

Education in Wales, as Seen by Study Visit Programme Participants

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This report has two aims: to inform about recent developments in Welsh school system, and to pay tribute to the Study Visits Programme that enabled us to learn about education in Wales from first-hand experience.

Travelling abroad, visiting the schools in a foreign country and gathering the experience in more or less systematic way was common in the early days of the discipline that is now known as comparative or international education. Obviously, comparative education has advanced to much more sophisticated methods since then. However, we are deeply convinced that there is no substitute for first-hand experience of different educational systems, their institutions, and administrators, teachers and pupils. One argument to support this claim might be the fact that many educational practices (e. g. rules of school life, temporal and spatial arrangements) are based on tacit knowledge. These implicit – maybe inexplicable – ways of doing things in schools seem so obvious both to local practitioners and researchers that they are often not listed in reviews and comparative reports. When covered, their description might go un-mentioned by readers without the appropriate experience of target school system. Exactly for these reasons the school visits used to be a popular part of the international conferences and congresses. However, in recent years it seems to be more and more difficult for a scholar to get into the schools in foreign countries, probably because of the increased emphasis on the safeguarding of school children. So it is an appreciated move that the programme of the study visits to schools abroad, originally intended mainly for decision-makers (school leaders, inspectors, representatives of local and national authorities etc.), was opened for educationalists and academicians recently. The darker side of this measure is the fact that the programme is to be closed down soon.

The Study Visits Programme, intended primarily for education and vocational training specialists and decision-makers, was started as the first peer-learning programme in the EU. The programme has been coordinated by Cedefop (The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training in Thessaloniki, Greece). The study visits have covered various themes in line with the priorities of the European policy agenda in the field of education and training. As both authors of this report are primarily interested in general education, we highly appreciated the decision to include issues of primary and general secondary education in the programme. Both primary and lower secondary schooling (not to mention pre-primary education) is the

96 necessary foundation for all subsequent vocational training and lifelong education.

Our visit took place in March 2013. As the goal of the Study Visits programme is the improvement of education policies at local, regional and national level, we met people from at least four levels of Welsh school system:

1. National level – officials from the Welsh Government (Department for Education and Skills), school inspectorate (including Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education and Training in Wales), national associations of directors and local governments;
2. Local level (staff members of county councils responsible for education, training and lifelong learning);
3. School level (primary and secondary head teachers and/or their deputies in two primary and three secondary schools);
4. Classroom level (we had the opportunity to observe a number of lessons in the schools we visited).

When devolution took place in Wales in 1998, establishing the Welsh Assembly, education and training became one of the areas of responsibility devolved to the Welsh government. Previously, the education system in England and Wales had been governed by the UK government. It is interesting to note that the population of Wales is approximately 3 million and 20% of them speak Welsh as the first language. Some 22% of 7 year olds are educated through Welsh. The structure of Welsh school system is similar to English schooling. Struggling for their identity, the Welsh governments (with mainly Labour, or social-democratic orientation) took steps to split from the educational policy of the London (now Conservative) ministry. However, recent outcomes of Welsh pupils have been disappointing on a range of measures. According to PISA 2009, pupil performance in Wales was lower in 2009 than in 2006. According to the math test, the highest achieving pupils in Wales were one year behind their peers in OECD countries. It is obvious, then, that quality assurance in schools – the theme of our visit as well as many other study visits within the programme (Cedefop, 2011) – became one of the hottest issues in Welsh educational system. The national priorities are improving literacy and numeracy (as measured by PISA) and reducing the negative impact of deprivation on pupil achievement and wellbeing.

The following components of Welsh initiatives were most interesting for us:

- focus on outcomes and quality of processes of teaching and learning;
- forensic data use for tracking individual students, school/local authorities’ performance and disadvantaged groups;
- different kinds of support provided to pupils at risk of failure;
- wide use of ICT in learning, teaching, and management of schools (Digital Wales);
- external evaluation by a body independent of political influences (HMI) and self-evaluation and school development planning in schools;
- support to teachers and school leaders as a counter-balance to external demands.

Let us comment on some of these components briefly.

There is a need to secure the consistency of provision of services and standards at school, local, and national level. We have seen some excellent examples of turning

the trends in failing schools in some local authorities in Wales. The South Wales local authorities have extensive experience in school reforms or re-starts. Systemic leadership, connecting strong and weak schools with a belt wheel principle, federating etc. gives the weaker schools the chance to change school culture and to improve the quality of processes and outcomes. Values would be translated – including staff, curriculum, and economic principles.

Some European countries apply the system of early tracking of pupils when children from age approx. 11 years old attend different school tracks (e.g. in the Czech Republic, and some states in Germany). This early tracking is a major challenge to fairness/equity of educational opportunity. The comprehensive way of organising secondary schools we saw in South Wales exhibits a wide array of good practices into how the school could cope with a mixed ability student population and with different needs, e. g. painstaking efforts to facilitate the successful transition to secondary school (particularly of those in risk of failure) or innovative curriculum design tailored to suit school context and its pupils.

Since 2011, the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child was made a statutory obligation for all institutions in Wales, and the Welsh Government requires schools to put the convention “at the heart of its policies, practice and ethos” (Lyle, 2013, p. 3). This means that children and young people should be given genuine opportunities for participating in debates about things affect them. Particularly, the traditional views of children as lacking the capacity to reflect on their learning and traditional power relations in schools are to be changed. At school level, we saw the *Making the Pupil’s Voice Heard* programme in the Newport High School in Newport, Wales. Students are involved in planning school activities, in the Student Council, hold regular meetings with the head teacher. Students even played a role when the new school building was designed; all suggestions from each individual pupil are heard, first in their own “houses”, then higher up.

Another example of national level initiative is the programme *Learning in Digital Wales* – a massive investment into infrastructure (connectivity, school wi-fi, national learning platform and repository of digital content) as well as into people (National Digital Learning Council and Digital Leader Team, continual professional development). Again, literacy, numeracy, and reducing the impact of poverty on attainment are priorities of the digital tools usage.

As several participants stated from their experience in their own countries, sudden and serious changes in policy negatively affect all the educational institutions and education itself. National education policy must be formed powerfully so long term strategic plans can be practised properly. In Wales, the stability and independence in educational system is achieved among other means by a strong local government voice and by formal and non-formal authority and the independence of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate. The Welsh Local Government Association is a local government lobbying body that could prevent and ameliorate the impact of changes in central government policy, bringing consensus to educational policy and improving the governance of education. The high degree of independence of Her Majesty’s In-

98 spectorate makes it a very effective element of stability and watchdog of quality in the systems. The HMI also oversees pre-service teacher training in tertiary institutions so that the necessary co-ordination could be assured.

The school buildings and classrooms we saw clearly reflect that there have been major investments in education in recent years in the local authorities we visited, and that education and training is a clear priority of the Welsh government. All the people we met, be it in schools or on the level of national and local governments, seemed to be very serious and creative in their efforts to turn the national goals for the educational system into reality. We are very grateful to Cedefop and local organisers for the opportunity to meet them.

To sum up, in Wales, the terms quality and excellence are clearly operationalised in terms of raising standards of literacy and numeracy. Equally important is 'closing the gap' among pupils coming from different socio-economic backgrounds; here, the receipt of free school meals serve as a single index that makes it possible to disaggregate data on achievement and address the problem of equity/disadvantaged pupils. The national policy is stated in clear and easily understandable statements and documents. This clear goal setting obviously helps in planning, implementing and evaluating the educational policy.

Wales is continuing its efforts to improve outcomes for its pupils across the country. We wish them luck in their efforts, but it may be more demanding than expected: the recent results of PISA 2012 show that there have been no changes to the overall picture, with Wales behind the rest of the UK in all three domains with no major changes in average performance since 2009.

On the other hand, at the close of the study visit, several participants felt an urgent need to stress that PISA is just one tool for the measurement of quality of education, and that the concepts of excellence, quality and efficiency must be challenged, re-thought again and again. Rather than one concept of quality in education, there are many qualities.

References

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