

The story of one school's international journey

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Deputy Head Teacher Sarah Gower was nervous about taking pupils from her school overseas. But she was determined to provide every opportunity to the pupils attending the school.

The Observatory School in Wirral caters for pupils with special educational needs. It is in a deprived area of the North West, with one of the lowest levels of employment and one of the highest levels of child poverty in England.

The area is not ethnically diverse and many of the students do not know anyone from a different country. Some of the students haven't even been to Liverpool, less than six miles away. Very few have ever travelled to another country.

We are all different and we are all the same

That's why the journey the school has been on has been so valuable for the students. Sarah explains: 'Our pupils just didn't know that people speak different languages. They assume that people who are a different colour are different from them. This experience has taught them that people are the same wherever they are.'

The international journey started with eTwinning, the online community for European schools funded by the European Union and managed by the British Council in the UK.

'We have done a few eTwinning projects before which introduced us to other schools and helped us share experiences. This led to us being awarded eTwinning school status, the only school in the Wirral to receive it. It shows a really strong commitment to international work so we were delighted to receive it.'

The school soon started to see the benefits. It encouraged the students to talk about themselves. It also taught them social skills, how to present themselves, how to show respect to others. They have seen enthusiasm and confidence growing in students since they started working with other schools.

The latest eTwinning project is a partnership with five schools in France, Finland, Italy, Turkey and Spain.

With encouragement from their French partner school, the Observatory School applied for Erasmus+ funding to take their pupils on overseas trips. But it wasn't without some trepidation: 'I never thought anyone would want to partner with us because of the type of school we are. When we first went into partnerships I used to mention that we were a SEN school but the kids asked me to stop. They wanted to go into this as equals.'

Earlier this year the school took a big step in its international journey with a trip to a mainstream school in Finland. The trip was a huge success and any anxiety and nervousness felt by the students or teachers quickly melted away once the students met their Finnish partners.

'The students made really good friends in the Finnish school. They went in there as equals and got to experience lots of different things they had never dreamed of doing before. When the trip came to an end everyone was saying they wanted to live in Finland, they couldn't believe how friendly everyone was.'

Since the first trip the school has also made visits to partner schools in France and Spain and plans are underway for a trip to Italy. Teachers from all of the partner schools have also visited the Observatory School.

A real exchange

The Observatory school students learned about life in different countries. They were also able to provide insights for the partner schools and talked about the techniques used to help pupils with special educational needs manage a challenging situation. As the Finnish students were fluent in English, the Observatory pupils treated their hosts to a lesson on speaking 'Scouse'.

For the teachers seeing their students fully participating in all the activities and growing in confidence was evidence of the value of the exchange. The visits have also helped to support the work they do together online within the eTwinning portal.

Jane Owens, chair of the board of governors supportive of the international opportunities carved out for pupils and teachers alike. She believes the approach taken by the Observatory School could act as a kind of template for other SEN schools thinking about embarking on international work.

The school's efforts were recognised this year when it was awarded International School of the Year in the TES School Awards 2019. The school is also on track to complete its accreditation under the British Council's International School Award. As

the teachers, the students and even the local MP say, 'winning this prestigious award has helped put Birkenhead on the map – in a good way!'