

5,000 INCOMING CHILDREN TAUGHT... 'These centres have helped to save the Welsh language'



Welsh learner Daniel Olande, main, and with his mother Dose and teacher Gwenan Ellis-Jones, inset

Pics: HADYB IBALL

FOR the best part of three decades children from all over the world have come with their parents to settle in Gwynedd.

From England of course, and other parts of the UK, but also from further afield, countries like Pakistan, Iraq and more recently Eastern Europe, Hungary, Romania and Poland.

Most have little or no ability to speak Welsh but in Gwynedd almost all schools teach through the medium of Welsh.

In the early 1980s the local authority took a far-sighted decision.

They introduced language centres where for 12 weeks pupils are given an intensive crash course in Welsh after which they emerge fluent conversationally and able to read, write and be taught anything, from mathematics to history or geography in Cymraeg.

Nearly 30 years on and there are 5,000 or so graduates of this unique programme - the only one of its kind in Wales.

There are four language centres for primary school pupils in Maesincla (Caernarfon), Llangybi, Penrhyndeudraeth and Dolgellau. There is also one secondary language centre at Porthmadog.

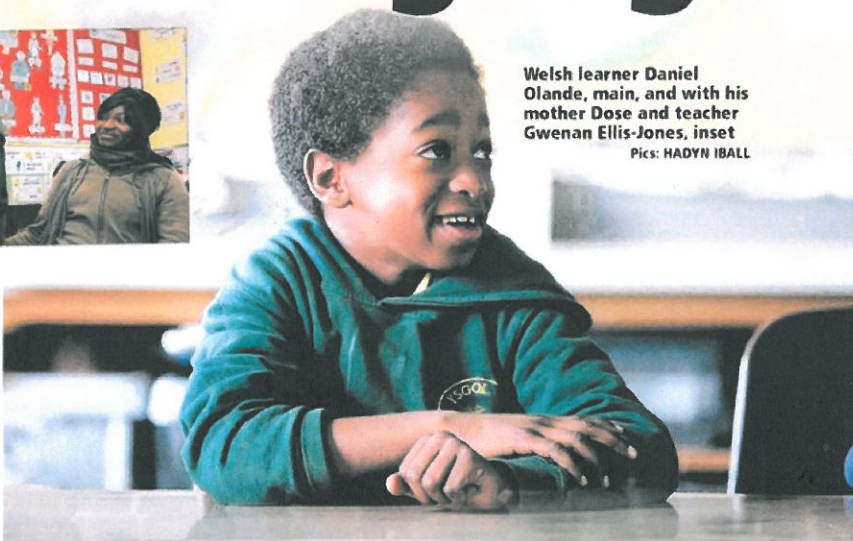
The Daily Post visited the Maesincla centre in Caernarfon where pupils from a variety of different cultures and countries are immersed in the culture and language of north west Wales.

Teacher Gwenan Ellis Jones said the centres were set-up for two reasons; to help the newly arrived children and their families learn - and to strengthen and protect the Welsh language into the 21st Century and beyond.

Ms Jones believes the centres have succeeded beyond question.

She said: "In 28 years there have been 5,000 pupils who didn't speak the language who are now fluent in Welsh. That's equivalent to the population of Pwllheli."

Ms Jones believes the impact of 5,000 non-Welsh speakers moving into a county which has a relatively small population could have threatened the very existence



'Being bilingual opens doors'

CASE STUDY

LAST year Daniel Olande and his mum Bose moved back to Caernarfon from England.

They'd spent a brief period in the area before then but neither really spoke Welsh.

Daniel, a Year 2 pupil at Ysgol y Gelli, was referred to the language centre at Maesincla by his primary school. Virtually all schools in Gwynedd teach

through the medium of Welsh.

As he nears the end of his 12-week intensive course six-year-old Daniel is now effectively conversationally fluent at Welsh.

His ability with the language has left his mum trailing in his wake.

Bose said: "Daniel has done so well since he started the language centre. His reading is really good and he can now read his Welsh books on

his own now. When I try to help him he teaches me how to pronounce the words correctly

"He finds it more difficult to read in English than in Welsh now. He is so much more confident and I think that will help him in the school."

Daniel himself proved his fluency after some mild interrogation from teacher Gwenan Ellis Jones.

With barely a second's hesitation he

answered all Ms Jones questions about what he learned that day and who he speaks Welsh with. For the record, his cousin Ben and all the time.

Despite her vast experience Ms Jones still marvels at the ability of, younger children in particular to master the basics of a language in such a short period of time. "It is amazing and being bilingual will open so many doors for them throughout life."

of Welsh as the primary language of not just the playground but the county itself.

"I believe these centres have helped to save the language," she said.

Each term, around 16 children attend each of the four centres for 12-weeks. At the end of the course the children can speak Welsh well enough to allow them to follow their education through the medium of Welsh.

"It is amazing to see children from so many different backgrounds - some with parents who don't speak English - pick up Welsh so quickly. They converse in Welsh throughout the day and have a vocabulary of 600-700

words. There is a lot of concentration on the oral skills and we use that as a building block.

"The benefits of learning a second language are well known but it gives them so much confidence, particularly when they go back to their schools and it is of such benefit to their education."

As well as supporting children to learn Welsh the centres offer an innovative course for parents. Blas ar Gymru introduces parents who are new to the area to the language, the culture and the local area. Parents get a taste of the language and a chance to learn more about the area which enables them to help and support their

children. This course is offered parents in all four language centres and has been running for five years.

Councillor Siân Gwenllïm, Gwynedd Council's cabinet member for education, said: "An innovative and unique scheme introduced back in the 80s. Over the years, hundreds of non-Welsh speaking children, who have moved to Gwynedd, have had the opportunity to learn the language, and also to learn about Welsh traditions at these special centres."

"These centres set the foundations for a lifetime of bilingualism and enables children to become fluent and confident Welsh speakers for life."