

Visit to Florence, 7-14th March, 2003

The second cycle of the Roots and Wings Leadership Programme began with myself and the eight other Ceredigion/Carmarthenshire Secondary Headteachers visiting Florence and meeting up once again with the Italian and Danish colleagues. Once again, the first three days were spent in a conference looking again at theoretical issues relating to leadership and gaining information on the Italian school system.

The first day of the conference set out the agenda for the second cycle of the programme, namely to consider the present reality in our schools to reflect upon that and to explore how we could 'act differently' with the aim of improving our schools.

The programme began with an input from a representative of the education authority in Tuscany who explained the Italian school system. For under 3 year olds there are care centres, for 3-5 year olds kindergartens, for 6-13 age pupils the equivalent of primary/middle schools. From 14 to 19 pupils attend upper secondary schools of various types from those following academic courses, to technical schools and vocational schools. There are also some vertical schools that cater from kindergarten to 19 year olds. The leaving age is 15 but an obligation to follow some form of institution until 18 either at school, other centres or as part of an apprenticeship.

At present there is a changing political climate in Italy and a desire to cut public spending and reform the education system and the proposals are to have primary schools between 5½ and 10 with no formal examination; lower secondary between 11 and 13 with a final exam and a dual system between 14 and 17/19 of academic or vocational education made up of two cycles of 2 years. There are lots of bodies involved in education with a lack of communication between those with involvement. Interestingly, there are no 'standards' in terms of subjects and assessment is very general based on 5 level very good to poor basis. Research is being cut and Italy does not have a strong pedagogical culture and teacher training has never been a strong aspect of higher education. Teachers are assigned to schools as are Headteachers to avoid possible

corruption. The impression left was of a rather disorganised system and in some ways much less central control and emphasis on standards than we have in Wales.

The second session of the day concentrated on reviewing the progress made since the first cycle with an emphasis on considering what had changed and what had not changed in our schools. In my case it was a desire to involve more staff and pupils in the decision-making process. As a result, a school council was in the process of being established and have involved staff in a number of reviews of present provision. However, I was still aware of the weeks in the 'red' or 'people' area of my Herrmann profile and the attractions of operating in more comfortable areas involved analysis and ideas. Both the other partners had also reflected on their schools and we all committed ourselves to continuing dialogue to offer the 'critical friend' perspective to influence the actions in our schools.

The next session focussed on the average scholars in Europe of the number of pupils who did feel that school is of benefit to them in preparing them for adult life. A quarter of young people in Europe do not want to go to school. From this the question was raised "whose school is it anyway?" and from this the need to involve the opinions of the various stakeholders in determining the values and experiences that school offers. Acting out the role of various stakeholders groups meant to establish what 'basic/baseline' expectation might be of various stakeholders and what might be considered at a higher level with the best possible outcomes. Having given thought to these issues our 'homework' for the evening was to produce a summary of our vision for our schools in 2005 in the form of a poster.

On day two we introduced our individual 'visions' for our schools and my own involved three essential areas:

- 1) greater partnership with other institutions to provide pupils with a wider curriculum;
- 2) a more democratic and reflective school which would assist in the fundamental desire to improve results/satisfaction with education by challenging existing weaknesses.

- 3) a school at the centre of its community with greater access and involvement and hopefully improved facilities.

The issue then became how we create that vision and the way that dialogue and coaching could help us to change things. We all have values and make assumptions that need to be challenged if we are to operate in a different way that will bring about change. Some time was then spent on spotting assumptions and asking our partner heads to consider these assumptions and values that underpinned them – were they an obstacle to ‘doing differently’ if that might further the success and achievements of young people?

The final morning of the conference was spent working on playing the role of advocate, inquirer and coach. The aim was to engage in genuine dialogue that would challenge our thinking and cause us to consider a fresh course of actions and values. The role of advocate and inquirer I found quite comfortable but the role of coach was a difficult role and both of the other partner heads felt a similarly uncertainty about that role. However, time ran out for further expert advice and input and we all departed to our host schools.

The next three days were spent in two Italian schools. Since we had met in September, my Italian host had been moved from his school and given a new school. This decision was being contested which meant for a slightly difficult situation. However, we were determined to make the most of the situation and it produced the opportunity to visit two schools instead of one.

The first day was spent at Scuola Citta Pestalozzi a 6-13/14 school set in the centre of Florence. It has been founded by a Professor of Pedagogy in 1945 as a progressive and experimental school. The emphasis was very much on group based experimental learning with the school adopting the structure of a city. The school was divided into various workshops namely:-

1. library - ½ hour of reading every day;
2. theatre – drama, produce their own productions including music and scenery;

3. newspaper – produce newsletters, newspapers and magazines;
4. woodwork – with Science/DT – how to make things;
5. multi-media laboratory – ICT;
6. music;
7. art.

The class is the core-structure of the school and the emphasis, was very much on learning by co-operating, teamwork and accomplishing projects. The number of teachers is high for the number of pupils with 5/6 teachers for two classes covering two years whilst part of the curriculum is mapped out the rest very much develops from the various projects undertaken. Assessment is not very formal with pupils withstanding assessment on 5 levels from insufficient to very good. There are no set standards in subject areas. The school had the buzz of a busy primary school with the pupils keen and interested without the order and formality that makes the British system. On leaving the school pupils go on to 14-19 secondary schools of their choice – there is no selection. The system is essentially a tripartite and with the academic option (liceo) or a technical school – or vocational school. From all schools the transfer to university is a possibility.

The final two days, were spent in Sassetti-Peruzzi Institute Professionale, a vocational secondary school (14-19) specialising in commerce (office) and leisure and tourism. This was situated in a poorer, more deprived outer area of Florence. Its pupils were mainly girls (75%) and there were serious issues of attendance/disaffection/motivation. Unlike in Wales the basis went for education in the chronologically arranged mixed ability class – taught by every specialists at this level. The school was fairly well equipped with ICT equipment but the bareness of the classrooms was a strange contrast to schools at home.

The two days at this vocational school, apart from visits around the school was spent by the three Headteachers deciding on issues we would work on in the next few months, explaining our thinking and getting prepared to further engage in dialogue and corresponding via e-mail and the 'Roots and Wings' website. Having knowledge of

the Italian head's school certainly would prove useful in knowing the context and against which actions might be taken. As both heads had already visited Wales they had some knowledge of the situation in which I operate. The plan is to also visit Denmark later in the year and this will complete the cycle of getting to know three different educational systems.

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