

### **Third Cycle of Roots and Wings Project**

This was the Third Cycle of the Roots and Wings Project involving a school from Carmarthen / Tuscany and Denmark. Prior to the visit to Denmark (Vejle) our trio was informed that the third member (Italy) of our trio would not be attending due to personal commitments. This was very unfortunate as strong links had been established between and amongst all three partners. However we were both (Wales / Denmark) very determined to make this a positive experience, reach our agreed targets and plan for future developments. We were now presented with the opportunity of discussing at greater length, issues which would be beneficial to us both as well as enabling us to undertake and put into practice the skills that were being highlighted during the first two days of the programme.

To begin our third cycle we were given an in-depth explanation of the Danish education system from early years through to university entry. The variation in types of institutions was very interesting and provided all participants with a clear view of not only the ways in which the system differed from the Welsh system but also to the possibilities of how we could benefit from adopting some of the structures that existed in Denmark. This initial approach to the theoretical side would give us a clearer insight to the real world when visiting actual schools, but it was significantly clear that resourceing both in human and financial terms were far better than those available to us in Wales. This should have been the case in view of the fact that taxation was at a much higher level than that which is currently being levied in the United Kingdom.

Following this introduction we were asked to work (in our case) in pairs on the tasks which we had prepared prior to the conference. The first task was to examine what we had learnt from participating in the programme to date under the headings of personal, professional and organisational. This was an introductory session before amalgamating with two other trios to prepare a joint statement on similarities or differences relating to our experiences. What transpired, was a series of statements which we all felt were very pertinent to what we had gained from the links to date. When the results were displayed, each group had similar outcomes but the third experience (Danish) would be the one which would rank the priority for education in its final position.

Our previous two conferences had merely touched on the issue of coaching, a concept which proved to be difficult to grasp because of the way it had been portrayed. However, this final conference had been adjusted to convey the importance of such a skill in a manner which could be understood by everyone. The language barrier for the Italian Headteachers had been broken down and concepts were more easily understood in this third cycle. What was more readily noticeable was that the three nations had bonded better on this conference and discussion was freer than had been previously. The importance of coaching was examined, including the manner in which it was to be conducted with the objective being to ask open questions which would encourage the person being interviewed to explore as many solutions as possible with the minimum amount of options being given by the interviewer.

The second task which had been prepared focused on issues which required coaching “to be put into operation” We both agreed to discuss managerial issues through coaching and found it to be both stimulating and rewarding. As we were only two participants we were afforded the opportunity of delving deeply into our issues which in turn was far more rewarding than having to examine issues on a superficial basis. It transpired that the coaching exercise became, or fluctuated between coaching and dialogue. Naturally, and of importance to the both of us was the agreement that this would be the case as we had undertaken the original coaching exercise. We noticed that even though we were not to give answers or direct the individual into responding in a certain way, it was possible to channel or “manipulate” the questions so as to give responses which the interviewer believed would be an appropriate response. In order to coach effectively as a duo we agreed that as the session progressed we should be allowed to change to dialogue as and when needed. We believed that coaching would only be successful if the process had been agreed beforehand. The topics chosen by us had focused on the role of assessment in raising achievement and the reorganisation of middle management to have a more managerial role.

The plenary session examined in detail what difficulties / success had been evident from our afternoon experiences. The most common difficulty was for the interviewee who was the one who should be addressing the problems with his / her own solutions. The second day of the conference involved some additional coaching sessions to highlight once again what was required of the interviewer to ensure successful coaching.

A detailed programme of events / visits was then discussed between the two of us which was to result in a tour of the host’s school visit to experience classroom teaching, discussions with senior staff, teaching and clerical staff, discussions with pupils, visit to a gymnasium to experience senior pupils being educated. The final day of the Danish visit was a conference including all the participating Headteacher to evaluate what had been observed and a discussion on the way forward.

The visit to the different teaching establishments in Vejle where we experienced schools teaching pupils 13-16 years of age, 16-19 years of age was very beneficial to my current role as Headteacher. As an Headteacher in Wales we are subjected to pressures which are not apparent in Denmark. The following points highlight factors which would certainly ease the pressures on Headteachers in general: -

- The pupil teacher ratio is substantially smaller allowing greater flexibility. (10:1)
- More free time available to Senior Staff – and more Senior Staff to ease pressures.
- Classroom assistants to reduce administrative tasks of teaching and clerical (office staff).
- Through schools i.e.3-16 where numbers in each year group became manageable.
- The Danish system is founded on values.

- More Headteacher time to visit classrooms / familiarise with pupils' atmosphere became "informal" but structured.
- Space – no narrow corridors – pupils are able to walk without obstructions – pupils are able to work in small discussion groups in corridors.
- Finance – is not an issue for funding per pupil is well above the Carmarthen figure.
- Resources – an abundance of modern well-equipped classrooms including state of the art library facilities.
- Substantial capital investment to ensure buildings meet the needs of all housed within.
- Superb facilities for handicapped pupils – also well staffed.
- A continental working day facilitating meetings / staff discussions at the end of normal working time. No lunch hour!

The most beneficial aspect is improving teaching and becoming focused on the use of resources, accessibility to resources and the deployment of classroom assistants. Before outlining some benefits observed to improve our own teaching and learning styles I would hasten to add that they could improve their quality of teaching and learning by: -

- Introducing Departmental teams with Heads of Department.
- Introduce a structured system of classroom observation.
- Undertake more formal assessment to pin point the attainment levels of pupils at the end of each academic year.
- Have a broader curriculum which would enable pupils to develop in shortage skills areas.

There is a clear willingness by the Danish staff to be receptive and open to more learning. They agree that there is room for improvement to benefit the pupils who are well behaved, polite, open minded and have been trained to organise themselves to a higher standard on consecutive years.

- From my observations in Denmark the effective use of administrative assistants is paramount in reducing the administrative burden on teaching staff.
- Team teaching has a role to play not only in delivering subjects on a cross curricular basis but also in the absence of a team member.
- The delivery of a topic through a thematic approach has its advantage but in moderation.
- Pupils have been trained to research information for themselves and thus, with careful oversight enables the student to become an independent learner. This factor was very evident in the Gymnasium where vast corridors were equipped with modern IT facilities strategically placed to enable students to "pop out", find information on the web and then return lessons.
- Pupils, in particular year groups are housed in sections of the school where ownership and accountability is important. This reduces movement around the school and ensure that there is good pupil

behaviour. Equipment is respected and appreciated and because there is access to it with guidance, it is used effectively to enhance learning.

- The discussions undertaken relating to our Boy v Girl issue is in its developmental stage. Nevertheless, within the visit progress has been made in particular with regards to some of the male / female experiments conducted with pupils and parents!! (Single sex groups).

These issues have been brought to the attention of the staff who are now in the process of implementing one or two of the points from above with the intention of raising standards.

In relation to pastoral care, it is very interesting to note that teachers, and not Heads of School or Senior Staff (unless support is required) deal with all academic or personal issues relevant to children under their care. This means that staff in Denmark have a vital role in the social development of children, releasing senior staff to undertake their management responsibilities with little teaching commitment.

I am delighted to have been given the opportunity of participating in this three way process which has enabled me to have a wider perspective on international issues. The greatest impact that I have experienced is being able to share experiences and difficulties with international colleagues who have been able to analyse the situations from a totally independent viewpoint.

Throughout this period I have gained experience in reaching conclusions by exploring as many avenues as possible before making final decisions. Furthermore, it has been possible to appreciate the differing difficulties in all countries but also to witness, at first hand how these issues have been resolved. We as a trio have agreed to continue with our managerial issues even though officially there will be no further conferences. It was agreed on the final day that there should be a fourth cycle to continue with the excellent work which is now being done by the newly forged partnership.

To date within our trio the following actions have / will take place.

October 03 An Italian Exchange 18 pupils and 2 staff came to Q.E Maridunum.

March 04 Our pupils returned to Italy – further visits organised.

January 04 2 staff from Vejle visited us with a view to an exchange in October 04 / return March 05.

October 04 Pupils from Vejle visited Maridunum (Carmarthen) Wales  
Pupils from Vejle visited Sansepolcro Italy

April 05 Pupils from Maridunum to visit Vejle  
Pupils from Vejle to visit Sansepolcro

Regular communication will be sustained by e-mail and telephone to our homes and the schools. We as Headteachers from our trio have agreed that

we will also continue to visit, personally, our link Headteachers to assist one another to develop systems which are beneficial to raising standards in one another's schools.

From all experiences gained I can thoroughly recommend such exchange of information to all Headteachers. However I offer one word of caution, the system of communication through Roots & Wings IT is poor. That is why a more effective form must be adopted. We maintained our sanity by regular phone calls, accompanied by our own e-mailing systems.

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