



Pupil Premium Primer



Alternative curriculum: Developing students' real world skills

Preparing a long-term pupil premium strategy

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The studio school

This account of an alternative curriculum focused on a studio school with 215 students located in a deprived area of North West England. Studio schools offer students aged 14-19 the opportunity to develop practice skills in workplace environments alongside more traditional and vocational courses. Delta Studio school (a pseudonym) has been open less than a decade and can educate up to 300 students. All of the teachers interviewed emphasised that it had used its relatively small size to develop a family atmosphere: “We know a lot about our students. They all know too much about us.” Its vocational emphasis attracts many students whose previous experiences of education have been negative. Many students were home-schooled until moving to secondary school where they found it difficult to fit in. One teacher stated, “If everything is going swimmingly for you at your school you wouldn’t look [to move] at age 13”. Another described the school as “kind of the last chance saloon”.

The fact that so many of its students had negative prior experiences of school meant that staff work hard to develop a culture of acceptance. While a high proportion of its students qualify for pupil premium, pupil premium is only one of many indicators of vulnerability in a school in which many students thrive after feeling a sense of belonging in school for the first time. As a result, pupil premium is not stigmatising, as one teacher emphasised:

“No one’s singled out in any way. I think that not only in terms of PP students. If you think we’ve got such a mix of students who are going through different gender issues at the moment, [...] in other schools that might cause for bullying or for being singled out. Certainly not here. People just accept everyone for who they are and that’s new to me. I’ve certainly not experienced that acceptance of each other as it is in the school, and I think in terms of PP students, they don’t stand out.”

This underlined the strong sense of community and security (school as “safe haven”) from which the teachers felt students benefitted:

“It becomes part of an identity for that student doesn’t it? Thinking about students who have struggled socially or have been bullied in their previous school. They didn’t feel that they belonged to a place but here they’re with people who are from a similar background who have similar experiences.”

Its curriculum offer is a key part of this culture.

Three curriculum pathways

Studio schools have more freedom to adapt and restrict their curriculum than other kinds of schools. Delta has three curriculum pathways:

- **creative**, which involves graphics, photography or media and film
- **computing**, which includes game design, app design and information technology
- **care**, which covers areas such as childcare, health and social care.

Artworks are integrated into the display and learning environment of the school, which the Principal described as a “curveball” for visitors: “Every visitor who walks through the door is gobsmacked because they expect Beirut and they’re greeted with this calm, tranquil setting”.

As a graphics teacher highlighted, preparing students for work is central to their approach:

“I train students to work in industry. I show them skills such as [using] Illustrator. As Year 9 students they are using Illustrator. Normally you wouldn’t use it until college or even university.”

All three pathways have led to students moving into jobs straight from school, although most go on to study at college first. The teachers felt that this clear vocational link motivated students, who were effectively disadvantaged in their previous schools by having to study subjects which did not interest them and often only increased their alienation. As Delta’s Principal said:



“I think we’ve got quite a strong narrative about what we do and we justify our curriculum well. Most importantly, the students thrive. I think that’s key. You can’t make that up. You can see it in bucketloads out there.”

As a teacher of Graphics stated, many students leave Delta with “real world skills” that enable them to move straight into industry: “I can’t understand what can be better than that”. The Principal gave a clear example:

“We had a really nice student who’s just gone to Manchester Uni to do game design and he wrote a testimony for us. Just off his own back. He said, ‘I want to put something on paper for you’ and he termed himself as a ghost. He said, ‘For the past three years of my other school before I joined the studio, I was a ghost and I sat in the class with the same teacher who actually lived on my street and after three years he still didn’t know my name’. He said, ‘I’ve come here and I’m my own person now. Everyone knows me, everyone supports me and everyone drives me.’”



A function skills “pathway”

Of course students also have to study core subjects. Some pupil premium students receive additional “pre-teach” lessons” which familiarise them with topics in Maths and English ahead of the lesson, as well as intervention groups which help them to catch up if they fall behind or extend the knowledge they have gained in lessons. These are effectively functional skills pathways in English and Maths, running from Year 9 to Year 11, which offer students “a stepping stone to build their self-esteem and confidence”. While many students involved are pupil premium students, the holistic nature of Darwen’s approach to support students with all kinds of needs means it is open to all students who need additional support. The small size of the school is a key factor which enables this compensatory approach, as a Maths teacher emphasised:

“We find that students come to us and kind of through home life or through parents they have a stigma about Maths [...] so we need to build those building blocks back up. We find that students come in with - imagine a brick wall with bricks missing. So when they initially come in and join us in Year 9, they fill in those gaps by building those foundations back up again, making them believe and having that little bit self-esteem that they can solve a problem.”

Cultural capital and pastoral support

The compensatory impulse of these intervention groups is also reflected in the emphasis on increasing students’ cultural capital, highlighted by all the teachers interviewed. This is closely linked to the curriculum through activities such as the annual creative writing trips:

“In regard to cultural capital because of the nature of the students here, in curriculum terms it’s made us approach the curriculum in ways we haven’t done before. And I think if it’s got to be rich and broad and meaningful, obviously, but accessible to all.[...] I think it’s essential we give our young people a taste of what’s happening in the world they live in and what’s happened in the past.”

In addition, Delta has a pastoral team based on the top floor of the school that deals with social, emotional and mental health issues rapidly, minimising the amount of time students lose from lessons.

What difference has this made?

Given their students' prior school experiences, the first challenge Delta faces is improving student attendance: "Some of these kids are at 32% attendance at their previous school. And they're 80% or 90% with us" (Principal). Although its restricted curriculum means standard progress measures put Delta at a disadvantage, its Principal is clear that GCSE outcomes remain a key yardstick:

"We measure ourselves against every other school even though we're not like every other school yeah and the DFE puts me at -1 because I refused to conform and deliver their humanities and languages. So I'm a little bit rebellious but I'm adamant our kids leave with eight GCSEs which opens up so many doors to you."

However, destination data are also a key metric. 95 per cent of students go on to Further Education or some form of employment, as the Principal emphasised:

"We are above national on all those aspects of where they go on to. [...] It's strange, because, you know, it's a very insular little mill town. So the measure for people who never go ten minutes up the road to [the nearest large town], but then suddenly will be off to Leeds for university study is huge. That should probably be what we're all measured on really."

Enabling factors

Factors which by staff felt have contributed to their students' achievements include the following:

- Small class sizes.
- Coaches offering tailored support to students.
- Students are all interviewed with their parents by school leaders to ensure they will fit into and flourish at the school.
- Students from low-income households are routinely loaned equipment, such as laptops and cameras, to enable them to progress.
- Part of the pupil premium budget is spent on revision guides for students, which they would otherwise be unlikely to access.
- Teachers form working parties to undertake collaborative action research focusing on areas such as SEND.

Taken together, this represents a systematic, personalised learning and teaching experience. Delta has enabled large numbers of young people who arrived at the school unengaged in education to develop marketable real world skills in a culture of acceptance in which pupil premium is regarded merely as one student characteristic among many.



This research was conducted by the Education Observatory and funded by the Social Mobility Commission as part of the Against the Odds study. View the full Pupil Premium Primer at

www.educationobservatory.co.uk/pupilpremiumprimer