

Clare School Norwich: learning and growing through study support

Many primary and secondary schools offer a growing number of clubs and activities after school and at lunchtime. However one special school in Norwich has taken the provision of 'vocational' activities into a completely different realm, so that they are now central to the school's curriculum.

My first contact with the pupils of The Clare School in Norwich was at a Scout camp, when 6th Form pupils were involved in The Duke of Edinburgh Award activities (see Special Children 180). I was impressed by how much the pupils were enjoying themselves, and how enthusiastic the parents were about the work that goes on in the school. Head Teacher Nigel Smith described the camp as 'the tip of the iceberg', and for 45 minutes he outlined some of the school's many vocational and extra-curricular activities, and why he thinks they are important. We ran out of time so he invited me to the school for a day.

The Clare School is the Norfolk county provision for children and young people aged 3-19 years who have physical disabilities. Many of the pupils have associated and additional needs, including complex medical needs. As Nigel puts it, "There are some very ill children in our school." The school is also recognised as a Centre of Excellence for provision for pupils with sensory impairment.

What visitors notice as soon as they arrive in the school is how busy and purposeful it is. The photo displays in the corridors immediately give a sense of the activities that the pupils take part in, and the following is not an exhaustive list, but rivals anything provided by the nearby university. Clubs include slot car racing ("We don't say "Scalextric"), Drumming, Film, IT, Sports, Expressive Arts and most intriguing of all, Gliding. The school also has its own Scouts Group, run by the Scouts' Association in the school on a Saturday afternoon, once a month. There is a Youth club once a month after school, a monthly 'Saturday Club' and a two weeks' summer scheme. Pupils also have access to the local University of East Anglia Sports Park for sports and leisure activities, including rock climbing and gymnastics.

Nigel Smith is clearly proud of these initiatives, and is quick to praise his staff's commitment, energy and enthusiasm, and the time they offer to make sure the clubs happen and are fulfilling. However he also points out that this impressive list does not just represent a chance for youngsters to socialise, though this is clearly an important element. What emerged from my discussion with Nigel and his colleagues is how rapidly the programme has grown, so that these activities are now regarded as a vital element of the school's curriculum, and drive to promote pupils' independence, self-confidence and learning.

All of these activities are brought together in the school's Vocational Education Programme, based on ASDAN. ASDAN is the UK-wide curriculum development organisation and internationally recognised awarding body, offering a wide range of curriculum development programmes. I immediately

had the impression that what the Clare School offers not only meets ASDAN's expectations, but goes beyond what ASDAN requires. They particularly aim "to promote the personal and social development of learners through the achievement of the ASDAN awards, so as to enhance their self esteem, their aspirations and their contribution to the community." The school "...blends activity-based curriculum enrichment with a framework for the development, assessment, and accreditation of key skills and other personal and social skills, with the emphasis on negotiation, cooperation and rewarding achievement." (Quotes describe ASDAN criteria, cited from the ASDAN website)

A closer look at two of the school's activities, 'The Flat' and 'Gliding Club' indicates that all of the elements ASDAN looks for are powerfully embedded. I had heard about 'The Flat' from students at the Scout camp, and though it was officially closed on the day of my visit, staff were very keen to show it in action, and rightly proud of what they and the pupils had achieved. The Flat is in fact a mobile classroom that has been converted into a café and shop. Pat Bagshaw, Sixth Form Teacher, described the inspiration behind The Flat's humble beginnings and its growth to becoming an integral part of the school's curriculum.

"We visited the Bay 6 Centre in Mansfield, and found ourselves in their coffee shop. Bay 6 is a real life training and working environment for learners with learning difficulties and disabilities, supported by West Nottinghamshire College. We were stunned and amazed at the facilities. We just could not believe the opportunities that the young people were being offered, and the skills that they were developing in the coffee shop. On the way home we became determined to create something similar in our school."

At the time, the only available space was a mobile classroom that was being used as a storage space for equipment that no one quite knew where else to put. Soon the equipment was moved out, and the interior and exterior painted, thanks to the efforts of local students. Parents became involved, and furniture and fittings were donated from the refurbishment of chalets at Center Parcs, via the local YMCA furniture depot. In the end all that the school needed to pay for were blinds for the windows and MDF for the counters.

Students in the Sixth Form now use The Flat to offer staff the chance to buy their lunch there every Wednesday. This service was originally available from the Life Skills room, with sandwiches being delivered to staff. Staff can now visit The Flat to buy and eat sandwiches and jacket potatoes in a cafe environment. The ingredients need to be selected, budgeted for and bought by the students. Students working there are expected to look professional, including having their hair tied back, and to observe stringent rules of hygiene. Pupils are involved in training before they work in the café and during their time there, including thinking about the importance of smiling at customers, making eye contact, saying 'please' and 'thank you', and thanking the customer for visiting. Students not only serve, but also use their money handling skills, prepare food and wash up.

A range of toys and crafts are available to buy, and The Flat also offers a range of goods provided to raise funds for local charities such as a hospice and the Red Cross. Pat Bagshaw feels this is an important aspect of The Flat's function, as it encourages students to see themselves as "givers as well as receivers". The Flat also runs Christmas Fayres, Spring Fayres etc. and sells books, crafts, DVDs and pictures. Students plan and run the stalls as part of their ASDAN. A member of the community also makes cushions to sell and parents and friends of the school donate items for sale.

At first all the classes were invited to visit, and to buy a snack and a drink. This has led to widespread interest from all pupils, and The Flat is regularly in use. Pat Bagshaw explains: "Let's imagine a child without a disability has a relative who has a birthday coming up soon, and they want to buy a card or a present in a hurry. They might plan with their family to go to the local shops, or even take a trip to the shopping centre. This might be virtually impossible for a family with a child with a significant disability. So they can come into The Flat and buy a card or a craft item. They experience the same feeling of excitement at being independent as any other child, and this is vitally important."

Another important function that The Flat provides is birthday parties. Many families find it relatively easy to organize a child's birthday party, especially if it is a local restaurant that is geared up for these events. This can become a logistical nightmare if many of the children invited have disabilities, or in the case of The Clare School, live very far away from each other. So the school offers families the chance to book The Flat, and host a party there. Parents can arrange for food to be brought in and supplement it with snacks and drinks from the café.

Younger pupils also drop in, to buy a snack, and they can do this in an unhurried way. As well as providing a pleasurable experience, it is an important way to practice vital life skills in a non-threatening way. Teachers regularly plan for pupils to visit, to practice their numeracy and money skills in a naturalistic way, as well as develop communication skills. The café was also a focal point for the school's French experience, when it became a French café for a few days, complete with Euros and a French menu.

No description of the school's vocational activities would be complete without a discussion about their Gliding Club. Over a cup of coffee provided for us in The Flat, I discussed gliding with teacher Ray Hart and 14-year-old Marcus, and his Communicator, who assisted our chat. (Marcus has a profound hearing loss and uses sign language). Ray is an experienced pilot, and every year during the school's activities week six children have the opportunity to fly a glider. Gliding sessions are offered to pupils who have shown good behaviour and effort throughout the year, as well as being part of the technology syllabus, where there is a large section on flight.

Ray explained that the rules of the British Gliding Association state that every flight in a glider should be regarded a 'trial flight' or lesson, so everyone should have some control over the glider. Marcus was very excited about the

prospect of flying. Though my understanding of sign is elementary, even I could see that he was making the sign for 'parachute' while we were discussing safety!

There are stringent health and safety regulations, and as can be imagined, detailed risk assessments are carried out before flights. One can imagine the enormous feelings of excitement and achievement that youngsters must experience. Ray gave a detailed list of links that gliding makes to the curriculum, as well as emphasizing the sheer aesthetic beauty of flying an aeroplane without an engine!

At the end of my day I had a final discussion with Head Teacher Nigel Smith. I reported that I could see that the vocational activities and clubs more than meet the requirements for ASDAN approval. They promote personal and social development, enhance self-esteem, build aspirations and help pupils contribute to the community. There is no doubt that the blend of activity-based curriculum enrichment helps develop key skills and other personal and social skills. What was also evident is that the Vocational Programme is having an impact on all pupils, and not just those in the 14 years plus age group who access ASDAN.

Pupils at The Clare School are taking part in activities that most mainstream schools, let alone special schools, would envy. However these achievements can be emulated by schools, and by doing so they will be safe in the knowledge that what they are doing more than meets the requirements of the National Curriculum, as well as providing valuable boosts to students' self esteem, confidence, and giving skills for life.

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