

Collaboration to extend learning

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Summary

A study of a partnership between a special school catering for young people who have severe learning difficulties and local further education colleges in order to develop a social enterprise aimed at extending learning into the community.

Key lessons learned

The need for a flexible approach, a shared vision, a commitment to ensuring that each learner is at the heart of the planning of their learning.

Introduction

About

Greenside is a Community Special School for 116 pupils aged 3-19 with a range of complex needs which include severe learning difficulties (SLD) and profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD). Greenside has specialist provision for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). North Hertfordshire College and Oaklands are both colleges of further education that have well established specialist departments catering for young people who have complex learning needs.

The Greenside Studio is a social enterprise that is open to the public 6 days a week from 10am to 5 pm throughout the year and provides exceptional opportunities for learning a range of vocational skills. There are 2 main elements to the enterprise – the selling of a wide range of sweets and confectionary as well as the provision of a ceramic studio, where members of the public can come to paint figures and ornaments.

Young people are given real life opportunities including: serving members of the public; measuring out quantities of sweet; handling cash; checking stock, buying stock from the warehouse, producing craft goods to sell, tidying, cleaning, presenting goods, decorating the shop window, working to deadlines, pouring slip clay into moulds and producing bisques to sell.

The Greenside Studio is also a base from which extended work experience in local shops, businesses and community groups can be supported by members of staff from Greenside. The Greenside Studio provides opportunities to develop creative skills, especially in pottery, ceramics and photography.

What we wanted to achieve

Greenside is a school that has actively sought to gain an international perspective. Participation in a range of European projects through the Comenius programme has provided staff and students opportunities to see at first hand provision in other countries. The emphasis on employment for young people with similar learning difficulties to those attending Greenside challenged our perceptions of what was possible. Visits to supported employment programmes in Melbourne, New York and Los Angeles transformed expectations of what could and should be achieved and fostered our ambition to develop work related learning provision.

Successful grant applications provided the start-up funding needed for our venture, which we call "The Greenside Studio".

Our vision was to provide a "living classroom" that enables learning to be based within the wider community. The teaching accommodation at the studio includes a kitchen. The development of key skills such as literacy, numeracy and ICT is a key aspect of the person centred planning for students.

In September 2012 Greenside opened a social enterprise in a retail shop premises at The Hyde Shopping Centre, Stevenage, SG2 9SD.

Our case study provides an evaluation of the development of this enterprise.

Implementation

Structured interviews with staff, students from school and colleges have been undertaken by Hazel Lawson of Exeter University, together with a questionnaire and observation of practice.

Planning our approach

- Planning identified the range of the study and the research tools that would be deployed.
- Interview questions were tested and then revised.
- A timetable was established.
- A letter explaining the aims and purpose of the project was shared with stake holders.

What we did

- Literature review was undertaken focussing on a number of key terms eg enterprise, work experience, vocational learning, role of special schools, 14-25 provision, curriculum etc.
- Questionnaires were completed in the first part of the spring term
- Interviews were conducted in the second part of the spring term.
- Summary of findings were shared in the first week of the summer term.
- The first draft of the document summarising the finding of the study was prepared.
- 11 interviews were conducted (7 - 32 minutes) with a range of 'stakeholders' – various staff and two parents.
- There was an analysis of individual student timetables.
- 6 informal interviews were conducted with students
- An analysis of the findings of the detailed study will be undertaken in July 2013

- By September 2013, the first draft of the final report will be complete, it is hoped to develop papers for publication by October 2013.

Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

Staff and parents have reported that students are demonstrating greater maturity, and assuming further levels of responsibility.

The vast majority of our students say they are proud of the Studio and want to work there.

Many have gained greater levels of independence; they are problem solving, communicating with members of the public and seeking to help others.

Learning has been extended; young people work at the enterprise after school and during the holidays, whilst those who attend college work at the enterprise.

Service level agreements have been established with North Hertfordshire College which will enable students who previously attended Greenside to undertake part of their course at the Greenside Studio.

What we learned

Students have fed back to us that sometimes they don't like waiting for customers. As a result we have extended the range of learning activities – ensuring a flexible approach.

What we are taking forward

The findings of our detailed study will inform further planning.

Consideration is being given to a second enterprise with the focus on young people who have profound learning difficulties.

How we are sharing it

Our study will be shared on the school's website and circulated to members of the LSIS Green Paper project.

We plan to prepare an article for The Journal of Special Education.

We have encountered difficulties in completing our main study within the time scale of the LSIS project. The social enterprise opened in September 2012, it was therefore not possible to start the evaluation of the project until January 2013. The findings of the study will not be available until September 2013. Copies of the report once published will however be available on request from the school.

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Provider name(s) Greenside School. North Hertfordshire College, Oaklands College.

Sector coverage FE College and special school for young people with severe learning difficulties.

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