

Embedding Culture into Topic Based Learning

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Within my provision, over 60% of students receive Free School Meals and an above average percentage receive Pupil Premium funding, Service Premium and additional funding for looked-after or previously looked-after children. Evidence from The Sutton Trust suggests that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have fewer opportunities to gain or encounter cultural capital, here defined as the knowledge acquired about dominant/high culture in society. The new framework set out by OFSTED in 2019 noted that 'inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital to succeed in life.' Ultimately, a student's ability to increase or attain cultural capital increases the chances of social mobility, gaining future employment and educational and social success. Within a Special Educational Needs context, students have additional social barriers to negotiate, indicating that further importance could be placed on the development of cultural capital to enhance life chances.

In order for staff to cascade cultural capital development skills effectively, I liaised with the Senior Leader who oversaw staff training. Following this, I delivered training to interested staff. We shared ideas on perceptions of culture and why it was important for our cohort of students. Some staff were unsure of what constituted cultural capital and were keen to categorise culture within subject areas such as Art. Whilst others saw developing cultural capital skills in a hierarchy below English and Mathematical skills, which they felt had 'more obvious' uses in day to day life. Speaking to teaching staff was beneficial as their views provided a microcosm of wider school thinking surrounding cultural development and enabled me to envision how to overcome opposing views and challenges. These included the varied understandings of culture that teaching teams held, how they prioritised it (or did not), accountability and timetabling concerns; would there be time for cultural development? One tool I shared with staff to combat doubts surrounding time, was the 'Image of the Day' whereby students are encouraged to share their ideas and ask questions on a thought-provoking image designed to engage deeper thinking. This activity could be completed during tutor time (twenty minutes) by either teachers or teaching assistants so that even staff with limited contact with certain classes/students could engage and reflect on cultural links. Staff feedback on the session was positive, although it is important to note that staff had volunteered either due to a perceived skills gap or general interest in the topic which could signify that the level of engagement may have been wide-ranging if the training was mandatory.

In many ways, the School's recent adoption of a holistic, topic-based curriculum and OFSTED'S new framework provided an excellent opportunity to engage with staff about cultural development and ensure staff bought in to the importance of a cultural offer for students. Without additional large, "in the big hall" whole school training, which can sometimes be negatively perceived due to previous poor experiences of mandatory staff training, I was able to reach all relevant staff through smaller scale half term planning sessions and use this

invaluable group time to collaborate ideas for teaching and embedding cultural experiences. These sessions lasted 3 hours every half term and provided staff with the opportunity to exchange ideas, as well as plan school trips, and parental showcases of work and displays. Through planning documents which teaching teams from curriculum pathways collaboratively wrote, it was agreed that key areas would link into cultural understanding to ensure even students with low cognitive functioning could access knowledge to gain cultural skills. The key areas which would foster cultural links were: Community, Respect, Diversity, Moral Purpose, and British Values. Teachers were encouraged to colour code cross-curricular learning activities that would link to the key areas as a method of informal accountability, whilst also providing sufficient autonomy for teachers to decide how learning was best implemented, with suggestions made as opposed to dictated mandates.

I was keen for staff to embed cultural provision in the planning stage of the curriculum (through medium term planning), and for activities to be taught with a cultural development intention in place, rather than as an afterthought. The overall objective was not to improve academic outcomes, which can sometimes be futile within a SEN setting (where predisposed conditions prevent cognitive retention) but repeated exposure and engagement with culture. This would lead to the building of cultural capital throughout school and with parents, to see longer term effects on student engagement with culture.

Through meaningful planning, significant opportunities for cultural development were identified, as cultural experiences shared a clear link with curriculum “wow moments” utilised each half term to act as a hook to engage learners. These included offsite visits and external organisations liaising with schools to provide a variety of cultural experiences. For the Mighty Metals topic, students visited the ‘Bottle of Notes’ sculpture and learned about the Industrial Revolution at the Dorman museum in Middlesbrough. This was followed up with class discussions facilitated by ‘Image of the Day’ including debates around metal and art, such as the touring Knife Angel monument to victims of knife crime created by the British Ironwork Centre. Additional links to local heritage were fostered through external class workshops with Darlington’s Head of Steam train museum. Weekly, students also visited a variety of parks which enabled them to appreciate the metal structures and use of materials in play areas as well as engage with local green spaces and local people. To conclude their topic, all students were encouraged to reflect on the cultural capital they had gained by inviting parents to a showcase of work, photographs and projects. Parents, staff and students responded extremely positively and staff reported that the process felt “less formal and more celebratory” than parents’ evening on feedback. Furthermore, on an inspiring note, some verbal feedback from parents noted how engaged their children were with local culture and arts and they endeavoured to create more opportunities outside school to visit local museums, heritage sites and galleries which would further develop their cultural understanding.

Initially, financing was not perceived as a major barrier, but as the Senior Leadership Team approved all cultural visits, depending on the immersive curriculum topic, both finance and transport became a challenge. The logistics of getting entire curriculum pathways to one place at one time to all experience the cultural “wow moment” meant that there were too many

groups needing to use the school's minibuses which then meant my colleagues and I had to hire coaches. Some cultural experiences were limited by risk assessments, student behaviour or attendance; however, the majority were extremely beneficial as evidenced by students reporting their feedback to staff teams. To ensure the continual immersion of cultural development, a specific budget may have to be created rather than using solely a curriculum one.

In conclusion, staff observed that students have responded extremely positively and developed their cultural capital through: exposure to new experiences; improved behaviour through modelling of how to behave in museums; new vocabulary and self-confidence to express opinions on art; flexibility of thought and willingness to try new activities, including role play and production of amazing displays which portray local cultural activities. In the future, an informal map of low-cost local cultural experiences/locations could be produced and provided for parents. This would be with the aim of supporting students to experience a variety of activities outside school as well as continual development, embedded through planning in school, to ensure access to cultural capital despite students being from disadvantaged backgrounds.