

Widening participation: targeting the very young

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ASPIRE is the Aimhigher partnership for South East London. It is currently based in four Higher Education (HE) Institutes - Goldsmiths College, University of Greenwich, London South Bank University and King's College - and six Further Education (FE) colleges - Bexley, Greenwich, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark and South Thames.

Aimhigher is the government initiative to increase the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE. It mainly targets young people aged 13-30, who are the first in their families to attend university, and who are deemed to have the potential to achieve five A*-C GCSEs.

Despite recent press reports about the failure of this initiative to have a significant impact on university application rates, it has to be remembered that the programme only began operating in 2002, and will probably take a long time to have a measurable impact. But, while we have to be patient about the results of students entering higher education, we are beginning to see green shoots suggesting that the scheme is already yielding benefits. For example, within schools in **Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge** areas, there was evidence of overall gains in GCSE performance and in performance in mathematics at Key Stage 3. Participation in summer schools and visits to universities were associated with increased achievement at GCSE compared with similar young people who did not take part.

According to a survey recently undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University, half of institutions think it is too early to say whether Aimhigher has had an impact on admissions. But more than a third think Aim Higher has affected applications. And more than 70 per cent believe it has added value to their widening participation activity. ASPIRE interventions have mainly concentrated on this pre-identified Aimhigher age cohort of 13-30 year olds. However, there has been much discussion within the partnership about the value of extending this work to younger children, especially at the crucial point of change from primary to secondary school, which recent government research has identified as an important point of 'slippage' even for well motivated children. The pilot of the government's **Key Stage 3 Strategy** began in September 2000 and the national programme in September 2001. A key objective is to improve progression across Key Stages 2 and 3. All the schools involved in the survey recognised the need to improve continuity and progression, but few of them were giving sufficient priority to this task. As reported in *The Guardian* (4 July 2002), David Miliband, the then school standards minister, said that the report demonstrated that 'Managing the move from primary to secondary schools has always been a challenging task for schools', and referred to a 'stagnation in progress' at this stage in children's schooling. (1)

My own experience as a chair of governors in a school in an area with a similar population to Lewisham had convinced me of the low priority given to history in the primary curriculum, and the limitations of the materials and expertise available in many schools. Intensive focus on the 'core' subjects of literacy, numeracy and science has led to the sidelining of other subjects, both in terms of teacher attention and timetable space.

The **Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)** national curriculum document states that pupils should be taught how to find out about the events, people and changes studied from an appropriate range of sources of information, including ICT-based sources (for example, documents, printed sources, CD-ROMS, databases, pictures and photographs, music, artefacts, historic buildings and visits to museums, galleries and sites). They are also required to ask and answer questions, and to select and record information relevant to the focus of the enquiry.

Going Places is a project aimed at addressing these, and many wider issues. The widening participation agenda speaks of raising both achievement and attainment, and we intend that the project should contribute to both these objectives. However, success in this field depends as much on its contribution to 'cultural capital' as on the details of the curriculum content. We intend to contribute to this by giving the children who participate a taste of the adult, student life; by introducing them to the university as an open and welcoming place, with direct relevance to its local population as well as its students. We try to present high level academic pursuits as interesting and fun. We hope too that the experience will develop a sense of ownership of the spaces and resources they are introduced to - the university, the museum, the internet resources, including census records, national collections (e.g. at the British Museum) and the history embedded in the buildings and urban spaces of Lewisham itself. By introducing the children to direct experience of historical research in this carefully limited way, we hope that they will develop a residual understanding of ideas and concepts which will directly or indirectly contribute to their future learning.

With these ideas in mind, we invited 24 children from local primary schools to spend a week researching their 'own' history. That is, by associating history with the environment, even the very houses and streets, in which they live, we encouraged them to take hold of the idea of historical enquiry for themselves. The project was run by two subject specialists, one permanent member of the widening participation staff, a computer technician, and six student ambassadors (referred to in the recent **National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)** report as student associates) - second-, third- and, in one case, fourth-year undergraduates, who are trained to help on a variety of outreach and widening participation projects. We introduced the children to a wide range of electronic resources, including maps and pictures relating to the history of South London. Through comparing current Ordnance survey maps of the area with aerial photographs, and maps made in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, they were asked to think about how the landscape changes, and how the local environment shapes their own lives, as well as the lives of those who lived here in the past.

In preparation for the next phase, an extended piece of guided imagination showed them how the sights, smells and sounds of Deptford have altered with the changing use of the landscape. Then, we took them out into the streets of Deptford with digital video cameras, for guided walks, to document past and present through local landmarks and interviews with the people who live and work there.

The third stage was to use the 1880 census records to find out about individuals who lived in Lewisham 120 years ago, and to create a dramatised reconstruction of some aspect of those lives - an element we described as 'interviewing your past'. The children frequently became so engrossed in these dramatisations that the skills of a Spielberg were needed by our student ambassadors who helped the children direct and edit the films. Stills of maps and pictures, footage from the local area and films of the dramas were then edited together using I-movie to create for each group a unique record of their approach to research and investigation during the week.

For the first two years of the project, we have followed up the children who participated with interviews in the summer of their first secondary school year,

asking them about their recollections of the project, their aspirations for the future, and their views of university as a possibility for them.

Going Places is now in its third year of operation, and during this time we have begun to identify the factors that make it a memorable and hopefully transforming experience. These include:

- Curriculum content that broadens horizons, whilst being closely related to the lives and experiences of the children participating
- Challenging, open-ended activities which allow for a variety of 'successful' outcomes within the framework
- Active engagement of the children in directing their own learning through the project
- Participation of current university students as 'ambassadors'

Fundamental to the success of the week is that it is much less target oriented than the curriculum the children are used to in primary school. The subject specialists who run the project aim to focus on the process of research and enquiry without a fixed and testable lesson plan, leaving the children considerable leeway to ask and attempt to answer the questions that interest them, as individuals.

Our evaluations, as well as the introductory talk at the beginning of the project, show that children often remember very little of their history learning at primary school, and often those memories are highly generalised ('we looked at Romans') or negative ('history is boring').

Pupil perceptions of effective teaching and subject relevance in history and geography at Key Stage 3

Over the last decade there has been growing research interest in identifying teaching and learning strategies that pupils perceive to be enjoyable and through which they feel they learn most effectively. However, history and geography are subject areas in which there has been 'a notable lack of research'.⁽²⁾

Some investigation has been taking place at the University of Nottingham into pupils' perceptions of the relevance of history and geography.⁽³⁾ Pupils enjoyed group work, active approaches such as discussion and debate, and investigative approaches. They disliked passive learning. Most found it difficult to articulate the relative usefulness of the subjects to their lives. Only those pupils who had a sense of their own future aspirations, and hence some understanding of what they needed academically to succeed in these, seemed clear about what history or geography contributed to their profile.

In Adey and Biddulph's 1999 survey, for history, one pupil stated that she did not want just to 'read the page and answer the questions 'cause that's boring' (school C). A girl at school B said that with a passive teaching approach, 'you're not putting your own ideas into it. You're just copying ... I can't be bothered ... You're not learning anything'. Other forms of writing, however, especially descriptive and creative writing (e.g. story writing (to display empathy), drama, poetry writing) were at the least 'acceptable' occasional activities. Only in school A were any pupils able to explain any aspect of the subject's relevance. Perhaps significantly, school A was the only school where pupils argued that source work was quite challenging. It was challenging because they had to justify their interpretation of sources.

In 'The classical elements of Key Stage 2 History'⁽⁴⁾, most children questioned thought it was important for children of their age to learn history. They had a clear understanding of the broad nature of the subject and a positive attitude to it. A very small minority of responses saw no reason for studying history (2 per cent) including 'I don't see how it can get you a job really' (Norfolk, Y6 girl) and 'I don't like it - so much work' (London, Y5 boy).

The interviews have shown clearly that, in the main, subject content per se does not shape pupils' attitudes to history and geography. The teaching and learning activities employed were far more influential. In this respect the interviews corrected an impression gained from the questionnaire returns. There pupils often cited topics they had not enjoyed studying, but the interviews made it clear that it was not the topic content that stifled enjoyment but the manner in which it was taught. The importance of process in influencing pupils' opinions serves to suggest strongly that if greater emphasis were placed upon appropriate and enjoyable strategies at Key Stage 3 (and if pupils could see that these strategies would characterise the teaching of history and geography at Key Stage 4) both subjects would be more attractive options for study at GCSE.

Going Places thus aims to address those issues by using an intensive week long experience devoted not to a specific time period, or to a 'civilisation' based concept (Romans/Greeks/Egyptians) but rather to an enquiry based on their own lives - the original working title was 'Who lived in my house?' In this way, we hoped to establish a real sense of connection between the children themselves and the lives of the people they would be investigating.

Going Places also introduces the idea of history at university in a friendly and exciting way. It invites the children to see beyond the short-term imperatives of SATS and the impending transfer to secondary school. It encourages them to see Higher Education as a real part of their future lives, rather than as a mysterious, distant part of the adult world, or as an extra layer of difficulty placed between them and their visions of themselves as adults. During the week the children become familiar, as far as is possible, with the university campus and way of life.

In this aspect of the project, the student ambassadors play an absolutely vital role. They are sufficiently young and unthreatening to make rapid connections with the children in their care. They can be highly effective role models, contributing to the children's image of themselves as potential successful HE students. Whilst many of the children (as revealed in the evaluation interviews) have strong opinions about the necessity of HE for future careers, this direct contact with students can make them better aware of the short term benefits of HE - both in social engagement, and in the process of study as something to be valued for its own sake. The week-long association between an ambassador and the five or six children in their group allows that relationship to develop, so that the children see life at university not only as something that they can achieve but also as enjoyable. That trust and understanding is a crucial part of the relaxed atmosphere during the course - it allows the children, with an ambassador and a school representative between the six of them, to take their own path in the investigation, and to negotiate the terms of their own success, planning what they want to research and film, and how they want to present their ideas.

The films produced during this week testify to the enormous enthusiasm and inventiveness of the children, and the wide variety of questions which will seize their imagination. The evaluations show consistently that the children enjoy and remember their week at Goldsmiths, that they take away positive messages about university life, saying for example, that they had thought it was all about 'hard work' and 'writing millions of essays', but that now they recognised the potential for fun in pursuing the ideas that interest them. Some had even tried to follow up these ideas themselves at home, and many expressed the desire for more time - even for a second week. They all remembered positively the friendship and enthusiasm of the ambassadors.

We look forward to this project, and others like it becoming a regular feature of the ASPIRE programme, and to creating a growing archive of material generated by the eager researchers.

Notes:

1. 'Primary-secondary transfer crucial to raising standards - Miliband', DfeS press notice, 3 July 2002 [http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2002_0136, accessed 5 April 2006]. [Back to 1](#)

2. P. Harland and J. Lord, 'Pupils' experiences and perspectives of the national curriculum: research review' (QCA, 2000). [Back to 2](#)
3. K. Adey and M. Biddulph, 'The influence of pupil perceptions on subject choice at fourteen-plus in geography and history', *Educational Studies*, 27.4 (2001), 439-50. [Back to 3](#)
4. G. Bage, R. Grisdale and B. Lister, 'The classical elements of Key Stage 2 history - an evaluation' (QCA, 1999). [Back to 4](#)

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