

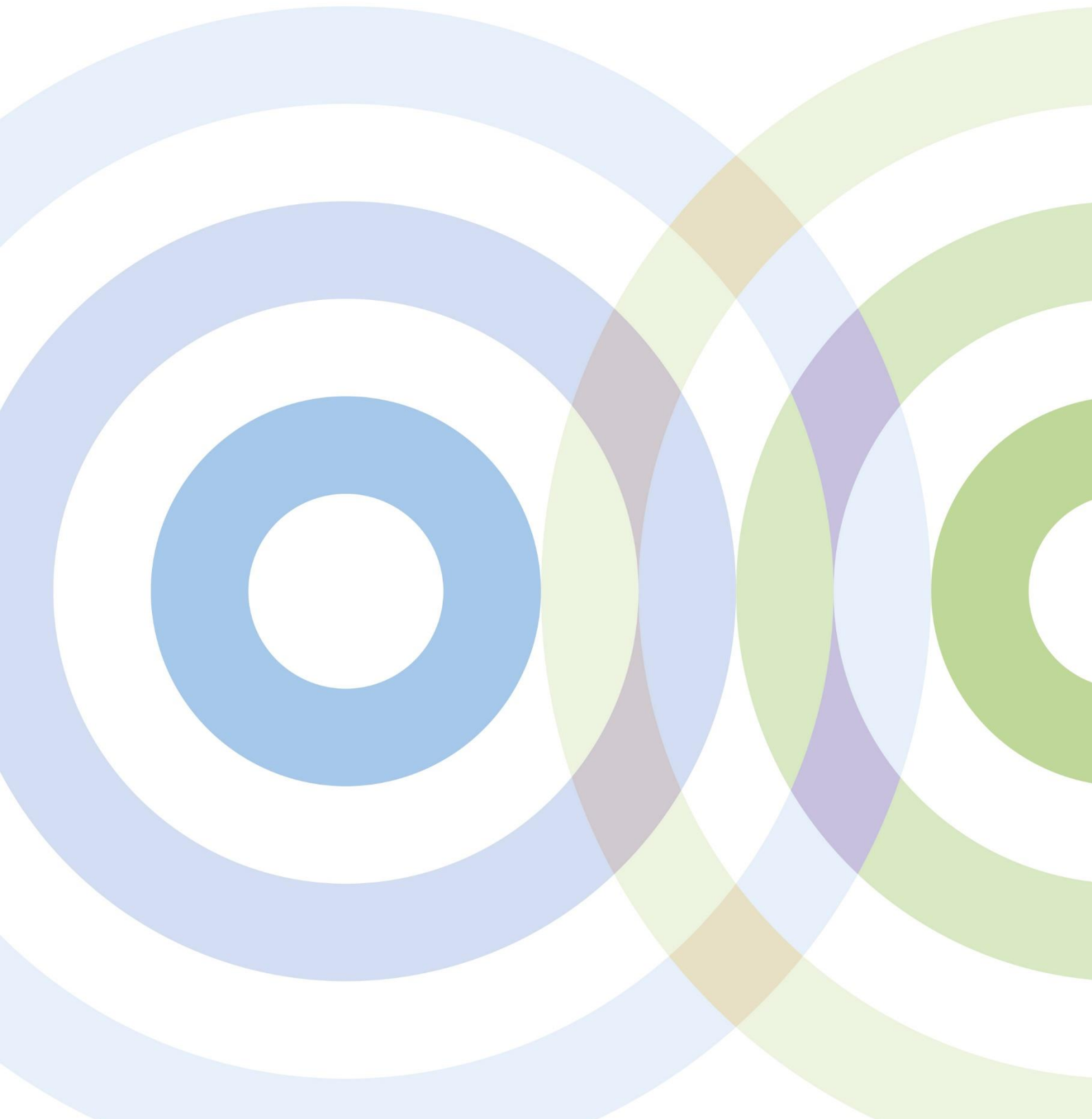


Ondata Research

MFL Mentoring: School case studies

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Executive Summary

MFL Mentoring has been working with schools across Wales since 2015 to increase the uptake of learners opting for a language qualification. The MFL Mentoring team have engaged with over one hundred and fifty secondary schools via a mentoring project focussing on a “multilingual, global mindset” (MFL Mentoring 2022). MFL Mentoring now partners with most Higher Education Institutions across Wales. Led by Cardiff University, this includes: Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, University of South Wales, University of Wales Trinity St. David and Swansea University.

The research undertaken included a literature review of all relevant reports and published peer-reviewed articles. Focus groups and interviews were undertaken with a group of schools identified by the project. Case studies were then constructed to examine the experiences of individual schools in more detail.

There are several factors in schools which can impact on the uptake of International Languages. These have been identified as:

- Influencing factors on learners considering International Languages were identified as:
 - Preferring other subjects more.
 - Small range of subject choices open to them.
 - Uncertainty over whether they needed a language for their preferred career.
 - Lack of confidence in their language skills.
 - “Negative attitudes” towards the “long-term usefulness of languages, sometimes reinforced by parents and family”.
- Overarching factors included learners focussing on “the transactional benefits of learning a language. For them, the focus was on languages as communication tools rather than the benefits of learning a language to access and understand other cultures.”

(Gorrara 2016, Gorrara, Jenkins, & Mosley 2019, Rushton & Thomas 2020).

As discussed, there are also structural barriers within schools. This includes reduced teaching time in Years 7 to 9 (Tinsley, 2017a; 2018a), limited options slots available for International Languages and schools not running GCSE or A-level classes as uptake is small (five to ten learners) (Tinsley, 2017a; 2018a). Further to this are issues with recruiting teachers, so even if there was demand for a language, there is not equity of access across Wales.



As the project has expanded to work with more schools across Wales in both English and Welsh-medium settings, the influencing factors encountered by the project have not changed much. However, with the introduction of Curriculum for Wales and the inclusion of languages in the LLC Area of Learning and Experience, there is an opportunity for more integrated learning experiences. For learners this means being able to show them the connections and relevance of languages across the curriculum, with the potential for more positive attitudes arising. There is also an opportunity for more integration with Welsh language learning.

The mentoring approach is summarised in Jenkins (2018): “The MFL mentoring model is less about building specific language skills (improving grammar, sentence construction, introducing tenses) and more about fostering a mindset that challenges assumed views about others and champions intercultural understanding and curiosity.”

The project team are key to the successful delivery of the aims and objectives and the effective working model is discussed more fully in Rushton & Thomas (2020) but ultimately the success is linked to the “strength and depth of project team who are extremely well-informed about the wider MFL context in Wales and how to work with schools and build lasting partnerships”. This is strengthened by the role teachers play within the project, as their professional judgement is relied upon in order to identify learners who would benefit from participation and they provide feedback on their local circumstances and how learners, teachers and the school are impacted. This professional judgement is a result of the combination of experience, reflection, knowledge of their subject and knowledge of their own local context (Tripp 2011). It is regularly applied within the classroom when assessing their own practice and responding to the needs of learners and is used within the MFL Mentoring project to great effect.

There are a range of benefits to learners, schools and mentors in taking part. Mentors are undergraduate or postgraduate students who have a passion for inspiring young people to see the many advantages and opportunities of seeing the world through different languages and cultures. Mentors work with small groups of six to eight learners in Year 8 or 9 over the course of six sessions. These sessions can take place online (synchronously or asynchronously) or in-person.

The evidence available for the MFL mentoring programme shows that “short, targeted interventions can have a significant impact on perceptions of language learning and motivation” (Gorrara, Jenkins and Mosley 2019). The impact on learners has been discussed in a number of publications and reports (Blake and Gorrara 2019, Jenkins 2018, Rushton & Thomas 2020, Tinsley 2017b; 2018b; 2019) and can be summarised as:



- Increased confidence in language lessons and a “strengthening the personal resilience of mentees as language learners” (Blake and Gorrara 2019).
- Improved communication skills and “improved willingness to contribute to discussions” (Jenkins 2018).
- More positive attitude towards languages (Tinsley 2017b; 2018b; 2019).
- Increased likelihood of taking an IL GCSE. For example, in 2018-2019 42% of mentees opted for an International Language GCSE, significantly higher than the national average (Rushton & Thomas 2020).
- Raised aspirations in relation to university study: ““mentees start to see for themselves what university looks like, breaking down barriers around accessibility and offering tangible role models” (Jenkins 2018).
- Shift of mindset: “away from a utilitarian view of learning a language” to that of “awareness-raising of the opportunities” (Blake and Gorrara 2019).

A combination of preparedness to meet expectations of learners to help them learn a language and ability to act as a role model allowed mentors to successfully show mentees the potential “to see beyond skills, subject choices and exams into a future with potentially exciting life-enhancing experiences” (Blake and Gorrara 2019).

Across the different school contexts and via different delivery modes, the mentoring project has a consistently positive effect on learners. This includes more positive attitudes towards International Languages and increased uptake at GCSE. The flexibility of delivery modes underpinned by a strong project ethos, high standards for mentors, recognition of the value of teachers’ professional judgement and significant investment into relationship development with schools all contributed to the project’s continued success in achieving its aims. The project team are responsive to the needs of schools. The following excerpts from the case studies provide examples of impact:

- Despite having previously healthy uptake, School A became involved in the project for the first time in 2021 following a significant drop in GCSE numbers as a result in changes to options. After participating there has been an increase in uptake but more work needs to be done and the teacher sees this as an ongoing annual challenge.
- For School B, the teacher felt the experience helped make languages “relevant to them” and they could see connections between subjects and their own interests. The teacher felt the mentor was particularly good at communicating these connections and sharing their own experience to reinforce the message that “languages are everywhere, and look at all the proof” (Teacher, School B). In general, the teacher felt



the impact was to help “changing that mindset [of learners] and keeping the mindset open”. This was the school’s first year of involvement in the project.

- School C have been involved in the project for four years. School C’s interaction in 2020-2021 was asynchronous but the structure of the programme and the efforts of the mentor clearly ensured a similar experience to the face-to-face programme experience in previous years. The teacher was pleased that a range of languages were explored and that learners completed a variety of tasks. The learners in the focus group very much enjoyed the open-ended nature of the discussions. The learners felt that through the questions the mentor asked them they were able to have an ongoing conversation and that the session content provided a “conversation starter” (Learner, School C). The mentor would always follow up with another question to the learners, ensuring the conversation kept going. The teacher felt the themes of the weekly sessions were interesting and encouraged learners to “think and open their minds to different cultures” (Teacher, School C).
- School D has been part of the MFL Mentoring programme for several years and it is considered an integral part of the school’s strategy to develop positive attitudes towards International Languages and to encourage their learners to consider further study. The teacher has observed the most impactful aspect of the programme to be where the university mentors share their “own really positive experiences of learning a language, of being in another country, what they’ve got out of it, what they’re going to do with it now”. The impact on learners is broad but the key aspects are improvements in learners’ “confidence and communication skills” (Teacher, School D). The teacher can quickly see the positive impact on learners following a session, they come back into class saying “Look what I can do now” and are “coming back brimming with a bit more confidence” (Teacher, School D).

The introduction of the Curriculum for Wales is seen by the project leads and teachers in schools as an opportunity to better integrate the teaching of English, Welsh and International Languages and to develop more positive attitudes to language learning in general. The mentoring project models a high quality approach to multilingual and interdisciplinary working and as such directly supports the implementation of CfW in schools. MFL Mentoring continues to be an important opportunity for schools to develop more positive attitudes to language learning and to secure uptake of GCSE.



Introduction

MFL Mentoring has been working with schools across Wales since 2015 to increase the uptake of learners opting for a language qualification. The MFL Mentoring team have engaged with over one hundred and fifty secondary schools via a mentoring project focussing on a “multilingual, global mindset” (MFL Mentoring 2022). MFL Mentoring now partners with most Higher Education Institutions across Wales. Led by Cardiff University, this includes: Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, University of South Wales, University of Wales Trinity St. David and Swansea University.

There are a range of benefits to learners, schools and mentors in taking part. Mentors are undergraduate or postgraduate students who have a passion for inspiring young people to see the many advantages and opportunities of seeing the world through different languages and cultures. For in-person mentoring, mentors work with small groups of five to eight learners in Year 8 or 9 over the course of six sessions. For online mentoring, which started in 2020 and will continue, mentors work with groups of up to 15 learners. Between 2020-22 online mentoring could take place synchronously or asynchronously as best suited the school context. A blended model is set to be introduced in the Autumn term 2022, leveraging the benefits of both in-person and online provision.

This report examines the evidence of impact of the project and the evidence for the effectiveness of the mentoring model based on published research along with internal and external evaluation reports. The current policy context and school environment are also reviewed. Following this there are four case studies, looking in more detail at the experiences of schools taking part in the mentoring project.



Methodology

This section describes the approach taken to this research. The research began with a literature review of evaluation reports (external and internal) alongside additional research carried out by the MFL Mentoring project and other relevant published grey literature and peer reviewed articles.

In collaboration with the project team a shortlist of schools for the case studies was developed. These covered a range of different types of schools, including both English and Welsh medium, and those in urban and rural locations. Once the schools were identified, a set of interviews with teachers and focus groups with learners were arranged for July 2022. A set of interview and focus group questions was developed based on the key findings and areas of interest from the literature review. In addition to the interviews and focus groups, a range of other sources of information about each school was provided by the project. The data available is listed in Table 1. A recent initiative from the MFL Mentoring project has been to provide an 'International Languages School report' to schools comparing their learners' responses to the baseline survey with those across Wales (where possible).

School	Teacher interview	Focus group	International Languages School report	GCSE uptake data	Teacher exit survey	Mentee exit survey
A.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
B.	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
C.	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
D.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 1. Summary of data available for each case study school

Consent was obtained from teachers and learners' parents ahead of the interviews and focus groups. The audio of the sessions was recorded and turned into a transcript for analysis. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke 2019) was used to code the qualitative data, with themes subsequently identified. Excerpts from the other data available was then used to provide further context in the case study write ups.

The following discussion sections examine the policy and school contexts before going on to review the effectiveness of the mentoring model used. These are then followed by the four individual case studies on page 19.



Policy context

Curriculum for Wales

The emphasis of the new Curriculum for Wales (CfW) is one of connectedness and cross-curricular working. Subject areas have been grouped into ‘Areas of Learning and Experiences’ (AoLEs) with International Languages (IL) sitting within Languages, Literacy and Communication (LLC) (Welsh Government 2020). The term ‘International Languages’ has been introduced as a way to collectively describe languages in a more inclusive way, with the intention of replacing Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) but these terms continue to be used interchangeably.

CfW “offers the opportunity to rethink how language learning can be delivered across English, Welsh and modern foreign languages, with pupils making connections between languages rather than seeing them as unrelated subjects” (Blake and Gorrara 2019). A further aspect of the new CfW is the emphasis on developing learners’ awareness of their own and other cultures. In practice this means being able to “look at their own local context and to challenge their relationship with their own culture and environment” (Jenkins 2018). Despite the opportunities the new curriculum offers, there are significant challenges in terms of implementation and there will need to be “a substantial programme of professional development that others have commented upon as a sector-wide challenge for the new curriculum” (Gorrara, Jenkins, Jepson and Llewelyn Machin 2020).

Uptake of languages in Wales

Welsh learners take one language plus Welsh in Years 7 to 9 and then after Year 9 a second language is not compulsory. Since International Languages became an option, numbers have significantly declined (Jenkins 2018). Gorrara, et al (2020) discuss the impact of this on uptake: “This does not always equate to equity of choice as group sizes and financial pressures on schools have led to GCSE modern foreign language classes not being offered due to small numbers electing to study languages as an option post-14.” In the 2021 Language Trends report, the authors note the increase in uptake of Welsh at GCSE but that “legislation has been the predominant influence” rather than learner motivation to study Welsh (Collen, O’Boyle and O’Neill 2021). However, the uptake of Welsh and International Languages at A-level is very similar, so moving to compulsory languages at GCSE would not resolve the issue.



There is clear evidence for the decline in uptake of languages in Wales, summarised by Llewelyn Machin (2022):

- 50% drop in GCSE entries between 2011-2021.
- Total of 4,625 GCSE entries across Wales in 2021.
- 14.4% of all learners in Wales took a language GCSE in 2021.
- 23% drop in A-level entries 2016-2021.
- Total of 387 A-level entries across Wales in 2021.
- 3.6% of all learners in Wales took a language A-level in 2021.
- “The rate of decline is rapidly increasing as overall entries drop by 2% per year with no sign of abating”.

This decline is not only confined to International Languages: there have been reductions in uptake for English language and literature (drop of 11.3% in A-level entries, 2017-2020) and second language Welsh (drop of 12.7% in A-level entries, 2017-2019). Gorrara et al (2020) comment on this being indicative of a wider problem for languages: “One compelling interpretation of such statistics is that language learning for formal qualifications is in crisis in all areas of the curriculum and that urgent action is needed to reset the languages dial and rethink the methods and approaches being used in the classroom.” There are steps being taken by Welsh Government to support the introduction of languages in primary schools and this is reflected in their programme for government (Welsh Government 2022).

MFL Mentoring receives funding from Welsh Government and when this initiative began it formed part of a programme of work under the “Global Futures” banner to contribute to developing more positive attitudes towards languages and to increase uptake. The broader Global Futures programme was evaluated in 2020-2022 and found to have provided “clear guidance, principles and awareness-raising to support multilingualism in schools” and “an increase in the quality and frequency of regional working to promote and deliver IL and enhanced access to expertise in universities and language institutes” (Jones, Duggan & Davis 2022). This has had benefits for teachers in improved knowledge, skills and confidence in their teaching. However, despite all of the work to support schools there are still several structural issues existing within schools which were not able to be addressed by Global Futures or its partners: “Global Futures has had a limited influence on the systemic issues that are linked to the decline in take-up of IL in the secondary phase, such as narrow options choices and lack of progression opportunities” (Jones, Duggan & Davis 2022).



Welsh language

Welsh Government has a goal of achieving one million Welsh speakers as part of their Cymraeg 2050 policy. Welsh Government aim to “work to provide the conditions to facilitate an increase in the number of Welsh speakers and an increase in the use of Welsh” with education being “central to our vision, but we must ensure our young people come out of the education system ready and proud to use the language in all contexts” (Welsh Government 2017a). Part of the work to achieve this includes increasing the numbers in, and numbers of, Welsh-medium schools and ensuring there are opportunities for Welsh language learning for all.

Welsh is compulsory for learners from ages five to sixteen and has been since 1999. However, there is a renewed emphasis on Welsh in the new Curriculum for Wales (CfW) via a continuum which will “provide the basis for teaching and learning Welsh and other languages in the future” (Welsh Government 2017b). Despite the emphasis on language learning and the goals of Welsh Government to develop more bilingual speakers and generate more speaking opportunities in local communities and daily life, “the relationship pupils have with the study of Welsh is often complex” (Jenkins 2018). Learners can be “turned off by the compulsory nature of the language and the often compartmentalised nature of teaching, with currently little bridging between Welsh and MFL [modern foreign languages]. This arguably makes pupils feel that their Welsh skills offer little benefit to further language study” (Jenkins 2018). This latter point is something the new CfW aims to address.



School context

There are several factors in schools which can impact on the uptake of International Languages. These were outlined by the project's academic lead early on in the lifetime of the project (Gorrara 2016):

- Influencing factors on learners considering International Languages were identified as:
 - Preferring other subjects more.
 - Small range of subject choices open to them.
 - Uncertainty over whether they needed a language for their preferred career.
 - Lack of confidence in their language skills.
 - “Negative attitudes” towards the “long-term usefulness of languages, sometimes reinforced by parents and family”.
- Overarching factors included learners focussing on “the transactional benefits of learning a language. For them, the focus was on languages as communication tools rather than the benefits of learning a language to access and understand other cultures.”

As discussed, there are also structural barriers within schools. This includes reduced teaching time in Years 7 to 9 (Tinsley, 2017a; 2018a), limited options slots available for International Languages and schools not running GCSE or A-level classes as uptake is small (five to ten learners) (Tinsley, 2017a; 2018a). Further to this are issues with recruiting teachers, so even if there was demand for a language, there is not equity of access across Wales. Findings from the Global Futures evaluation showed “The number of hours spent teaching modern foreign languages in secondary and middle schools has continued to fall, mirroring a reduction in the number of teachers teaching MFL” (Jones, Duggan & Davis 2022). Language Trends 2017 identified only 36% of schools with a full time International Languages teacher and in the 2018 report, 8% of schools did not have a fully staffed MFL department, with one quarter reporting difficulties in recruiting teachers (Tinsley, 2017a; 2018a). There has also been consistent feedback from teachers that despite all of the work being done in schools they feel “unsupported by senior management” (Tinsley 2018a).

As the project has expanded to work with more schools across Wales in English, bi-lingual and Welsh-medium settings, the influencing factors encountered by the project have not changed much. However, with the introduction of CfW and the inclusion of languages in the LLC Area of Learning and Experience, there is an opportunity for more integrated learning experiences. For learners this means being able to show them the connections and relevance of languages across the curriculum, with the potential for more positive attitudes arising. There is also an opportunity for more integration with Welsh language learning. As outlined in the



policy context section, the compulsory nature of Welsh from ages three to sixteen compared with eleven to fourteen for International Languages is a challenge. There are also concerns relating to the appropriateness of the GCSE content: “Stakeholders and practitioners considered that IL qualifications are not currently fit for purpose and there is concern with regards to learner progression opportunities and careers linked to IL” (Jones, Duggan & Davis 2022). There is a wealth of evidence from across multiple sources and studies showing the negative trend in relation to language learning and there is a significant understanding within the language community in schools and universities in Wales as to ways in which to address the issues. The MFL mentoring model is now examined more closely, with the benefits to learners, schools and mentors being discussed.



Mentoring model

Mentoring framework

The approach is summarised in Jenkins (2018): “The MFL mentoring model is less about building specific language skills (improving grammar, sentence construction, introducing tenses) and more about fostering a mindset that challenges assumed views about others and champions intercultural understanding and curiosity.”

In order to ensure success, the mentoring project have a targeted approach with clear aims and objectives (Blake and Gorrara 2019) and in particular, the mentoring approach is used “as a framework to stimulate discussions around languages and identity” (Gorrara et al 2020). The session content is linked to learners’ “life experiences, enabling them to investigate how different concepts relate to them individually” (Gorrara et al 2020).

The project team are key to the successful delivery of the aims and objectives and the effective working model is discussed more fully in Rushton & Thomas (2020) but ultimately the success is linked to the “strength and depth of project team who are extremely well-informed about the wider MFL context in Wales and how to work with schools and build lasting partnerships”. This is strengthened by the role teachers play within the project, as their professional judgement is valued and relied upon in order to identify learners who would benefit from participation and they provide feedback on their local circumstances and how learners, teachers and the school are impacted. This professional judgement is a result of the combination of experience, reflection, knowledge of their subject and knowledge of their own local context (Tripp 2011). It is regularly applied within the classroom when assessing their own practice and responding to the needs of learners and is used within the MFL Mentoring project to great effect.

With regards to the growth and success of the project, the team worked to ensure there was a partnership with regional consortia to help develop relationships with schools. There is “value of working across the educational sector to improve uptake and attitudes towards modern foreign languages for younger learners in Wales” (Blake and Gorrara 2019).

However, the annual funding cycle for the project is a significant challenge. This is something experienced by other projects in the Global Futures programme, with a particular issue around sustainability of projects. For example, staff experiencing uncertainty about whether or not their contract will be continued can result in increased likelihood of moving to a more secure role. In projects such as this, the staff and the relationships they develop are key to its success.

In terms of the content of the mentoring sessions, they are filled with “activities that promote self-reflexive curiosity and questioning” and there is an opportunity for cross-curricular learning



as “MFL mentors aim to bring languages together to highlight the interconnectedness of languages with other disciplines” (Jenkins 2018). This final point ensures integration with the Curriculum for Wales and its emphasis on cross-curricular learning.

Multi-lingual mentors (the 2021 cohort between them speaking over forty different languages) are used to help bridge “a perceived gap between different cultures, reminding pupils of the intercultural and multi-lingual community they are already a part of” (Jenkins 2018). One of the key goals for the Cymraeg 2050 policy is to increase opportunities for Welsh in the post-compulsory phase and the Welsh-speaking mentors within the project can positively impact on aspirations and attitudes towards Welsh as the learners are able to see Welsh continue to be used by those in Higher Education. However, recruiting enough Welsh-speaking mentors to fulfil demand is a challenge.

Sessions and delivery mode

In terms of timing, the aim is for the mentoring programme to run in schools before learners select their GCSE options. Mentoring runs in six session cycles with sessions lasting from thirty minutes up to an hour. There is one mentor for a group of up to eight learners face to face or fifteen online, who have the same mentor each week. The choice of a group mentoring approach was made due to the ages of the learners and to minimise “concerns around safeguarding and child safety, whilst fostering the development of a supportive relationship between mentors and mentees who were closer in age than in a typical pupil-teacher mode” (Blake and Gorrara 2019). The approach is one of near peer mentoring, where learners are introduced by mentors to a “different ways of seeing themselves and their futures as learners of multiple languages, modelling themselves on their university ‘friend’ and near peer language learner” (Gorrara, Jenkins and Mosley 2019).

The delivery mode used by the project team has changed over time in response to external circumstances, the needs of schools and the ability to include schools in the programme even if a mentor is unable to travel to their location. These developments have arisen from the project team’s goal to continuously improve the project, this has included working closely with colleagues developing the new Curriculum for Wales, ensuring close alignment. For example, the team moved from offering face to face to blended (known as digi-mentoring: a mixture of online and face to face) and online only. The external evaluation of digi-mentoring found this approach to be just as effective as the face to face mode (Tinsley 2018b). Even more flexibility was needed during the COVID-19 pandemic as the online sessions were used in many different ways, including both synchronous and asynchronous. These online activities have included “a variety of quizzes, videos, activities and scenario-based learning, the resources gradually increase in intellectual complexity, requiring the user to reflect on languages as ‘live’



and multi-faceted” (Jenkins 2018) with discussion of a range of cultural topics forming the basis of interactions with the mentors. However, the project also recognised that “learners’ experiences of the digital are incredibly varied, and more often than not, connected primarily to social interactions, not educational ones” and this has implications for accessibility, something the project kept in mind when developing and structuring the online mentoring experience (Jenkins 2020). This has become even more important as there has been a decline in literacy levels following the COVID-19 pandemic (Estyn 2021).

Whilst the mode itself has been flexible, the underlying ethos and rigorous approach to training for mentors and comprehensive support for schools to implement the project is unchanged. In the sessions, the “aim was to build rapport and understanding between mentor and mentees as fellow language learners” (Blake and Gorrara 2019). The result being a continued positive impact in schools in relation to attitudes towards languages and uptake of International Languages GCSEs.

As discussed, the mentors are not there to teach languages, instead by “Mentoring through languages and for languages accentuates the value of intercultural awareness and sensitivity” and the framework used by the project emphasises a multilingual approach via interdisciplinary learning, for example by “promoting problem-solving skills through analysing word patterns; deconstructing the ‘language’ of science as objective or considering how creativity and the expressive arts use language—verbal and non-verbal—to communicate human experience across media, cultures and time” (Gorrara et al 2020). This model shows the success of a multilingual and interdisciplinary approach and encourages a move away from “siloes monolingual teaching and making connections between languages and cultures, generating more resilient and engaged language learners” (Gorrara et al 2020).

Impact on Learners and Schools

The evidence available for the MFL Mentoring programme shows that “short, targeted interventions can have a significant impact on perceptions of language learning and motivation” (Gorrara, Jenkins and Mosley 2019). The impact on learners has been discussed in a number of publications and reports (Blake and Gorrara 2019, Jenkins 2018, Rushton & Thomas 2020, Tinsley 2017b; 2018b; 2019) and can be summarised as:

- Increased confidence in language lessons and a “strengthening the personal resilience of mentees as language learners” (Blake and Gorrara 2019).
- Improved communication skills and “improved willingness to contribute to discussions” (Jenkins 2018).
- More positive attitude towards languages (Tinsley 2017b; 2018b; 2019).



- Increased likelihood of taking an IL GCSE. For example, in 2018-2019 42% of mentees opted for an International Language GCSE, significantly higher than the national average (Rushton & Thomas 2020).
- Raised aspirations in relation to university study: ““mentees start to see for themselves what university looks like, breaking down barriers around accessibility and offering tangible role models” (Jenkins 2018).
- Shift of mindset: “away from a utilitarian view of learning a language” to that of “awareness-raising of the opportunities” (Blake and Gorrara 2019).

A combination of preparedness to meet expectations of learners to help them learn a language and ability to act as a role model allowed mentors to successfully show mentees the potential “to see beyond skills, subject choices and exams into a future with potentially exciting life-enhancing experiences” (Blake and Gorrara 2019).

Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to an online and blended mode of delivery for the majority of schools, there has been a further impact on learners:

- Improved digital skills in terms of knowledge of different platforms such as Microsoft Office.
- Improved literacy skills as learners were often interacting with their mentor via a chat function or via the completion of different online activities.

The project team identified an opportunity to develop learners’ digital skills beyond that of a social interaction only and accessibility was important: “This means that when constructing and curating meaningful uses of digital technology into the language learning classroom, we need to consider how to structure the experience in a way that is accessible to all learners” (Jenkins 2020).

More generally for schools, there have been further impacts and opportunities:

- The opportunity to build an ongoing partnership with a university (Tinsley 2017b).
- Increased profile of International Languages within the school (Tinsley 2017b).
- Teachers have reported that they feel that impact has increased over time (Tinsley 2019).
- Schools opted to take part in other initiatives to increase awareness of the benefits of languages, including language clubs and talks from invited speakers (Tinsley 2019).



With regards to the project's main aim around uptake, the following table summarises the resulting choices made in relation to IL GCSEs amongst mentees.

Year	Number of schools participating	Delivery mode	GCSE uptake			
			Number of responses from schools	Number of mentees data provided for	Mentee IL GCSE uptake	Whole school IL GCSE uptake
2021-2022	69	Online	31 (45%)	908	35%	13%
2020-2021	71	Online	42 (59%)	879	37%	13%
2019-2020	80	In-person	23 (29%)	612	40%	17%

Table 2. GCSE uptake data

GCSE uptake data is requested from schools, with the project team supplying forms and prepaid envelopes to encourage their return. Ensuring high return rates from schools is a challenge, however Table 2 shows consistent results over the previous three years, also despite the pandemic. The returns available show a consistently high uptake amongst mentees, two to three times the school average. This is a significant achievement given the challenging educational environment for learners in the past three years and indicates the success of the project in responding to the needs of learners and schools. Not least, it evidences the continued success of the project despite its significant adaptations in recent years in response to COVID-19.

Impact on mentors

The benefits of participating extend to mentors and those recruited by MFL Mentoring are motivated to share their own experiences and interests in languages. This ensures close alignment with the ethos of the project, undoubtedly contributing to the successful delivery in schools (Rushton & Thomas 2020). Mentors also express a sense of pride in their achievements in “promoting the importance of languages in broadening global and career horizons” (Blake and Gorrara 2019).

There are a range of impacts on mentors, summarised as:

- Development of transferable skills, including communication skills, time management, organisational skills, leadership (Tinsley 2019).
- Improved confidence (Tinsley 2019).
- Motivated to promote International Languages and interested in a career in teaching (some for the first time, whilst others decided it wasn't for them) (Blake and Gorrara 2019).



- Increased career options, useful as direct experience to include on CV and discuss in job interviews (Blake and Gorrara 2019).
- “The value of experiencing an environment outside of the “university bubble”, visiting other areas of Wales and being able to apply what they are learning in their degree programme” (Rushton & Thomas 2020).

These initial discussion sections have provided context and background to the wider policy environment in Wales, the circumstances existing for language learning in schools and the approach and impact of the mentoring project. The following case studies look at the experiences of schools in more depth, using a range of sources of information, including survey data, interviews and focus groups.



Case Studies

School A

School description	School A
Regional Educational Consortia	Not affiliated
English or Welsh medium	English medium
Number of pupils	750-1000
Age range	Secondary: Years 7 to 13
Year mentored	8
Number of years in the scheme	1
Mentoring mode	Online, synchronous and asynchronous. Learners took part during form time and regular lessons.
Percentage of mentees opting for MFL GCSE	40%
Percentage of year group opting for MFL GCSE	31%
Teacher comment on GCSE uptake	Increase compared with previous year.

About the school

School A participated in the project for the first time in 2021-2022. The teacher who is the liaison for the mentoring programme is also the lead in their school for the LLC Area of Learning and Experience for CfW. The department has been very successful and the teaching staff are “very experienced” (Teacher, School A). There are limited opportunities for engaging with languages within timetabled sessions, with one important way of accessing languages is through clubs which cover seven languages but this is “all before school, lunchtime after school, because the curriculum is obviously narrow” (Teacher, School A). Overall, School A has tended to “buck the trend considerably” (Teacher, School A) in terms of language uptake until four years ago when there were changes to options for learners. At that point uptake quickly fell from around 55% to around 20%. Choices were made earlier and the range of subjects available to learners increased. The surveys undertaken by the MFL Mentoring project were key in helping the department understand the reasons for the decline in uptake. In summary in terms of attitudes, “it’s not about the fact that they [learners] don’t enjoy languages”, but more about “the perception that maybe they’re difficult” (Teacher, School A). In terms of the learner attitudes and the current curriculum, the teacher from school A felt learners had seen an “an emphasis on the utility of languages” and with the introduction of readily available tools such as Google Translate, they didn’t think they needed to take a language. In the pre-participation survey responses, in terms of ranking of International Languages amongst learners with respect to other subjects, they had similar views to those of learners across Wales: International Languages sat twelfth out of thirteen, with Welsh in the



lowest position at School A. In terms of difficulty, again learners at School A agreed with those nationally, with 28% responding that they considered International Languages more difficult when compared with Welsh (27% nationally).

Impact of mentoring

It was the decline in uptake which prompted the school to become involved and they were aware of the programme and its reputation. The teacher was keen to have an impact on learners and to “fire their imaginations” and mentoring has “shown them a different side that maybe we don't have time to do in timetabled lessons” with the hope that they could persuade some more learners to choose an International Language at GCSE. School A has had a very positive experience with the mentoring scheme this year: “it's been very successful for us” and they have seen an increase in uptake, something which the teacher says is “credit to the scheme”. The numbers at School A have increased by 50% in one year and whilst they're not back up to where they were, staff feel that they can build on this.

One further benefit of participation was the focus on multilingualism, with the mentor emphasising their experiences of being an international student in the UK and encouraging learners to discuss their language experiences at home. The teacher felt that for learners who spoke a language other than Welsh or English at home “it was a really nice environment for them to kind of be proud and to, to share their language as well”. Learners felt the mentor was able to show them that by taking a language qualification, “it's not just about learning the language, it's about other factors as well” (Learner, School A) and they recognised the opportunities it could open for their future careers. The teacher has also observed that since the sessions, conversations with learners have continued and one of the learners in the focus group felt they now paid more attention to lessons, whilst another felt the experience improved their progress in language learning.

The mentoring sessions

In terms of the sessions running online, the teacher felt they worked well. In order to encourage engagement with some of the activities the teacher would sometimes prompt the learners taking part. The teacher felt the mentor was very engaging and the learners were particularly interested that they could speak multiple languages but were taking a course on linguistics, something they had not come across before. The learners in the focus group enjoyed having the mentor in their sessions to guide the discussion. There was a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous sessions due to availability issues some weeks and the teacher felt the live sessions were more impactful due to the live discussion aspect. There was support from staff and senior leadership saw that involvement in this project was “prestigious” but the



department tried to only impact on language lessons. This meant it wasn't always possible to have the mentees together at the same time. The learners who took part in the focus group said that the sessions "didn't feel like a lesson" but they were "still learning things at the same time". In particular, learners enjoyed the open-ended discussions, sharing their "own opinions" and having a back and forth with the mentor. They felt they built a partnership with the mentor and supported each other's learning, they felt confident talking to each other and felt listened to by the mentor and their peers. It was also very helpful for learners to have a better understanding of the route to university and the options open to them. The learners in the focus group talked about how they benefitted from hearing about the mentor's own personal experience. The learners found the experience "helpful" and "worthwhile" and "it definitely changed my mind on the French GCSE" (Learner, School A).

Links to the curriculum

The teacher felt the content of the sessions "supports what we're doing" but at the same time covered "content that we don't have time for", specifically looking at connections to culture. "The materials and the discussions that were generated were very effective and impactful" (Teacher, School A). Within the school cohort, there was general interest from a large number of learners and having seen "the impact and change in attitudes" of learners, the teacher would like to involve more learners in future years as they think "it's worth the time investment" and they would allocate one lesson per week.

In terms of Curriculum for Wales, the teacher sees this as an opportunity to build interest and show progress in languages. They didn't feel the system of key stage levels were helpful, as learners thought it was challenging starting in Year 7 to move through and reach level six. With the introduction of CfW, they are using it as an opportunity to pilot teaching French through the medium of Welsh. They see this as a chance to influence the general attitudes towards languages and move away from the utilitarian perceptions of learners. Some of the learners in the focus group discussed feeling confused when moving between French and Welsh lessons, so greater integration could benefit them. The teacher felt the content of the mentoring programme linked very closely with the LLC Area of Learning and Experience and modelled experiences they want all of their learners to have.

Being part of the project has helped the school to identify reasons for a decline in uptake and provided a better understanding of the motivations of their learners. Initially the teacher thought it was for schools with little or no languages uptake but they now recognise the value of involvement and the integration of it with the curriculum. The project has also modelled a high quality example of multilingual cross-curricular learning, which will benefit the school's



own curriculum development as they implement the new LLC Area of Learning and Experience.



School B

School description	School B
Regional Educational Consortia	Partneriaeth
English or Welsh medium	English medium
Number of pupils	500-750
Age range	Primary and secondary to Year 11
Year mentored	9
Number of years in the scheme	1
Mentoring mode	Online, synchronous.
Percentage of mentees opting for MFL GCSE	Not reported
Percentage of year group opting for MFL GCSE	Not reported
Teacher comment on GCSE uptake	Not reported

About the school

School B has a primary and secondary campus with learners progressing to a local college or sixth form following Year 11. A significant number also progress into agriculture or tourism. Due to the combination of primary and secondary in the school, language learning extends down into Year 6 and this has been the case for the past three years. With the introduction of CfW there are plans for this to move even further down the school. This was the school's first year being involved with MFL Mentoring.

Overall, the situation with regards to languages is "fairly positive" (Teacher, School B) and there is good uptake at GCSE. One of the key barriers for the school is that learners see languages as being "difficult" and the school finds it a challenge to encourage learners to take GCSE. However, they have a good proportion of their Year 10 cohort choosing French, with this regularly being around or above 25% uptake which the teacher finds very positive: "we feel really quite happy with that we know we're above where we're meant to be". The teacher is also encouraged by the gender split, with a mixture of boys and girls opting for a language. To support the uptake of languages, teachers spend the first few weeks of Year 9 classes focussing on "what's the point of a language?" The teacher sees an immediate positive response from learners as they are able to begin to identify the benefits of language learning and they see their participation in the MFL Mentoring project as integral to establishing these positive attitudes. The school was motivated to get involved with the project in order to reach those learners who may not have had opportunities for international travel or who did not see themselves as language learners.

The department is small with only two members of staff, with one of these posts recently recruited to as the previous teacher moved onto another role. The school found it very difficult to recruit to the position and several changes were made to the role in order to encourage



people to apply. Time was spent having conversations with supply teachers and other colleagues and members of the local community to promote the role and encourage people to apply. One of the issues identified was the more rural location of the school and the part-time nature of the post.

In terms of the curriculum developments, the teacher has invested their time in professional learning and developing primary colleagues' capacity in languages, with both French and Spanish being a focus. However, the key aim for the teacher is to develop her colleagues' capacity so that language learning is embedded across the curriculum, ensuring a multilingual approach regardless of whether the learners are covering a topic on literature or biology. There is an opportunity to continue to engage with School B to follow how the multilingual approach is implemented and the impact this has on attitudes towards language learning and subsequent uptake in the secondary school. The multilingual approach of course includes connections to Welsh. For example, the teacher referenced activities related to the translation of words from English to Welsh and French, with the emphasis on identifying similarities and differences and the teacher recognises the need for a "consistent triple literacy approach".

Attitudes to languages

When considering learners' attitudes to French, these were reported as positive; but when attitudes to Welsh were discussed, these were reported as "negative". Learners do not speak Welsh in the local community, with English being the main language spoken at home. However, the teacher feels as though this negative perception doesn't affect International Languages, as when learners come in to take a language for the first time at Year 7, everyone is at the same starting point. They do acknowledge that this may change if the learners have a negative experience of French or Spanish at primary following the changes as a result of Curriculum for Wales: "If the primary teachers aren't positive, and understand how to teach languages, that could well have the same impact, as it has on French". Another issue in relation to the CfW is the move away from using levels to show progress through a subject. The teacher felt these were particularly useful for helping boys to see their academic progress but they feel the responsibility will be on teachers to ensure learners are able to understand they are being successful, even when the "progression steps are a little bit more fluid". However, despite the challenges in relation to CfW, the teacher also sees it as an exciting opportunity, "I think we've got a lot of possibilities in secondary" and has already pulled together a cross-curricular, multilingual project for learners linked to the Tour de France. In School B pre-participation survey responses, International Languages ranked higher here than in the national responses: ninth at School B compared with eleventh nationally. Welsh also ranked higher: eleventh at School B and thirteenth (out of thirteen) nationally. However,



in terms of the perceived difficulty of International Languages when compared with Welsh, this matched the national response of 26% who felt they were more difficult.

Challenges and barriers

Due to the lack of a sixth form within the school there are further challenges in terms of highlighting options for progression and the usefulness of languages for a range of career opportunities. There are limited options locally for language learning at A-level. The school's sixth form was closed in recent years for financial reasons. The teacher feels as though learners are sticking to more traditional choices for A-level and are less willing to take the risk on a language. There are further challenges and barriers in relation to literacy, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic: "Our children's languages experiences have weakened, there's been quite a lot of attrition there, especially in the oracy" (Teacher, School B).

Impact of mentoring

The teacher was very positive about the school's experience of mentoring. Their mentor was an international student from Australasia studying in Britain but was on placement in Paris at the time of the sessions, so brought a very international perspective to their time with the learners in School B. They felt the mentor "was great with the kids and had a really lovely rapport built up with them" (Teacher, School B). Learners were brought together during the school day and often had to miss other lessons to participate and those chosen to take part were those who were unsure about whether to choose a language. The teacher observed that the learners "were engaged, they were motivated. They enjoyed the work. It didn't seem like work". There were two rounds of mentoring with different groups, the first round went very well but the second round was not as successful and the learners were less engaged. The teacher feels this was down to the mix of learners and with hindsight would have separated this group as it was made up of friends. The second round of mentoring also came after learners had made their options choices so would prefer to run it with younger pupils "to get a fuller effect" (Teacher, School B).

In terms of impact on attitudes of learners, the teacher felt the experience helped make languages "relevant to them" and they could see connections between subjects and their own interests. The mentor was particularly good at communicating these connections and sharing their own experience to reinforce the message that "languages are everywhere, and look at all the proof" (Teacher, School B). In general, the teacher felt the impact was to help "changing that mindset [of learners] and keeping the mindset open". This was a "super positive" experience for the school, despite the challenges around the logistics, IT and staff issues due to COVID; and they are keen to participate again. Having been through the programme once,



they feel that as they themselves have a better knowledge of the topics, there is more they can do to integrate it with their own teaching, especially the work at the beginning of Year 9 on “what is the point of a language?”.



School C

School description	School C
Regional Educational Consortia	Central South Wales
English or Welsh medium	Welsh medium
Number of pupils	500-750
Age range	Primary and secondary to Year 13
Year mentored	9
Number of years in the scheme	4
Mentoring mode	Online, asynchronous. Learners completed sessions in their own time.
Percentage of mentees opting for MFL GCSE	67%
Percentage of year group opting for MFL GCSE	22%
Teacher comment on GCSE uptake	Increase compared with previous year.

Table 3. Overview of School C

About the school

School C is a Welsh medium school from ages three to eighteen. In addition to Welsh language teaching, the first International Languages lessons are at Year 5. Staff also support feeder schools in their cluster with teaching French, Italian and Spanish. The department is made up of two part-time teaching staff, with the main language offered at secondary school being French. The school has been part of the project for four years.

With the developments in relation to the Curriculum for Wales and cross-curricular learning, one of the projects will be focussed on sustainability which the languages department will help to establish in partnership with science colleagues. The LLC Area of Learning and Experience is seen by the teacher as an opportunity to “be a bit more creative” but there are still limitations to what can be achieved because of the small number of hours in the timetable each week with the different year groups. This is three hours in Year 7, four hours in Year 8, two hours per fortnight in Year 9. The reduction for Year 9 happened recently and was made to allow for learners to experience a greater number of subjects before making GCSE choices. Despite the time limitations, School C has continued to see a consistent number going on to take an International Language at GCSE. Due to the size of the school the numbers taking GCSE can be small and depending on the year there is not always an A-level cohort but for the coming school year there are four taking French. However, even with small numbers, the GCSE and A-level have support from management and continue to run. Senior management are flexible in terms of the subjects on offer because they are used to a fluctuation in uptake across all subjects from year to year.



Attitudes to languages

Being a Welsh-medium school, in general the attitudes towards languages is very positive amongst learners and their families and there is an understanding of the importance of language learning. However, there are still challenges in terms of aspirations and encouraging learners to travel beyond their local community for work and study. One connecting aspect the teacher struggles with is building links with local business and industry where International Languages are important for their field. Being part of the mentoring project connects School C to a wider community and network where they can get support in achieving their own aims and to identify further opportunities for learners.

The majority of learners in the focus group did not speak Welsh with their family at home, with one learner being the first person in their family to learn Welsh. Overall, however, the learners felt that their families were all very supportive of their language learning. Given their experience with bilingualism, the learners were able to identify multiple benefits to language learning and how it may impact their future opportunities for travel and careers.

The mentoring sessions

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic staff at School C have embraced the use of digital tools such as Microsoft Teams to identify opportunities for learners to be better connected internationally. For example, the head of department has spent time developing French contacts and this has resulted in projects with schools in France and Guadalupe. This participation has been made possible because of the level of comfort schools now have in connecting virtually and the increased digital skills of both teachers and learners.

School C took a different route to the selection of learners than the majority of other participating schools. Whereas schools generally use a combination of the pre-participation survey to identify those who were unsure along with the professional judgement of the teachers, School C used teacher judgement and learner choice as to whether or not they take part. This was more possible in this case due to the size of the school and the knowledge the teacher had of the learners. There were also challenges in terms of identifying a time when all of the mentees could be together to take part in the sessions. Therefore learners from School C participated in the sessions in their own time and discussions with the mentor and each other occurred via the chat function in Microsoft Teams. Learners were used to interacting via this platform as the teacher regularly posts articles and discussion points which they comment on or engage with in some form. Having the flexibility in the delivery mode of the mentoring programme was very important for the school and ensured they were able to continue to participate.



The teacher felt the themes of the weekly sessions were interesting and encouraged learners to “think and open their minds to different cultures” (Teacher , School C). They were pleased that a range of languages were explored and that learners completed a variety of tasks. The learners in the focus group very much enjoyed the open-ended nature of the discussions, which is something that has commonly been reported as impactful by mentees. School C’s interaction was asynchronous but the structure of the programme and the efforts of the mentor clearly ensured a similar experience for these learners. The learners felt that through the questions the mentor asked them they were able to have an ongoing conversation and that the session content provided a “conversation starter” (Learner, School C). The mentor would always follow up with another question to the learners, ensuring the conversation kept going. In order for this approach to be successful the mentees needed to regularly engage and the learners in the focus group clearly recognised this and would check-in to the mentoring chat every day or two to keep on top of the discussions. They also recognised by engaging they would be able to steer the conversation towards their interests and get answers to aspects they themselves were interested in. Following the completion of the programme learners completed an exit survey (n=15). Over 90% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “My mentor improved my experience of the sessions”.

Other aspects enjoyed by the learners were the creative activities, for example when responding to some activities they were asked to write their response in the form of a Tweet, rather than just typing into the chat box and this “made it more fun and creative” (Learner, School C). One further area for consideration suggested by the teacher in School C was the use and importance of technology for languages when it comes to communication. The learners enjoyed the topics linked to their own interests and there was the suggestion of including some more sport-related content, especially something that was topical and current. For example, if the French rugby team were doing well or if there was something linked to Euro 2022 women’s football tournament.

Impact of mentoring

In terms of impact of mentoring on learners, responses from School C mentees were more varied when compared with other case study schools: 47% agreed or strongly agreed that “mentoring made me more likely to take an international language for GCSE” whilst 53% neither agreed nor disagreed. This may be due to the self-selection of the pupils in that they were already more likely to take an international language at GCSE but despite this approach to selection of pupils there was an increase in uptake compared with the previous year.



School D

School description	School D
Regional Educational Consortia	Partneriaeth
English or Welsh medium	English medium
Number of pupils	500-750
Age range	Secondary: Years 7 to 11.
Year mentored	9
Number of years in the scheme	7
Mentoring mode	Online, synchronous. Learners took part after school.
Percentage of mentees opting for MFL GCSE	75%
Percentage of year group opting for MFL GCSE	10%
Teacher comment on GCSE uptake	Consistent with previous year.

Table 4. Overview of School D

About the school

School D has been part of the MFL Mentoring programme for several years and it is considered an integral part of the school's strategy to develop positive attitudes towards International Languages and to encourage their learners to consider further study. The school is in an area of deprivation and there are challenges in relation to low literacy levels amongst learners and parents and low aspirations in relation to further study at university. There is a high likelihood learners will stay local to where they grow up and they are unlikely to travel far beyond their local community for work or study. In addition to participating in the mentoring programme the school has also run language clubs and brought in external speakers. They participate in events such as European Day of Languages and Eisteddfod but the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on a number of extra-curricular activities and opportunities to participate have reduced.

Attitudes to languages

In terms of broader attitudes towards languages amongst learners and their families, the teacher has observed that there is a lack of understanding of the benefits of language learning. Teachers in the school work hard to highlight to learners that they are global citizens and that local employers are looking for people with language skills as they work internationally and that they won't just need a language for travel: "People need to speak a language here for all kinds of reasons" (Teacher, School D).

Teachers of International Languages work closely with their Welsh language colleagues to ensure coherence across the lessons. However, the teacher observes that their learners find Welsh language learning a significant challenge as many do not speak it in their own homes



(Two per cent of learners who completed the pre-participation survey reported they speak Welsh at home and nine per cent of learners said their parents speak Welsh).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on literacy levels of learners when they come to secondary school and in general “find the concept of language quite difficult” (Teacher, School D). This has consequences for language learning: “When you have children with poor literacy levels, they can't read English [and find it] hard to access, then they find Welsh hard to access” (Teacher, School D). This has further consequences for the uptake of International Languages, as learners don't feel able to take on another language in addition to Welsh as they already feel as though they are already “doing a foreign language” (Teacher, School D).

Senior management within the school are supportive and continue to offer GCSE courses even when the numbers have been low (ten or below). Year to year, the numbers for International Languages is on a par with subjects such as History and Geography. The teacher observed that in general within the school there is a high interest in vocational courses, something they feel is a consequence of low literacy levels and there are “quite a lot of different obstacles to get through, before you can convince children that doing a foreign language is really for them” (Teacher, School D). However, when learners were asked about their subject preferences in the pre-participation survey, International Languages ranked sixth out of thirteen at School D (one was the highest ranking, with thirteen the lowest) whilst across all responses in the project (n=5755), International Languages sat at eleven. In terms of difficulty, twenty five per cent of learners at School D considered International Languages more difficult than other subjects and this was similar to attitudes found across Wales. In the responses to the pre-participation survey, learners reported consistently higher levels of enjoyment of English (71% at School D versus 56% across Wales), Welsh (38% at School D versus 26% across Wales) and International Languages (53% at School D versus 33% across Wales) when compared to the Wales-wide responses.

Triple literacy is a strong focus for the school and based on discussions in the focus group with learners, it was clear this approach has impacted on them as they were able to easily discuss and compare English, Welsh and International Languages in terms of their similarities and differences, with English often being identified as the “odd one out” (Learner, School D, focus group). This attitude was also reflected in the pre-participation surveys where a higher proportion of learners from School D agreed or strongly agreed that Welsh (43% at School D versus 28% across Wales) or English (55% at School D versus 42% across Wales) helps them to learn International Languages when compared with the responses across Wales. When responding to the exit survey, learners (n=5) all mentees agreed or strongly agreed



that: “The mentoring made me think about how Welsh and other languages are similar.” However, the impact on their attitudes towards Welsh was less clear as three out of five stated they “Neither agree nor disagree” with the statement “The mentoring made me think differently about Welsh” whereas two agreed.

When compared with the responses from learners across all schools participating (n=5755), a higher proportion of learners from School D indicating they would definitely or probably take an International Language at GCSE (27% of learners at School D compared with 16% project-wide). These results were used to help identify those who were unsure about taking a language GCSE and who would benefit most from participating in the mentoring programme.

The mentoring sessions

The numbers participating in the most recent year of mentoring were lower than previously as the teacher found it difficult to persuade learners to take part in the online programme. They are keen to return to a face to face delivery mode for the coming year, as the teacher feels that approach is more “dynamic”. The teacher always meets with the mentor ahead of the start of the programme to get to know them and discuss the school context.

The teacher has observed the most impactful aspect of the programme to be where the university mentors share their “own really positive experiences of learning a language, of being in another country, what they've got out of it, what they're going to do with it now”. The impact on learners is broad but the key aspects are improvements in learners’ “confidence and communication skills” (Teacher, School D). The teacher can quickly see the positive impact on learners following a session, they come back into class saying “Look what I can do now” and are “coming back brimming with a bit more confidence” (Teacher, School D).

Beyond developing their confidence and communication skills, learners enjoyed being able to make connections between their language learning and their own lives outside of school. They experienced this through learning more about different cultures and how things are done differently around the world in terms of food, music, literature. They were also introduced to new connections with their prior interests, for example, one learner talked about being able to have a better understanding of mythology as they knew more about the language so they were able to work out what things mean. In terms of what they were expecting of the programme, learners thought the project would be very similar to their classroom experiences of learning a language. Instead, they found it to be more linked to cultural topics and filled with discussion-based activities and conversations mediated by their mentor consisting of open-ended questions. The project is giving learners the opportunity to pursue topics they are interested in and to “it really kind of helped to kind of build on the things you were doing already in school



and just help to kind of bring more context” (Learner, School D, focus group). Learners in the focus group discussed being able to continue to use the experience from mentoring beyond the sessions as they said they were able to sit in class and pick and draw on and remember and share from their discussions and knowledge.

The learners participating in the focus group discussions shared their motivations for studying a language, such as to support them in traveling in the future and they recognised the potential for their future careers. Learners understood that a language qualification would be of benefit to them in the jobs market, particularly where international travel was required or if you worked for a company who did business internationally. They also felt it would be advantageous if you were up against someone for a role and they had similar qualifications: “if I got a job in Wales, and I was fluent in Welsh, I'm more likely to get a job than someone who isn't fluent in Welsh” (Learner, School D, focus group).

Impact on learners

Overall, mentees enjoyed the programme, with 100% of the mentees responding to the exit survey (n=5), saying they strongly agreed that they enjoyed the mentoring sessions. All of the respondents also strongly agreed that the mentoring made them more likely to take an international language for GCSE, demonstrating how successful the project is at achieving its core aims. In terms of their experiences of the mentoring programme, learners felt they were able to get to know their mentor, even though the interaction was online. They also felt that over the course of the programme the mentor was able to get to know them better and they also got to know fellow learners better too. The relationship with their mentor was very important and all of the learners responding to the exit survey agreed or strongly agreed that the mentor “improved my experience of the sessions”. Learners were able to discuss their experiences with languages in more depth with each other, whereas normally “I'm so focused in the lesson, you know, to ask my friends, about their experience” (Learner, School D, focus group). Learners reported increased confidence as they spent time talking about a range of topics and having the opportunity to spend time discussing has been crucial to this. The “ability to have an open conversation and having room to share your perspective with feedback alongside it” (Learner, School D, exit survey) was an important and enjoyable aspect of the programme for learners.



Conclusion

- Across the different school contexts and via different delivery modes, the mentoring project has had a consistently positive effect on learners. This includes more positive attitudes towards International Languages and increased uptake at GCSE.
- The flexibility of delivery modes underpinned by a strong project ethos, high standards for mentors, recognition of the value of teachers' professional judgement and significant investment into relationship development with schools all contributed to the project's continued success in achieving its aims. The project team are responsive to the needs of schools and continually reflect on their own practice.
- The high quality of the training and resources for mentors supports the relationship development between mentor and mentee, allowing for rich discussions to take place, allowing for the mentees to develop positive attitudes towards International Languages.

The case studies show how the mentoring project can address a range of different issues and challenges within schools but it is clear that structural issues are still a significant barrier for uptake. For example, despite having previously healthy uptake, School A became involved following a significant drop in GCSE numbers as a result in changes to options. After participating there has been an increase in uptake but more work needs to be done and the teacher sees this as an ongoing annual challenge.

The introduction of the Curriculum for Wales is seen by the project leads and teachers in schools as an opportunity to better integrate the teaching of English, Welsh and International Languages and to develop more positive attitudes to language learning in general. The mentoring project models a high-quality approach to multilingual and interdisciplinary working and as such directly supports the implementation of CfW in schools.

One continuing challenge for the project are the requests from teachers to open this experience to more learners. Teachers are seeing the benefits to their learners and want to increase the impact in their school further, however the small group mentoring model and the opportunity for relationship development with the mentor would not be possible if whole classes are being engaged. This situation is clearly recognised by the project team as a result of the close working relationships they have with schools and it is a sign of their success that teachers are keen to embed this approach further. It is therefore hoped that the LLC Area of Learning and Experience will help to provide more opportunities for discussing cultural topics and making connections in regular classroom teaching. However it will still be some time before it is known whether the introduction of the new curriculum will have a positive impact



on uptake. MFL Mentoring therefore continues to be an important opportunity for schools to develop more positive attitudes to language learning and to secure uptake of GCSE.



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About the author

Ondata Research collaborates with clients to help them understand project impact, whilst also providing mentoring and support through the phases of project development and delivery.

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Laura has extensive experience with a range of education projects across formal and informal education. In addition to evaluation she is experienced with project and resource development, delivery and training for a variety of organisations such as schools, science centres, museums, education charities, universities and professional bodies. She is undertaking PhD research relating to professional development of teachers after having completed an MRes in Educational Research with the University of Stirling.



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