

Rapporteur Group on Bilingualism

The Advantages of Bilingualism in Welsh and English

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Why is bilingualism important for children in Wales? The reason is that it will affect the rest of their lives and those of their parents. Being bilingual, multilingual or monolingual is likely to affect a child's identity, networks of friends and acquaintances, schooling, employment, marriage, preferred area of residence, travel and thinking. Bilingualism increases opportunities and choices.

There are many possible advantages of bilingualism from which children and adults benefit. This article lists ten of them based on international research from the 1960s to the present.

1. Communication with the whole family and the community

Where parents have different first languages, a child who is bilingual can communicate in both of those languages. This can allow a close and special relationship with each parent to develop. At the same time, both parents are passing to the child part of their past and their heritage.

Being bilingual creates a bridge between generations, with grandparents, for example, or with other family members. This helps to build a sense of belonging to the extended family.

Being able to speak Welsh also allows people to play a full part in community life in those areas of Wales where the language is widely used.

2. Extending the enjoyment of reading and writing

If someone can read and write in two languages, they are able to enjoy two literatures in their original language. This can open up a deeper understanding of different traditions, ideas, ways of thinking and behaving. The pleasures of reading novels, poetry and magazines and the enjoyment of writing to friends and family are all doubled for bilingual people.

3. Access to two cultures

One of the advantages of being bilingual is having access to two cultures, which can be two different worlds of experience. With a language goes a wealth of things like idioms and sayings, folk stories and history, poetry, literature and music, both traditional and contemporary.

4. Tolerance of other languages and cultures

Because two languages give someone a wider cultural experience, there is often a greater tolerance of differences in cultures, creeds and customs.

5. Thinking benefits

Research has shown that having two well developed languages can give people particular advantages in thinking, far from bilingualism making people mentally confused, as is sometimes alleged. There are four main areas:

Creative thinking - bilingual children have two or more words for each object and idea. When different meanings are attached to words in the two languages, a bilingual person may develop the ability to think more flexibly.

Sensitivity to Communication - bilingual people have to know which language to speak with whom, and when. They therefore appear to be more sensitive to the needs of listeners than monolingual people.

IQ Tests- research from many different countries of the world shows that bilingual people tend to do better at IQ tests compared with monolingual people of the same socio-economic class.

A head start in reading - bilinguals being less fixed on the sound and more centred on the meaning of words has been shown by Canadian researchers to give a head start in learning to read. This tends to be an advantage for bilingual children around the ages four to six.

6. Raised self-esteem

Being able to switch naturally between languages, and being able to talk to different people in those languages, makes children feel good about themselves and their abilities. A sense of real ownership of both Welsh and English can do wonders to help raise a child's self-esteem.

7. Security in identity

The Welsh language is one of the few things that differentiates Wales from the rest of the UK and it can be a powerful link between Welsh people everywhere. Everyone in Wales and from Wales can be proud of the language, even if they don't speak it. It belongs to us all.

8. Educational benefits

Research evidence from bilingual education systems in Canada, the United States, the Basque country, Catalonia and Wales shows that children who have two languages tend to do better in the curriculum and to show slightly higher performance in tests and examinations. This is partly related to the thinking advantages of bilingualism mentioned earlier.

9. Easier to learn a third language

There is growing evidence from European research that bilinguals tend to find it easier to learn other languages. The current examples are children from countries such as Holland, Denmark and Finland who often speak three (or four) languages with ease. Another example is the Basque country where learning Basque, Spanish and English has become increasingly frequent.

10. Employment advantages

There are potential economic advantages in Wales (which are continually increasing) of being bilingual. A person with two languages will probably have a wider choice of jobs available in the future. Welsh speakers are increasingly needed in the retail sector, tourism, transport, public relations, banking and accountancy, administration, translation, secretarial work, marketing and sales, the law and teaching. Being bilingual does not guarantee a meal ticket but it gives a person an additional valuable skill when job seeking

Conclusion

In most decades of the last century, bilingualism was seen in Wales as a potential deficit: in thinking, character formation and not least in schooling. In the last two decades, the dominant international view is that bilingualism has definite and many benefits.