

## Czech Republic EPRESS blog

### Day 1

It was an early start for us from Stansted airport to Prague. We left foggy UK and a short 2 hour flight later arrived in a rainy Czech Republic. We were pleasantly surprised by the public transport and managed to navigate to our hotel easily via bus and train.

During the afternoon the rest of our international group arrived and we sat down to a delicious evening meal at the hotel. The talk quickly turned to food education as we introduced ourselves to new members of the group and discussed how much we have already got from the project and what we were looking forward to on this visit. It was great to speak to others who are as passionate as we are at Washingborough about educating our children and young people in this area. Our project managers Dorte and Mat encouraged us to watch one another's vlogs to learn more about our various perspectives on the project. I have already learnt much about our new members and we have been swapping recipes and ideas for future plans. Watch out for cricket flour in a snack shack recipe coming soon (yes, really!). We all look forward to seeing food education in practice in the Czech Republic tomorrow.

### Day 2

Our day began with a short bus ride to Seminko Kindergarten, a small pre-school with just 61 children aged from two to six years. The school has been set up within a co-operative and is privately funded by parents which has enabled them to develop as they have. The kindergarten is set within an ecological conservation area where four separate groups run non-profit organisations including a farm for native Czech breeds of pig, goat, sheep and birds.

The kindergarten as well as other schools and the public are free to use the surrounding grounds for education and forest school classes from Seminko Kindergarten are taken into the wider grounds each day. The school was purpose built as a forest school with a kitchen on site and the Czech healthy school food standards adopted from the planning stages. Regulations on forest gardens mean that no pesticides are used on the site. The plant life within a forest school must include variety of fruit trees/bushes. Composting is expected also and they are not to use peat. At Seminko Kindergarten we saw Solar and wind power being used for outdoor areas.

The children go outside every day, regardless of the weather and we are told they are very happy to be outside. Learning through exploring their environment is a key aspect of the forest school system.

We were all intrigued by the equipment used to mimic bird call for many species and find out that the children learn to recognise bird calls. Lots of the equipment here is made from natural materials, has



been a conscious decision by staff to use sustainable resources and reduce the use of plastics.

As part of our tour we were taken to the dining room. The eating space is a permanent set up with beautifully painted spacing spots for children to navigate around the room in an orderly fashion. For

example a stop circle in-front of the serving hatch and a thank you one just next to it. A bell rings to signal the start and finish of meal. Children must be quiet (indoor voices) and stay seated unless they need something once the bell has rung. If finished first they can take paper to draw while they wait for the second bell.

It was very interesting to hear that on a Friday the children have etiquette lessons. Known as formal Friday, uniform is only worn on a Friday. Lessons are not just table etiquette but all social skills. E.g. How to let someone go first, excuse me, after you, saying please and thank you of course. It is nice to see that values also feature in the education system here.

Parents like to be involved in the development of the school and are invited in twice a year to help with maintenance, they repaint, weed, prune plants and create new areas.



We enjoyed a tour of the indoor classrooms where we were struck by the obvious love for nature, an abundance of equipment and natural resources for children to extend their outdoor learning (and a slide as an alternative to the stairs!). The facilities outside include large covered classroom areas where children can be taught outside under shelter if the weather is extreme. When a class is using the outdoor areas they are outside for the whole day. They bring their snack and water with them and eat these outside. Only returning to the indoors for lunch. They even have composting toilets within the grounds. We

have taken many ideas for the development of our own outdoor areas and are inspired to get children learning outdoors as a normal part of our planning.

From Seminko Kindergarten we travelled to Angel School also in Prague, but much larger with almost 1000 pupils. Immediately the contrast between the two settings struck us. Angel School is a very large inner city school catering for children from six to sixteen years. The school is a bilingual school and some lessons are taught in English (11 hours a week in year 4/5) Parents in this school are very active in activities with two parent groups. The drive towards healthier food in the cafeteria and the food education was led by the parent organisation. The parent organisation have a budget funded by voluntary parental contributions. Parents in the Czech Republic find this normal and here they give about 28 euro a year, per child, to this budget, to organise projects including the support of healthy lifestyle choices. The parent organisation do surprise quarterly drop ins to try the school food and feedback to the group and to the head. Children have also done this from time to time and had differing opinions to their parents on food choices! The parent group organised a competition to design a dish for the menu and dish was named after winning pupil. I see an idea forming for a similar competition here! The parent group support all areas not just food. Providing prizes for competitions, equipment and treats for the children. They organise a summer party to celebrate food in the school. The committee includes over 40 parents who are passionate about supporting the children and school.

We were served lunch in the school cafeteria at Angel School with the children. We had all pre-booked from a choice of three dishes



as the children do. We noticed some delicious fruit platters which were very popular. I had chicken with potatoes and gravy. Meals here in Czech public schools are charged at cost price, about 1-1.5 euro. Most children (90%+) eat the hot meal at school, but they may bring their own or go home for lunch if they prefer. We were told the choice of 3 meals is unusual for the Czech schools. Most only offer 1 or 2 options. The school also offer a daily healthy snack such as fruit or yoghurt which can also be pre ordered and the government provide free fruit/veg and milk, but this is not every day, about twice a month. The classes take turns to get the packs.

After a short break for refreshments we began our outdoor tour guided by two year five children. We heard how the children have been making raised beds and filling them with produce. The herb bed has been placed near the kitchen and is supplying the school kitchen. The school are working with some groups who have supported them in developing more gardening areas. They have taken inspiration from their visit to us and other schools in the UK which led to the raised beds here. New raised beds are planned for another area connected to the after school club. The parents will also be involved in the care of these beds and are encouraged to stay a little longer after pick up to do this. Older children in the school have been working in craftsmanship lessons on the composting beds and the raised beds. They have found this a great way to bring food into other areas of the curriculum. Being inspired by their visit to Denmark the teachers here are keen to get more children cooking in school. Unfortunately, government regulations mean they cannot use the school kitchen that is already there for lessons and so school is applying for grants to develop a teaching kitchen for the children to use.

The KOKOZA (closed cycle of food) project are supporting the school to make plans to develop their gardening and growing areas. They brought in composting equipment to support the class working on worms and helped source and plan the new raised beds. An interesting project the school run is one for year one children who spend a day learning about their school cook; what are the cooks favourite meal, learning how their food is cooked and what happens to the waste they throw away. By doing this the children get to know the kitchen staff work and this builds a better relationship between children and lunch time staff. Something we thought we could do here in the UK to help the children connect more with the people who are working in our own kitchens.

Another project planned by the parent committee was 'let's not waste any food' the aim of which is to reduce food waste. Devised by the tasting committee and class teachers. Classes chose how to reduce the amount of food waste in school. Some made posters, other gave presentations with graphs to demonstrate how much food the school was composting or re-distributing to outside waste schemes. The children learnt how scarce food can be in third world countries and how lucky we are to always have food available to buy and eat.

One of the subjects taught within the Czech system is 'us in the world' where the children learn about ecological issues. Also included is food education/cooking. This subject allows many cross curricula food links to be taught. Biology also provides many food education links including digestion and keeping your body healthy. During Year 7 and 8 they have a trained specialist who comes in to educate the children about eating disorders.

As an inner city school, access to outdoor areas and farms is limited. The school are working hard to develop a food curriculum after their visit to us in the UK last year. They have been focusing on using food to make cross curriculum links. E.g. fractions with fruit using the free fruit that the government give them.

We had the opportunity to discuss the differences between our school food cultures as well as the food education systems. It is interesting to hear that school meal uptake is highest when government/schools in all three countries subsidise the cost of meals to make them more affordable to parents. In the Czech Republic the parents only pay the cost price. Here 88p and Hull £1. Our cost of £2.30 is probably a barrier to gaining a higher uptake in ks2.

### Day 3



We set off early and travelled by train and coach to Brno. We arrived around lunch time and enjoyed a traditional Czech lunch in a small village cafe. From there we drove to the herb and tea company Sonnentor, who supply natural organically farmed high quality herbs, spices and tea. We followed a tour that visiting school children would see. We learnt that the company began when the founder connected with local organic farmers who were already in the industry and with their herbs and flowers began making produce to sell and export for a fair price. The farmers he works with value a close connection with the land and plants. Where possible crops are planted and harvested by hand. We were given a tour of the site and watched a video showing the process from planting, to harvest, to drying, and processing. They celebrate the preservation of culture and tradition. Unique codes allow the finished package to be tracked easily to the farm and the producer. Some of the waste product (herb dust) is then burned to produce energy. The ash is then used for fertiliser and also bi-product can be used to feed livestock. All the packaging is natural and degradable. The clear wrap is made from plant cellulose, the bags from banana leaf or corn maize!

After visiting the herb and tea company we set off for what I consider the most exciting visit of our trip... A chocolate factory! I say factory, but this is a very small scale factory with just 2 rooms on a farm. It was a short drive on the coach to Family run business started in 2013 when the owner's wife started making truffles while on maternity leave with bought in high quality chocolate and fresh ingredients, locally sourced where possible. Which she did around caring for her baby. This was not so easy to begin with, with only a small market for high quality, smaller producer selling a relatively expensive produce. They stuck to their principles of only using high quality ingredients ethically sourced, and gradually demand grew. However, the shelf life of the truffles was short and this gave problems when exporting. They then decided to expand their product line to begin making their own chocolate from imported cocoa beans. To begin with they found the samples they bought did not produce nice tasting chocolate. We

sampled some pure beans before they were processed which were bitter, with a very strong taste, there was a slight chocolate taste at the end. I have brought a few home to show the children. After much trial and error they met someone who was able to supply a perfect bean and realised how important getting a high quality cocoa bean is to produce a good tasting chocolate. They now import high quality beans from Madagascar, Guatemala, Columbia and Belize. We learnt that 85% of cocoa beans that come from Africa and are of poor quality without fair trade standards. Often exploiting child labour. These beans produced poor tasting chocolate and so they did not use them. Trying to get high quality beans from Ecuador was difficult as they were grown for disease resistance rather than taste. Next the bit we were all looking forward to- chocolate tasting! First we tried chocolate from Belize. We also smelt beans from Columbia, which smelt like cherry trees. We then smelt Guatemalan beans which smelt more vinegary. The grower will ferment then dry the beans and ship them to the producer. This small ethical company try to minimise waste by choosing high quality beans so less need be thrown away. During processing the husk is removed and the nibs are kept. The husk can be used to make a chocolate tea, fertiliser also to make a chocolate beer! Beans which are not up to standard are used for these other uses. I was given a small sample of the husks which we can use in school when learning about fair trade chocolate. We handled the whole bean pods but unfortunately these are hard to come by so I wasn't able to bring one back. I will continue looking for one though as it's really nice to see the fruit in its original form. All the cocoa beans and cocoa butter used here are organic. It was interesting to hear that most growers are essentially organic as they do not have access to pesticides, but not all are registered as such due to regulations. The beans are sorted by hand here at the factory and then roasted in ovens for about 15-20 mins at 120-130deg. After roasting the husks are removed by machine leaving the nibs ready to be ground. The nibs are ground for 72 hours and only organic sugar is added 30% sugar 70% cocoa nibs so no other added ingredients are needed. For milk chocolate they add milk powder and cocoa butter. The chocolate is then poured into a tempering machine to make it smooth and glossy. You need to heat it to 50° c, then cool it down to 30° c, and then pour it into moulds. All of this is done by hand. They also make some cakes and truffles still but the bars are the most popular. I asked how white chocolate is made and found out that here it is made by only using the cocoa butter extracted from the cocoa beans, vanilla, sugar and milk powder. We then saw the kitchens where they make cakes and truffles with their own chocolate. After our tour of the factory we had the chance to try more chocolate, strawberry chocolate, coconut chocolate, milk chocolate.



Back upstairs, we learnt more about how the cocoa grows and is harvested. The beans grow on trees. The flowers grow straight from the trunk of the tree! We heard how they family have been to visit their farmers and see the cocoa growing, harvested and fermented. Because he has been to see his farmers he could tell us so much about the and the whole process. Apparently the flesh around the bean is

sweet and tasty, but not often eaten by locals as the bean is far more valuable as an export. Each pod

contains about 50 beans. The beans are fermented within a co-operative who work together. The fermentation takes 8-10 days beans are turned from one box to another every 2 days. If beans are not fermented properly the whole batch will be affected and go bad. After fermentation the beans are spread out on drying racks to dry out in the sun for 1 or 2 weeks depending on the weather. The beans are then transported by sail boat to Europe which is much better for the environment than usual shipping methods. They aim to reduce the impact of importing the bean as much as possible. It is clear that they have a close working relationship with their Balinese farmers. By working with a direct trade partnership they pay a fair price directly to the farmer which means the farmer is not forced to sell land to big companies and can afford to send their children to school. This is very important to the ethos of the company.

We then took a short stroll through the connecting field to the family vineyard of one of our colleagues Veronica. We met her husband and father in law and were able to sit and enjoy their company and an home prepared drinks and a local traditional wedding snack while we waited for our coach. A late journey to our next hotel which again was beautiful with a windmill. It's a shame we didn't get more time to explore the surrounding area as it was so picturesque. We checked into our hotel and enjoyed a simple traditional Czech dinner menu. While discussing the importance of knowing where our food comes from and supporting small farmers to continue using traditional methods and varieties of fruit and vegetables.

#### Day 4

Our last day on the project and first our coach took us into Brno where we dropped our bags at tonight's hotel and took a short walk to Materinka Brno a Montessori nursery and pre-school. We learnt a little about the Montessori methodology in education and how the nursery and preschool organise their learning around 5 areas: practical life, sensory education, maths, language and cosmic education.

While at the kindergarten we were able to observe a group of children creating a dish together for their lunch. The Teachers supported the children to create a yoghurt dressing to go with a salad. The environment is very calm with only one small group in the nursery there is no other background activities or noise to compete against. After preparing the lunch the children chose an activity. They play with toys to develop motor skills. Look at books, independently or with a teacher if they wish. All resources are displayed in an attractive way, accessible to all children. It is a very appealing classroom. Another group we were taken to observe were preparing for lunch. Setting the table with their own cutlery, plate and cup. The children are encouraged to be as independent as possible and even wash their own dishes and put them away after eating. We then sat down to eat the salad the children had prepared for us earlier.





From Materinka Brno we took a bus to Waldorf Brno, a state run Stein school for children aged 6-15 years. Outside learning is very important here, we had a tour of the garden and loved all the garden structures to support outdoor learning. We then came into the teaching kitchen, which was small but had everything the children needed. It looks out onto the garden and so children can enjoy their meal outside after preparing it.

Children are able to cook at school on a regular basis. The school garden has many areas for learning. Two large outdoor classrooms, herb garden, raised beds,



bee hives, sand pit, climbing areas and swings. We came away with lots of ideas about how to develop our own outdoor areas to enable classes to take more lessons outside.



Our final visit of the trip was to the Brno open gardens. Built 2012 to support environmental projects within the city. They have a large plot which was once part of a monastery garden. The aims of the garden include the conservation of bees, education of the public and the promotion of ecological issues. A passive building, it has two green roofs, toilets fed partly from rainwater, solar panels and wind turbines. There are two gardens.

Our tour began in the educational garden, built in 2014, it is a garden of 4 elements. Here children learn about sun, wind, water and soil. In the water area there is a dam which shows the way changes to the natural rivers change the water flow, how houses built up around a river effect the nature around it. There are a number of groups of children using the garden today, some as a school trip and others with family groups. From the water area we pass through the chronology of the earth, showing us how the earth was created, and the history of our planet. It's interesting to see how small our own ens is one of soil, decomposition, we learn what elements make up the soil in different environments and use a viewing scope to view the creatures in the soil. The children learn that the soil is the mirror of the landscape. We then pass through a wooded area where we learn the way water is used by the trees and how they cool the air around them. As the tree releases the moisture the air becomes more humid which cools the air around it. A very important



reason to keep green areas and trees in our built up areas.



As we reach the green roof of one of the education centres buildings we enter the area dedicated to learning about the sun. The green roof of the building is also helping to cool the building. It catches water from the air. The temperature of a green roof is much lower in the summer than a regular roof. The roof has educational equipment which can show, how by mirrors, that the power of the sun can move a small turbine!

Our tour then continued to the second garden, the old monastery garden which used to be abandoned and not well kept. The gardens belonged to a monastery a long time ago, during WW2 the monastery was bombed. The nuns gave the use of the garden to the government to be used for educational purposes. It is an organic garden with bees, herbs and vegetables. The garden is used to teach about agriculture. The processes from planting grain to making bread. The children learn that it is important to preserve history and so part of the bombed monastery remains. There is also a small city farm area where they keep sheep, rabbits and chickens and a great outdoor kitchen! Again we have taken away lots of exciting ideas for our own outdoor areas.

And so we ended our tour and the final trip of our exchange program here with some time for reflection. We spoke about what we have gained from the program, what our hopes and plans are for the short term and also for the long term. We look forward to hearing the results of the research based on our trips and sharing our journey with the other schools as we move forward.