

Conducting the Interdisciplinary Project for the Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages: A Case Study

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Abstract: This article provides an insight into the experiences and benefits gained as a result of studying foreign languages and being able to spend time abroad. As part of Interdisciplinary Project of the Scottish Baccalaureate for Languages I spent time in both Germany and Spain. There I carried out work experience in a nursery in order to further my language skills but also to compare the different rules and regulations which each country follows in respect to childcare. I outline the challenges which are needed to be overcome in order to achieve the Scottish Baccalaureate for Languages award, and how they have been of advantage to me both in an educational context and in everyday life. The actual project report is attached as appendix.

Keywords: Scottish Baccalaureate; German; Spanish; work-experience; childcare; working abroad

Throughout my school career I have always enjoyed learning languages. To me, being able to speak a second, third or perhaps even a fourth language is extremely important for my future career and also for my love of travel. This year at school I studied both Spanish and German at Advanced Higher level and decided to further enhance my linguistic skills by undertaking the Scottish Baccalaureate for Languages. This allowed me to travel to and spend time in both Germany and Spain in order to carry out my project.

Having undertaken a childcare course as part of my Duke of Edinburgh Award, and being made aware of just how many rules and regulations are in place in respect to children, I have since become interested in the ways that nurseries in Scotland are run. I am sure that I am not the only one who is unaware of all the “behind-the-scenes” work which occurs in a nursery daily, and my research thoroughly surprised me by introducing me to all that. My initial interest in the legal angle was sparked by my intention to pursue a career in law. I also felt that childcare would be a good topic to research during my time abroad as I was a little insecure about my language abilities at the start. The idea was that I would be dealing a lot with children who would perhaps not pick up on my language faults as much as adults. I knew that I would also be dealing with adults but over the year my linguistic skills improved and I found this less challenging than I initially thought.

In order to be able to make a valid comparison between childcare establishments in Scotland, Germany and Spain I needed to visit a nursery in each country. I knew that

before I travelled abroad it would be wise to have a basic idea of how nurseries in each country are run. This was done through internet research on English, German and Spanish websites, as well as speaking to native language assistants in my school who told me about their childhood nursery experiences. I also spent time with the language assistants to gather useful nursery vocabulary for my time abroad.

Feeling confident in my preparations, I arranged to visit a Kindergarten in Germany in June 2010 as part of a school exchange. This allowed me to spend time in the Kindergarten during the day, as well as spend time with my host family in the evenings and at the weekend. Initially I found the experience difficult. Having felt that I had a reasonable knowledge of the German language I suddenly felt very out of my depth arriving at the Kindergarten and discovering that nobody could speak any English! However, I remained positive and tried my best to communicate with everyone; in no time at all I became used to the different language and found my linguistic skills improved very quickly. Thankfully my host family spoke wonderful English! It was a delight to return home in the evenings and be able to speak to someone in my native tongue, although I was keen to gain as much from my experience abroad as possible and often insisted the family speak to me in German. Having thoroughly enjoyed my time in Germany and with greater confidence now that I knew what to expect, I quickly arranged a visit to a Spanish *guardaría* in October 2010, which was just as enlightening and enjoyable. Again, not many people in the *guardaría* and the parents in my host family could speak English, but this time I was prepared to expect this and, once again, was determined to make the most of my time in Spain to improve my Spanish. Upon my return to Scotland I visited a nursery where I was able to observe what went on there. Having visited a nursery in each of the three countries I was able to make some valid comparisons, having witnessed for myself the differences. My time abroad also allowed me to learn more about the culture of the countries as I spent time living with local families – not to mention the benefits it brought to my German and Spanish studies.

However, after collating the findings of my experiences abroad I felt that there were still some gaps in my research as mere observation did not seem sufficient and as new questions had popped into my head over time. I decided to produce a questionnaire, along with the help of the language assistants who helped me with my translations. This was sent to each of the nurseries I had visited, asking for further details about rules and regulations they had to adhere to, policies they had to follow, and more questions about daily nursery life. Although producing the questionnaires was both challenging and time consuming with the translations and terms-of-phrase used in each country, I found the responses extremely helpful, and as a result was able to finalise my report.

As a final part of my Baccalaureate Project I had to present my findings to both my mentor and also to those who I felt might benefit from and find interest in my report. Of course it would be both too costly and time consuming to return to Spain and Germany to present my findings to them, so instead I decided to make a presentation to the Child Protection Team at my School. As no member of the Child Protection Team spoke either German or Spanish I carried out my presentation in English, although I do wish that I had been able to make presentations in German and Spanish too in order to show off my much improved linguistic talents. Personally, I felt that my presentation went well, and my feelings were confirmed in the positive feedback which I received from my audience. They found my research extremely interesting and were surprised to discover that Germany, a country which appears to be very regimented, was in fact very laid-back in its approach to childcare procedures compared to Spain, a seemingly relaxed and laid-back society, which has strict rules and regulations regarding childcare. My research and project concluded that Scotland can be found somewhere in the middle of both Germany and Spain in relation to childcare and my audience felt that the procedures which we follow here are good practice.

Having completed my research and presented my findings I am glad that I decided to undertake the Scottish Baccalaureate for Languages. The Interdisciplinary Project has helped me to improve my German and Spanish skills by learning new vocabulary which I would not have learnt merely by sitting in a classroom, as well as requiring me to put my grammar skills to the test in a verbal, rather than written, context. It has also brought me into contact with other people who I would perhaps not have met had I not undertaken the award. I have made friends in both Germany and Spain with whom I have kept in contact and together we help each other improve our language skills through e-mail. I hope to return to both Germany and Spain in the near future as I am eager to further improve my language skills and visit my friends there. Having carried out this project I have realised that, although we are three countries that are part of the European Union, we are quite different, not just concerning childcare but also in everyday life.

For me, the Scottish Baccalaureate of Languages has been of great benefit and I would thoroughly encourage anyone with a love of languages to undertake the award.

A copy of my finalised project can be found in the appendix overleaf.

Appendix: Interdisciplinary Project Report

Every day, nurseries in Scotland comply with many rules and regulations covering every single aspect of nursery life. Last year I carried out work experience abroad and followed this up with further personal research throughout the School year. This allowed me to observe and compare the differences between a Kindergarten in Germany, a guardaría in Spain and a nursery in Scotland.

I feel that there is a widespread feeling in this country that legal regulation in all aspects of childcare has grown to the point of absurdity with common sense being left to one side. This line of reasoning could be summed up in these commonly heard attitudes:

1. We are becoming an ever more litigious society, something we have imported from the USA; the shared language makes us more vulnerable to such 'lunacy' than our mainland European partners. It could be said that Child Protection laws exist principally to cover the backs of those dealing with vulnerable youngsters.
2. Another more sombre argument is that Scotland witnessed the appalling Dunblane massacre, and subsequent legislation has been enacted in order to help prevent any repetition of such a dreadful event. Some would see many of the measures brought in as something of an over-reaction; if a crazed man like Thomas Hamilton wants to carry out such an unspeakable crime, numeric key-pads on doors, numbered visitor badges and hand-held teacher alarms will have no effect. It seems that these modern phenomena are symptomatic of the fussy and pointless rules politicians and lawyers like to inflict on the sensible, long-suffering majority.
3. No one can be unaware of the child-abuse scandals that appear with all too frequent regularity in our news bulletins. We hear reports of Scout packs or children's football teams folding because no adult will take them on for fear of having their motivation questioned in the most offensive way imaginable.

I find all of this is confusing. Should these opinions be disregarded as "Daily Mail Reader Angst", the kind of nonsense spouted by those obsessed with the modern clichés of "nanny state" and "political correctness gone mad"? Or should we be so dismissive of what are widely and deeply felt feelings of rage and despair?

To address these questions I investigated what happens in Spain, Germany and Scotland. Are the situations different in another country? If so, what conclusions can be drawn?

From the outset, the differences between the nurseries are clearly noticeable. Arriving at the Kindergarten in Fellbach I was extremely surprised. No questions were asked; no security checks took place. I was just ushered into one of the play rooms and told to socialise with the children. Entering a Nursery in Scotland and Spain is completely different. As soon as you walk in you are immediately pounced upon by at least one

member of staff, demanding to know why you are there. In Scotland we are forever worried about strangers – it is one of the very first things we are taught in life by our parents and teachers – “Never talk to strangers” – yet in Germany, from my observations, the way the children interacted with other adults and by speaking with my colleagues, they are very relaxed about other people. Visitor books are a common sight in nurseries in Scotland but no visitor book was noticeable in either Germany or Spain.

There are strict rules in place in Scotland and Spain as to who drops off and collects children. Upon registration at the nursery, parents must state who has permission to collect their child. If someone else comes to collect the child, the parents are contacted immediately. A child is not allowed to leave until the parent grants permission. In Germany, the majority of children were collected by the same parent who dropped them off. However, no note was made of who left or when. At the end of each day in Fellbach, the gate from the nursery garden to the neighbouring public play-area was opened, allowing the children time to play before being collected. I feel that this highlights significant differences between the countries. The children in Germany were happy and enjoyed being able to run around the park freely, sometimes even out of sight of staff. In Scotland this would never be allowed as children are not allowed to leave the nursery premises before obtaining permission from a parent.

Nurseries in Scotland and Germany have similar entrances. It is common in both countries to have electronic doors, some with key-pads, with the code known to only those necessary. The Kindergarten in Fellbach had a buzzer instead, both inside and out, and reachable only by adults, to release the door. Beside this, was a visitor’s bell. However, I can’t help but think that if someone is intent on entering the Kindergarten, why would they bother to ring the visitor’s bell when they can easily gain access simply by pressing a pad beside it? At the nursery I visited in Scotland, there is no electronic key-pad but a bell which is used by everyone who visits the nursery and the door is answered by a member of staff. Both the nurseries I visited in Germany and Scotland have glass doors to enable nursery staff to see who a person is before deciding to let them in.

Children in Spain and Scotland are supervised at all times, something which is a legal requirement. Yet in Germany the children are independent and able to do whatever they want - sometimes there is not even an adult present in the room. The adults maintain that they are aware of what is going on but “view from afar to allow the children to learn for themselves.” In the Kindergarten there is a craft room. Along with the usual pens, pencils and paint, there are also child-size hammers and saws. The children are left unattended in this room, and able to use the resources without supervision. Such a thing would never be allowed in Scotland. Even in technology in

senior school we are not allowed to use the equipment without permission from a teacher. This again shows how relaxed Germany is compared to Scotland and Spain.

The rules about taking trips out of a nursery are extremely different. In Scotland for every trip, be it just to the park down the street or somewhere further afield, a different permission slip, signed by the parent or guardian, has to be obtained, and a risk assessment has to be carried out beforehand. In Spain nurseries also require a signed permission slip and need to carry out a risk assessment before a trip can take place. In Germany, trips out of the Kindergarten follow the same rules as a normal day and no extra permission slips are required.

Risk assessments are not required for anything in Germany, whereas in Scotland and Spain they are a legal necessity for every activity. The only forms required in Kindergartens are health forms and one permission slip for everything. In Scotland, many forms are required such as health forms, permission slips, forms for absence, holidays etc. Spain also require forms for everything that happens in the nursery.

In Scotland at least half of all staff in a nursery must be qualified as outlined by the government Inspecting Unit. They also have to undergo an enhanced disclosure, SSSC check, provide two references, their birth certificate and passport, undergo a health check and have no previous police convictions. Unqualified staff are unable to lift up children and change nappies – in order to change a nappy, two people have to be present. This is to protect the adult by providing a witness if any issues, such a child abuse, were to arise. All changes must then be recorded: when and by whom. In Germany and Spain, qualifications are also needed, but there are no rules against non-qualified people, such as myself, lifting up the children. In Germany and Spain only one adult is needed to change a child. Any member of staff is able to do this, and the changes are not recorded.

I feel that what I have discovered is ironic. The stereotype most people would imagine would be regimented, regulation-bound Germany, relaxed and easy-going Spain – with Scotland somewhere in the middle. This was emphatically NOT my experience. For what it's worth, here are my thoughts on why this is so. Germans have been, since the end of World War II, engaged in a counter-reaction to anything that smacks of authority and regimentation; personal freedom and individuality are sacrosanct – even when it comes to three-year-old tots. Spain, however, is a very child-centred society, and the high level of protection there is all centred on the welfare of the precious young people. Scotland's situation – in the light of US-style litigation and the legacy of Dunblane – I have already commented on.

So where does this leave us in terms of the “nanny state” argument? Secretly, I was hoping to prove that the UK, Scotland, Dollar Academy could be considered being neurotic and obsessive in its procedure. However, research into the legal thinking behind child protection leads me, a little sadly, to concur that we have little choice but to stick with the levels of legislation that are in place. They may be annoying, time-consuming and bureaucratic, and we can all find examples to poke fun at and hold up for to public scorn.

However, it would take just one more case of abduction, abuse or – God forbid – child-murder for the same people who mock the rules to be calling for tighter controls and demanding the resignation of those whose lax policies left our children exposed. As someone who has witnessed the joy and fun kids have in an open play environment, at heart I am tempted to come down on the “Daily Mail” side of the agenda; as a future lawyer, my head tells me that this is unrealistic, and that what we are doing is probably right.

