Critically assess the impact of the Education Acts, passed during the period 1870-1944, on schooling in Wales and the quest for 'full attendance.'

In the years between 1870 to 1944, there were multiple education acts. Some of the critical acts were the Elementary Education Act 1870, the Education Act 1880, the Welsh Intermediate Education Act 1889, the Elementary Education (School Attendance) Act 1893, the Education Act 1902, the Education (Administrative Provisions) Act 1907, the Education Act 1918, Education Act 1944.[1] In the concluding decades of the nineteenth century, the Welsh economy demonstrated extraordinary contrasts, and various Welsh industries endured changing circumstances. Steel overpowered iron, the copper industry diminished, and the coal industry remained the height of success, reaching a pinnacle production of fifty-six tonnes in 1913. Industrial growth had created a striking disparity in the dispersal of the inhabitants of Wales and was to have great significance for the provision of education.

One of the most vital and earliest acts regarding education was the Education Act of 1870, also known as the Forster Act. Subsequent to the general election in 1868, Prime Minister William Gladstone nominated William Edward Forster as the Vice-President of the Department of Education. In February of 1870, Forster presented a Bill with the objective *'to cover the country with good schools'* [2] by creating new non-sectarian schools to add to the already established elementary school system. The new schools would be publicly funded and maintained by elected school boards, with a period of time for the existing schools to enhance their quality and services. A great deal of people were firmly against these revolutionary changes; the church wanted to conserve and expand its control on education, while the non-conformists were greatly against church schools receiving additional financial assistance; there were also many people who greatly opposed the imposition of fees to assist elementary education. Nonetheless, William Cowper-Temple added an amendment to the Bill that limited religious schooling to basic Bible teachings and permitted parents who objected to religious

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[1] UK Parliament, *Key Dates,* <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/keydates/> [accessed 6 February 2024]

[2] H. C. Dent, 'To Cover the Country with Good Schools: A Century's Effort', *British Journal of Education Studies,* 19.2 (1971), 125-138 (p.125)

education to remove their child from scripture classes and school prayers. On the 9th of August 1870, the Bill passed into law.[3]

The creation of school boards introduced a 'dual' structure of elementary education: voluntary schools were funded by government grants, donations, and school fees; the new board schools were able to obtain extra funds through the rates. As the upper class and the church were mainly against school boards, and liberals and non-conformists were greatly in support, the circumstances had the possibility for hostile feuding over power; and in some locations, there were fierce clashes. On occasion, landlords and industry employers would intimidate and coerce their tenants and employees to vote in opposition to the creation of school boards.

Before the 1870 Act, there were school places for sixty per cent of children in Wales. However, this increased to seventy per cent in the countryside, and the industrial regions suffered severely with a lack of places; in Merthyr Tydfil, it was as low as twenty-two per cent. Less than a third of schools that received government grants were British schools. In rural regions, schooling in rural regions was largely set up and controlled by the National Society for Promoting Religious Education and other churches. The establishment of school boards brought a radical transformation to education. By the end of 1872, a total of 129 school boards had been set up, and a further 107 boards were set up between 1873 and 1895. '*Between 1870 and 1900, the number of schools in Wales more than doubled; of the 1,709 schools in receipt of government grant in 1900, 893 were board schools, 687 Church or National schools and 51 British schools.*'[4] However, there were significantly more pupil places available in board schools; in 1900, they made up sixty-five per cent of school places.

The emergence of school boards led the way for a countrywide network of elementary schools in Wales, the same as in England; however, significant difficulties persisted until the start of the century; these include faulty buildings, insufficient equipment, inadequate teaching

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[3] Derek Gillard, *Education in the UK: a history,* (2018) <https://www.education-uk.org/history/chapter06.html#:~:text=The%20'Cowper%2DTemple%20clause',Temple%20(1811%2D1888).> [accessed 8th February 2024]

[4] Gareth Elwyn Jones and Gordon Wynne Roderick, *A History of Education in Wales,* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2003), p.80.

techniques and disciplinary issues. The main issue with education was the perpetual problem of absenteeism. Mandatory education had not been included in the 1870 Act. The Act allowed the school boards to have the capability to make attendance mandatory between the ages of five and ten. Only a few school boards assumed this policy, and the government only made attendance compulsory until 1880. Attendance in Wales was always below the attendance rates in England. In 1899, attendance in Wales was 75.6 per cent, and in England, it was 81.55 per cent. There were numerous reasons for (poor attendance: the job market was in demand for cheap child labour, which families relied on; opposition to being forced; parents' indifference to education; and the persistent outbreaks of childhood illnesses, for instance, scarlet fever and whooping cough.

While being a teacher was a difficult and challenging career, it was still a popular profession in Wales. However, this might have been due to the lack of career opportunities rather than the intrinsic appeal of teaching. Amongst agricultural hardship and perpetual shifts in the success of industries, teaching depicted stability and, to a certain extent, status, which counteracted low wages and harsh work conditions. By the new century, '*Between one in four and one in three boys and 30 to 50 per cent of girls leaving secondary schools in South Wales became teachers*.'[5]

In 1880, the Cross Commission report acknowledged the necessity for higher education, as schooling generally ended for the majority of children when they reached eleven. The report's ideas for a new kind of evening further schooling were displayed in the 1890 and 1893 Education Codes, which discarded the higher age restriction and provided grants based on attendance rates instead of on writing, reading and arithmetic examination grades. This cleared the way for an expanded syllabus, which contained domestic science, languages, bookkeeping, shorthand, and handicrafts. From then on, the standard day school syllabus of the three R's constituted only a small piece of the syllabus of evening schools.

The Aberdare Committee, which investigated the state of intermediate and higher education in Wales, resolved that secondary schooling was

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[5] Gareth Elwyn Jones and Gordon Wynne Roderick, *A History of Education in Wales,* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2003), p.83.

outrageously insufficient and proposed a system of secondary schools throughout Wales. It took eight long years of lobbying prior to the committee proposals being set into law as the Welsh Intermediate Education Act 1889, which was one of the earliest acts of modern history to apply solely to Wales, '*therefore of the first importance in modern-day recognition of the distinctive educational needs of Wales*'[6] The Act allowed for an arrangement of publicly financed secondary schools in Wales over a decade before England. The Act established a shared education committee in each nation, whose members were recommended by the Privy Council and County Council. After the Act, joint education committees were swiftly established, and proposals were presented to the Charity Commission for assent and alterations. By the start of the new century, there were close to a hundred schools across Wales with a combined population of nearly seven thousand students, consisting of equivalent figures of male and female.

In several rural and industrial regions, the quantity of working-class children in school at the start of the century was as elevated as one in three, with a considerable amount being the offspring of unskilled fathers. Intermediate education had established a hierarchal system; starting with the public elementary schools and ending with university colleges. There were now restricted opportunities for offspring of lower-class parents to advance to further schooling, increasing throughout the coming decades. For a number of years, the social advancement of working-class children as a result was far ahead of that in England. By 1914, a system had been created which allowed more Welsh children into secondary and further schooling than anywhere else in western Europe, aside from Scotland. This significant change in Welsh society had been achieved by advantageous legislation and supportive interpretation by public bodies, along with the participation of every sector of society in giving financial support through scholarships in schools and higher education. A distinctive attribute was the donations of innumerable workers, from chapel and eisteddfod contributions to donations from quarries and mines across Wales. Another element of this unique society-wide support was altruism. The Welsh people were proud of the success of others in their community, the offspring of their neighbours and colleagues who were able to obtain more reputable and

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[6] Gareth Elwyn Jones and Gordon Wynne Roderick, *A History of Education in Wales,* (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2003), p.87.

higher earning jobs or even relocate to more wealthy areas. It is one of the most engrossing features of the history of secondary schooling in Wales that it was not only accepted but a point of pride in Welsh societies when people who succeeded in the system improved their standing and moved away from the community.

Despite the advantages of the creation of colleges and intermediate schooling for Welsh society, the majority of children quit schooling at fourteen, or often earlier. During the majority of the century, evening lessons focused on the three R's (reading, writing, arithmetic) had supplied opportunities which made up for the inadequacies of elementary schooling, however changes to the Elementary Education Act in 1893 expanded the syllabus, allowing a variety of craft and trade subjects to be on offer and accessible. Evening lessons were the prime place to obtain an education on scientific and technical subjects, which were topics that were not included in elementary and secondary schooling until the end of the century.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the state systems of schooling in England and Wales merged. For both nations, there had been thirty years of government elementary schooling, which was henceforth mandatory and free of charge.

An 1896 government Bill had ventured to get rid of the school boards however failed to be enshrined into law. Efforts to undercut the school boards were pursued, and the reappointment of the Unionist government in 1900 brought an end. The 1899 Cockerton judgement determined that the London School Board had acted unlawfully by supplying secondary schooling in London's higher-grade schools. The outcome was the Education Act of 1902. The Act meant that the county councils and county boroughs were the local education authority. This meant county boroughs with more than 10,000 residents and urban cities with more than 20,000 residents were in charge of only elementary schooling. Consequently, these authorities assumed responsibility for the school boards and the technical instruction committees. Enforcing the Act in Wales ensured disputes on two factors. Firstly, it caused a hostile situation between the government and local authorities regarding the upkeep of voluntary schools. By the end of 1902, the Bill became enshrined in law. A national convention was held in Cardiff in June of

1903; where they encouraged local schooling authorities in Wales to decline to adopt the Act.

By December of 1903, just two counties in Wales had adopted the new system as stated by the law; in other counties, there were various extents of resistance. In the 1904 county-council elections every Welsh county returned a majority against enacting the legislation. For retribution, the government enshrined the Education (Local Authority Default) Act 1904 which permitted the Board of Education to directly handle the non-provided schools and avoid dealing with the local education authority. This law became known as '*the Coercion of Wales Act*'[7] In return, a union was formed between local authorities and non-conformists decided that at the end of 1904 to decline to dispense any elementary schooling when the Act was applied.

In 1941, the Central Welsh Board petitioned for a National Council for Education and a Sectary of State for Wales. The Federation of Education Committees argued for a mandatory, free of charge and universal system in which the age of finishing school would be increased to sixteen, with part-time mandatory schooling to eighteen for the students who did not continue in full-time education. The government's reaction to the mounting recommendations was to produce a white Paper on Educational Reconstruction in July 1943, which was established on two bases: schooling should be a continual process from the age of five till eighteen, while the secondary education system ought to demonstrate diversity along with equal opportunities. It suggested that the age of finishing school should be increased to fifteen for all and continued to sixteen when circumstances allowed.

A committee was established, led by Sir Cyril Norwood, which published a report where they supported the White Paper's plan for diversity of schools. The Norwood Report, along with the white paper were largely embraced by all political groups, therefore it is little wonder that the Bill was submitted to Parliament in December 1943 and enshrined into law in August 1944. The Act required that local authorities must present their proposals for secondary restructuring by April of 1945; this presented numerous problems, the most significant was the insufficient condition of

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[7] University of Cambridge, *Secondary Education And Social Change in the United Kingdom Since 1945,* (2018) <https://sesc.hist.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Briefing-paper-Wales.pdf> [accessed 11 February 2024]

existing school establishments, amplified by the increase of the age to finish school to fifteen in 1947. In the Welsh cities, there was no consistency in regard to the responses of local authorities to the conditions of the Education Act of 1944. In a number of cities, particularly Cardiff and Flintshire, schemes were conservative and typical, displaying the viewpoint of the directors of education and local authorities involved.

To conclude, the 1870's is when remarkable change began to happen in education, and this had a significant impact on Wales and Welsh schooling. Urbanisation massively shifted the Welsh population, in 1851 lower than twenty per cent of the population resided in Welsh towns by 1891 this had increased to fifty per cent. The class structure had become significantly more complex. Wales persisted to be a country less focused on social classes compared to England. This was largely due to the more egalitarian values of Sunday school, chapel and Eisteddfod. The Welsh language differentiated Wales from England. In 1870, close to three-quarters of the inhabitants of Wales knew Welsh. For most Welsh people it was their native language; for others in rural regions, it was their sole language. The Education Act of 1870 was created for England, with no thought for the Welsh people or the Welsh language. The government connected the language with the lower classes and believed it had no value. The new schools did not teach or allow students to speak Welsh. Some teachers even punished pupils who spoke Welsh in class. This resulted in the Welsh language reducing massively. However, there was a national revival by the turn of the new century.