, causal events and moral positions (Silver and Lewins, 2014: 81).

In selecting the localities for qualitative investigation it was important to employ a probabilistic approach to sampling (Davies, 2008: 174) to reflect the cultural, the diversity of Wales as well as a range of childcare provision. Strategic selection of samples is also known as *theoretical sampling* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or *focused sampling* (Hakim, 2000) in that localities were selected to provide illuminating examples of a type of case. The areas of Blaenau Gwent, Ceredigion and Wrexham were chosen to reflect geographies in which it was known that there were different levels of childcare use and provision, but also as areas that are linguistically, economically and socially diverse. **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.** set out some of the contrasting statistical variables between the three areas that set the comparative study in context, and highlight factors that are important in contextualising the analysis of the data.

Insert Table 1

Insert Table 2

## *Findings*

### *The quantitative study*

NSW data was used to measure childcare choice on two levels; first, whether parents used any childcare, and second, if they did, whether this was formal and or, informal care. It was found that 60.6% of parents in Wales used some form of childcare with 40.3% choosing informal childcare and 20.3% using formal childcare. The picture of childcare use in Wales was found to differ to that consistently reported in England (Huskinson et al., 2014, 2016) where 79% of all parents report using some form of childcare, with 67% using formal childcare and 40% used informal care. Some of the difference in formal childcare use can be explained by early education policies where in Wales, most children at aged 3 and 4 receive free Foundation Phase early education in schools whereas their counterparts in England receive their early education entitlement in childcare settings. Nonetheless, even when examining childcare received by only 0 to 2 year olds, use of formal care was lower in Wales (29.5%) than found in England (40%) (Huskinson et al., 2016: .47).

Amongst Welsh-speaking households, a greater proportion (+13%) said that they needed childcare, particularly if they worked (+9%). With a good degree of significance, the data showed greater demand for childcare in line with Welsh language ability (Table 3).

Insert Table 3

Investigating those households that actually used childcare found that parents with the greatest Welsh language ability were also 13% more likely to use childcare than non-Welsh speakers. Use of both formal and informal childcare was found to be

more commonly reported by Welsh speaking families, but the gap was greater for informal care (+12%) than formal childcare (+7%) over non-Welsh speakers (Table 4).

Insert Table 4

Thus far, the data describes a greater propensity for Welsh speaking families to need childcare, to use childcare, and particularly to choose informal over formal care. Yet there are structural factors amongst the Welsh-speaking population that might also explain the links inherent within their possession of differing capitals. Bourdieu (1986) describes four generic types of capital: economic (e.g. inherited or generated wealth), cultural (e.g. educational qualifications, aesthetic preferences, bodily characteristics and comportment, speech and dialect), social (e.g. networks, group membership) and symbolic (e.g. role, legitimacy, authority, prestige). Each type of capital can be represented in either material or symbolic form and its value is determined by the characteristics of particular fields at specific times. In the context of childcare, a married mother who stays at home to care for her young child may be seen as the transformation of her husband's economic capital into symbolic and cultural capital. On the other hand, a single mother who has no choice but to stay at home with her child can be seen as representing an inability to translate cultural or social capital into economic capital. According to Moore (in Grenfell 2014: 99), while economic capital is the most fundamental, the remaining three forms of capital be seen as 'transubstantiated' forms of economic capital – in other words, the social advantages they confer can be translated into power, or become proxies for economic capital.

To test the strength of association between Welsh language, capitals and the use of childcare, we used a logistic regression analysis (Fielding and Gilbert, 2006: 279).

Three models were developed to test the extent to which variables chosen to represent capitals are associated with the use of any childcare (Model 1), formal childcare (Model 2) and informal childcare (Model 3). The variables chosen were tested to establish a linear relationship with each of the models' dependent variable. For each parameter, the B statistic reports the predictive effect of each, followed by the  $\rho$  value which tells us whether the independent variable has statistically significant predictive capability.

Insert Table 5

The three models (Table 5) illustrate how different measures might predict the use of childcare. Across all three models, employment status was the strongest predictor of childcare use with negative 'B' figures indicating that within the NSW categorisation, households with adults working the most, were more likely to use childcare. Welsh language on its own was found not to be a significant predictor of childcare use overall (Model 1) suggesting that variables such as higher employment rates amongst Welsh speakers were more important in explaining the data presented in Table 3. Similarly, no strong relationship was found between formal childcare choice (Model 2) and language. However, a strong positive correlation was found between Welsh language and informal childcare use (Model 3) providing confirmation through the analysis of a large data set of Morris & Jones (2007) previous findings. Across all three regression models economic factors were found to be predictors of childcare use, but in conjunction with factors that can be seen as cultural and social. The balance of the relative predictive effects would seem to suggest that dispositions, such as Welsh language, social contacts and connectedness, have greater importance in the choice of



informal care, while a household's economic situation is a better predictor of formal childcare use. As such, it supports the notion of a particular habitus of informal childcare use that can be seen to cut across class boundaries that might be normally defined in narrow economic terms. The findings further support Baker, Brown and Williams (2014: 52) hypothesis that the social and cultural capitals associated with Welsh language are transubstantiated and convertible into economic capital evidenced by higher levels of employment amongst Welsh speaking families<sup>6</sup>.

### *The qualitative study*

The 45 parents interviewed for the study were asked about language and whether it had any influence over their choice of childcare. Writing about choice of education, Hodges (2012) categorised parental motivations as economic, cultural, educational or personal, and content analysis of interview responses was coded using these headings. Ten Welsh-speaking families were interviewed including seven where both partners in the couple were native Welsh-speakers, and three where one non-Welsh-speaking parent (the mother in all cases) was with a Welsh-speaking partner. In addition, English-speaking mothers in all areas were asked about language choice and preferences.

Children from families interviewed where Welsh was the main language spoken in the home were all living in Ceredigion where there is some Welsh-medium childcare (mainly *cylchoed meithrin*) available in all areas (Ceredigion County Council, 2015). However, few Welsh-speaking families used Welsh-medium formal childcare provision, but instead, used informal care with grandparents. Language transmission was not found to be an issue that was consciously considered by these parents. It was a 'given' within the habitus inhabited by these parents that children who spoke Welsh in their home would also speak Welsh with them, their grandparents, in pre-school and in

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<sup>6</sup> Within the NSW sample of families, 83% of Welsh speaking respondents were employed compared with 73.9% of non-Welsh speaking respondents.

school itself. For example, Alex had used a local childminder to support her full-time work, and it was natural that she was Welsh-speaking:

‘I don’t think I even thought about it. I knew [the childminder] anyway, so it wasn’t an issue.’ (translation)

For parents like Alex, the density of Welsh-speakers and social networks<sup>7</sup> alongside the availability of Welsh-medium childcare provision was not a constraining factor. Baker, Brown and Williams (2014) have written about the Welsh notion of *buchedd* being similar to Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, representing a particular way of life, way of behaviour and “...sense of identity conferred, of being part of a particular culture or community” (2014: 47). They compare life in the Welsh-speaking heartlands to peasant life in the *Bearn*, where Bourdieu was brought up and where he identified that the distinctive language, as in Wales, formed symbolic and cultural capital that had considerable transferable value within the community, but little outside. Where Wales differs from the *Bearn*, according to Baker, Brown and Williams is that with devolution and the development of uniquely Welsh institutions and civil society, the cultural capital gained through speaking Welsh now has a wider currency (2014: 51). This was recognised by both Welsh and English speaking parents in Ceredigion, many of whom expressed a desire for their children to be able to speak Welsh to gain social or economic advantage:

‘I think if you live in Wales you need to speak Welsh. I don’t and if I want to stay within this area, there is a lot of jobs I can’t apply for and you know, the necessity is you must be able to speak Welsh. And so it’s up to them, I am giving them a choice if they want to stay within this area they’re not going to be excluded from any of the job opportunities.’ (Kate).

Three English-speaking mothers interviewed in Ceredigion had Welsh-speaking partners, and here a different dynamic was evident. While childcare choices were

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<sup>7</sup> Morris (1989) in her study of networks and young people on Anglesey found that Welsh-speakers had the densest social networks.

similar – mostly a mixture of informal care and sessional Welsh-medium childcare – it was a more conscious selection, with parents aware of the economic, cultural and symbolic value of Welsh language provision.

For non-Welsh-speaking parents, choice of Welsh-medium childcare was found to be a more complex issue with distinct variations between the case study areas. In Ceredigion, there was a normative approach to choosing Welsh-medium childcare. Although the proportion of Welsh-speakers in the county is falling, it is still close to 50 per cent and is the third highest in Wales (ONS, 2011). The majority of childcare in Ceredigion is Welsh-medium - either purely Welsh-medium or bilingual (Ceredigion County Council, 2015) - and 76 per cent of primary school children are taught through the medium of Welsh (StatsWales 2016).<sup>8</sup> This combination leads to norms and values being shared by parents which were found to transcend linguistic divides. Non-Welsh speaking mothers said that they sent their children to Welsh-medium childcare - particularly *cylchoedd meithrin* - as preparation for Welsh-medium education:

‘We started off with the Ty a Fi for both children. My son is what 11 weeks and he goes already. Personally it was my choice to take them from about six months and toddle in Welsh so that you got bombarded with the language then.’  
(Deina)

Jackie, whose daughter attended a *cylch meithrin*, feared that her child would stand out as being ‘English’ if she started school with no Welsh:

‘Yes, it had crossed my mind that I was a bit concerned with you know getting picked-on for not speaking Welsh. We used to go to the ty a fi and then she started at the *cylch* which is great as she’ll be going to school with most of them.’

Unlike parents in other areas, non-Welsh-speaking parents in Ceredigion expressed little concern about their inability to support their children in Welsh language early

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<sup>8</sup> It is noted that Ceredigion’s language policy is focused on primary education and the county has no Welsh-medium secondary schools.

education. Some had used relatives and friends for informal childcare to enhance their children's language development, supporting Baker and Jones' (1998: 41) evidence of bilingual education bridging generations.

In Wrexham<sup>9</sup>, while parents said that they would like their children to be able to speak 'some Welsh', few of those interviewed chose Welsh-medium childcare or education. The main reason stated was that they feared they would not be able to support their child's learning and that this would have a negative effect on the child's educational attainment. Emma had enrolled her child in an English-speaking playgroup and was planning to send her child to an English-medium school:

'I'd like [my daughter] to be able to understand maybe a little bit but I wouldn't want her in a Welsh school. I've got a family member that moved to Wrexham from down south when she was about eight or nine and her mum and dad sent her to the Welsh Junior school and she really struggled, especially with homework. Her mum and dad couldn't help her because they didn't understand how to help her and I know she really struggled.'

Because children were going to learn some Welsh compulsorily in school, parents interviewed in Wrexham did not feel that there was any particular advantage in Welsh-medium childcare. While some parents did recognise that there might be economic advantages to be gained from bilingualism, none of those interviewed saw this as a significant enough incentive to pursue Welsh-medium childcare and education. How much this is driven by, or is reflected in, the Council's education policies are open to question. Wrexham Council's Language Policy for Schools Maintained by the Local Authority (LA) '*...aims to ensure that pupils gain the educational stimulus afforded by bilingual education*'. Primary schools are all technically bilingual, although '*...the degree of bilingualism may differ from school to school*' (Wrexham County Borough Council, 2016). What this means in practice is that, in the majority of the schools,

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<sup>9</sup> Where 13 percent of people speak Welsh (ONS 2011) but where only 3 percent of childcare places are categorised as Welsh-medium (Wrexham County Borough Council 2014).

English is the main medium of instruction, with Welsh taught as a second language (StatsWales, 2016).

In Blaenau Gwent<sup>10</sup> there was limited interest shown by the parents interviewed in Welsh-medium childcare or Welsh-medium education, with only one parent having chosen provision on the basis of language. Many parents in Blaenau Gwent shared the concerns of those parents in Wrexham who were worried about their inability to support children in Welsh:

‘We’re not Welsh-speaking so we wouldn’t be confident in supporting our children with their learning. I work in an English-medium school - children have moved to my school because they’ve struggled in a Welsh-medium school and learning through the medium of Welsh.’ (Claudia).

While some parents interviewed recognised that there could be an economic advantage, they did not think that it was important enough to modify their choices. As found by Hodges (2012) in her study in neighbouring Caerphilly, parents’ cultural identities can be strong enough to make a difference even if economic incentives are not sufficient to influence choice. One parent who was using Welsh-medium sessional care for her children (and intended for them to go on to Welsh medium education) framed it as a very positive choice:

‘I would have loved to have been able to learn Welsh when I was in education and I would love my three children to speak it. We’re Welsh and should be able to speak our language. They don’t teach it enough in South Wales and they should. We go to the Meithrin and they love it.’ (Jenna)

These comments also illustrate Hodges’ (2012) notion of a ‘lost generation’ of people who did not have the opportunity to learn Welsh themselves, but placed a high cultural value on the language. Nonetheless, most parents in Blaenau Gwent were negative, or at

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<sup>10</sup> Where 7.8 percent of people speak Welsh (ONS 2011) and where only 4 percent of childcare places are categorised as Welsh-medium. The 2014 Childcare Sufficiency Assessment survey found a greater number of Polish-speaking parents than Welsh-speaking parents in Blaenau Gwent (Blaenau Gwent CBC 2014).

least ambivalent to Welsh. As in Wrexham, the attitudes expressed by these parents are perhaps reflective of, and reflected in, the language policies in place in the local authority. Blaenau Gwent Council's Welsh Language Education Policy '*...aims to ensure that pupils of all ages are given the opportunity to learn Welsh*' (Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, 2014), yet just 4 per cent of pupils receive Welsh-medium education (StatsWales, 2016).

The qualitative evidence highlights important differences in subjects' narratives related both to the languages spoken by parents and the spaces they inhabited. In Ceredigion, almost half the population speaks Welsh, primary education is mainly Welsh-medium and most childcare provision is Welsh-medium or bilingual. Here, the choice of Welsh-medium childcare was both less of an issue – because it was normative for many families – and yet more of an issue, as both English and Welsh-speaking parents expressed a positive preference for Welsh-medium childcare and early education. Parents justified their preferences in cultural, social and economic terms with multi-layered benefits identified for their children, and in some cases for them as well. In the other areas, few parents said that language was an important factor in their childcare choices and subsequent choice of primary education. Where they did, it tended to be expressed as having a cultural rather than the economic and social values that were spoken about by parents in Ceredigion.

### *Discussion*

The relationship between the Welsh language and childcare is shown in this study to be important on many levels. The strong correlation between informal childcare use and parents' language abilities illustrates a dynamic that will not be present in other parts of

the UK<sup>11</sup>, while the relationship between language transmission and childcare choice, and the value of Welsh childcare provision as valuable cultural capital are findings that distinguish childcare practice in some parts of Wales.

Language was found to influence parents' choices in particular situations, and confirmed previous research suggesting that childcare is an important factor in language transmission, with specific informal care being chosen by some parents to ensure or enhance acquisition. In Welsh-speaking areas, this was found to be a positive choice by both Welsh and English speakers, with both groups recognising benefits both intrinsically and as a transubstantiated form of capital; yet, in non-Welsh-speaking areas, the Welsh language was often considered negatively.

Welsh government policy has, to date, tried to support parents to raise children bilingually (Welsh Government, 2011) and this study highlights that formal and informal childcare has an important part to play in both inter-generational language transmission and language acquisition by the children of non-Welsh-speakers. In Welsh-speaking areas informal childcare is a cornerstone of language transmission, but the strong preference is likely to depress demand for formal childcare in these areas. This is essential in providing children from non-Welsh speaking homes with childcare that not only supports language acquisition but provides parents without access to informal carers with more opportunities for employment. In areas where Welsh is less widely spoken, many parents are sceptical of the benefits of bilingualism, but even those who would like their children to be exposed to Welsh in the early years have few choices as Welsh medium provision is not delivered by the childcare market.

Work on strengthening the infrastructure for developing Welsh medium provision has moved forward and this includes plans to increase Welsh Medium

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<sup>11</sup> Studies of some migrant communities have highlighted distinction (e.g. Williams and Gavanas in Lutz 2016) but the focal point of study is most often integration through acquisition of a new language rather than transmission of mother tongue or minority languages.

provision in the childcare and early years sector (Welsh Government, 2016b: 7). Yet, while over the next few years, elements of strategy will be implemented in partnership with key stakeholders such as the Mudiad Meithrin and increasing Welsh Medium provision as part of the expansion of Flying Start (2016b: 11), RhAG have also suggested that there needs to be a more holistic and joined-up approach in co-ordinating all policies affecting Welsh medium early years provision (RhAG, 2013).

International literature suggests that the aspiration to nearly double the number of Welsh speakers by 2050 (Welsh Government, 2016a) will not be achieved through the education system alone, but will require a home-school-community approach to language within which the early years is a critical component. The current and coming cohort of Welsh parents are the first to have been exposed to the Welsh language throughout their primary and secondary education and should be more likely than previous generations to value bilingualism. The policy challenge will be to fully support this generation who have learnt Welsh in school to play an increased role in transmitting the language to their children, both in the home, and by making positive choices around Welsh medium and bilingual early childhood education and care.



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Table 1. Socio-demographic locality profile<sup>1</sup>

	Working households with dependent children (2013)	Job density (2013)	Lone parent households (2011)	Deprivation (Child Deprivation Rank / 22 Councils) (2014)	LSOAs in most deprived 10%	% of adults with low or no qualifications	Welsh speakers in population (2011)
Blaenau Gwent	36.2%	0.44	14.0%	2	23.0%	65%	7.8%
Ceredigion	48.0%	0.73	8.0%	16	0.0%	37%	47.3%
Wrexham	44.8%	0.71	11.0%	17	6.0%	51%	12.9%

Table 2. Childcare in localities<sup>2</sup>

	Childcare places per 100 children (2015)	Working families using informal childcare (2015)	Working families using formal childcare (2015)	All families using childcare (2015)	Proportion of Welsh medium childcare settings (2010)
Blaenau Gwent	7.3	34.8%	6.1%	37.9%	6.0%
Ceredigion	18.2	33.3%	23.9%	45.8%	94.0%
Wrexham	20.3	35.9%	25.4%	46.4%	3.0%

Table 3. 'Have you ever needed childcare?' by Welsh language ability of respondent (Welsh Government, 2015c)

	Derived Variable - Welsh Language ability					Sig.
	No Welsh	Can understand spoken Welsh only	Can speak Welsh but can't read or write Welsh	Can speak and read Welsh, but not write Welsh	Can speak, read and write Welsh	
All Households	47%	46%	50%	50%	60%	Φc= .095 ρ<.001
n=	2,587	126	74	56	586	
Working households	63%	53%	67%	69%	72%	Φc= .089 ρ<.005
n=	1,572	93	46	35	434	

<sup>1</sup> Jobs: NomisWeb 2013; Children and Lone Parents: ONS Census 2011; Deprivation: StatWales 2014. Education: Welsh Government, 2015c.

<sup>2</sup> Childcare Places: CSSIW 2014 and ONS 2011; Childcare use: Welsh Government, 2015c; Welsh Medium Childcare: Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, 2014, Ceredigion County Council, 2015

Table 4. Use of childcare and Welsh language ability of respondent (Welsh Government, 2015c)

	No Welsh	Can understand spoken Welsh only	Can speak Welsh but can't read or write Welsh	Can speak and read Welsh, but not write Welsh	Can speak, read and write Welsh	Sig.
Uses any childcare	47%	45%	50%	50%	60%	Φc= .098 p<.001
<i>n</i> =	2,587	126	74	56	586	
Uses informal childcare	38%	37%	39%	39%	50%	Φc= .172 p<.005
<i>n</i> =	2,586	126	74	56	587	
Uses formal childcare	19%	19%	24%	23%	26%	Φc= .094 p<.001
<i>n</i> =	2587	126	74	56	587	

Table 5. Multiple logistic regression analysis modelling childcare use (Welsh Government, 2015c)

		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
		Uses any childcare		Uses formal childcare		Uses informal childcare	
		B	Sig.	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
<i>Economic capital</i>	Age of child	-.020	.000***	-.025	.000***	-.011	.000***
	Employment status	-.281	.000***	-.110	.000***	-.238	.000***
	Housing tenure	-.019	.000***	-.021	.000***	-.019	.025*
	Social class (ACORN)	.007	.020*	-.001	.002**	.000	.960
	Deprivation score (WIMD)	.015	.458	.018	.855	-.005	.526
	Local affordability of childcare	-.025	.065	-.033	.010*	-.006	.451
<i>Cultural capital</i>	Parent's education level	-.033	.003*	-.019	.000***	-.026	.007*
	Consumption of culture	.009	.000***	.003	.016*	.016	.009*
	Parent's country of birth	-0.02	.000***	.003	.476	-.027	.000***
	Welsh language	.079	.104	.035	.576	.059	.000***
<i>Social capital</i>	Household type	-.003	.000***	-.007	.002**	.000	.990
	Marital Status	.013	.826	-.008	.526	.022	.019*
	Extent of social networks	.008	.161	.007	.309	.011	.000***
	Connectedness	.000	.403	.000	.453	.000	.000***

\*significant at p<0.05; \*\*significant at p<0.005; \*\*\*significant at p<.001