

EUROPEAN CITIZENS: OUR TWIN SCHOOL IN ENGLAND

At the beginning of February, Vasco de la Zarza school was selected -among the Spanish schools having a bilingual project- to take part in a contact seminar which was going to be held in Peñaranda de Duero, Burgos, where sixteen British and Spanish schools were meeting to find a twin school to begin working with by means of different projects concerning several aspects on both teaching and learning foreign languages.

During the seminar, our school made contact with a British state secondary school -Bourne Community College- and both schools gave birth to the draft of a shared project which was going to be further developed in the visit to England our school was invited to at the very end of the same month.

Thus, I travelled to West Sussex, on the south coast of England, on 26th February to visit the school for the three following days. When I arrived at the school on Monday 27th at about eight o'clock in the morning, I was welcome by the school headteacher, Mrs Margaret Eva, who introduced me to the team of teachers at the meeting they usually have every Monday morning. I felt overwhelmed by the warm welcome they gave me, especially the foreign languages and ICT departments. Soon after that, I was taken for a tour around the school installations that are organized in several different buildings around a very wide playground provided with some wooden tables and benches beside some trees. As every department has its own area, I visited most of them and had the opportunity to greet the heads of the different departments. To be honest, I must say what struck me the most was their ICT facilities: the school has got five large ICT rooms and two smaller ones as well as a laptop for every teacher to be used in their own classrooms.

The school was built fifty years ago in a town called Southbourne located between the well known cities Chichester –in the east- and Portsmouth –in the west- collecting students from the surrounding areas both in Hampshire and West Sussex. Around 650 pupils attend the school with ages from eleven to sixteen, which correspond to our secondary education level.

Throughout the three days I stayed there, I visited many classrooms within the different departments and attended some of the lessons, both Spanish and English ones. I met some groups of students at different years (they organise the secondary education in levels they call “years”) and I answered all the questions they asked me about our school, our students and our city. They seemed especially impressed by our way of clothing when attending school; they think our students are lucky because they don't have to wear a uniform as they do. Some students wanted to know details of our timetable and the subjects we study here and when I told them we start school at nine o'clock they found that this was a more reasonable time to begin than theirs, a quarter past eight. They wondered why we begin lessons later than they do and however we finish at the same time; they couldn't guess that we don't have lunch at half past twelve as they do but at three o'clock, when we get home after school.

In addition to meeting students and teachers and attending lessons, we had time to draw up a document which specifies the aims of our project and the activities we are going to carry out. So, among the main objectives, we must mention three of them: First of all, to develop in our students the respect and tolerance necessary to live in a world which is growing wider each day, to contribute to the education of future men and women who can feel themselves citizens of a plural world. Secondly, we also bear in mind to improve the English language acquisition of our students by means of knowing and sharing not only the way of living of British people but also listening to the real language they talk. Finally, our third aim has to do with the interchange of different pieces of information, experiences and methods of teaching between the teachers at Bourne Community College and at Vasco de la Zarza school, establishing a rich source of knowledge as a result of a very close relationship, not only of the foreign languages departments but also of the rest of the departments which can be involved.

Concerning the short-term activities we are planning to carry out, we must emphasize, on the one hand, the exchanging of e-mail messages, including researches on different aspects of language, culture, geography, sciences, etc.; on the other hand, we will have videoconferences

connecting different groups of students involving again several aspects related to both schools, cities, environments, etc. As far as medium-term activities are concerned, the main objective is to take our students to Southbourne for some days to share with British students their families life, their school lessons and also their way of living.

We have already had some staff videoconferences and e-mails exchanging up now and we would like to invite other members of our education community to join the project; both -the head team of the school and the group of teachers directly involved in the project- are very hopeful that this project, which is just beginning, will mean a very important step towards the improvement in our students' academic and personal achievement and abilities and –as a consequence- a global profit in our school together with a commitment of state schools for the quality in education. Nevertheless, we are conscious that this project also implies a great challenge for all of us and a tremendous effort in terms of time and equipment but we are firmly convinced that it is well worth attempting.

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