

Cycle 3 – Evaluation – Trio I
ROOTS AND WINGS
VISIT TO DENMARK 3rd – 10th OCTOBER, 2003

POST ACTIVITY REPORT ON VISIT TO VEIJE PROVENCE, JUTLAND

INTRODUCTION

The visit again began with a 2 day conference where we were presented with several perspectives on the Danish Education system from serving headteachers and members of the host education authority. Presentations were also given on the nature and value of coaching as a management skill.

A pre-conference task had been to prepare a brief paper on an aspect of our own School to share with the other members of our trio of headteachers. I used the preparation of a self-evaluation Report for Inspection purposes.

We had also been asked to prepare a brief outlining a particular issue emerging from the School that impinged on school effectiveness that could be used as a coaching exercise between the trio. The issue I used was that of developing the management skills of a Head of Department who wanted to improve the effectiveness of the departmental team.

Both briefs were debated between trios and the activity used to develop coaching skills; each member of the trio taking it in turns to act as observer and feedback comments on the effectiveness of the other trio members in dealing with the issue in hand.

The conference ended with a session planning for the four days that would be based in Danish Schools.

The remainder of the week, I spent mainly in a 7 — 16 age group school, a Folkskole, observing classes, talking to staff and pupils and meeting with the Headteacher and his deputy and the administrative staff. Visits were also made to senior schools or gymnasium, teaching the 16 — 19 age group; one a vocationally orientated school, the other more akin to our Sixth Form Colleges. Again we were able to visit lessons and talk to staff and students.

RELEVANCE

As a consequence of comments fed back after the visit to Italy a more pragmatic approach was taken in Denmark. The educational context with which the schools in Denmark work was provided factually and systematically. Only one management skill, that of coaching, was targeted, and this allowed time for full discussion and practice in the context of role play.

It was highly instructive to experience and discuss a system of education driven by different values from our own and much better resourced. It was also rewarding to practice

a new skill, that of coaching with the time to consider pitfalls, have objective feedback and practice in neutral circumstances.

The international context had two distinct advantages. Our differences initiated deeper debate about ends and means than if the discussion had taken place in Wales amongst only Welsh headteachers. It was also a positive environment in which to develop new skills; we had clearly broken down barriers at previous meetings and had developed a common interest and commitment.

CLASSROOM! SCHOOL OBSERVATIONS

- There was an overriding impression of calmness and civility in all schools visited, a remarkable lack of tension in relationships between pupils and between pupils and staff.
- Classes were well resourced and class sizes were small e.g.
 - PTR 1 10.7
 - Average class size 1 19
 - Expenditure per head £4785
- Schools were built to create space, corridors were very wide, library/resource areas were central to the school and easily accessible.
- The personal and social development of pupils was a priority, at the expense of subject coverage and academic rigour. Young people were given time to develop and mature.
- Formal education starts later, age 7, and continues for longer. Most (98%) of pupils attend a state Kindergarten pre 16.
- Pupils can opt to postpone moving to the “16 — 19” stage if they or their parents think they are not ready. They join a “Year 10” class or school for 16 — 17 year olds.
- After the 16/17 stage, their equivalent of reaching an A level standard takes 3 years.

Foreign languages, especially English, are vital components of an education. Language learning begins at 9 and for most students continues to the last or last but one year of pre-university education or employment; for a majority of students therefore until they are 18.

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Learning assistants, called pedagogues, receive three years training before employment. They run pre-school (and after school) clubs and may work as ‘supply teachers’.

The system is not examination driven. National examinations are taken at age 16 and are partly oral examinations.

The ‘class teacher’ has a central role in home-school co-operation and meets with parents of the form regularly. The class teacher will teach three subjects to their “form”. Parents have a central role and were shocked to discover that in Wales they might be asked to raise money for the School. Their role was to promote earning and the school value system.

A School is accountable to its value system, generated by parents, staff and pupils, not for

examination results.

BENEFITS FOR THE SCHOOL — RAISING STANDARDS

Nothing from the Danish system would be easy to replicate in Wales without comparable resources, similar educational aspirations and value systems and a wider common acceptance across society of the purpose of education.

If we were to take a “people centered” rather than a “subject/standards centered” approach to learning I am sure we would develop more mature, confident and well balanced young people.

The government wish to have Schools’ Councils and Youth Councils is a “Danish approach”. It does not sit easily with most other values that underpin the Welsh system of education.

Some Danes would like to bring more academic rigour to their system. They do not know how to do it and keep the positives they already have.

IMPACT UPON SCHOOL/PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Further justification for the School’s initiative to develop its community role and engage with pupils and parents on a wider front, not just the academic.

Both schools are engaged in “Active Learning Projects’. There will be value in exchanging ideas about these developments and perhaps teaching staff exchanging roles.

Values are at the heart of Danish Schools and discussed unselfconsciously at all levels. Perhaps as staff, governors, pupils and parents, we should re-visit our “Aims”.

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Pupil links are about to be developed; initially by e-mail and using the Peace Mala Project. It will help internationalise our curriculum.

The Danes seem to have pulled off the trick of giving respectability to vocational pathways. There will be value in a member of our staff visiting Denmark to look at how, by using general and vocational educational programmes, they have done this.

The visits have been enlightening and motivating, have raised the headteacher’s aspirations, and developed aspects of his management skills, in particular those of coaching and mentoring.

Harvey Jones