



British Council

Comenius Lifelong Learning Programme

Overcoming obstacles to participation

Practical tips

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1. COMENIUS: MEETING YOUR NEEDS

Schools have many demands made of them. A Comenius partnership can be a means of meeting some of those demands, while at the same time providing enjoyable and relevant opportunities for learning.

Your Comenius partnership can help to promote equality of opportunity and to tackle social disadvantage. It can be used to challenge stereotypes and to promote good race relations. It can extend learners' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development while making learning both fun and 'real'.

This paper identifies some of the practical ways in which schools are overcoming difficulties of involving students and staff in their Comenius projects. It is based on an initial survey of 336 schools involved in the Comenius programme in 2007, and incorporates the findings of both a questionnaire and a telephone interview. It also explores ways in which your Comenius partnership might contribute to your school's agenda.

2. PROVIDING EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND TACKLING SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE

A teacher from a secondary school writes:

Today is my first day back in school after attending a Comenius Partnership meeting in Bulgaria. We took two students with us - one whose family is from the Yemen and the other, born in Pakistan, travelled to England when she was six years old. Both girls are Moslems and they stayed with host families identified by the school in Bulgaria. Both the school and the host families were very welcoming, caring and generous in so many ways - they ensured that the girls had many wonderful experiences and a memorable time during the four days that they spent in the school and in the city. The girls have benefited in many ways and they were a real credit to us all.

He emphasises that in order for an exchange like this to be 'a positive educational and social experience for all involved' there has to be very thorough preparation and 'trust between all parties involved'.

Schools and FE colleges spoken to in the survey were keen to highlight the inclusive nature of the Comenius programme. One teacher pointed out that there are two levels of involvement:

- Those who directly participate in the programme, of whom some are likely to be involved in exchange visits
- Everyone in the school, because of whole school assemblies, displays, and the fact that the visitors are likely to talk to the school and visit classes.

Some institutions carefully select a specific group of students for the programme. For example, one college focused on adult returners to education, and another school used the programme to support a group of minority ethnic boys. Some institutions offer Comenius as part of the curriculum to more than one year group, for example geography in Year 9 (14 year olds) or citizenship for 11 to 14 year olds, whereas others apply the programme to the entire curriculum across the whole school. One nursery has used the Comenius partnership to develop the Reggio Emilia approach to education. This has enabled them to explore, with their partner schools, creative and child-centred education, which has informed their teaching styles and has transformed the school's learning environment outside the classrooms.

A recent report from the Refugee Council¹ warns that 'when schools have practices in place that provide additional support to refugees and asylum seeking young people, these should be delivered in a way that does not mark out these young people as different from their peers'. An FE college involves its Comenius team when working strategically with the refugee and asylum seeker groups. It has developed a successful open day which includes these groups, is well-supported by external agencies and provides opportunities for the current students to host shows, present their work and share their food.

Many schools ensure that the whole school community is included in the programme. In some cases non-teaching colleagues, for example a governor, school bursar and/or parents, have participated in exchange visits. Schools say that this is a 'great team-building activity'.

One principal of a school for students with special educational needs, which uses information and communication technologies (ICT) to facilitate the partnership, says that the programme puts 'all young people on an equal footing'. He points out that 'if you want to widen horizons you have to look beyond the current horizons'. Professionals outside his school say that their eyes have been opened to the 'art of the possible' by his students who are involved in the Comenius programme.

3. OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO PARTICIPATION

The survey generated a considerable amount of information, including documents, photos, reports, CDs and school inspection reports. Staff were generous in sharing their experiences, their successes and any areas of difficulty. A number of common difficulties that prevented students from participating fully in the programme were identified. Some of the obstacles to participation, for example requirements for safeguarding learners, are general ones facing all institutions, but other difficulties relate more specifically to the engagement of 'harder to reach', and consequently under-represented², groups.

¹ Doyle, L & McCarriston, M, 2008, *Beyond the school gates; supporting refugees and asylum seekers in secondary school*, London, UK, Refugee Council.

² In 2007 the national priorities for Comenius focused on widening the participation by disadvantaged or marginalised groups, including learners from minority ethnic groups, socio-disadvantaged or geographically deprived areas, travellers, looked-after children and those with learning difficulties or disabilities.

Although exchange visits lie at the heart of the Comenius partnerships, e-Twinning can also be used to develop multilateral and bilateral links between institutions in the UK and other European countries. The e-Twinning programme, part of Comenius and also managed by the British Council, offers schools a secure and controlled online space for the development and implementation of their partnership, including space for pupil email exchange. It is useful, for example, at the preparation stage of an exchange visit, so that learners are well-prepared and feel confident about their visit to the partner school. It can also be used with those groups of students who are unable to travel and be part of the exchange, so that they can still be included in the project. For those Comenius partnership projects that are unable to encompass any student exchange visits e-Twinning is extremely valuable.

Ways in which institutions have overcome obstacles to participation are described in the following sections, as shown in the table below. The most common stumbling block to successful exchanges is the first listed, the management of the requirements placed on schools and FE colleges to ensure the safeguarding of children and young people.

Obstacles to participation	Obstacles which apply at:	
	Institution level	Individual level
3.1 Safeguarding requirements e.g. CRB checks	3.1	-
3.2 Other documentation requirements e.g. application forms	3.2	-
3.3 Problems with regard to hosting exchanges	3.3	-
3.4 Financial considerations	3.4.1	3.4.2
3.5 Parental concerns	3.5.1	3.5.2
3.6 Lack of interest	3.6.1	3.6.2
3.7 Perceived as taking too much time/too much work	3.7.1	3.7.2
3.8 Perceived as being a distraction from academic work	3.8.1	3.8.2
3.9 Learners' anxieties	3.9.1	3.9.2

Some obstacles to participation relate to students' backgrounds and particularly affect those from under-represented groups. These barriers include:

- Documentation required
- Hosting exchanges
- Financial considerations
- Parental and learners' anxieties
- Lack of interest, which may be the resultant symptom of any or all of the above obstacles.

3.1 Safeguarding children

Over half of the institutions surveyed say that the current child protection regulations have had an impact on their ability to participate fully in the Comenius programme. Whilst staff fully accept the need for such regulations, they say that these requirements make it very difficult to manage meaningful exchanges. As noted above, this is a common obstacle to participation faced by UK institutions taking part in the Comenius programme.

The Scottish Executive³ states that 'It is for all of us to help children and young people to be safe'. Guidance sets out the safeguarding responsibilities of local authorities, schools and FE colleges. The difficulty arises when the UK children and young people wish to stay with their partner school's host families abroad.

All UK nations have similar regulations to ensure the safeguarding of children and young people, although the terminology and the details of the systems in place differ. For many of the European partner schools these regulations come as a surprise and it is often easier for the partner schools to visit the UK, rather than for UK students to make the exchange trip.

Despite the difficulties, some institutions do facilitate student exchange visits, but for others this is not feasible. There is a wide variety of ways in which institutions do manage the difficulties posed by the safeguarding requirements. Strategies used to overcome this obstacle include:

- *Staying with host families.* In those partnerships where UK students do stay with host families, teachers underline the importance of the trust they have built up with their partner school. One teacher emphasised that trust and sharing of information are essential elements of the partnership. He said he could rely on his partner school to undertake the necessary checks on the families who were going to host the UK students. There has to be much preparatory work to share all the necessary regulations and requirements. In these exchanges, students stay with families who have children of the same gender and age. Good planning has led to some very successful trips. Another teacher says that their partner school is in a small community where all the families are very well-known to the school. Carefully drawn-up risk assessments have incorporated the partners' recommendations and enabled the UK headteacher and school governors to make a judgement that the benefits of the exchange visit outweigh the risks, which have been well defined and carefully managed. Consequently the students are able to immerse themselves in another European culture by staying with the families from their partner school.

³Scottish Executive, 2004, *Protecting Children and Young People: Framework for Standards*, Edinburgh, Scottish Executive, Crown Copyright.

- *Staying in hostels.* Some schools engage in exchanges where the students stay in hostels rather than with host families. In one case those from the all the schools who were participating in the project stayed in the hostel together, so that the students could enjoy socialising in the evenings when they were not engaged in other activities. This kind of accommodation often needs booking one to two years in advance. If the visit by the UK institution involves rooms being shared by an adult and a student, which might be required for some students with additional needs, further checks have to be carried out in the UK prior to departure.
- *Staying in other accommodation.* One small junior school takes their pupils' parents with them and they all stay in rented accommodation. The school invites a parent from each family to join the trip, and engages in fund-raising so that no-one is excluded. On the return visit the pupils from the European school are hosted by UK families, and the European parents stay in local accommodation. In this way the school effectively manages the stringent requirements, but also maximises the opportunities.
- *Teacher exchanges.* In some schools where student exchange is not possible, the teachers engage in exchanges. This enables students to experience working with teachers from other cultures. Sometimes, where a real friendship has developed, teachers stay with each other, but often they stay in accommodation near their partner school. This approach has the lowest risk, but still requires that the visiting European staff either have police checks at home in advance of the visit, or are not left unsupervised with UK students.

Author's note: A new vetting and barring scheme is to be introduced in schools in England in October 2009. It will apply to existing staff. It is acknowledged that further guidance is required for schools wanting to engage in exchange visits where their students will stay with host families. Up-dates will be provided as the information becomes available.

3.2 Other documentation

The amount of documentation required in terms of application forms, risk assessments, plans and budgets may deter schools from joining the programme. This obstacle is closely aligned to Section 3.1 above (safeguarding children) and is part of the concern about the time commitment required and the quantity of work involved. Once again, this is a common obstacle to participation faced by UK institutions taking part in the Comenius programme, although the quantity of required paperwork varies. Staff undertaking exchange visits with students with learning difficulties and disabilities say that they have even more paperwork to complete.

Some teachers highlighted the difficulties arising when students do not have passports. Often much help is needed to complete the application forms, and in some cases financial support is also requested. Some students will be excluded from exchange visits because they do not have the necessary documentation to allow them to re-enter the UK following the trip to Europe.

Some institutions are required to complete a large amount of documentation before taking their students abroad. One school for students with special educational needs says that, at least a year in advance of the visit, it completes four lever-arch files of paperwork for 16 students accompanied by 12 members of staff. Another school points out that there is much to do for the first visit, but that it gets easier subsequently. One teacher says that, if the institution is really committed to the programme, time should be set aside for teachers to complete the necessary forms. This was the case in a school where the completing the application form took two staff a day each.

Teachers say that it is important to share risk assessments with the partner school so all are aware of the depth and breadth of UK health and safety requirements. In one school, not only is much care taken to ensure that dietary requirements are met, but, for example, the journey from the host family to the host school is mapped out in advance and shared with the UK student.

One school for students with special educational needs aims to plan for the unexpected when taking students on exchanges. Role play is undertaken with the students well in advance of the trip, so that the young people feel comfortable with the new experiences. However, not all scenarios can be anticipated, and in this case the homeward journey was delayed in the departure lounge by nine hours because of the arrival of an important world figure.

Many schools have indicated that partner-finding sessions have been very useful. Teachers taking advantage of these opportunities have found completing the applications easier and, because time has been allocated by their institutions for the attendance at these sessions, there has been less pressure on them. Such sessions also enable the sharing of good practice and, by working together, innovative answers to difficult questions can be found. For example, one UK school has found that sharing with its partner school the risk assessments it is required to complete has ensured that the partner school is aware of these requirements when planning the visit. This school gave the example of the risk assessment for water margin activities, which requires tidal information to be obtained prior to the visit. The partner-finding sessions can also provide opportunities for the partners to start to develop trust between them at an early stage of the programme. As indicated in Section 3.1 above (safeguarding children), trust between partners is very important in developing successful partnerships.

Author's comment: Comenius partnership reporting requirements have been simplified under the new Lifelong Learning Programme, although an interim and a final report are necessary for standard two-year partnerships. Detailed financial reporting is no longer required, but records of project activity need to be kept. This additional flexibility will enable each school to use its funding to the best possible advantage for the Comenius project.

3.3 Hosting exchanges

For some institutions the visit by their partners involves hosting large numbers of staff and students. One school which will have over 50 visitors this year will use an outdoor pursuits centre to accommodate the guests. Some schools find many families say they are unable to host guests because of the cost or lack of space. Schools which cited this obstacle tended to have a diverse ethnic student population. The difficulties of finding suitable accommodation for host families have been resolved in a number of ways:

- To begin a dialogue with parents well in advance to ensure that they are aware there is no requirement to be 'long-term British'⁴ in order to be a host family.
- To anticipate financial constraints well in advance of the trip, and explore ways of providing effective financial support for those parents for whom the cost factor is the barrier to offering hospitality.

Removing the requirement for students who take part in the exchange to offer reciprocal hosting arrangements has been an important step towards widening participation in some institutions.

One school has found it has taken a long time for parents to be sufficiently confident to offer to host exchange visitors. The teacher there emphasises the importance of taking a long-term view. She says she knows the programme is having an impact on the wider community when parents stop her in the playground and offer hospitality for the next exchange group.

3.4 Financial considerations

Whilst finance is a common obstacle to participation which is not specifically related to any particular group of students, one teacher stated that, in his experience, White British students from families with higher incomes were more likely to be engaged in the programme. He said the general reasons for this was that this group of students already had passports, had travelled abroad on holidays with parents, were more used to being away for short periods from their parents and these families were more likely to offer accommodation to the visiting students.

⁴This is a term used by one school to describe white families who have lived in the UK for several generations.

3.4.1 The institution

There are a number of other costs sometimes associated with the programme, which teachers feel should be identified:

- *Cost of teachers' time in completing the application form.* In some cases the Comenius form-filling and planning time is built into in-service training at the beginning of the year. Teachers say that where they have attended a partner-finding conference as a part of their professional development, much of the application process has been completed during the sessions. This is seen by a number of institutions as the preferred way of starting a Comenius project.
- *Cost of supply staff.* Some schools have overcome this difficulty by arranging their exchange visits in the holidays. For some institutions this kind of activity is permitted only during the holidays. Holiday exchanges can make scheduling difficult as the European term dates differ and, as in one or two schools in the study, staff are unwilling to commit themselves to a school activity during their holidays. Some institutions have managed to overcome supply difficulties by planning well in advance of the trip so that colleagues are aware of the cover requirements, and any problems can be effectively dealt with long before they become major stumbling blocks. In one small school staff willingly cover for each other knowing that they too will go on a trip. In another school, judicious use of support staff and teachers means that the timetable is unaffected for those not involved in the exchange visit. Some schools schedule short exchange visits over a long weekend thereby reducing the expense of employing supply teachers.
- *Costs associated with booking in advance.* Where exchanges involve staying in paid-for accommodation, booking this accommodation, whether it is an outdoor pursuits centre or a hostel, frequently has to be done well in advance, sometimes by as much as two years. This may necessitate making financial decisions in advance of an agreed budget, and there may be a risk of losing the deposit should arrangements need to be altered.
- *Hidden costs.* For some schools there are hidden costs. For example, one special school found that it had to purchase climbing harnesses for the students to keep them in their seats during the flights. Schools would like an expert to support them so that these costs can be identified at the beginning of the project and incorporated in the overall planning. One or two teachers working with special needs students have offered to support others embarking on an exchange visit for the first time. Their experience will be made available.

3.4.2 The individual

There are several costs under this heading:

- *Additional personal costs.* One FE college where students participate in exchange visits offers a number of support mechanisms to help students save a sufficient sum in order to participate. This has required the college to make all the travel arrangements itself, supporting the application for passports and helping students to manage a savings scheme. Visiting students do not stay with host families as many of the UK students are living away from home in rented accommodation.
- *Additional expenses for host families.* One school found that some parents felt unable to offer hospitality because of the cost of feeding the visitor. Experience shows that offering host families funding to cover the cost of the visitors' food is not effective if left to the last minute.
- *Parents' travel costs.* As already mentioned, where schools have overcome the difficulties of the safeguarding regulations by taking parents on the exchange visit, the cost of the trip creates a problem for some families. Sometimes the school has engaged in fund-raising events to enable one parent from each family to participate.

Author's comment: Under the new arrangements for Comenius partnership funding, schools receive flat-rate or "lump sum" funding, based on the number of mobilities they plan to undertake. As long as they provide evidence at the reporting stage that these mobilities have taken place, schools do not need to provide actual details of expenditure incurred and will retain the full lump sums awarded. Any savings on the *real* cost of travel can be used for supporting other aspects of the project, such as some of the suggestions above. Additionally, schools can request a reduction of up to 50% of the mobilities they must undertake, to release funds for special needs related costs, for example carers to accompany disabled travellers. This flexibility can enable schools to overcome some of the financial constraints described above.

3.5 Parental concerns

Parental anxieties cover a range of areas. Some are specific to particular groups of students, for example Muslim students need to be able to carry out their religious observances. Other concerns are more general, for example the anxiety of separation.

3.5.1 The institution's role in overcoming parental concerns

Parents' anxieties about hosting visitors sometimes result in their own children not participating in the programme. Some parents are concerned that their own culture and language will bar them from offering hospitality to visiting students. These parents often

believe that the visitors will want to stay in a 'typical British home'. This causes a difficulty for institutions that require students who go on exchanges to act as hosts for the return visit. Unless this problem is dealt with effectively some students from minority ethnic backgrounds will be excluded. One school found that some families had no spare rooms for the visitors, or felt very diffident about offering what room they had. If the school's vetting procedures lack sensitivity, this too causes some families to withdraw. A number of institutions avoided these difficulties by providing some form of local accommodation for the visitors. This enabled all their students to participate regardless of their background. Where schools have long-standing exchanges, they say that finding host families becomes easier as families become more confident about hosting the visitors.

Schools that overcame parental anxieties effectively had many meetings with parents in advance of the exchange visit. One primary school has found that taking pupils regularly on residential trips to centres in the UK means that parents have grown accustomed to the idea of their children staying away, so that a visit to a European partner school is viewed as just another trip.

The Comenius co-ordinator in one school made an individually-tailored list of benefits showing how much each student would gain from the exchange visit. This was shared at meetings with each set of parents to allay fears. These meetings often lasted over two hours. The teacher estimated that it took about eight to nine hours per set of parents to engage them fully with the exchange visit. This was deemed to be a good investment which ensured that the students were able to participate in the exchange.

Some families do not allow their girls to travel on any form of public transport because of concerns about their safety. This excludes these girls from participating in an exchange visit. One school has overcome this barrier to participation by providing video-conference links so that the girls can still join in with the discussions and the work. Sending photos in advance of the video-conference helps to 'break the ice', and it has been agreed that if the girls usually wear headscarves they will wear them during the conferencing too. In this way barriers caused by differences can be broken down. The school is finding that parents' fears are slowly being overcome.

3.5.2 The individual

Parents' anxieties about letting their children go on exchanges, as identified by the schools, are very varied, and include:

- *Anxiety about separation.* Some schools support parents who have anxieties about being separated from their children, by working with them prior to the trip through meetings, phone calls and other regular contacts. Providing residential trips in the UK enables parents to get used to the idea of their children being away from them, while still being in the same country. Building trust between staff and parents, particularly if the student has additional needs, is often the solution.

- *Concerns about religious observances.* Teachers say that detailed planning is essential to ensure that all religious and cultural requirements are taken into account when arranging the exchange visits. One school says it always requests a vegetarian diet for its Muslim students as this is easily understood by the partner school and prevents any embarrassment should a student have to refuse a meat dish for religious reasons. Another school says it schedules stops for prayer so that all who wish to are able to complete their daily observances. It is easy to miss something. For example, one school with a diverse student population realised that it had failed to provide equal opportunities for its Muslim girls because when wearing their normal headscarves they were not able to go into their French partner school.
- *Concerns about child-protection issues.* Staff say that parental concerns about safety issues can often be resolved by sharing with parents the rigorous risk assessments and child protection requirements that have been undertaken. If an adult is sharing a room with a student the additional risk assessments of these should also be shared. Once again it is about building trust.
- *Concerns about losing control of their child.* For some parents there is an anxiety that their child will be faced with experiences from which, for personal, cultural or religious reasons, the parents want to protect their child. Teachers say that working closely with the parents, listening to their concerns and reassuring them is the only way forward. Without that the parents are likely to withdraw their child/children from the programme.
- *Concerns about internet abuse.* Some parents are concerned about the possibility of internet abuse when their children are engaged in e-mailing pen pals. Schools overcome this in a number of ways, including:
 - Ensuring that the e-mails are sent as class sets, and not to individuals
 - Composing a whole class e-mail which is sent to the partner class.

Author's comment: e-Twinning can also be used effectively to ensure that when students are unable to participate in an exchange visit they are still included in the programme.

3.6 Lack of interest

This obstacle is sometimes the symptom rather than the cause. It is likely to be associated with particular student groups, as it is closely aligned with many other difficulties such as financial concerns, parental anxieties and documentation requirements.

3.6.1 The institution

Where staff are unwilling to get involved the programme leader needs to explore why this is so. It may be provided as an excuse for other obstacles, for example time commitment; or it may be because of other factors within the institution, such as:

- The leadership of the programme, which may be insufficiently inclusive, so some members of staff feel no involvement or interest in Comenius
- The management of the programme, which may lack clear planning
- Anxiety about travel, which may arise for historical reasons. Exchange visits are not synonymous with involvement in the project. Staff are still able to participate without visiting Europe.

Where schools have successfully overcome this problem and engaged staff they have done it through open dialogue and getting the staff to take ownership of the programme by building relevant and exciting projects across the curriculum.

3.6.2 The individual

For some students an exchange is not feasible because of the absence of the required documentation, such as a passport that will allow them to return to the UK. However, these students can still be engaged in the curriculum work and in the return visits. One school said that although they are near London it was not until their European visitors arrived that their students actually visited the sights in the capital city. This school found that their students were proud to be hosts and enjoyed having the visitors to stay.

In one school the student leaders were suspicious of the programme because of the 'free' exchange trip. They said that nothing was free! However, after the first successful trip, many more students were keen to get involved in the next one. It takes time to introduce a new programme and win over the stakeholders.

3.7 Taking too much time

This is a frequently identified obstacle, with the application forms and the required documentation, including risk assessments, regularly being cited. The programme does take time, but whether it takes too much time depends not only on the benefits it brings but also on how well it fits into the institution's aims and objectives as identified in development plans. This is a general obstacle to participation cited by institutions and is not linked to any specific student group.

3.7.1 The institution

In many of the successful Comenius partnerships the programme is seen as a vehicle to deliver specific outcomes identified in the institution's development plans, rather than as an end in itself. In these cases, time spent in developing the Comenius work is also, for example, time devoted to raising student attainment and working with the wider community. Projects need to be relevant to the curriculum and to be inclusive, so that some of the 'harder

to reach' students can also achieve success. In some cases the Student Council is involved, which helps to drive the project forward.

One school hosting an exchange visit invites its local university to send students as translators. Other schools use their local community to assist in translation when necessary. This is one way in which schools can demonstrate that they are building social cohesion within their wider community.

In one school the Comenius 'power house' was the group of gifted and talented students for whom the project was initiated. They formed the steering group, but the project was embedded in the curriculum for all 14 year olds, and involved parents, governors and staff.

3.7.2 The individual

Institutions say that where the chosen project is real and relevant, students are keen to get involved. Some schools run the Comenius project as a lunchtime or after-school club. On the other hand, where the project is part of the curriculum, schools say that students really enjoy learning about real people and real places, and communicating with them. Schools say that the pen-pal relationships often continue long after the students have left their school. True friendships are not perceived as a waste of time.

3.8 Perceived as being a distraction from academic work

This obstacle is often one that is merely perceived, rather than one actually occurring in practice. It is not associated with any particular ethnic group.

3.8.1 The institution

Institutions indicate that 'selling' the programme to the staff and supporting them to embed it in the curriculum bring staff members 'on board' and are very important aspects at the planning stage. One school sets a timetable for the lifespan of the project across the year groups to ensure that all have the opportunity to work on it within the curriculum areas. There are different activities for the different year groups, but all are involved, including parents, governors and all school staff. Involving the school manager also helps to spread the administrative jobs.

3.8.2 The individual

Some students are aware that the Comenius activities take time that they could otherwise be spending on academic work, but this applies usually to any extra-curricular activity. There is an element of choice, in the same way that after-school activities compete with academic studies. However, where the Comenius project is a means of delivering the curriculum, there is no tension.

3.9 Learners' anxieties

The variety of concerns raised by learners is broad. Some anxieties relate to students' religious observances or their cultural background, but others are more general, for example worries about new foods. Institutions are very adept at managing these. In one case an institution so successfully supported an older learner to overcome his anxiety about travelling to Europe that he now lives and works abroad.

3.9.1 The institution

Overcoming learners' anxieties about the unknown is routine in many schools. Additional preparation time is required when students with learning difficulties and disabilities are taken abroad. Not only is time needed to prepare the students fully, for example through role play so they can practise how to behave and what to expect in different situations, but also additional risk assessments are required. However, staff say the rewards can be immense, and the visits are very worthwhile. Travelling details need to be very carefully planned so that, for example, all the journeys to and from the partner school and the accommodation are mapped out. One experienced headteacher says 'If in doubt, don't', but if the student is well-known by the staff going on the trip and can be trusted to respond appropriately in certain circumstances then the headteacher would be content to include the student. The essential element is trust. As the headteacher points out, he wants to take good ambassadors and not have concerns about managing unreliable behaviour which may cause problems with host families. He will send students home if their behaviour is poor.

Students with particular learning difficulties, such as those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, are less likely to go on exchange visits. Sorting out anxieties before the trip, especially any connected with language, is very important.

3.9.2 The individual

Many institutions help to sort out individuals' concerns by involving the students in the planning of the trip, so that all can raise problems at an early stage. Where schools give clear guidance about, for example, the standards of dress (for example, no football shirts or T-shirts with offensive logos) students accept these and in some cases welcome them. Students are often much happier talking to their peers about their concerns. Providing opportunities for those who are going on an exchange visit, to talk to for those who have already been on one, is a very effective way of resolving students' anxieties.

4. ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The case-studies provide a wealth of recommendations, some of which have been outlined in the section above. Other ideas include:

- Ensure that school inspectors are aware of the Comenius work undertaken in the school. In a recent Estyn inspection report the Comenius programme was cited as enabling 'a highly successful partnership [to be] forged with European

countries' and 'these experiences extend the pupils' horizons and considerably raise their awareness of other cultures'. It praised the 'outstanding provision for developing the pupils' understanding of global citizenship'.

- Use web chats. One school uses web chats on the whiteboard to facilitate class to class discussions. Next term they will use a webcam so that the classes can see each other during their discussions.
- Keep the project simple. A number of schools say the project should be straightforward so that institutions are not overstretched.
- Attend any partner-finding sessions on offer.

5. LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ⁵

Comenius projects provide excellent opportunities for learners to become leaders. Recently the DCSF in England emphasised the importance of involving children and young people in decision-making, and pointed out that the effective participation by children and young people will depend very much on the extent to which local authorities and schools meet the principles outlined below:

- Respecting and trusting all children and young people
- Creating the necessary time and space and resources for participation
- Providing training and support for children and young people to ensure that they are able to participate effectively
- Providing training for adults so that they can support children's and young people's participation effectively
- Sharing information that is timely and relevant and that is jargon-free and can be understood by children and young people
- Managing expectations, for example explaining what is 'out-of-bounds' for practical, legal or political reasons
- Supplying clear and timely feedback on outcomes to all children and young people, not just those directly involved in a given decision-making process
- Celebrating achievements and recognising the learning that children and young people gain through participation.

Many of these principles have been covered in the sections above. Staff in the case-studies are already applying them.

⁵ DCSF, 2008, *Working together, listening to the voices of children and young people*, London UK, DCSF

6. USING COMENIUS WORK TO RAISE ACHIEVEMENT

Comenius projects offer an excellent way of closing the gap between the lowest achieving groups and the national average by:

- Encouraging parents and the wider community to play a full part in the life and development of the school
- Developing a strong ethos and culture of mutual respect where all students are able to have their voices heard
- Supporting the development of effective planning and teaching through curriculum projects, where teachers are able to spend time reflecting on the identities, and cultures of the communities represented in their lessons and in the school, so that this can be shared with their partner school
- Having high expectations for all, and ensuring all are included, either passively or actively in the programme
- Creating strong leadership so that a coherent programme can be delivered across the school and its partners.

7. COMENIUS PROJECTS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO COMMUNITY COHESION

English schools are required to promote community cohesion, and school inspectors have to make a judgement about this. The definition for community cohesion was provided by Alan Johnson, who was then Secretary of State for Education and Skills:

‘By community cohesion, we mean working towards a society in which there is a common vision and sense of belonging by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people’s backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar life opportunities are available to all; and a society in which strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community.’

Ways in which Comenius projects can contribute to community cohesion include:

- Enabling students to have regular opportunities to work with others from different ethnic, religious, non-religious and socio-economic backgrounds, for example when using e-Twinning to develop the Comenius project
- Increasing students’ understanding and knowledge of both the UK and global communities, for example when they are hosts to visiting partners the UK students often learn much about their own country and visit sites they have not been to before
- Ensuring that students learn about others and understand them, for example as guests in the partner’s community, or when preparing for an exchange visit or a video conference link
- Valuing diversity and promoting shared values, for example when collaborating in developing the work and communicating with the partner institutions

- Ensuring equal opportunities for all to succeed by removing barriers to access, so that everyone in the school community can participate in the learning and partake in the wider activities, for example by planning that the visitors engage with the whole school, providing opportunities for positive interaction between students, parents/carers and staff
- Ensuring the same outcomes for all the different groups, so that all can achieve, for example by the careful choice of partner institutions so there are no barriers to participation due to socio-economic, religious, non-religious, ethnic or cultural reasons, or because of age, gender or sexual orientation.

8. UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

Comments from schools and colleges about their Comenius projects include:

- Great team-building exercise, as staff come back from an exchange knowing each other much better
- Raises staff morale. One school said, 'It is very good to have visitors, as it raises the school's morale'
- Boosts the self-esteem of minority ethnic groups involved in the programme, as it provides the opportunity for the institution to demonstrate that it values diversity
- Whole school (in some cases including the administration, support staff, kitchen staff, business managers and cleaners) participation increases people's 'ownership' of the programme and helps to build an effective team within the school. This can be further supported by Comenius' In-Service Training, which provides professional development opportunities for educational staff to enrol in a course, to job shadow or undertake other training activity in Europe.
- Good material for the school's self-evaluation. From one school, described in a recent inspection report as being 'located in an interface area that has suffered from acute civil and social unrest in recent years', the teacher wrote:

Pupils also learned interesting information about the climate, geography and history of each of the countries. This has proven very valuable, as children from a small school in a disadvantaged area now have an awareness of the wider world outside their immediate doorstep.

She also said that 'it has been my privilege as a teacher to witness the impact of the project on the life of the whole school'.

- Good engagement of boys. The Comenius project in one school has engaged boys particularly well because of the use of ICT in the work. This was not an intended outcome of the project, but is one of the findings of the school's self-evaluation.

- New ideas and teaching strategies. One group of teachers came back from a visit and put sofas in the classroom for use during circle time. This has had a significant impact on the quality of the sessions.

9. OVERALL SUMMARY

Staff interviewed in these case-studies have provided a wealth of experience and their willingness to share their learning has resulted in many exciting insights, particularly regarding mobility activities which lie at the heart of the Comenius experience. Four main themes reoccur:

- Plan in detail well ahead of the trip
- Talk to those going on the trip and to those staying at home in order to dispel any difficulties long before the departure date
- Remember that the benefits do far outweigh the difficulties, and there are experienced colleagues who have offered to help
- **Enjoy it!**

Many thanks go to staff in the following institutions that were so generous with their time, their strategies, and their ideas:

Acle St Edmund VC Primary School, Norwich

Ash Field School, Leicester

Bishopswood Special School, Reading

Chichester High School for Boys, Chichester

Currie Primary School, Belfast

Dereham Neatherd High School, Dereham,

Durham Trinity School, Durham

Lewannick Community Primary School, Launceston

Lincoln Christ's Hospital School, Lincoln

Pond Park Nursery School, Lisburn

Saltford Church of England Primary School, Bristol

Selly Park Technology College for Girls, Birmingham

St Ann's Roman Catholic Primary, Mossblown

St Marys Catholic School, Churchdown

Stevenson College, Edinburgh

Trinity School, Dagenham

Wilkes Green Infant School, Birmingham

Ysgol Eglwys Bach, Colwyn Bay