In the April 2018 Easter holiday, teachers visited Elblag to look at narrowing the attainment gap in Poland. The Educational Visit was funded by Erasmus +.

Erasmus + supports the implementation of the European policy agenda for growth, jobs, equity and social inclusion.

Europe needs more cohesive and inclusive societies, which allow citizens to play an active role in democratic life. Erasmus+ is an important instrument to promote the inclusion of people with disadvantaged backgrounds.

Well-performing education and training systems help to tackle challenges by providing people with the skills required by the labour market and the economy, while allowing them to play an active role in society and achieve personal fulfilment. Reforms in education strengthen progress towards these goals, on the basis of a shared vision between policy makers and stakeholders, sound evidence and cooperation across different fields and levels.
Background

Poland is leading the way for England's schools, Education Secretary says

Nicky Morgan, the Education Secretary, says that Coalition’s education reforms have been heavily influenced by the approach in Poland after it leapt up international rankings.

Poland has overhauled its education system over the past decade and gone from being below average in the OECD group of economies to being among the top 10 nations for reading and science, and top 15 for maths. Pupils attain higher scores on international tests than Britain in both reading and maths.
Nursey and Pre School

UK
Pre school / nursery education 30hrs provided by government at age 3
General nurseries/ pre schools

Poland
Pre school / nursery from 4
Specialised nurseries/pre school (music, art, languages)

The educational system in Poland is broadly very similar to that in the UK. The qualifications which students can gain at age 16 are equivalent to the British GCSEs and the qualifications that can be gained at age 18 are equivalent to the A Levels in the UK. Currently compulsory education in Poland starts at age 6 and ends at the age of 16. In addition there is a statutory requirement to a year of pre school education.

PRIMARY
Szkola Podstawowa - Primary school, starting at age 6 for 6 years

LOWER SECONDARY
Gimnazjum - Lower Secondary School, from age 13 for 3 years, certificate awarded: Świadectwo ukończenia gimnazjum – equivalent to the British GCSE.

UPPER SECONDARY
Entry to upper secondary schools depends on the satisfactory results in the lower secondary school. Students can then choose from a variety of schools:

- Szkoła Zawodowa - Basic vocational school, from age 16 for 2 or 3 years. Education includes school based practical training and periods of placement with employers. Certificate awarded: Świadectwo ukończenia szkoły zawodowej – equivalent to a British NVQ2.

- Liceum Ogólnokształcące - General secondary school, from age 16 for 3 years, certificate awarded: Świadectwo ukończenia liceum ogólnokształcącego. Commonly known as "Matura" (Certificate of Maturity) – equivalent to British A-Levels.

- Technikum - Technical secondary school, from age 16 for 4 years, certificate awarded: Świadectwo ukończenia technikum – equivalent to British A-Levels + NVQ3.

- Liceum Profilowane - Vocational secondary school, from age 16 for 3 years, certificate awarded: Świadectwo ukończenia liceum profilowanego – equivalent to British A-Levels + NVQ3.
Observations from lessons held at five schools throughout the week.

The first school we visited celebrated the way they ‘integrated’ children with SEND into their school and curriculum. Classes of 20 (maximum allowed) who had these children in, were supported by an extra adult, in some schools we visited this was a trained teacher but usually it was someone with a teaching assistant qualification. In the first school the teacher and teaching assistant worked seamlessly together; managing behaviour, questioning children and ensuring all the children were engaged.

This first class of 7 year olds had maths tasks to complete, that were of a similar expectation we would have for children at that stage in their education. The children were predominantly engaged throughout, I was impressed how organised, independent and self-reliant the children were.

Polish teachers we spoke to struggled with the integrated nature of the schools – they felt special schools needed greater investment and children to be catered for by those settings. The special schools we visited felt very nurturing and inclusive, but some of the children I felt would be better served in a mainstream setting with more of an emphasis on academic subjects. The focus at the special school seemed to be around social and life skills, which some of the pupils definitely needed.

Across Poland the teachers use textbooks to support their teaching of maths and other curriculum areas. The UK is starting to put greater emphasis on the use of maths textbooks, which I favour as it reduces workload for teachers and ensures certain standards are met.

The schools do not have any expectations around what is written in books to show progress. This is vastly different to the UK where a large emphasis is put on the quality of work going in the children’s exercise books. Progress is recorded by the teachers after the children have completed tests at the end of a topic.

Classroom environments did not seem as rich as primary schools in the UK. High quality children’s art work was displayed, but the classrooms did not have learning prompts (apart from handwriting) on the walls.

Standards of handwriting were very high with lots of time given to practice of this skill – this took the form of gross motor skill and fine motor skill development.

The majority of lessons we visited the children were engaged in what they were doing and made small steps of progress, a question I would like to investigate further would be around the teachers assessment for learning strategies. How did they make sure all children understood? What happened to children who fell behind?

Behaviour on the whole was good, with the teachers rarely having to use behaviour management strategies, some children did lose concentration in the lesson which the teachers chose to ignore. In the UK and schools I work in low level disruption would have been dealt with earlier by the teacher, with an expectation all children are engaged throughout.

I was impressed with how well the children shared resources, took turns and cooperated. Is this linked to them starting formal schooling later? They have learnt sharing and team work strategies before they are starting academic education.

A highlight of the trip was the visit to the music school. Primary school children sitting on space hoppers to learn was eye opening and achievable with a class of 12. Classrooms with 30 children all sitting on space hoppers might not work in the UK. While this school was musically selective, it did not
charge. I struggle to think of a similarity we have in the UK. The music curriculum running alongside the national curriculum put extra strain on the children and the school had incredibly high expectations around the amount of work the children had to put in. The results were amazing though, with the performance we saw a real highlight of the whole trip.

Teachers in Poland, as in England, worried about workload and money, many had second jobs to support themselves and families. A teaching career meant the other member of the family had to go out and ‘work’.

The trip was enjoyable and informative, it gave me the opportunity to reflect on my teaching, English schools and the school system.
Elblag, April 2018 - Bradley Saunders

Poland is a country that has seen some rapid developments in the past 30 years. However, it has also had its own crises, which has had an impact on children and their learning. When asked, the school counselling team stated the biggest barrier to learning currently is what they have coined ‘European Orphans’. This term relates to families that have been split because parents have left Poland to find better paid work elsewhere, leaving children with extended family members. This unsettling at home has had a negative impact on children’s learning.

Children begin formal primary education at the age of seven in Poland, with a kindergarten facility available from the age of five. In the schools we visited on our trip, it was clear to see how quickly children settled into formal education. By March (when we visited) all children in the youngest classes could write with a fluent joined handwriting style, behaviour was of a high standard and all children appeared to enjoy their time in school. Teaching children to write with a joined, neat style was something I wanted to investigate further. Teachers stated that children practised handwriting for the first three months of school, for around three to four hours a day. This wasn’t always formal teaching of letter formation, but included physical warm ups, and strengthening of hand and arm muscles. It clearly worked! Furthermore, in each classroom in every school, there was the same handwriting style taught, consistent across the whole town. In the UK we have various handwriting styles, some schools differ from class to class. Where I work, in a multi Academy Trust, we do have one handwriting style taught across all schools, however this change was recent. I am excited to see the positive impact this consistency will have.

The ‘integrated curriculum’ which incorporates both SEN and Non-SEN children in one class, was something not apparent in all schools we visited. Where SEN children were in mainstream schools, they usually had an extra adult in the classroom. This additional support is similar to what you may see in the UK. However, the quality of this support may be variable. Teaching assistants are paid less than classroom teachers in Poland and are responsible for differentiating the learning for the SEN pupils. This was not always evident in lessons observed. I asked one teacher what her opinion was of an ‘integrated curriculum’ as it was not common practice everywhere. She felt the integrated curriculum was ineffective and too challenging for teachers. In her opinion, she would rather see more schools created that specifically catered for children with SEN.

We visited an SEN school on our final day, which was forward thinking, tailored to their children and a warm and inviting environment. The support these children received was of a high quality and varied. Children were taught how to cook and iron, they had art lessons and one to one PE lessons which built strength and coordination. Every child’s needs are different, and I do feel the ‘integrated curriculum’ could be developed, through support from the SEN specific schools. In the UK our curriculum feels a
lot more inclusive. I believe this is a strength, and something that teachers in Poland could see in practice, if they were to visit.

Finally, I asked the teachers what their biggest struggle was. It may not be a surprise but they stated a lack of money was their largest challenge. Many teachers have a part time evening job, as well as teaching. Additionally, one teacher said that because he chose to be a teacher, it meant his wife would have to work too, and not stay at home and look after the children. Clearly the budgets provided for Education in both Poland and the UK have put additional strain on the profession. It would be interesting to investigate how easy it is to recruit new teachers in Poland.

My trip to Poland was informative and fascinating. I look forward to reflecting further on my experiences and will definitely be considering our approach to teaching handwriting and the quality of support SEN pupils receive in school.
Elblag, Poland April 2018 – Ann Leech

Poland is a country I have close family links with via my in-laws, however I have little knowledge about their education system. So, visiting Poland and experiencing teaching and learning in another E.U country was an opportunity I could not miss.

Children start their formal education much later in Poland; aged 7. Compared to England, this is considerably later on, so I had expected to see a gap in the pupil’s abilities. Surprisingly, in the classes I visited with younger children, the missing gaps were not obviously evident. Although some of the work was pitched at a slightly lower level, engagement in class, motivation and behaviour was at a high standard. Looking at the children’s work, it is clear to see that they hold handwriting and presentation skills in high esteem. All their handwriting was neatly joined and identically formed—this is from children who only started school seven months earlier! After questioning the class teacher, she explained that this is something that is taught every day and for several hours during the first few months at school. They also use a specific printed book, which starts with colouring activities to encourage hand eye co-ordination. As the child progresses, the work becomes more formal by practising letter patterns and then words. My school has introduced daily handwriting work and I am hoping this produces similar results to that of Poland.

In all the schools I visited, none had a school uniform, although children did look neat and tidy. The plainest difference that stood out for me was the way that the school day was organised. Lessons begin early at 8am but the day finishes at 2pm. In order to accommodate working parents, the schools provide afterhours activities/workshops. Lessons are forty five minutes in duration with a ten minute break between lessons (there are longer breaks around midday, so that children can eat their lunch). During these times, children do not go outside for their break time as they would do in the U.K. Instead, there are wide corridors where the children can play, with markings on the floor for younger pupils and comfy chairs for older children. They are encouraged to eat their snacks, go to the toilet etc. at these times. I found this time to be rather hectic and noisy and there wasn’t any visible adult supervising across any of the schools I visited. This didn’t seem to cause any disruption to learning though, as once the bell rang, children soon lined up, walked into class quickly and quietly ready to learn. In all of the schools I visited throughout the week, only one child asked to go to the toilet during a lesson. I found this amazing, as in my school children frequently ask to do this.

Classrooms looked very different to that of the UK. They are small, although class sizes were also small (approximately 14 pupils). Rooms were stark in comparison to the U.K; no working walls or posters to encourage independent learning. Although this does create a less stimulating environment, it did contribute to a tidy uniformity between classes. Classrooms did look similar within schools and between schools in the town too. It was interesting to see that classrooms were also arranged in a similar way too, with every teacher’s desk to the left of the board and interactive whiteboard, children’s desks arranged in rows either side and a carpet space in the centre. One school, (Elblag’s Music School) had a forward approach to seating. In each room, as well as chairs, gym balls were available for children to use if they wished. Quite a number of children (particularly boys) took advantage of this but it did not interrupt their learning. I did notice that the children’s posture was
better on these than a chair. It did make me laugh when the children were asked to gather on the carpet and the children sitting on gym balls bounced over!

A final difference I noted was the age range of the children at primary school in Poland. Polish primary schools cater for children between the ages of 7 and 15 years, so it was rather unusual to see younger children and teenagers walking together in corridors. As the older children require to be taught more subject specific lessons, the organisation of the school needs to accommodate this. This means that in Poland, children between the ages of 7 and 9 are taught by their class teacher as they would do in Key Stage 1&2 in England. However, this is not the case for children between the ages of 10-15. Instead, children receive lessons delivered by subject specialist teachers, much the same as a secondary school in the U.K. We were lucky to observe one in geology and I have included a photograph to show how this lesson was organised.

Spending time experiencing education in Poland was fascinating. I will continue to reflect on the approaches I saw and I hope that I can draw on this experience throughout my career.