The Greenside Studio:
A classroom in the community

RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT SUMMARY
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A copy of the full report is available at: www.**greenside**.herts.sch.uk

Introduction

Greenside School caters for 116 pupils aged 2 to 19 years with a range of complex needs which include severe and profound learning difficulties. The school also has specialist provision for pupils with Autistic Spectrum Condition.

The Greenside Studio is a social enterprise and community learning initiative, a specialist vocational teaching resource based in a shopping precinct local to the school. The Greenside Studio is a physical place and space incorporating: an 'old fashioned' sweet shop with shelves of sweets in jars; a classroom/ceramics area with tables and chairs and shelves of fired ceramic ornaments and figures, ready for painting; a small storage area and an accessible toilet; a kitchen diner/work; a kiln room; and a storage room for ceramic bisques.

The Studio offers a specific bespoke provision which is located within the local community. Many Greenside students attend the school from the age of five years or earlier and the needs of these students have become increasingly complex and more severe. The Studio provides a 'half-way' environment between the structures and systems and order of school and 'life after school'. It provides work experience which is not otherwise easily available for young people with severe learning difficulties.

This is a summary of research evaluating the first year of the Greenside Studio initiative with a focus on the educational 'side' of the enterprise, the learning opportunities and outcomes and potential developments.

Research design

A range of records and data from different stakeholders was gathered as illustrated below.

Documentation about The Studio use		
Five case students: record of time/activity and learning/progress records		
	Online survey – 27 staff	Semi-structured telephone interviews – 12 staff, 2 parents, 1 governor (7 – 32 minutes in length) Face-to-face interviews - 2 students
September 2012	February - March 2013	May - June 2013

Summary of findings and some emerging questions

Alternative educational environment – The Studio is regarded as an extension to school yet also as a very different environment to school.
Sides – different sides to The Studio can be identified: educational, creative, business, vocational, community; these affect different stakeholders' perceptions.
Space – The Studio adds to space available in school, and is seen as a different space which is, in turns, both flexible and inflexible.
Community – different interpretations of community exist and may relate to views around the extent to which students are already members of 'the community'.

The purpose of The Greenside Studio
Staff throughout the school who responded to the survey all had ideas about its purpose. The Studio is seen as providing: a 'real', safe environment outside of the school environment and situated in the community; a curriculum; opportunities for different skill development; experience of working in an authentic working environment; and a public demonstration of the qualities, skills and talents of young people with learning difficulties. Purposes are for students, in terms of skills development, work experience and community based learning. Purposes also relate to the community in terms of developing awareness of the school and young people with learning difficulties.
- How do different purposes compete? Which are prioritised?
- Does the rapid development of the business mitigate against greater student independence?
- Does The Studio prepare students for 'life after school'? If so, how? If not, how can this be achieved? Is it intended to be a bridge between school and 'life after school'? Or a bridge between school and employment? (Is the latter realistic? Does The Studio help make this more realistic?)
- How much is the initiative about making Greenside students/young people with learning difficulties visible in the community and how much is it for the students/young people themselves? What should the balance be?
- How can the studio be used to 'educate' the community about young people with learning difficulties? Should this be a purpose?

Greenside Studio use
Over the year the timetabled use and possibilities of use have developed such that by the end of the year The Studio was fully timetabled. The main use as stated on the timetable is for work experience, travel training and preparing lunch. The majority of The Studio's use is by Post 16 students and all Post 16 students have accessed The Studio to varying extents – ranging from one afternoon session a week for the summer term to three mornings a week all year.

The survey responses indicated that staff throughout the school had some awareness of The Studio and the activities it supported. More tangible functional and practical skills (for example, shopping, handling money, shelf filling) were mentioned far more than less measurable aspects (for example, developing confidence, learning to interact with the public).

- What is the best use of The Studio in terms of use of the different spaces (kitchen, shop, ceramics, community base)?
- What is the best use of The Studio in terms of different activities? What sort of balance should there be between different opportunities?
- How can flexibility be maintained whilst still ensuring full use of facilities?
- Who should use The Studio? Specific Post 16 students? All Post 16 students? Other students in the school? Who decides who uses The Studio? Is student choice possible?
- Is there a point at which the use becomes tokenistic?

Learning opportunities

For most of the Post 16 students who use The Studio regularly, the different environment was seen to provide opportunities beyond school which have enabled learning of practical work tasks (for example, weighing sweets, serving customers), supported students in meeting their IEP targets and also led to unintended learning outcomes (for example, speaking up for yourself).

The Studio was seen to extend school provision in a number of ways: providing similar learning opportunities to school but in a different context (for example, literacy and numeracy activities); providing different learning opportunities (such as work-related tasks and creative activities); extending the range of facilities (kitchen, kiln); extending the number and type of people the students work with; and, for some students, extending the school day.

The Studio was considered by most respondents as having 'scope for learning for everyone', if only as an alternative environment.. Examples were given of how tasks were differentiated for example, providing a jig template, shadowing) and teaching assistants mentioned how they adapted themselves to the students. There was considered to be a wide range of opportunities and tasks so that activities can be matched to the needs, interests and abilities of students.

- Should there be a balance between focus on 'curriculum' learning (basic functional skills, numeracy, literacy, travel, lunch preparation, practical work skills) and 'personal' learning (self-esteem, behaviour, overcoming shyness, modifying behaviour)?
- Does learning occur in a similar way to learning at school, albeit in a different community context, or is there a different way of learning?
- How much should and do accreditation units frame/control the intended learning outcomes?
- What learning possibilities are as yet untapped? Is there a danger of limiting opportunities to 'traditional' practical life/independence skills learning?
- How can different types of learning be planned for, recorded and evaluated? Is there a tendency to focus on recording the more measurable practical skills at the expense of the less tangible? Can 'stories of learning' be developed with students?
- How can the students have greater involvement in planning for and evaluating their own learning? (eg maintaining own electronic learning logs, using video, photographs as well as text, developing stories of learning).

Evaluation of success

Success was regarded in a number of ways, in terms of: student learning; student behaviour and happiness; community use, interest and involvement; and a profitable shop. Methods of evaluation put forward included those techniques already used (learning logs and external accreditation); few suggestions were made about ways to develop these or for alternative means.

- What measures of success are important? How can each be evaluated? Over what time scales? How can students be involved in evaluations? (eg video diaries; video interviews with other shopkeepers, members of the public, each other; market research with public).

Potential development of The Studio

Staff suggested a range of ideas for extending or developing the use of The Studio: carrying out more creative activities; mixing with different groups of pupils/people; developing more products or services; extending the use to other areas of the curriculum; extending the use to other community groups; extending work experience opportunities; and using the space for other school purposes, for instance, meetings. Ideas around the long term potential of The Studio formed four main groups: for The Studio to be a profitable, developing business, with the potential for it to be emulated; to provide work experience and opportunities; to be a base for teaching and learning activities; and to develop relationships and partnerships.

- In what ways should The Studio be developed? Wider activities? Wider range of students? Other groups? Other products and services? Extension to other curriculum areas?

Student involvement and aspirations

Students are involved in some day-to-day decisions in The Studio environment, for example, around choices for lunch. There seems to be a danger, perhaps, that busy-ness, time constraints and working to deadlines limits opportunities for student independence, decision making and control.

- How can students be more involved in higher-level decisions? Have greater control in running The Studio? Could there be a Studio Council, perhaps, which involves/is run by/is chaired by students? How can students' aspirations be sought and understood?

Support mechanisms – developing independence

- What sort of 'support mechanisms' are used to support students (for example, shadowing, prompting, pictorial instructions, having a mobile phone contact)?
- Should support approaches look different to that in school? Most staff come from a school background – how does this influence their relationships with, their expectations of, and the way they support students? Is there a place for training staff to work in a different way?
- Can these be examined in greater depth to understand in more detail the ways in which students can be supported, with an intention to gradually reduce support for students?
- Is there a place for deliberate 'sabotage'? (a number of learning episodes were recounted where unintended or 'hidden' learning has occurred because something has gone wrong).

Concluding comments

The research project indicates that The Greenside Studio social enterprise and community learning initiative has had a successful first year. The 'learning curve' for all involved has been immense – in terms of understanding a retail business environment, incorporating educational curricula within this, developing the business (and deciding how far, and how, to develop the business), and managing the complex timetabling and travel logistics of staff and students. Learning opportunities in a range of areas (eg retail, travel, cookery, ceramics) are evidently developing.

A number of tensions, issues and questions arise which may support discussions around The Studio's development, for example, understanding of community, clarity of purpose and vision, its use as a viable employment facility. The Studio is seen as an exciting place (it is full of sweets!), it is easily accessible and being special motivates staff and students to use it. Some participants in the research note a necessarily tentative start – the potential of The Studio in terms of use of space, activities and learning opportunities has, perhaps, only just been tapped.