

# Education of the people, by the people: the elementary school in Victorian Wales

## Abstract

*Victorian elementary education in Wales has often been seen as a tool of social control and as an alien linguistic experience for children. While both these perspectives are partially correct, they simplify the diversity of education across Wales and underplay how schools were grounded in communities. This was rooted in the buildings themselves, the ways communities shaped and were interested in the work of schools, and the role and care of teachers within those communities. Of course, since communities were not homogenous bodies, education also reflected local rifts but, again, this meant elementary schools were formed by local rather than external dynamics. Despite the role of the state in education, Victorian elementary schools were in, and of, the community.*

In 1874, four years after the legislation that enabled it, the first board school in Merthyr Tydfil was opened with a ceremony that involved a procession by the town band and over a thousand children. At its conclusion, G. T. Clark, chairman of the school board and manager of a local ironworks, told a gathering of the town's 'principal inhabitants' that, for the first time, children would be 'instructed by the representatives of the people, chosen by the people. For the first time in the district of Merthyr the children of the people would be educated by the people'.<sup>1</sup>

This democratic interpretation is rather different to the popular idea of British Victorian elementary schools as places of social control. Whereas its first histories were rooted in a Victorian and Edwardian Whiggish model of historical scholarship and celebrated education as something progressive and positive, the next generation of academic writings were influenced by Marxism and the social history movement and portrayed mass schooling as something that imposed middle-class power and ideals on the workers. This interpretation was rooted in how the state and other patrons of education felt that teaching people to read the Bible would make them accept the social order and infuse them with bourgeois values such as hard work, discipline and thrift.<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, historians have seen schools as part of a project of disseminating an elite view of national identity to the working class through teaching about the Empire and encouraging a pride in national achievements.<sup>3</sup> In a seminal article on social control and education, Richard Johnson concluded, 'Supervised by its trusty teacher, surrounded by its playground wall, the school

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<sup>1</sup> 'Opening of the new Board School at Penydarren, Merthyr', *Aberdare Times*, 8 August 1874, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> On the whiggish nature of the early histories see Christopher Bischof, 'Progress and the people: histories of mass education and conceptions of Britishness, 1870–1914', *History of Education*, 49, 2 (2020), 160-83. The classic work on education as social control is Brian Simon, *Studies in the History of Education* (London, 1960). For a discussion of work on social control see Gary McCulloch, *The Struggle for the History of Education* (London, 2011), ch. 4. For education as social control in a Welsh context see D. G. Enoch, 'Schools and inspection as a mode of social control in south-east Wales, 1839-1907', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 22, 1 (1990), 9-17.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Heathorne, *For Home, Country and Race: Constructing Gender, Class, and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880-1914* (Toronto, 2000).

was to raise a new race of working people - respectful, cheerful, hard-working, loyal, pacific and religious.’<sup>4</sup>

But achieving social control through education when there was a limited budget, a *laissez-faire* attitude, and all schools were under local control was a different matter. At first, the state simply gave schools grants and advised them on how the money should be used through annual inspections. After 1862, funding became linked to pupils’ performance in an annual examination. This gave the state some control over expected attainment levels and what should be taught and teachers certainly felt under pressure to concentrate on what examinations required, not least because their salaries might be linked to the outcomes. Yet the annual inspection and examination day was only a superficial interrogation and most of what happened in classrooms on a day-to-day basis remained firmly in the control of teachers and school managers. Truancy and absences further undermined the effect of education. An awareness of this shifted the focus of education historiography from what the state was trying to achieve to examining bottom-up experiences of teaching and learning. Now Victorian education tends to be seen as something complex and diverse, with schools varying both from state expectations and each other. Local conditions are accepted as having a significant influence on how schools operated, the experience of children, the expectations and behaviours of parents, and what teachers could actually achieve.<sup>5</sup> The importance of looking at schools from the bottom up is evident in the recent work of Hester Barron on interwar London. She stresses how neither parents nor children were passive consumers of education and sees schools as ‘social worlds’ that were shaped by wider communities but also affected them, with educational experiences being ‘drivers of significant social change’. This makes, she argues, schools ‘an essential lens through which to view the social history of interwar Britain’.<sup>6</sup>

Within Wales, far less has been written about elementary education and Robert Smith’s pioneering 1999 book remains the only detailed consideration of the system as a whole. He acknowledged the limited reach and scope of education, but concluded that the system created was:

the greatest tribute to the leaders of Welsh society in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. The Wales of 1902 was very different from that of 1870. The influence of elementary education was one of the factors that facilitated economic progress and furthered change in social attitudes and the creation of a more

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Johnson, ‘Educational policy and social control in early Victorian England,’ *Past & Present*, 49, 1 (1970), 96-119, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> For an insightful example of recent approaches see: Susannah Wright, ‘Teachers, family and community in urban elementary school: evidence from English school log books c.1880-1918’, *History of Education*, 41, 2 (2012), 155-73. For children’s agency see Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth 1889–1939* (Oxford, 1981). More broadly on agency in education, see Laurence Brockliss & Nicola Sheldon (eds), *Mass Education and the Limits of State Building, c.1870–1930* (Basingstoke, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Hester Barron, *The Social World of the School: Education and Community in Interwar London* (Manchester, 2022), pp. 3, 4.

sophisticated approach to the political life of the nation. The schools created as a result of the 1870 Forster Act were a crucial influence in fashioning modern Wales.<sup>7</sup>

Russell Davies, in contrast, took a more pessimistic view. He argued schooling in rural parishes after the 1870 act was 'for most pupils, a peripheral and ephemeral experience.'<sup>8</sup> The fact that the English language dominated schools was central to such negative perspectives and this led Gareth Evans to conclude, 'To a considerable degree, the elementary school became an alien institution for generations of pupils in Victorian Wales.'<sup>9</sup>

This article argues that to see elementary education just in terms of social control or as an alien experience is to miss its importance in communities. It builds on my wider research that has argued that the Welsh language was employed far more in schools than has hitherto been understood.<sup>10</sup> Here, I follow Barron's lead and see schools not as 'a state imposition on working-class communities' but as institutions 'grounded in their local communities'.<sup>11</sup> Barron was making this argument for the interwar years but this article argues that this grounding within communities was already forming in the Victorian period. This was rooted in the buildings themselves, the ways communities shaped and were interested in the work of schools, and the role and care of teachers within those communities. Of course, since communities were not homogenous bodies, education also reflected local rifts but, again, this meant elementary schools were formed by local rather than external dynamics. Victorian elementary schools were in, and of, the community.

To make this argument, the article draws heavily on school logbooks from across Wales. Logbooks were daily diaries kept after 1862 by headmasters and mistresses in schools in receipt of state funding. They vary significantly in content and approach and were written with one eye on influencing the inspectors that read them. Many are sparse in detail and most miss out key basic details on how teaching and classrooms were conducted and

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Smith, *Schools, Politics and Society: Elementary Education in Wales, 1870-1902* (Cardiff, 1999), p. 281. Similarly, see Peter Stead, 'Schools and society in Glamorgan before 1914', *Morgannwg*, 19 (1975), 39-56, p. 42. For notable work on specific elements of Victorian elementary education see: B. L. Davies, 'The right to a bilingual education in nineteenth-century Wales', *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* (1988) 133-51; B. L. Davies, 'British schools in south Wales: the Rev. William Roberts (Nefydd), South Wales representative of the British and Foreign School Society, 1853-1863', *National Library of Wales Journal*, 18, 4 (1974), 383-96; G.R. Grigg, 'Nurseries of ignorance'? Private adventure and dame schools for the working classes in nineteenth-century Wales, *History of Education*, 34, 3 (2005), 243-62; Russell Grigg, 'Wading through children's tears': the emotional experiences of elementary school inspections, 1839-1911, *History of Education*, 49, 5 (2020), 597-61; David C. James & Brian Davies, 'Patterns of and influences on elementary school attendance in early Victorian industrial Monmouthshire 1839-1865', *History of Education*, 46, 3 (2017), 290-305; H. G. Williams, 'Learning suitable to the situation of the poorest classes: The National Society and Wales 1811-1839', *Welsh History Review*, 19, 3 (1999), 425-52; H. G. Williams, 'Nation state versus national identity: state and inspectorate in mid-Victorian Wales', *History of Education Quarterly*, 40, 2 (2000), 145-68. For historiographical reflections see Gareth Elwyn Jones, 'Education and nationhood in Wales: an historiographical analysis', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 38, 3 (2006), 263-77 & Deidre Raftery, Jane McDermid, and Gareth Elwyn Jones, 'Social change and education in Ireland, Scotland and Wales: historiography on nineteenth-century schooling', *History of Education*, 36, 4-5 (2007), 447-63.

<sup>8</sup> Russell Davies, *People, Places and Passions. Pain and Pleasure: A Social History of Wales and the Welsh, 1870-1945* (Cardiff, 2015), p. 111.

<sup>9</sup> W. Gareth Evans, 'The British state and Welsh-language education, 1850-1914', in Geraint H. Jenkins (ed.), *The Welsh Language and its Social Dimensions, 1801-1911* (Cardiff, 2000), p. 471.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Johnes, *Welsh Not: Elementary Education and the Anglicisation of Nineteenth-Century Wales* (Cardiff, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Barron, *Social World of the School*, pp. 277, 275.

managed. There is also no way of knowing whether passing records of punishments administered and other incidents were made because they were unusual or for some other reason. Some logbooks, however, are full of pontifications and reflections on work and life in schools and all, if contextualised and not taken at face value, are integral sources for both the history of education and communities more broadly.<sup>12</sup> Logbooks do not record, at least directly, the perspectives of the children and this article thus also draws on autobiographical writings. Most life stories contain memories of school but these are viewed through the prism of later experiences and most working-class people did not write autobiographies raising questions around their representativeness. Nonetheless, such sources are still invaluable in understanding how education functioned and its role in the life of individuals and communities.

### **Community spaces**

Education underwent a vast transformation between 1847 and 1900. In 1847, the infamous 'Blue Books', a state inquiry into working-class schools in Wales, were highly critical of school buildings and the quality of staff and their teaching. Schools were, the commissioners argued, failing to teach children to speak English, despite that being their primary goal and why parents sent their children there.<sup>13</sup> Their argument that schools needed to utilise the Welsh language in order to better teach English was lost in the furore caused by their bigoted comments on Nonconformity, Welsh morality, and the intrinsic value of Welsh itself. Nonetheless, the Blue Books fed into existing concerns around the state of education and it gave a fillip to the growing movement to establish better provision. In subsequent decades, the (Nonconformist) British and (Anglican) National charitable societies supported communities in building and running schools and securing government grants to help finance them. Slowly, schools moved from being held in chapels, churches, kitchens, outhouses and sheds to purpose-built buildings. But provision still struggled to keep up with a growing population in industrial Wales, while rural communities struggled to raise monies to ensure every child had access to a school. The 1870 Education Act was to fill in these gaps. It did not change what was taught nor take over control of the British and National charitable schools, but it did lay the basis for a significant expansion of education through the creation of local school boards. These were elected bodies with local tax raising powers; they were not set up everywhere but where they did exist the new boards used local taxes and central funding to embark on a significant period of school building. In 1877, there were 1,316 publicly-funded elementary schools in Wales with 223,883 pupils on their books; by 1900, there were 1,709 and more than 391,000 pupils.<sup>14</sup>

The new schools were public buildings in the heart of communities. On the outside, the schools were marked by high roofs and large windows; there might be ornate flourishes and substantial chimneys. In the larger towns, they were grand architectural statements and reflections of significant local pride. Rural communities tended to build smaller, less grandiose buildings, if only because they had fewer resources; but these schools too were

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<sup>12</sup> For discussions of logbooks see Pamela Horn, 'School Log Books', in K. M. Thompson (ed.), *Short Guides to Records, Second Series* (London, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Gwyneth Tyson Roberts, *The Language of the Blue Books: The Perfect Instrument of Empire* (Cardiff, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics, 1700-1974*, tables 12.3 and 12.6.

testaments to local efforts and fundraising.<sup>15</sup> Their importance is clear in how, unlike many of the era's town halls and chapels, many are still used for their original function. Furthermore, a school might be the only public space in a community that did not have fixed furniture. This, along with the fact that schools were not generally associated with any particular Nonconformist sect, meant the buildings were often used for both secular and religious public events, reaffirming their place in the community. So important was this function that school might actually be cancelled to make way for a community event in the day time.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 1: Caernarfon National School, 1850s (courtesy of National Library of Wales)

Inside, conditions could be less impressive. The growing population of industrial areas meant many schools were quickly too small. Buildings might have insufficient space to hang coats, or toilets that were poorly ventilated or too close to classrooms. School logbooks are full of complaints about conditions being too cold or too warm. Windows might be high up to ensure children did not look out but that could also mean lighting inside was not what it should be. None of this was conducive to learning. Yet this argument should

<sup>15</sup> The *Cambrian News* said the new Board Schools were 'very handsome' and a great credit to the boards, architects, builders and everyone else involved. 'Opening of the school board schools', *Cambrian News*, 7 August 1874, p. 5. On the architecture of schools see Malcolm Seaborne, *Schools in Wales 1500-1900: A Social and Architectural History* (Denbigh, 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Bodringallt, 23 May 1870. Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Llandeusan National, 20 September 1869. All archival references in this article are to school logbooks unless otherwise stated.



not be taken too far, especially given how children themselves came from homes that were similarly overcrowded and uncomfortable. Elizabeth Andrews (b. 1882) remembered that the conditions in her Hirwaun school were ‘appalling – bad sanitary arrangements, poor ventilation, no provision for drying clothes, and poor water supply’. She, however, still loved her time there.<sup>17</sup>

Being a public space meant there was something of a spectacle about schools. This is evident in an 1866 engraving of Aberdare British School, which shows people walking in the grounds (figure 2). Logbooks often record visitors or strangers arriving at the school suggesting they were places that people felt they should see in a local community. Indeed, in some places, children were specifically taught to greet strangers they encountered on their way to and from school.<sup>18</sup> Such interest was not always welcome. In 1867, a school in Aberaman was said to be distracted by ‘grown up persons peeping through the window’; a year earlier, a drunk man entered Bala British School creating ‘a little disturbance’.<sup>19</sup> Children who did not attend school were particularly interested in what happened inside. At the annual examination at Georgetown girls school in Merthyr, the mistress locked the yard gate to prevent some ‘unruly children of the neighbourhood from coming into the school room during the inspection’. Those children, instead, climbed up to a window to look in.<sup>20</sup>



Figure 2: Aberdare British Schools, 1866 (courtesy of Rhondda Cynon Taff library services)

Community interest in schools was part of a wider concern for children themselves. Childhood was not a static concept but the spread of education and legislation restricting child employment increasingly defined it as period of schooling.<sup>21</sup> There was also a growing

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Andrews, *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (Dinas Powys, [1957], 2006), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire Archives: Cwmcothi Board, 3 February 1878.

<sup>19</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Aberaman Boys, 30 May 1867. Dolgellau, Meirionnydd Record Office: Bala British, 13 March 1866.

<sup>20</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Georgetown Girls, 14 April 1863.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of conceptions of childhood in a Welsh context see Siwan Rosser, *Darllen y Dychymyg Creu Ystyron Newydd i Blant a Phlentyndod yn Llenyddiaeth y Bedwaredd Ganrif ar Bymtheg* (Cardiff, 2020).

celebration of the innocence of childhood, something evident in literature, popular culture and even the growing fashion of Christmas and Santa Claus. This, along with the fact that children were the future of both communities and the nation itself, meant there was concern about how they were doing.<sup>22</sup> The investments of communities and the state were products of these wider concerns for child welfare. But community concern about the young also extended to when children became a nuisance. Indeed, the extension and enforcement of compulsory attendance was at least partly driven by children misbehaving on the streets.<sup>23</sup> Such concerns were evident in rural communities too, with farmers complaining about children playing in their fields.<sup>24</sup> In 1873, the master at Treffriw reduced the lunch break by half an hour because children who did not go home to eat were liable to get into mischief by 'going about the village'.<sup>25</sup>

Yet elementary schools were not just for children, and this deepened their place in communities. Some ran evening classes for adults and teenagers, although this became less common as the century progressed and the demands on teachers increased. Men and older teenagers might enrol as normal pupils too, especially when employment was limited in a local community.<sup>26</sup> External investigations claimed this did not to cause tensions or hurt pride because it was common for different ages to learn together at Welsh Sunday Schools.<sup>27</sup> However, that was not universally true and young adults could not be made to conform or follow rules in the way children could.<sup>28</sup> An Aberaman master, for example, complained in 1874 that the 'working boys' who had entered school because of a coal strike were troublesome and disrupted progress.<sup>29</sup>

Strikes could also keep children away from school because there was no food to send with them for lunch or because they were needed to help pick coal.<sup>30</sup> In 1869, a master in the Rhondda went as far as saying, 'The gloom that has largely pervaded this place through the entire stoppage of the Bodringallt pit seems to have fallen upon the school. The attendance has been greatly thinned through that misfortune and those that remain seem to have lost all heart for their lessons.'<sup>31</sup> In rural areas, where children's labour was vital to farmers, attendance levels were affected by the rhythms of the agricultural calendar. The existence and timing of the long summer holiday was determined by agricultural needs, but, in term time too, harvests, stone picking, shearing and the like all kept away substantial numbers of children; some rural schools simply decided to shut rather than face the inevitable near-empty classrooms that major events in the agricultural calendar could cause.

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<sup>22</sup> On the wider history of childhood see Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Sascha Auerbach, 'Some punishment should be devised': parents, children and the state in Victorian London', *The Historian*, 71, 4 (2009), 757-79.

<sup>24</sup> Dolgellau, Meirionnydd Record Office: Bala British, 28 June 1866.

<sup>25</sup> Conwy, Conwy Archives: Treffriw British, 20-24 October 1874.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see the note on an 18-year-old joining a school: Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire Archives: Cwmbach British, 28 February 1888.

<sup>27</sup> Schools Inquiry Commission, *General Reports by Assistant Commissioners. Vol VIII: Midland Countries and Northumberland* (London, 1868), p. 6-7. *Reports of Assistant Commissioners appointed to inquire into State of Popular Education in England*, vol. II (1861), pp. 480-1.

<sup>28</sup> At the 1879 inspection of Talybont board school, a young man learning arithmetic looked out the window causing the inspector to draw attention to the need for good manners in his report. Conwy, Conwy Archives: Talybont Board, 7-13 April 1879.

<sup>29</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Aberaman Boys, 1-5 & 8-13 June 1874.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: United Collieries (Boys), Treorchy, 11-15 July 1898.

<sup>31</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Bodringallt, 29 November 1869.

Other significant local happenings such as fairs, religious gatherings and eisteddfodau could also lead to children missing school. The master of Treffriw recorded 'when there is anything of a public 'nature' in the neighbourhood it is useless to keep school as I find most of the parents encourage their children to attend such things.'<sup>32</sup> At Tregaron, market day kept children away on the first Tuesday of every month so the school managers decided to open on Saturdays in those weeks instead.<sup>33</sup> In such ways, schools were shaped by local circumstances and happenings; far from being external impositions, they were integral parts of the life of every community.

### Contested spaces

Such interruptions could be frustrating for teachers because they felt the effect on attendance undermined efforts to teach the children in preparation for the annual examinations. This meant schools could come into conflict with wider community practices and traditions. At Groesgoch in Pembrokeshire, for example, attendance was disrupted by the irregularity of the local calendar, where in addition to the 25<sup>th</sup> of December and 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 'Old Christmas' and 'Old New Year's Days' were both celebrated on two different dates within the community, while Epiphany was celebrated on as many as three different dates.<sup>34</sup> In Anglesey, schools were disturbed by a local custom of 'clapping', where children visited local farms before Easter to be given eggs. There was little they could do against such a well-established custom but one teacher on the island still called it 'barbarous'.<sup>35</sup> After an epidemic caused the custom to cease one year, another master recorded he hoped it would never return.<sup>36</sup> In other places, teachers made conscious and successful efforts to change local culture. At Llidiart-y-Waun, the master complained that there had been much absenteeism because of 'a stupid habit' of farmers inviting children to watch sheep washing and shearing, making the event 'quite a holiday'. Two years later he recorded,

I have, by dint of persuasion etc., almost stamped out the custom. As the shearing season extends over nine days or a fortnight, it was rather a serious drawback to have the children going from one farmhouse to another during all that time. It was an old homely custom, but in these days it can't be indulged in as every day is important to the welfare of the school.<sup>37</sup>

More often, however, schools served communities rather than competed against them. Sending children to school cost families money, both in terms of the fees that most schools required before their abolition by law in 1891, and in the wages lost when children were in class rather than at work.<sup>38</sup> This meant that schools had to concentrate on what working-class parents wanted to be delivered if children were not going to be kept away.<sup>39</sup> It was this that lay behind how schools concentrated on teaching basic literacy in English,

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<sup>32</sup> Conwy, Conwy Archives: Treffriw, 27 September 1876.

<sup>33</sup> Aberystwyth, Ceredigion Archives: Tregaron National, 4 March 1873.

<sup>34</sup> Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire Archives: Groesgoch Board, 6 January 1874.

<sup>35</sup> Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Llandeusan National, 11 April 1870.

<sup>36</sup> Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Aberffraw Board, 12 April 1900.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in M. J. Evans, 'Elementary education in Montgomeryshire 1850-1900', *The Montgomeryshire Collections*, 63, 1 (1973), 1-46, p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Christine M. Heward, 'Compulsion, work and family: a case study from nineteenth-century Birmingham', in Ronald K. Goodenow and William E. Marsden (eds), *The City and Education in Four Nations* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 87.



something that brought both prestige and economic advantages.<sup>40</sup> But communities had other needs and the most enlightened teachers knew this. At the small coastal school where she was headmistress, Sarah Jane Rees (b.1839), for example, used her own experience of sailing to teach maritime skills and help local boys prepare for master mariners' certificates.<sup>41</sup>

Such approaches were gradually encouraged by the state. Needlework was made compulsory for girls in 1862. This was about providing people with practical skills. Some mothers objected, saying they could teach this themselves, but others sent children to school with sewing that needed doing.<sup>42</sup> In the 1880s and 90s, other practical subjects such as agriculture, cookery, drawing and domestic economy were permitted, though not required, by state regulations. However, making such provision was not easy in small schools and most did not take advantage of the evolution of the permitted curriculum, not least because they were too focussed on teaching English. In 1897, manual instruction (carpentry and the like) was taught in a quarter of schools in English county boroughs, but in just seven in the whole of Wales.<sup>43</sup> Making the local environment part of lessons should have been easier. The education department saw visits to the local area as important in teaching history, geography and science.<sup>44</sup> This did happen at times; in 1900, children at Brithdir were taken up the mountain Cader Idris as a reward for good attendance and, when on top, they were taught about what they could see.<sup>45</sup> However, it is evident from logbooks that such trips were not common. Indeed, local history and geography were much neglected. In Newport, an inspector found in 1877 that pupils knew the names of rivers in Africa but not the one in their own town.<sup>46</sup> Such problems extended to a common failure to teach both Welsh and Welsh geography and history too. But there does not seem to have been any real local pressure for that to change and, even when the education department began making concerted efforts from the 1890s to encourage attention to Welsh issues, schools were generally reluctant because there was no community demand otherwise.<sup>47</sup>

Much more effort was put into 'improving' the character of local children. Education had always been seen as a way of improving people and the intervention of the state did not lessen this.<sup>48</sup> At many schools, children were subject to lectures on the virtues of cleanliness, obedience, honesty, not swearing, kindness and even smoking and drinking.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Johnes, *Welsh Not*, ch. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Jane Aaron, *Cranogwen* (Cardiff, 2023), pp. 53-5.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Gareth Llewelyn, *Sand in the Glass* (London, 1943), p. 7. Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Llangefni National, 24 March 1876.

<sup>43</sup> *General Report for the Year 1898 by A. G. Legard, Esq., one of Her Majesty's Chief Inspectors, on the Schools in the Welsh Division*, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Dolgellau, Meirionnydd Record Office: Brithdir, 1 & 5 June 1900.

<sup>46</sup> Smith, *Schools, Politics and Society*, pp. 142-3.

<sup>47</sup> Johnes, *Welsh Not*, chs. 5 & 9.

<sup>48</sup> Susannah Wright, 'Moral instruction, urban poverty and English elementary schools in the late nineteenth century', in Nigel Goose & Katrina Honeyman (eds), *Childhood and Child Labour in Industrial England: Diversity and Agency, 1750-1914* (Farnham, 2013), 277-95.

<sup>49</sup> For examples: honesty: Ruthin, NE Wales Archives: Llangollen National, 16 December 1868; not swearing: Dolgellau, Meirionnydd Record Office: Brithdir, 25 March 1873; temperance: Caernarfon Record Office: Llanllfni British, 21 September 1894; smoking: Caernarfon Record Office: Bethel, 2 September 1864; Swearing: Llandrindod Wells, Powys Archives: Trecastell National, 28 September 1864; obedience: Dolgellau,

Despite having no formal power to do so, some teachers punished children for their conduct outside school or even for not going to Sunday School. In 1864, the master of Glasbury (Breconshire) punished a group of boys for throwing mud at the local church doors and stones at its bells. The next day, he spoke to children about the importance of regular and punctual attendance and of making the most of their time and striving to get on; 'What is worth doing is worth doing well' he told them.<sup>50</sup> Such ideas of improving children were shot through with prejudices towards working-class children and communities. In 1877, the teacher at Talybont board school recorded that he 'Cautioned children against some bad habits prevalent in the neighbourhood.'<sup>51</sup> In 1871, the master at Bryncethin complained 'The home habits have a great deal of influences upon the children to their great disadvantage'.<sup>52</sup> This summed up how moral education was often seen as necessary because of perceived failures at home. Schools were thus to provide what parents could or would not and 'rescue children from the influence of the domestic environment'.<sup>53</sup>

There were pressures on teachers from 'above' that encouraged such approaches. The state education department approved of moral education but gave no clear guidance on how this should be done.<sup>54</sup> The absence of specific instructions on teaching methods and approaches was not unusual and much of the state's influence came down to its inspectors. It was they who decided grant levels and offered advice to teachers on how schools should be run. Some were clearly snobs or at least thought improving working-class communities was some challenge. In 1865, one inspector in Wales concluded 'if their school career can help to make children more orderly, obedient, and truthful, it has accomplished no mean result'.<sup>55</sup> The 1861 inspection report for St David's Roman Catholic school in Swansea claimed that 'the excessive ignorance and dictatorial influence of the parents render any progress the result of almost a miracle of patience in the teacher.' A year later, the inspection report said the teacher deserved much credit 'for her success in civilizing and disciplining the children of a population remarkable for roughness'.<sup>56</sup> How much informal pressure inspectors actually put on teachers to 'civilise' is not recorded but written school reports show that moral issues were never their priority and they instead concentrated on examining children in the 3Rs in their brief annual visits to schools.

Another gentle push on teachers to address moral issues was their training and professional literature. One teaching manual encouraged teachers to address 'certain disagreeable habits' that were 'very offensive, and injurious to the discipline or cleanliness of the school'. These included eating bread during lessons, yawning, keeping hands in pockets and standing in lazy or lolling postures.<sup>57</sup> The snobbery that underpinned such advice was openly evident in *The Schoolmaster*, a weekly newspaper for teachers. In

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Meirionnydd Record Office: Bala British, 10 April 1866. Teaching children about the evils of drink was not always popular with Conservative members of school boards; see Smith, *Schools, Politics & Society*, p. 151.

<sup>50</sup> Llandrindod Wells, Powys Archives: Glasbury Parochial, 7, 8 November 1864.

<sup>51</sup> Conwy, Conwy Archives: Talybont Board, 21-26 May 1877.

<sup>52</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Bryncethin National, 8 March 1871.

<sup>53</sup> Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, p. 73. Wright, 'Moral instruction', p. 288.

<sup>54</sup> Wright, 'Moral instruction', pp. 280, 292.

<sup>55</sup> *Report of the Committee of Council on Education, 1865-66*, p. 64.

<sup>56</sup> Swansea, Richard Burton Archives: St David's RC, 1861 & 1862 reports.

<sup>57</sup> P. W. Joyce, *A Hand-Book of School Management and Methods of Teaching* (Dublin, 1863), pp. 86-7.

defending corporal punishment, an editorial argued in 1872 that the amount of punishment needed was determined

in a great measure by the domestic surroundings of his pupils. It is an easy task to control those pupils who come from well-regulated homes, who are carefully nurtured by parental example, and who live in a neighbourhood where the decencies and proprieties of life are respected. It is otherwise when the children of the reckless, the immoral, and the drunken are assembled, and in districts where ear and eye are continually polluted by contact with vice in various forms.<sup>58</sup>

However, the moral struggle in schools was not simply snobbery imposed from outside. In addressing moral issues, teachers were also reflecting and acting upon pressures that existed within Welsh society. There was a powerful desire within Welsh public culture to emphasise society's respectability to counteract the public moral criticisms made in the notorious Blue Books. Chapels and Sunday Schools, run from within communities and with no external state influence, usually shared the same desire to morally shape children as the day schools. This was not just about keeping up appearances. There was a clear spiritual and theological basis to Nonconformity's desire to convert non-believers and save souls through improving behaviours. Moreover, as society changed, with population movements, industrialisation, urbanisation and technological change, respectability was a recurring concern and it had to be repeatedly reasserted. Those who transgressed, whether that was through how they behaved in public or private, could thus find themselves condemned, shunned or even prosecuted.<sup>59</sup> The moral struggle inside schools was also happening in the wider communities they existed within.

Most teachers generally came from working-class backgrounds and when they criticised the morals of communities, they were criticising their own people.<sup>60</sup> In doing so, they were demonstrating how deeply felt the divides between the rough and respectable working class were, even if these did oversimplify working-class culture and miss how people could move between the two positions according to context.<sup>61</sup> The salience of this divide was also evident in how parents might approve of the attempts to 'improve' their children. At St David's Roman Catholic school in Swansea, the mistress recorded that two boys had been withdrawn because she was 'too gentle' and would not 'beat & chastise them as a strong master would do'. But at their new school, the mistress recorded, 'they soon learned to swear, blaspheme, fight, and become incorrigible', and thus the mother was anxious to have them readmitted at their old school.<sup>62</sup> Such concerns and fears of rougher children among parents meant some kept their offspring away from board schools altogether and used private institutions instead.<sup>63</sup> Such attitudes could rub off on their

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<sup>58</sup> 'Corporal punishment', *The Schoolmaster*, 17 August 1872, p. 65.

<sup>59</sup> Andy Croll & Martin Johnes, 'A heart of darkness? Leisure, respectability and the aesthetics of vice in Victorian Wales', in Mike Huggins & J. A. Mangan (eds), *Disreputable Pleasures? Vicious Victorians at Play* (London, 2004), 153-71.

<sup>60</sup> For the history of teachers see Asher Tropp, *The School Teachers: The Growth of the Teaching Profession in England and Wales from 1800 to the Present Day* (London, 1977) and Christopher Bischoff, *Teaching Britain: Elementary Teachers & the State of the Everyday, 1846-1906* (Oxford, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> Peter Bailey, 'Will the real Bill Banks stand up? Towards a role analysis of mid-Victorian working-class respectability', *Journal of Social History*, 12, 3 (1979), 336-53.

<sup>62</sup> Swansea, Richard Burton Archives, St David's RC, 15 July 1873.

<sup>63</sup> Smith, *Schools, Politics & Society*, p. 140.

children too. The son of a printer, born in 1905, remembered of his first day at school in Cardiff that he was afraid he might have to sit next to one of the children dressed in smelly rags.<sup>64</sup>

As well as the influence of tensions within the working class, schools were also shaped by local relations between classes. In some districts, parents came under pressure from local employers to send their children to school, a clear demonstration how the power of employers ran deep and wide. In 1870, parents of absentee children at Dafen tinplate works National school were warned that any loss in the school's government's grant, which was linked to attendance and children's performance in exams, would be deducted from their wages.<sup>65</sup> Sometimes the opposite happened. The labour needs of some influential local employers could lead to children being tempted away from school.<sup>66</sup> When this happened there was a little a teacher could do. At Aberffraw, a teacher was vexed by a gamekeeper coming into school to hire boys for 'illegal employment' as game beaters for a local landowner. The fact the gamekeeper then later came back to pay the boys, and thus publicly reward them for missing school, rubbed salt into the wound.<sup>67</sup>

This was the subtle power of the gentry in action. Their power effected education in other ways too. The 1870 education act required the creation of school boards where provision was inadequate but the gentry often feared this would mean a dilution of its power in favour of local Nonconformists. In Cardiff, the hostility of the Marquess of Bute contributed to a board not being formed until 1875. Compulsory purchase orders had to be used because he opposed the building of some schools on his land for fear they might affect property prices.<sup>68</sup> Once created, the boards were dominated by the middle class rather than the wealthiest in society but this was not always true. In Merthyr, Rose Crawshay the wife of a powerful ironmaster, influenced the rest of the board to attempt to do away with corporal punishment.<sup>69</sup> Even if the gentry were not on a school board, their influence could still be powerful. In Gower, an inspector complained in 1884 that education provision in the locality was not satisfactory because 'The majority of the Board are completely in the hands of the great landowners of the neighbourhood, and seem disinclined to act contrary to their personal interests'.<sup>70</sup> However, as Matthew Cragoe has argued, the Welsh gentry and aristocracy did have a strong sense of paternalism.<sup>71</sup> Most offered financial support to schools and paid for treats such as special teas. In 1869, children at Llandeusant National school marched in procession to a local inn, 'where they were amply treated with cakes and coppers' by the local lady of the manor's agent, to mark the walking of the boundaries of the local hundred.<sup>72</sup> However, gratitude was expected for such paternalism and, in

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<sup>64</sup> W. C. Elvet Thomas, *Tyfu'n Gymro* (Llandysul, 1972), p. 100.

<sup>65</sup> Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire Archives: Dafen Tin Plate Works National, 17 October 1870.

<sup>66</sup> Bischoff, *Teaching Britain*, p. 185.

<sup>67</sup> Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Aberffraw, 21 December 1898, 1 December 1899.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, *Schools, Politics & Society*, pp. 76, 100.

<sup>69</sup> 'Corporal punishment', *The Schoolmaster*, 7 September 1872, p. 98. On Crawshay see A. V. John, 'Beyond paternalism: the ironmaster's wife in the industrial community', in A. V. John (ed.), *Our Mother's Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History, 1830-1939* (Cardiff, 1991), 43-68.

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Gareth Elwyn Jones, 'Education in Glamorgan since 1780' in Prys Morgan (ed), *Glamorgan County History*, vol. 6 (Cardiff, 1988), 315-332, p. 321.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew Cragoe, *An Anglican Aristocracy: The Moral Economy of the Landed Estate in Carmarthenshire 1832-1895* (Oxford, 1996).

<sup>72</sup> Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Llandeusant National, 19 October 1869.

preparation for receiving a tea from him, children at Aberaman were taught 'God Bless Lord Bute'.<sup>73</sup> Paternalism also co-existed with snobbery. This was evident in the diary of Amy Dillwyn, the daughter of a Swansea industrialist. After volunteering in a local school, she wrote of the children: 'I wish they weren't so dirty; they will clean their slates by spitting on them & the girls afterwards rub theirs with their pinafores which are also used as pocket handkerchiefs. Now that's nasty. Then all their clothes smell so strong that in hot weather one can hardly stand it'.<sup>74</sup>

Schools thus reflected and reproduced both the overt and subtle local stratifications within society.<sup>75</sup> But, for all the tensions around class and respectability, the most profound community rift that shaped education was religious. Before the 1870 Act, there were significant rivalries between the National and British educational societies as both sought to secure local religious loyalties. This was particularly important for the National Society since Anglicanism was clearly a minority adherence in Wales. Anglican schools might encourage or even require their pupils to attend church on Sundays or even midweek and to learn the catechism, with the hope of drawing them away from the chapels.<sup>76</sup> The fact that Wales remained staunchly Nonconformist suggests this did not work; indeed, one minister claimed that the proselytising of National schools caused Nonconformist parents to develop 'a prejudice and dislike' towards the church.<sup>77</sup> Rivalries between Anglicans and Nonconformists dominated Welsh discussions of the 1870 education act and the subsequent creation of school boards.<sup>78</sup> Nonconformists had their own internal intolerances and there were cases and allegations of teachers losing their jobs because they belonged to the 'wrong' sect.<sup>79</sup> Teachers might be more lenient on those who were better dressed or on children whose parents shared the same religious affiliation as them.<sup>80</sup> There were genuine religious differences at play in all this rather than just notions of local power and influence. Amy Dillwyn recorded in her diary that she had given a lesson on baptism and the church with 'much fear & trembling ... I am so afraid of offending the Dissenters & being the cause of the school coming to grief & yet I cannot in conscience go on teaching on religious subjects & not teach what are to me all-important truths.' Nonetheless, she concluded 'Of course I shall try & guard what I say as much as possible from giving offence.'<sup>81</sup>

Her desire not to give offence points to how education could be a common ground rather than a source of religious conflict. There were cases such as the Marquess of Anglesey's refusal of permission for a new British school on his land, but these were not

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<sup>73</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Aberaman Boys, 8 September 1868.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in David Painting, *Amy Dillwyn* (Cardiff, 2013), p. 44.

<sup>75</sup> William E. Marsden, 'Social stratification and nineteenth-century English urban education', in Ronald K. Goodenow & William E. Marsden (eds), *The City and Education in Four Nations* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>76</sup> For example, Ruthin, NE Wales Archives: Gresford National, 14 March 1881.

<sup>77</sup> David Davies, *Reminiscences of My Country and My People* (Cardiff, 1925), p. 67.

<sup>78</sup> For a detailed discussion of the rivalries and tensions over creating new schools in Llangefni see Neil J. Smelser, *Social Paralysis and Social Change: British Working-Class Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1991), pp. 176-87.

<sup>79</sup> See the account in J. Elwyn Hughes & André, Lomozik, *Canmlwyddiant Ysgol y Cefnfaes Bethesda ynghyd â Hanes Canolfan Gymdeithasol y Cefnfaes* (Bethesda, 2007), pp. 5-6.

<sup>80</sup> Sir Henry Jones, *Old Memories* (London, 1922), p. 33.

<sup>81</sup> Swansea, Richard Burton Archives: Amy Dillwyn diary, 10 June 1866. Quotes used courtesy of Susan Morris and Richard Burton Archives, Swansea University (Ref. DC6/1).

common and the gentry generally supported Nonconformist-controlled schools.<sup>82</sup> This reflected how, despite the intensity of religious arguments, there was more that united than divided the Anglicans and dissenters. Behind their conflicts were powerful shared assumptions that the education of the masses was important, needed support and should have a Christian character. A realisation of this could lead to compromises such as the one in Dyserth, where the rector agreed to Nonconformists having a majority on the management committee of a new local school.<sup>83</sup> Parents were also flexible when it came to religious ideals. Some refused to send their children to Anglican-run schools but far more were more interested in schools that were convenient and effective. Thus the inspector Longueville Jones said in 1857 that only a third of children at Anglican schools were from church families.<sup>84</sup> Nor were National schools straightforward beacons of Anglicanism. Many never enforced church attendance or the catechism and instead were almost indistinguishable from British schools. Indeed, their teachers might actually be Nonconformists since there were just not enough Welsh Anglican teachers to fill all the vacancies.<sup>85</sup> For all the appearance of community conflict within education, the daily realities could be far more harmonious.

### **Teachers and the community**

It was the teachers that really defined a school, not its religious nature. Given the size of the profession, there was no such thing as a typical teacher and they varied in temperament and approach. Because schools were community institutions, people could be very judgemental of local teachers, holding them responsible for the condition and behaviour of local children. They might visit a teacher's home or workplace to complain about children's conduct or even their ability to answer a stranger's questions.<sup>86</sup> Parents, too, regularly visited schools to complain about how their children were being taught, and in particular, disciplined. Many argued their case vigorously; some even turned violent.<sup>87</sup> Parents did not have it all their own way. Unless they were willing to withdraw their child, there was little they could actually do about a teacher they did not value. In mining areas, some collieries insisted on seeing a certificate confirming that a child had completed their education before employing them, and this gave teachers some power over parents. The 1870 education act allowed local bylaws making attendance at school compulsory and this became universal after 1880. However, enforcing this was not easy, not least because some parents could not afford the fees that all schools charged until 1891. It was thus always important that, as one inspector put it, teachers won 'the confidence of the people'.<sup>88</sup> This required listening to parents and respecting the local culture. With demands coming from managers, parents, neighbours and inspectors, the best teachers 'managed their schools by negotiation'. They explained local conditions to inspectors and helped ensure schools

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<sup>82</sup> D. Eryl Davies, *Christian Schools: Christianity and Education in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Wales and Its Relevance for Today* (Bridgend, 1978), p. 27. Cragoe (*An Anglican Aristocracy*) argues that the gentry did support the establishment of British schools.

<sup>83</sup> Davies, *Christian Schools*, p. 39.

<sup>84</sup> *Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education, 1857-58*, p. 496.

<sup>85</sup> Robert Roberts, *A Wandering Scholar: The Life and Opinions of Robert Roberts* (Cardiff, 1991), p. 257.

<sup>86</sup> For example, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales: Diary of Harry Thomas, Llanmaes, 10 May 1859. Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire Archives: Five Roads British, 11 October 1867.

<sup>87</sup> For discussions of parents and schools see J. S. Hurt, *Elementary Schooling and the Working Classes, 1860-1918* (London, 1979), ch. 7 & Johnes, *Welsh Not*, ch. 8.

<sup>88</sup> *Report of the Committee of Council on Education 1872-73*, p. 237.



worked with rather than against communities.<sup>89</sup> One teacher said that he always found the best approach with parents was to listen.<sup>90</sup> Angry parents could also be placated once they heard a teacher's side of a story of punishment. In 1863, after a girl was punished for disobedience, the mother came to Georgetown girls schools to discuss it; after having the circumstances explained to her, she left 'satisfied'.<sup>91</sup> Teachers might visit the parents of irregular attendees, to persuade them to send children to school, or local employers to explain why hiring young children was wrong.<sup>92</sup> At Blaenau Llangernyw British school, the master even felt that his personal visits to parents were more effective in ensuring attendance than the law on compulsion introduced after 1880, which he implied was not enforced with care or fairness.<sup>93</sup> Teachers might also try to temper local influences that they felt were unfair on parents. In 1885, the Trefor Welsh Granite Quarry Company insisted the teacher in its school tell parents who claimed they could not pay fees that they must get the parish to pay or withdraw their children. However, he decided not to do this, except in the cases of those who gave 'great terrible insolence'.<sup>94</sup>

Teachers were able to exercise some influence over parents because their occupation was a position accorded some respect if not abused or conducted contrary to local needs or with too much conceit.<sup>95</sup> Frederick Hoblely was just nineteen when he was appointed master of Narbeth National school in 1852. He lodged at a local farm and got on well with the boys he taught, finding them 'bright, quick and intelligent'. He liked the local people very much: 'they were always very kind and considerate, and always treated me with great respect and courtesy', giving him the best chair when he called at their home.<sup>96</sup> Hoblely moved to Wales from England but around three quarters of teachers working in Wales were Welsh and thus shared many values with the communities they taught in.<sup>97</sup> Sometimes school closures were because a teacher wanted to attend a local event rather than just because the children did.<sup>98</sup> Some went along with customs that outsiders would have disapproved of. Huw T. Edwards (b. 1892) remembered there was a tradition at his school at Ro-wen that every new boy had to fight on his first day to 'show his worth'. Rather than stopping this, the teacher would watch to see how they fared.<sup>99</sup> Many teachers had positions of authority in local religious institutions. They might provide local services such as letter writing and the like.<sup>100</sup> Many clearly cared for their pupils. Frank Hodges, who went to school in Abertillery in the 1890s, thought it was many teachers' 'devotion to duty and real love of children' that saved pupils from the poor education that conditions would have otherwise led to.<sup>101</sup> When Rh. Roberts left his 'beloved pupils' after six years working at

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<sup>89</sup> Bischoff, *Teaching Britain*, p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Llanerchymedd British, 1 November 1864.

<sup>91</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Georgetown Girls, 17 February 1863.

<sup>92</sup> For example, Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Maesteg Garth British 7 March 1893 & Caernarfon Record Office: Abergwyngregyn National, 24 July 1891.

<sup>93</sup> Ruabon, NE Wales Archives: Blaenau Llangernyw British 17 August 1869, 17 July 1885.

<sup>94</sup> Caernarfon Record Office: Trefor Welsh Granite Quarry Company school, 6 November 1885.

<sup>95</sup> Tropp, *The School Teachers*, p. 34.

<sup>96</sup> 'From the autobiography of Frederick Hoblely: a nineteenth-century schoolteacher', *Alta: The University of Birmingham Review*, 6 (1968), 331-9.

<sup>97</sup> Johnes, *Welsh Not*, ch. 5.

<sup>98</sup> Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Llangeinwen National, 24 August 1877.

<sup>99</sup> Huw T. Edwards, *Hewn from the Rock* (Cardiff, 1967), p. 22.

<sup>100</sup> For example, see J. Lloyd Williams, *Atgofion Tri Chwarter Canrif, cyf. IV* (London, 1945), pp. 229-30.

<sup>101</sup> Frank Hodges, *My Adventures as Labour Leader* (London, 1924), p. 5.

Llanddoged, he recorded 'it would be difficult to find a nicer lot of children, and one could not have spent over six years with them without feeling a pang of sorrow at the thought of parting with them. May God Bless them all!'<sup>102</sup>

Teachers who did not understand local culture often did not succeed. Early in the century, there had been a fashion for employing teachers from England to help children learn English. However, the impracticality of a teacher not speaking the same language as pupils meant this faded.<sup>103</sup> But the problem of external teachers went beyond language. In 1865, inspector Joseph Bowstead noted that some English-monoglot teachers from Pembrokeshire had done well in Welsh-speaking areas because they understood local customs and manners. In contrast:

an English youth, fresh from a London normal school, when transported into a remote corner of the principality, is apt to regard the people around him as semi-barbarians, and himself as the only person in the locality who has any real pretensions to civilization. He soon lets this feeling appear in his intercourse with his scholars, and the remarks which he drops from time to time are carried with the speed of wind to every fireside within reach of his school.

This would, he argued, cause attendance levels to fall away.<sup>104</sup>

However, it was not always easy to find a teacher that 'that suits the neighbourhood' as one school board put it.<sup>105</sup> There was a shortage of Welsh-speaking teachers in rural districts because many chose to seek employment in urban areas or England where wages were higher.<sup>106</sup> Thus, throughout the period, there were English-monoglot teachers working in Welsh-speaking communities. The tensions and problems that this could cause were evident at Pennant National school in Montgomeryshire. In 1891, a new mistress recorded her annoyance that a member of the board had come into school and spoken to his granddaughter in Welsh which she did not understand. The board member took the unusual step of responding to this in the logbook, stating that there had been complaints that girls were made to constantly knit for their new teacher and that the lower age groups were being neglected. After the mistress denied this, he sought the truth of the matter from his granddaughter. Perhaps feeling that the community was uniting against her, the mistress promptly resigned.<sup>107</sup>

### **Learning and social change**

The continuation of Welsh monoglotism in rural communities is a reminder of the limited impact of education. Yet English was spreading, and while migration was the primary driving force in this, education was teaching some children the basics of a new language, even if it was how much they would use English in later life that would determine their fluency.<sup>108</sup> More broadly, education was surely part of the way Wales and Britain became modern societies, as communities became less focused on local conditions and interacted more and more with the rest of the nation and beyond, creating what James Vernon called a 'society

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<sup>102</sup> Conwy, Conwy Archives: Llanddoged, 24 December 1887.

<sup>103</sup> Johnes, *Welsh Not*, ch. 5.

<sup>104</sup> *Committee of Council on Education, 1864-65*, pp. 157-8.

<sup>105</sup> Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire Archives: Five Roads Board school, managers' minute book, 4 January 1876.

<sup>106</sup> Johnes, *Welsh Not*, ch. 5.

<sup>107</sup> Llandrindod Wells, Powys Archives: National School Pennant, September 1891.

<sup>108</sup> Johnes, *Welsh Not*, ch. 9.

of strangers'.<sup>109</sup> In theory, maps on school walls and geography lessons would help people in remote communities appreciate there was a wider world; history, meanwhile, connected these strangers, helping form an imagined community based on Queen, Country and Empire. But these were abstract concepts and teachers made few claims of being responsible for such grand achievements. They knew, after all, that it was really the 3Rs that dominated their work. Geography, history and any other subject struggled to find much time in the curriculum. Some children did not even understand their history and geography lessons because their English was not good enough.<sup>110</sup>



Figure 3: Pupils and teachers at Llangurig, 1891 (courtesy of National Library of Wales)

In contrast, some teachers did feel they were having success when it came to moral and behavioural issues. At Troedyrhiw mixed school, the teacher recorded for two weeks he had 'made extra exertions' to get children to come to school clean and punished a few 'with a slight stroke on their hand for being dirty after repeated warnings.' A week later, he noted with satisfaction: 'The children put on a much cleaner appearance owing to my very great vigilance in respect to washing'.<sup>111</sup> In 1881, the master at Llandegfan recorded:

No serious breach of discipline has occurred for some time which testifies to much improvement in general behaviour. Indeed, lying, fighting, pilfering, truant playing and bad language which prevailed to an alarming extent a few months ago have altogether disappeared as far as can be gathered from constant watchfulness.<sup>112</sup>

Those outside education could see an influence too. At Llanllwchaern, the local vicar in the 1860s thought that the master's moral influence had brought a 'marked improvement' in the children's manners and general conduct.<sup>113</sup> In 1824, an anonymous inhabitant of Llanerchymedd wrote to his local paper, celebrating recent developments in education:

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<sup>109</sup> James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley, 2014).

<sup>110</sup> Johnes, *Welsh Not*, ch. 5.

<sup>111</sup> Cardiff, Glamorgan Archives: Troedyrhiw Mixed, 11 & 18 April 1883.

<sup>112</sup> Llangefni, Anglesey Archives: Llandegfan National, 20 May 1881.

<sup>113</sup> Llandrindod Wells, Powys Archives: Llanllwchaern National, 5 December 1865.

every body who likes goodness and quietness, ought to do what they can to help these Schools. Our town is not the same place it was, the streets are quieter a great deal, and where I used to have ten panes broke in my shop window in the year, I have not one now.<sup>114</sup>

Yet whether morality and behaviour actually changed is a different matter. Some teachers admitted that their moral lectures did not work.<sup>115</sup> Russell Davies has shown how public respectability in Carmarthenshire at the turn of the twentieth century hid a world where crime, illegitimacy and vice were rife.<sup>116</sup> Nor was there always agreement on what constituted wrongful behaviour. One example of this was a case at Swyddfynnon, where a six-year-old boy was caned for poking out the eyes of a newly-born bird with a pin. His parent came to school the next day and asked the teacher how he had the heart to prevent children amusing themselves.<sup>117</sup> Education could thus only go so far if it ran contrary to community norms. This was why attacks on Welsh in schools did not lead to a decline in Welsh speaking in the countryside when the language was celebrated in chapels and firmly embedded in community life. In contrast, lectures against lying might be more effective because they were running with rather than against what was heard at chapel.

The impact of schools was also undermined by very practical issues. Family finances and the need to work meant many children's education was intermittent or shortlived. When they did attend, they might have walked several miles in unsuitable clothes. Children might not have had much to eat before school. None of this would have made it easy to concentrate. Moreover, the fact that many schools shunned the Welsh language undermined significantly their efforts to teach English literacy, condemning many children to learn to read English without understanding the meaning of their books because their own language was not used to explain things.<sup>118</sup> Even as this became less common with the greater use of Welsh to teach English, children were not being taught to speak English since their examinations, and thus their teaching, concentrated on written and reading tasks. Much of this was based on rote learning and repetition. In England, there were those who felt that what education had best equipped them for was being bored.<sup>119</sup>

Of course, some children – whether through their own talents, hard work or with help from a teacher, neighbour or family member – did learn and become literate. Jonathan Rose has argued that by teaching basic literacy, elementary schools set pupils free to read on their own. His research has shown how some working-class men led vibrant intellectual lives and took a keen interest in politics, science, philosophy and classic fiction.<sup>120</sup> But the impact of such successes on communities could actually be negative. David Howell has suggested that better education encouraged migration from rural areas, as it restricted aggregate family earnings by taking children out of the labour force and then trained the next generation to be clerks, railway porters, and shop assistants rather than agricultural

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<sup>114</sup> Letter, *North Wales Gazette*, 12 August 1824, p. 3.

<sup>115</sup> At St Davids RC school (Swansea), children were lectured about the 'moral, social and sanitary benefits' of 'early rising', but the teacher still complained that many were still habitually late. Swansea, Richard Burton Archives: St Davids RC, 17 December 1873.

<sup>116</sup> Russell Davies, *Secret Sins: Sex, Violence & Society in Carmarthenshire, 1870-1920* (Cardiff, 1996).

<sup>117</sup> Aberystwyth, Ceredigion Archives: Swyddfynnon, 11 May 1883.

<sup>118</sup> Johnes, *Welsh Not*, chs. 3 and 6.

<sup>119</sup> Anna Davin, *Growing Up Poor: Home, School and Street in London, 1870-1914* (London, 1996), p. 216.

<sup>120</sup> Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, 2001), chs. 5 & 7.

workers.<sup>121</sup> Even if educated children did not leave, there is some evidence from England of children starting to look down on their working-class rural backgrounds as they developed wider aspirations.<sup>122</sup> There were similar hints in Wales. David Davies MP, who was chairman of a school board, reported that one farmer told him of a thirteen-year-old he had taken on: 'the first thing he does is to take up a newspaper, and if I tell him to get on with his work, he snubs me telling me he knows more than I do.'<sup>123</sup>

But it is vital not to exaggerate the impact of education. For all the vast economic changes undergone, much of life in Victorian Wales remained remarkably unchanged. Religion, superstition, and local customs and traditions all proved remarkably resilient into the twentieth century and could even be strengthened and disseminated by written discussions and accounts.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, most people remained within their communities, proud of where they came from and assertive in their local identities.<sup>125</sup> For those who did experience social mobility, it was intermediate and higher education that was important, not their time at elementary school. In 1900, there were 391,318 pupils in Welsh elementary education but just 7,445 in intermediate (secondary) schools.<sup>126</sup> In this sense, elementary education was not a vehicle for social change within communities, or at least not a powerful one. Indeed, its failings did not even matter that much to many people since any stigma around illiteracy or poor language skills would be blunted by how common it was. Moreover, the most common occupations in industrial and urban areas did not require strong or sometimes any literacy skills.<sup>127</sup> Many men and women must have never picked up a book or a paper and probably never felt a need to read or write in English in their daily lives. Education and the English language may have been routes to social mobility, but they were far from essential to everyday life in many parts of Wales.

It was perhaps not so much a case that social changes were being caused by education but rather than they were driving people's desire for it. With the economic benefits of literacy being muted, Mitch has argued that the growth of cheap newspapers may have done more to promote the cause of literacy than government expenditure because it created a very practical benefit to being able to read.<sup>128</sup> But the impacts of modernity ran far wider than just the mass press. Railways and steamships were making it easier for people and ideas to travel, raising the practical benefits of literacy, if only to keep in touch with the growing number of people leaving their home communities, either for abroad, England or industrial Wales. Industrialisation was demonstrating the practical and financial possibilities of science, technology and geology. Urbanisation was making clear the need for understandings of health and hygiene. The popular hunger for knowledge about such things was evident in publishing in the Welsh language and the subject of talks at the

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<sup>121</sup> David Howell, *Land and People in Nineteenth-Century Wales* (London, 1977), p. 97. Cf. Smith, *Schools, Politics & Society*, p. 154.

<sup>122</sup> Pamela Horn, *Education in Rural England, 1800-1914* (Dublin, 1978), p. 149.

<sup>123</sup> *Hansard*, 4 July 1878, col. 785.

<sup>124</sup> Lisa Tallis, 'Literacy, magic and 'superstition' in nineteenth-century Wales: the example of Dic Aberdaron', *Welsh History Review*, 26, 3 (2013), 389-422.

<sup>125</sup> K. D. M. Snell, 'The culture of local xenophobia', *Social History*, 28, 1 (2003), 1-30.

<sup>126</sup> *Digest of Welsh Historical Statistics 1700-1974*, table 12.6.

<sup>127</sup> For a discussion of this and the occupations that did not require literacy see David F. Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: The Influence of Private Choice and Public Literacy* (Philadelphia, 1992).

<sup>128</sup> Mitch, *Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England*, p. 211. For a discussion of stigmas around literacy see Maxine Burton, *Illiteracy in Victorian England* (Leicester, 2014).

National Eisteddfod.<sup>129</sup> It was not mass education that was driving these forces of modernity but rather that elementary schools were a response to such changes and local people's desire to take advantage of them.

## Conclusion

At the opening of a new school in the village of Salem in Carmarthenshire in 1878, the chairman of the school board told the audience that Wales was going to have schools as good as France, Germany and America. He concluded saying that any poor Welsh child with ability could rise to be Lord Chancellor, an Archbishop or Prime Minister.<sup>130</sup> Some historians have concluded that such elementary schools were engines of social change but others thought they were 'alien institutions erected in hostile territory' and that there was an 'estrangement between school and community'.<sup>131</sup> The reality lay somewhere between. Despite the aspirations of the state to improve working-class communities, Welsh Victorian elementary schools were not effective enough to bring about widespread changes in manners, beliefs and outlooks. They were not even good at making young Welsh monoglots literate and fluent in English. In all this, schools were rooted in their communities rather than impositions upon them. They had to try to provide the kind of education parents wanted if children were going to be expected to attend on a regular basis. They had to make way to local customs and needs, even when teachers did not want to. Those teachers not able to win the confidence of local parents often failed. Of course, education could still be a place of conflict and tension but in this too it was generally reflecting divisions within communities rather than acting as an external pressure upon them. Elementary education may not have deserved quite the praise lavished upon it at the opening of board schools, but it was something shaped by and rooted in local conditions.

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<sup>129</sup> Robin T. Chapman, 'The turn of the tide: melancholy and modernity in mid-Victorian Wales', *Welsh History Review*, 27, 3 (2015), 503-27.

<sup>130</sup> 'Opening of a board school near Llandilo', *Cardiff Times*, 26 January 1878, p. 2.

<sup>131</sup> Michael Katz, 'Review of *School Attendance in London, 1870-1904: a social history*', *Victorian Studies*, 14, 1 (1970), p. 100.