**Vysoke Myto, Czechia Meet May 2024**

On Sunday morning very early 7 students from CBS Midleton boarded the Aircoach to Dublin for an early morning flight to Prague. We were very excited and although some of the students knew their partners from Ireland others were going to be staying with students they hadn’t met. I filled them in as much as I could, having gone on a preparation visit last summer to see the school and town. Their experience was to be very different from mine though because they were staying with families in many local towns and villages.

We got a train out of Prague immediately and this was quite different as the train had a private compartment for the boys and it was much hotter than Ireland. They were met by the families and went away for the night. Vysoke Myto is a beautiful ‘chocolate box’ town with a huge town centre and 3 very old town gates still standing and the school is right at the centre in an old building reminiscent of a boarding school from Enid Blyton stories. We were in much earlier than an Irish school starts, 8am and met with five other groups from five other countries (Italy, Spain, France, Germany, Ireland ) in the main hall. This week the school hosted two different Erasmus projects simultaneously and we did some activities together and others alone.

The Czech students had written a song about peace and we sang it together. Each group introduced themselves on the stage and we had an interactive tour of the school in mixed groups led by students. We got to see their subjects and rooms of the building and also were asked questions about our schools and what we were thought of Czechia so far. The students put on a dance demonstration for us of different dances they learn in preparation classes for their prom/debutants ball such as Polka, Tango, Jive etc. They proceeded to teach everyone how to dance a Polka and we had good fun getting to know each other through dance. Later that night we had a bonfire in the woods where we all cooked sausages and sang songs with a guitar. The students were already starting to feel settled in and all were happy with their families and enjoying having so many young people around.

The next day we went on a tour of Litomysl which has a UNESCO castle, Zamek Nove Hrady and beautiful castle with gardens and a maze and the sandstone forest Toulovcovy Mastale for a long hike. It was a full day out and the Czech students had broken us up into groups based on language and gave us guided around Litomysl to show us the sites. We took the stairs up the church tower in Chram Nalezeni for a stunning view of the town and explored the castle grounds and had a picnic in the park. The forest has the most amazing sandstone structures and a really landscape to explore. The students enjoyed picking wild blueberries and even though it rained it was very enjoyable. They were not too tired to go and dance the night away at a local club the school booked out for the night. A band from the school performed and a student acted as DJ for a few hours. This was a great way for the students to bond and let their hair down.

Back to work the next day. Our students had prepared in two groups two quite different presentations about Ireland. The German group did the same and we visited 4 different classrooms to give guest lessons about our school, reason for our visit and information about Ireland. One group brought a hurley and sliotar and demonstrated some skills in our traditional national sport Hurling. The Czech students also tried their skills and asked lots of questions about Ireland. Because our school is such a strong hurling school they were able to show them videos of the game in play at a national level. The other group had prepared a puppet show based on the story of St Patrick and how he brought Christianity to Ireland. It was a younger group and they laughed and enjoyed the antics of the puppets with the snakes. The students also played and interactive game where they had to guess which Irish names were for boys or girls and invited kids up to the board to try to spell them. The kids in turn asked the Irish boys to try to spell Czech names. Even though the boys were nervous to begin with and were a little out of their comfort zone they gained confidence and by the last day in school were volunteering to give talks in other classes and other schools!

Next we broke into our international working groups to plan for our final activity on the Friday. Our groups were 7 fold Baking, Creativity, Music, Old Age home, Puppet show, Website and Sports. These groups tied in with our previous meeting in Germany where we had decided on groups for self care under these headings. We had provided interactive exercises for students to do as a means of self care in times of difficulty. Each group had a teacher/mentor for facilitation and had a brain storm around the logistics of our final activity. In my group we planned a visit to the Old folks Home and discussed our fears and ideas. Students were nervous that it would flop and that it would be awkward. We decided on setting up 4 stations manned by two students each with one Czech interpreter on each station, card games, interviews, nail polish/hand massage and badminton with balloons. The other groups equally had to prepare their work in the case of the baking they had premade the biscuits and spent a few hours decorating them beautifully. The puppet show was written and practised ‘Hansel & Gretel’. The creative group made a selection of gorgeous bookmarks in different languages with positive quotes on them for distribution. The musical team had a practice and decided songs everyone would know and enjoy for performance. Another group laid out games to teach the PE classes the Irish boys brought rugby balls to teach them all tag Rugby. Finally the last group prepared information for our website to disseminate our project and its outcomes for each school involved in the project. It was evident in our last class before school ended that the group had really gelled. We sat down in the art room and stones we had gathered in the forest were painted by each student. Whilst decorating them we shared our playlist ‘Positive Vibes’ and anyone who hadn’t yet added to it was asked to share two songs they find uplifting. There was a lovely atmosphere in the room and students were openly happy and having fun.

We took a whole day out in Prague to see the capital city. We went by train together and the Czech students all took charge of mixed group walking tours. First we all walked up to a look at point high up on the hill opposite Prague castle and took some group shots. The students decided it would make a better photo by climbing up on the huge statue with all the country flags and they were right it makes a very international suitable for Erasmus photo. What was really great was the way the students took charge of the day and brought each group to quite different sites in the huge city. We all met up on Wencelas square before the train back. Even though we were not all together we had a photo app set up for everyone to share their nice photos and experiences. Through this we could find budding photographers and keep an eye on what they were up to in the teachers’ absence.

The grand finale took place on the Friday and we had one last chance to gather our thoughts and ideas before setting out to all the different venues in our groups. The rain off thankfully but the marketplace had a big marquee tent erected in case of a downpour. The group I was involved with could not have asked for a better outcome. The elderly folk were so genuinely pleased to have visitors and be made feel so special that our fears were not realised at all. We all sat down together in a very relaxed way and both men and women loved the hand massages with hand cream and loved just answering the young people’s questions. We had also brought some sweet treats from Germany and Ireland to share with them and they had laid out coffee and tea with Czech treats for us. There was no need for us to play any organised games with them and we decided against forcing it all they wanted was to spend time with us. They were comfortable to allow us to take a group photo and even invited us to see their garden and what their rooms were like. The next day we met a few of them around the town and they were excited to see us. They students all agreed it felt lovely to smile and be happy around them and just to give of themselves. The idea was just to show honest kindness. The other groups had similar reports where all were happily received and just blessed strangers passing by with gifts of gingerbread and bookmarks. Anyone who wanted gave out their painted stones also to bless someone. The music was well received and locals joined in our watched on and the sports session was a great success. We had a briefing afterwards and everyone shared something that they enjoyed the most about the experience.

We had a final session with the whole group and this time only 4 days later students volunteered to speak at the mic and say their farewells. There was a lot more confidence evident than on the first day and again it was obvious friendships had been made and would be continued. Students had the whole of Saturday free and chose to go bowling all together and there were tears I believe as goodbyes were said. They all came to the station to see us off on Sunday morning. There may have even been a few broken hearts!

Our project was called Positive Vibes and at the heart of was the students’ well being and their mental health. We chose not to dwell on the negative side of mental health and focused instead on how to make ourselves feel good. I am glad this was the case as it freed people up to relax and enjoy each activity. In each country students had fun producing their presentations and learned many skills through that. Here it all culminated in them displaying acts of kindness and sharing with others. The Czech Republic meeting’s aim is to focus on putting kindness into action. Kindlon &amp; Thompson (2000) writes that boys who have developed an emotional awareness and empathy are not only less cruel towards others but are more “resilient under the pressure of cruelty that comes their way” (p.89). Feshbach and Feshbach (2011) share the same opinion, and believe that social competencies can be both taught and learned. This strongly proposes that teaching empathy to young people will have a twofold positive outcome; not only will students develop more empathy and compassion for others but will also develop self compassion and resilience in the face of adversity’. Not only did our project have positive effect on the school and community in Vysoke Myto, but if also effected the students and the teachers involved for the better.