

Transforming LIVES

The Global Teacher Prize received over 8,000 nominations from 121 countries.

David Swanston, a teacher dedicated to making sport accessible for visually impaired children, made the final 10...

David's innovative approach has had a huge impact during his 14 years at St Vincent's School in West Derby, from developing the school's PE curriculum to creating enrichment activities centred around green spaces, horticulture and wellbeing.

Speaking of his nomination for the Varkey Foundation Global Teacher Prize, David quickly turns attention to St Vincent's – one of only four schools in the UK with a curriculum for children with visual impairments: "I'm proud and so pleased that the school has been recognised. It's a testament to the work the school has done for a number of years," says David.

Rickshaw Relay Challenge

After completing the mandatory qualification (MQTVI) in Teaching Learners with a Visual Impairment, which is now delivered by St Vincent's School and Liverpool John Moores University, David became the Head of PE at St Vincent's. He is now Deputy Principal and works to make sport accessible for visually impaired children locally, nationally and internationally.

"I teach blind football and rugby to pupils, and we're currently working on a prototype rugby ball for the blind, with different textures and sounds," explains David. "Some kids have no light

perception, so the ball is responsive to touch and will emit sound, too."

"We have a number of children who represent their country and have been able to travel the world with their skills at Paralympic level. One of our pupils, Rainbow, plays football for the England blind football team and has just completed day two of the Rickshaw Relay Challenge for Children in Need." Starting at Media City in Manchester, Rainbow cycled the 32 miles to St Vincent's School in Liverpool, stopping off at locations that are special to him.

SightBox

Pupils and staff at St Vincent's are involved in a number of initiatives, including SightBox, which aims to tackle segregation and make sport more accessible for visually impaired children across the globe.

St Vincent's has worked with Liverpool Rotary Club to fund the project. "SightBox is a toolkit that has been sent to over 20 countries around the world, designed by the students at St Vincent's. The project raises awareness of visual impairment and allows children to navigate a range of sports," explains David.

"A SightBox will include a variety of accessible sports equipment, balls and games, as well as plans and short videos to support children with

activities. The project promotes inclusive sport and raises awareness in communities."

As part of the SightBox project, David visited Ethiopia: "I visited a school for blind children and worked to support students' mobility, independence, and access to a curriculum. I only spent a short time there, but we did as much as possible, including setting up a navigation system in the school grounds, and working closely with Engineers Without Borders from Israel, focusing on agriculture and growing produce within the school grounds. There was also work done to support eye testing and to create links between special schools and mainstream schools in the region."

Reverse inclusion

Reverse inclusion is where visually impaired pupils lead sessions for their sighted peers. "We bring mainstream children to learn from our visually impaired pupils, for example, during the Duke of Edinburgh Award and as part of our involvement in the ParkRun initiative. Children from mainstream schools run blindfolded with support, to gain a better understanding of visual impairment and break down barriers. Reverse inclusion puts our pupils in leadership roles, builds confidence, promotes independence and enables



sighted peers to think of the challenges these children are facing on a daily basis.”

Reclaim the green, reclaim the nature

St Vincent's has developed a green curriculum, integrating climate change issues through creative collaborations and community projects that support wellbeing and develop skills, as David explains: “We have a community garden and use horticulture as a vehicle for future employment opportunities. We try lots of different approaches, as all children have individual ways and rates of learning and the children at our school have different needs – their functional vision differs.”

“Recent work with the Eden Project and Great Dixter has enabled pupils to consider garden design, and alternative methods to horticulture for children with a visual impairment. Working through the RHS Campaign for School Gardening, pupils were able to showcase this at the RHS Tatton Park Flower Show – a garden planned, designed and 100% sown from seed by the students.”

St Vincent's is also part of the UK Schools Sustainability Network and have pledged to go net-zero by 2030. “We're taking St Vincent's pupils to the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow to meet world leaders, and share our Seeds of Hope –



“...if we can get our youngsters independent and confident, the rest will follow”

harvested from our very own school wildflower meadow,” David tells us. “We make sure students are aware of issues and ensure they know that they have a voice and they can make an impact.”

What next?

“I was an ice hockey player for many years. I grew up in Scotland and continued to play while I studied in Liverpool.

I'd like to introduce adaptive ice hockey for the blind in the UK,” says David.

“I'm also interested in how we can link our parks with hospitals and schools, increasing our green initiatives, and I'm working to get more children in KS1 and KS2 swimming. It's challenging to get children swimming, and particularly when they have visual impairments as children

need tactile cues and in-pool support.”

“We'd also like to scale up SightBox to get more countries involved. Before lockdown, we had a group of children from Sierra Leone and Indonesia who came to learn about SightBox, and take ideas back. We'd like to upscale the training and CPD available, hold reciprocal visits and design more physical items for the box, so that children can access a whole range of sports.”

“If we can make sport as accessible as possible, if we can get our youngsters independent and confident, the rest will follow.”



David Swanston is Deputy Principal at St Vincent's School for children with sensory impairment.

To donate to the Children in Need Rickshaw Challenge, visit: donate.bbcchildreninneed.co.uk/rickshaw