

Still GETting Across Borders?

Austerity, Brexit and Scottish Schools

Annegret Landgraf and Jennifer Riedel

Each year, German students from three universities get the opportunity to spend a school year as teacher assistants at Scottish schools via the GET Across Borders programme. Two of last year's participants from Leipzig share their observations and thoughts on how austerity and/or Brexit have affected and still will affect both Scottish schools and the programme itself.

Striking the Heart of the Educational System: How Austerity Measures Influence Scottish Schools

Annegret Landgraf (North Lanarkshire)

The consequences of the Banking Collapse of 2008 have been covered in all kinds of media. Rising taxes and prices as well as falling incomes have met severe austerity measures in the United Kingdom. National spending was cut down to prevent further debts. This national government policy has of course also affected public spending on devolved matters in all parts

of the UK, among them education in Scotland. In this article, I will present some personal observations and considerations on the impact of austerity measures on Scottish schools.

Poor schools...

The radical cut-down of the schools' budgets have led to a drastic reduction of teachers as well as learning support staff and social workers, who are actually desperately needed within Scotland's Primary and High Schools. Class sizes are getting larger, which makes teaching as a job ever more demanding. Even at primary schools, teachers have to deal with class sizes up to 25 to 28 pupils. When you consider that these children start at an age of four to five, it becomes patently obvious that they require a lot of care and support, which in this case definitely cannot be guaranteed. When it comes to secondary schools, class sizes are likely to get even bigger. The classrooms are usually equipped with desks and chairs for 30 pupils. However, I have experienced classes with

more than 30 learners, and consequently, some pupils had to share their desks. Anyway, the rooms are quite small and, so to speak, filled to overflowing, so there can be no talk of a good learning environment any more. A lot of time is spent settling down all the pupils properly before the actual lesson can begin. Teachers are really pleased if they can use half of the period for proper teaching because even after all pupils are finally settled down, disturbances and interruptions of the lesson are common, since the children are simply sitting too close to each other.

After gaining an insight into several Primary and Secondary Schools in different towns, it became clear that teachers have to deal with various, widely different types of children. Fortunately, at Scotland's schools inclusion is nothing that needs to be questioned any more. All pupils learn together, regardless of what special educational needs they have. School uniforms create a visual equality and largely conceal the socio-economic background of every pupil. However, these differences still exist and need to be considered by teachers.

Due to austerity measures, the small number of learning and pupils' support staff as well as social workers cannot satisfy all the children with special educational needs properly. Speaking about a school with over 1,200 pupils, it becomes abundantly clear that three learning support teachers and six pupils support teachers are definitely not enough. In consequence, teachers have to embody a lot more roles than working as a lecturer and educator because they need to undertake some duties of

the supporting staff as well. Hence, most classes are divided into different learning levels, which means that teachers almost never work together with the pupils as a whole class. In addition to that, teachers need to prepare various kinds of learning material to respond to the needs of every single child properly. Considering that even at Secondary School some pupils are not able to read and write properly, it becomes really challenging for one teacher to support these children according to their different levels and to prepare the rest of the class for the upcoming national examinations at the same time.

In practice, plenty of paper and photocopies would be required to provide pupils with an adequate learning environment. At this point, teachers experience the influence of the austerity measures again, since they are compelled by the schools to make fewer photocopies to save money. As a consequence, teachers are caught on the horns of a dilemma between assisting pupils as much as they can to become the very best versions of themselves and saving money to go easy on the schools' budget.

On top of this, not only the different learning levels and austerity measures but also the difficult behaviour of pupils in class present a challenge for the teachers. Several pupils with very bad concentration problems would actually need a supportive person next to them, helping them to follow the lesson and preventing disruptive actions. But in reality, shouting at teachers as well as throwing and destroying of school material and furniture are daily occurrences in some classes and require a lot of patience and emotional strength of the

teachers. Of course, such behaviour could be caused by various factors, including domestic problems, but it can also indicate that one basic need is not satisfied, namely, hunger.

... and poor families

Unfathomably, poverty within the United Kingdom, one of the 30 richest countries in the world, is growing. The gap between rich and poor is widening and the poorest have been hit hardest by austerity. Due to growing unemployment, an increasing number of families living on the breadline cannot afford enough food for their children. To reduce the number of children that go to school without any breakfast or packed lunch, several schools have established breakfast clubs and offer breakfast for free.

In theory, it sounds like a great way to solve the problem, especially since the breakfast offers are versatile. Children can choose from a variety of cereals, bread, fruits and even some packed snacks like chocolate and energy bars to get through the upcoming school day. Unfortunately, it has turned out to be rather a nice opportunity for a little talk with friends before school than an opportunity to take a free meal, because most of the pupils do not eat anything. Furthermore, children coming from a poor social economic background are often missing out on the offer. At a school with 1,200 pupils only ten to fifteen of them show up for Breakfast Club, although far more children would need to take up this offer of help. Additionally, the children taking part in the club are usually satisfied with a drink rather



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than taking something to eat. It might be that some of them feel ashamed to reveal that they actually need something to eat, but it could also have other uncharted reasons. For instance, some of them might have to take care of younger children before school or have to help in the household. Nevertheless one cannot rule out the possibility that some of the pupils just want to sleep in.

Apart from this, parents who are unemployed or earn only a very low income are given the opportunity to apply for free school lunches for their children. Colourful posters in the school hallways promote this offer, but unfortunately, they often escape the pupils' notice. Hence, schools should work more closely with families living on the breadline in particular, to promote the different offers of assistance much more. However, due to austerity measures, the number of social workers who usually get in contact with poor families and try to improve their living and learning conditions is decreasing, although they would be desperately needed. As a consequence, parents are often unaware of those offers and miss the opportunities of them.

As a consequence of growing poverty only a few pupils are in possession of their own folders, paper, or pencil cases. The majority of children at school do not have more than one pencil or even ask the teacher to borrow a pencil to be able to follow the lesson. One can imagine that these pupils' notes are not really clear, as they are missing the opportunity to highlight important information with different colours or even to underline something. However, especially young pupils desperately need clear

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notes and folders to organize their learning material.

Almost all teachers buy pencils at their own expense to guarantee that all pupils are at least given the opportunity to write and, therefore, to learn. It seems to be only a small amount of money that is needed to buy a bunch of pencils, but if you consider that at the beginning of every period ten out of thirty pupils ask for a pencil and some of them will definitely accidentally forget to bring them back, it becomes obvious that over the course of the school year, teachers spend a lot of money on this. This shows how much empathy, helpfulness and care most teachers extend in the pursuit of their job. Nevertheless, it should not be the teacher's task to buy school material, but

the duty of the government to provide schools with a sufficient budget that enables them to buy necessary material and also to support poor families.

Setting priorities

Over the last couple of years, the budgets for the different departments within schools have been cut down drastically. For example, a modern languages department of a secondary school is equipped with a budget of around 500 pounds per year for all the language-learning pupils. Such a secondary school includes the classes S1 to S6; this means the department should be equipped with books, dictionaries and other learning material for 30 pupils per level at six different levels. Unfortunately, especially when it comes to the examination period, it becomes obvious that there are, for example, not enough dictionaries for everybody. Some pupils have to be content with old ones, other pupils with shortened versions of the standard dictionaries. Hence, there can be no talk of equal conditions for everybody. Because of that, money is needed to buy dictionaries for all pupils to guarantee that the examination conditions at school conform to the rules made by the government.

Paradoxically, almost each school department is equipped with 30 iPads that can be used in class. On the one hand, it should be highly appreciated that schools work with media that are state-of-the-art and teach the pupils how to use them for professional matters. But on the other hand, it is then hard to believe that there is such a lack of basic resources that are of more

fundamental importance.

One possibility to save money and, in addition to that, also save our environment would be to remove disposable cutlery and plates from schools. All of the visited Primary and High Schools make use of disposables that lead to an enormous amount of waste and with that also a huge waste of money every day. Even small changes can make a difference and make the pupils aware of the fact that our resources are limited and everybody needs to take care of our environment.

In my view, the austerity measures strike at the heart of the educational system in Scotland and the whole United Kingdom. Today's children are the ones that will shape the future of the country – they will bear the consequences of the austerity policy longest. Due to that, it is unacceptable to save money at the cost of national education. Already today, the educational standards and the well-being of pupils are endangered, and the situation is likely to get significantly worse over the next years if nothing changes.

GETs in Scotland

Jennifer Riedel (Aberdeen)

Working as a German Educational Trainee (GET) gives students from Germany (Mainz, Koblenz and Leipzig) the opportunity to gain practical experience at schools in Scotland. The program "GET across borders" was established at the University of

Mainz. Students do not only gain an insight into teaching and into a new school system, but they also help promoting and maintaining the German language at Scottish schools.

I came to Scotland in September 2019 and started working at a secondary school. The school focuses very much on languages. It is not only interesting to see the different teaching styles but also the differences between Scotland and Germany. Pupils attend primary school from year 1 up to year 7. Having completed primary education, everybody moves on to secondary school. Compared to Germany, Scotland's school system does not differentiate between the students' ability and therefore, all levels are taught at one school.

Because of the fact that I am studying primary education, I was looking for a primary school here. I eventually found one. However, this school never offered German classes, only French. Now it is on me to arouse the students' interest in learning a new foreign language. It is absolutely great to share the German language and cultural values with them. The Scottish Government aims to ensure that by 2021 all students at primary schools will have learnt two additional languages before moving on to their next school. This so-called 1+2 approach is a great opportunity to start language acquisition already in early childhood.

However, as the primary school I am currently working at shows, not all primary schools are working on this approach yet or might not have the means to realize this approach at all. This is one of the reasons why it

is important to send language assistants abroad, but how will "GET across borders" change with Brexit? The program is mainly financed by ERASMUS. GETs do get a certain amount of money from the Council, but the biggest share of the funding comes from ERASMUS. With the UK not being part of the EU anymore, the financial situation is difficult. As a result, if students cannot be financially supported, they might not be able to pass on the German language and cultural values to pupils at Scottish schools in the future.

Author's Note:

For more information on the GET programme see:

<https://www.get-across-borders.uni-mainz.de/get-across-borders-2/>