

# Background

## Use of the term ‘immersion education’

The term ‘immersion education’ was first used in Canada in the 1960s, according to Baker and Wright (2021), who refer to educational experiments with the aim of children becoming bilingual (and bi-cultural) in English and French. They suggest that ‘immersion education’ is an umbrella term. Although there is a common emphasis on presenting a new language (or target language), immersion education approaches can vary in several ways internationally. For example, there can be a difference in the percentage of teaching through the medium of the target language or the age at which the target language is introduced.

Considering ‘heritage language education’ can be helpful when considering the Welsh context. According to Baker and Wright (2021, p.237), this is a term that refers to a wide range of programmes that aim to provide an opportunity for learners to develop a higher level of proficiency in a minority language. ‘Heritage language education’ focuses on protecting and reviving minority languages, and it tends to target those who already speak that language. Redknapp (2006) and Lewis (2006, 2011) note that Welsh-medium schools often teach learners from Welsh and non-Welsh-speaking homes in the same class. This means that ‘immersion education’ and ‘heritage language education’ principles are often combined in classrooms in Wales. That is, immersion education in Wales is usually a combination of what has been recognised internationally as ‘immersion education’ and ‘heritage language education.’

The Welsh Government (2021a) published research on [‘Welsh-medium education through late immersion: mapping the provision in Wales’](#) in October 2021. It provides useful background information about immersion approaches for latecomers in 10 local authorities in Wales.

Outside academic circles, the terminology that is used to describe ‘immersion education’ varies. In our report on Welsh language acquisition, we describe Welsh language immersion as follows:

‘The immersion method is a way of working that focuses on using Welsh as the only medium of teaching and learning, by using practical and visual techniques

to support learners to develop vocabulary and syntax' (Estyn, 2021, p.63)

The Welsh Government describes Welsh language immersion by explaining:

'Schools providing Welsh-medium education use Welsh to deliver the curriculum. Learners in these schools come from a variety of linguistic backgrounds, some from homes where Welsh is spoken and others where Welsh is not spoken. Learners receiving their education through the medium of Welsh and who do not speak Welsh at home undergo a process of language immersion (the target language in this case is Welsh). All learners in Welsh-medium education are taught in the same classroom, whether or not they speak Welsh at home.

Examples of schools practising immersion can be found all over the world. The Canadian model for implementing immersion is widely documented. It shows that learners need to be taught fully through the target language for two to three years to ensure that language competence is developed sufficiently. Another language is then introduced.

This is the model we use in Wales. It means that learners are taught fully in Welsh up to and including the school year in which the majority of learners turn 7. After that, we introduce English as a subject, and to varying degrees as a medium of instruction. Welsh remains the predominant language of the classroom.' (Welsh Government, 2021b, p.5)

The Welsh Government recognises two main categories of immersion education that we will use for the remainder of this report:

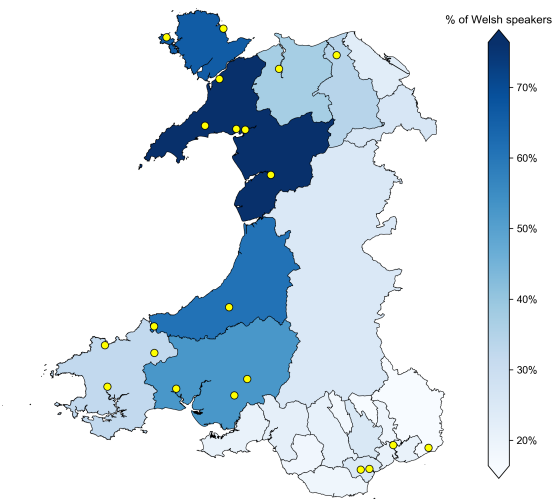
The Welsh Government uses the term 'early immersion education' to refer to immersion education in the foundation phase (Welsh Government, 2021a, p.6). This includes learners' experiences in Welsh-medium non-maintained settings and schools. According to its definition of schools in the Welsh-medium category, learners are taught fully in Welsh until the end of the foundation phase in these providers. We will use the term '**early immersion**' for the remainder of this report.

The Welsh Government uses the term 'late immersion education' to refer to immersion education that targets 'latecomers' (or 'newcomers') to Welsh-medium education (although it recognises that academics use additional terms, such as 'mid immersion') (Welsh Government, 2021a, p.3-4). It defines 'latecomers' as 'children (aged 7 years or over) who do not speak Welsh but wish to access Welsh medium education after the end of the foundation phase. We will use the term **'late immersion'** for the remainder of this report.

This report considers 'early immersion' in Welsh-medium non-maintained settings and schools, and in Welsh streams in bilingual schools. When considering 'late immersion', this report outlines provision that is available to support 7 to 11-year-old learners. Such support can be provided in primary schools, language immersion centres, or as part of a transition programme with Welsh-medium secondary schools. Local authorities use several different terms to refer to these centres, including 'language immersion centres', 'Welsh language units' and 'Welsh immersion centres'. In this report, the term 'language immersion centres' is used, unless we are referring to a particular provider. Some local authorities provide late immersion support in key stage 3. However, we did not visit secondary schools as part of this thematic review.

Of the 22 local authorities in Wales, 10 maintain language immersion centres to provide an intensive 'late immersion' programme to latecomers. In the 10 authorities that maintain language immersion centres, there are a total of 21 centres. Many of these centres tend to be in the local authorities with a high proportion of Welsh speakers and, in some of these authorities, Welsh-medium and bilingual education is more common than English-medium education. They are often located in 'host' schools but they part of the local authority education service's provision. See [appendix 1](#) for a list of the language immersion centres in Wales in the autumn term, 2021. Welsh Government recently announced that it would fund language immersion centres in a number of local authorities that do not currently have provision (Welsh Government, 2021c).

**Figure 1: Location of language immersion centres in Wales**



# National priorities



Immersion education intertwines with a number of national priorities. [Appendix 2](#) explains the relevance of the following documentation in immersion education.

- National Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) ([Welsh Government, 2013, p.2](#))
- [Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015](#)
- [Successful Futures: Independent Review of Curriculum and Assessment Arrangements in Wales](#) (Donaldson, 2015).
- ['Cymraeg 2050 - A million Welsh speakers'](#) (Welsh Government, 2017a). 'Welsh-medium immersion education is our principal method of ensuring that children can develop their Welsh language skills, and for creating new speakers.' (p.21)
- ['Cymraeg 2050: our plan for 2021 to 2026'](#) (Welsh Government, 2021d)
- ['Our National Mission'](#) (Welsh Government, 2017b)
- [Welsh language acquisition](#) (Estyn, 2021)

During the period in which we contacted local authorities, namely the autumn term 2021, nearly all were working towards preparing, or were already consulting on, their new Welsh in Education Strategic Plans. As a result, many authorities have revised their vision for Welsh immersion education recently and were continuing to adapt their plans in light of feedback from the consultations.