

Learning from school visits

As a member of the UK team participating in the Transform Autism Education project, one of the most significant learning opportunities for me was the visit to a special school in Greece.

The school was facing significant challenges: financial, administrative, staff shortages, lack of resources and poor accommodation. Yet within the school community there existed a passion and determination to overcome barriers in order to provide for the needs of pupils with autism.

The head teacher had created a culture and ethos where staff worked collaboratively and prioritised professional development, hence engagement in the project. For me, hearing their stories and seeing their commitment first hand, shone a spotlight on schools in the UK and provided the opportunity to reflect on UK practice and policy with a clearer focus.

I realised the potential impact for colleagues in my own organisation in the UK to also experience this learning and so planned for Greek and Italian team members to shadow Communication/autism team staff on school visits during the UK transnational meeting.

The outcome was an enriched perspective for my UK colleagues and for all teams, an opportunity to gain new insight and learning to inform practice and thinking. Some of the learning is captured in the following comments from staff.

- It was a great experience to have the opportunity to network with practitioners from other countries and also directly with a young person with autism and their support worker. Learning about their support mechanisms and how vastly they differ from the UK was interesting and illuminating. Practitioners I took out on the visits were extremely keen to learn about how inclusion was promoted within my school which promotes equity and inclusion in autism education by enhancing the skills, knowledge and understanding of teachers and other school staff who work with children aged between 5 and 10.

- The school we visited was flattered to be asked to show our visitors the strategies it has put into place and was surprised to hear their very positive comments. Particularly those around visual support systems, familiar and consistent routines and regular communication with parents and professionals involved with individual pupils. It was interesting to hear how the visitors' experiences differ to in the UK. I think we sometimes take for granted the services that are available to CYP in Birmingham with a diagnosis of autism and the high expectations and aspirations we have.
- Overall it was a very positive experience and staff at school really valued the opportunity to showcase their good practice and to talk to visitors about their use of the AET framework – this in itself was very empowering for me as the school could really see the value in all they were doing and as a result of the visit they are even more keen to take suggestions on board and are being more proactive with adjustments they make in their settings.
- I learnt about some of the differences in the education system in Greece and how the practitioners were so passionate about their roles in getting the right support for the young people they educate. I also learnt that there is a lot of good practise in our mainstream schools and that this should be celebrated.
- It gave me an insight into how other countries are trying to take the frameworks on board/ research that is going on and also made me think about what was really important and how best to highlight this to visitors. It gave me a chance to see how I am impacting directly on the setting and what this looks like to visitors outside of our team. It also gave me a chance to step back from the setting and see how well they explain and share work I had been doing with them for a couple of years.

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