

Darwen Aldridge
Community Academy



THE
ALDRIDGE
FOUNDATION

Opening Eyes: From the North West to New York

Using entrepreneurship and education to open minds,
challenge barriers and change life chances.

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“The Opening Eyes programme is very important to me because I believe travel, like entrepreneurship, can be a powerful and immediate means of opening young people’s eyes and minds to new experiences and different cultures in a way that challenges the way they view themselves and the world around them.

It makes them question the status quo and ask, ‘is there a different, or better, way to do this?’

Where better to teach this than in New York, one of the most entrepreneurial cities in the world - but also one of the most diverse in terms of culture, and contrasting affluence and poverty.

Opening Eyes could be the catalyst that changes these young people’s lives.”

Rod Aldridge OBE, Chairman of the Aldridge Foundation



An Entrepreneurial Itinerary

In October 2009, 19 sixth formers from Darwen Aldridge Community Academy (DACA), in Lancashire, embarked on a unique school visit to New York City. These students were participants in the Academy's first international trip as part of the new Opening Eyes programme, which give students the opportunity to travel abroad and broaden their horizons. Many of them had never travelled abroad before. Some didn't even have passports before the visit.

The Opening Eyes programme was inspired by entrepreneur Rod Aldridge, who is Chair of the Aldridge Foundation which sponsors two Academies with an entrepreneurship specialism.

The programme supports his vision of raising students' aspirations and complements an Academy curriculum designed to enrich learning, encourage higher attainment and enhance entrepreneurial creativity and passion. He wanted the Academy to pioneer an innovative approach to school visits that would be thought provoking and offer more than just a tour of the tourist sights.

New York was chosen as the first destination because of its inspiring and entrepreneurial culture as well as the opportunities it offered to challenge perceptions of affluent America by visiting schools and social enterprises in the Bronx.

The Academy carefully selected an itinerary that demonstrated how another culture tackles issues arising from social deprivation. To contrast with their visits to the Empire State Building, Times Square and other famous sites, the students visited two independent Charter Schools in the Bronx, helped at a social enterprise bakery and a volunteering project for the homeless.

This was an independently organised school trip involving a high level of preparation and stringent safeguarding measures to ensure the safety and wellbeing of the students.

In addition to donations from the Lloyd Trust, Darwen Rotary Club and the Aldridge Foundation, the students applied their entrepreneurial knowledge to fundraising activities ranging from selling snacks in a school tuck shop to packing bags at a Sainsbury's supermarket.

Parents and other staff and students at the Academy were kept informed of activity in New York via blogs and emails during the trip. One of the parents said that accessing the blogs and emails showed her the advantages of modern technology:

"It was my first experience of 'blogging' and I was able to wake up every day and read about what Lauren had been up to eight hours before. It sounded brilliant and helped me feel in touch."

During the trip, students also kept written, audio and video diaries with reflections of what they had seen and learnt. These were used in school coursework and to prepare a presentation for Academy staff, students and funders on their return.

Students studying photography were given cameras to capture their experiences in New York. A selection of these photos are on display in an art-gallery in Darwen town centre, which DACA students have opened as a social enterprise with £35,000 funding the Youth Opportunity Fund. Some of these photographs have been used to illustrate this report.



Opening Eyes to Poverty and Homelessness and Entrepreneurial Solutions

DACA staff selected three different community-based projects in New York that showed students a range of approaches to tackling social deprivation. Darwen is an area with high levels of unemployment and indices of disadvantage. However, the students were surprised to learn that America does not have a welfare state and were brought face to face with impoverished and homeless families who relied on sheltered accommodation, food donations and the generosity of volunteers.

The **Yorkville Common Pantry** in Upper West Side is a volunteer-run scheme packing and distributing donated food parcels for families. Its proximity to Central Park highlights the sharp contrast between rich and poor in the neighbourhoods of Manhattan. Ten of the students spent a day unloading vans, making up food parcels and serving customers, some of whom were in a distressed state. One reason for selecting the Pantry was to help demonstrate how geographical location can be an influencing factor in the services individuals receive. Students were struck by the fact that this was not state funded but a charity relying on local people to help their community survive. Lucy, aged 16, said:

“I didn’t expect to see a very young family queuing with a shopping trolley to get food handouts – it was quite shocking. I thought ‘this mother has hardly had a chance to start her life yet’. I hadn’t appreciated the lack of a benefit system here compared to at home or that poor people have to rely on volunteers even for food for their children.”

Keeley, aged 18, said the day at the Pantry was an emotional experience:

“It was exhausting work but I realised I was helping people with stories like mine - I can see how this has happened to them. It has given me a more grown up attitude to education and appreciating people’s time and commitment when they try to help. Being able to stay on at the Academy for sixth form and the support from my teachers has improved my grades. If I achieve my goal of qualifying as a nurse it will give me the opportunity to work in other countries if I want to.”

The **Jericho Project**, is a supportive housing agency, which provides accommodation for New York’s homeless people, many of whom have suffered long term substance addiction. It is funded through charitable donations and grants from foundations and trusts. Its aim is to help people move off the streets permanently by providing support services for tenants to reconnect with families and to find ways into education and employment so that they can live independently. This was the first time many of the students had been confronted with the reasons how and why an individual can end up with no home. One of the students reflected:

“The tenants are not just getting a handout - they pay rent and are trying to get back on track. It has made me feel differently about the homeless because we learned about all the difficulties they face in getting off the street. Before you can go to the doctor or apply for a job, or almost do anything, you need an address, which they don’t have. There is an understanding in America about why you need education and knowledge, but these people need support from the Jericho Project to get that or they will end up back where they were.”



Increasingly the project's work involves setting up accommodation for veterans (one out of four homeless people in the USA are veterans). Their plight struck a particular chord with Tom, aged 16:

"I was surprised about how small the apartments were but we were told that new tenants feel safer in small spaces. It was pointed out to us that the tenants were glad to 'have more room to sleep than they would in a car'. You don't think about things like that normally. I understand now how hard it is to rebuild a life. The project worker said that even though they don't realise it, most people in New York City are two or three payslips away from homelessness. That was a reality check for me."

Tom is an air cadet who has visited military bases in the UK and Prague. His mother commented that since visiting the Jericho project, he had started to consider the mental health issues and rehabilitation issues he might face when released from service. Tom was highly enthusiastic about the whole trip and his family believe it has given him a new impetus to become a high achiever at school.

DACA teaches students about social enterprise so there were valuable lessons to be learnt from a visit to the **Greyston Bakery**, which reinvests some of its profits into the Yonkers community to provide jobs, healthcare and affordable housing. They take great pride in the quality of what they produce including the brownies they bake as ingredients for Ben & Jerry's cookie-dough flavour ice cream.

The bakery's policy of 'open hiring' means anyone can turn up at the door and be put on the waiting list to become an apprentice. This encourages consideration of how to apply entrepreneurship to help solve social problems:

"They explained that it is important for people to know that open hiring is a good thing and that the bakery is capable of high standards. This also it means they can make more money to put back into the community. Usually entrepreneurs only want to make a profit for themselves but Greyston do it to help others. Now when I read about Greyston on the back of Ben & Jerry's I'll think 'hey I have been there!'"

"Open hiring is good because if there are no interviews employers can't make excuses why not to hire someone who has made a mistake before. But when they hire people who need a second chance, the employers help with housing and childcare so that those people can stay in their local community with dignity."

June Quick, who teaches Health and Social Care BTEC at DACA, was confident that the experience of visiting a social enterprise will enable the students to write knowledgeable assignments for the BTEC modules on welfare and equality, diversity and rights.

"More importantly it will make them think about different types of adversity faced by individuals – not just those they are familiar with – and make them think about which are the best models for solving those problems."



Entrepreneurial Education in the Bronx

Perhaps the most challenging and thought provoking day, especially for the teaching staff, was spent at two schools in the Bronx: the **Harriet Tubman Charter School** and the **KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Programme) Academy**.

Charter Schools are independent education providers who use public money to school children in deprived areas where state-run schools have previously 'failed'.

While there are obvious similarities to the British Academy programme, the teaching methods and school environment and facilities are very different. The Harriet Tubman school is located in a former supermarket and the KIPP academy uses a floor of an office block. These schools are able to apply their own methods of teaching and have achieved very high standards despite the serious levels of socio-economic adversity experienced by their students. Their results challenge the perception that outstanding grades cannot be achieved in underserved communities and demonstrate that buildings and environment are not paramount.

One student reflected on her experience of visiting the Harriet Tubman Charter School:

“Looking out of the bus I thought ‘I would not like to be alone on these streets’. I didn’t know what to expect at the school and was surprised that it was in a converted supermarket. They made the best of what they had and when we went into the classes they were having fun but learning at the same time.”

Jess, aged 17, commented on how inquisitive the American students were about the UK but she was surprised at how little they knew about real life in Britain. One American student asked her ‘do you hold out your little finger when you drink a cup of tea?’ Comparisons were made about TV shows, computer games and sports shoes. Following the visit, many of the students have chosen to keep in touch through email and social networking sites.

The pride in their school and education was evident. They also demonstrated an entrepreneurial flair in how they raised money for school trips. If a student wanted to attend a school trip they had to raise most of the money themselves.

Keeley said: “The kids appreciate being there and see education as a way to get out of the Bronx. They want to go to university and the teachers theme the classrooms around the universities they went to themselves with pictures of inspirational role models. They want to be at school and are really proud of it.”



Fiona Beaumont, Vice Principal at the Academy, applauded the Charter School ethos of raising aspirations:

“Within sixty seconds you are aware of what university the teacher attended and how much they respect education. I applaud that. I was impressed at how far they had taken the initiative APP (Assessing Pupil Progress), which is starting to become popular in the UK. Students’ work was displayed all over the school annotated using the terms GROW, for areas of work needing further development, and GLOW, for areas of praise. The support from parents and the community was noticeable – that’s something that needs to be developed further in the UK.”

The second school, part of the KIPP group, targets ‘underserved students develop the knowledge, skills, and character traits needed to succeed in top quality high schools, colleges and the competitive world beyond.’ These schools share core values, one of which is ‘More Time’. This means that the students spend on average 60% more time in school learning than other America state schools. A typical day is 7.30am to 5.30pm on week days, alternate Saturdays and for three weeks of the summer holidays. They do not place importance on buildings or facilities but focus instead on quality of teaching, rigour and structure.

There were mixed reactions from the DACA students:

Lucy, aged 16, said: “It was just one floor in the middle of a big depressing block. The teacher who spoke to us was completely committed and said although it looked very strict, it was the only way the students would be able to escape deprivation. He said they needed to give the kids structure. For me it seemed to be the opposite end of the spectrum from the Harriet Tubman school and too severe. I felt confused because if you are not lucky enough to be at the KIPP school, then you do not have the same chance in life. They really appreciate education here. We need to value what we have at home more. I’ve never really thought about that before.”

David, aged 17, said: “I was surprised that the students had to walk between classrooms in silence and it made me think of soldiers in a military academy. I am glad we went because it made me appreciate what we will be getting when our new Academy building opens in Darwen next year. These only have a corridor. We are lucky.”

One of the KIPP teachers explained the disciplined culture in the school:

“Urban America doesn’t follow rules. You have to earn the right to break a rule; you have to be able to abide by it before you can break it. In this school we say have high aspirations, work hard but be nice.”



International Culture Reflected in Entrepreneurial Activity

Creativity is a key entrepreneurial aptitude and is encouraged in DACA art lessons as well as across all curriculum subjects.

The visits to New York's MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum enabled students to see original iconic paintings and works of art that they had only previously seen in books. One of the A Level students was inspired by seeing works by her favourite artist, Chuck Close:

"At the Met I got to see the Chuck Close self portraits. They look like photographs from a distance, especially with the highlights in his glasses, something I hadn't realised before. His more recent paintings are made up of hundreds of small squares, which you can only see when you get up close."

New York Sights – An Entrepreneurial History and Geography

Taking the ferry to Liberty Island and the historical records at Ellis Islands helped the students understand the importance of heritage to the American nation. The museum of Ellis Island documents the journeys of these early entrepreneurs from all parts of the world to begin a new life in a new world.

Sian, aged 18, said:

"I never thought I would see the Statue of Liberty close up. On Ellis Island there were lots of Americans wanting to find out about their family history."

A more sombre feeling was evident at the Ground Zero site where the Twin Towers had once stood. Most of the students were aged about nine when the Twin Towers were struck. One student commented:

"I know about what happened to the World Trade Centre and my aunt showed me her holiday photographs of Manhattan when it was still there. It is strange to look at the photographs on my camera and think 'how could those huge towers ever have been in the skyline?' It's not natural."

CONCLUSION: Entrepreneurial Lessons Learned

The Opening Eyes visit to America was a success on many levels. The majority gained a great deal simply by being on a school visit for 10 days and seeing the sites of one of the world's most inspiring cities. However, the majority also gained insights into a different culture that left them feeling inspired - and grateful.

For the students, the visit to the Greyston Bakery gave them hands on experience of working in a social enterprise that gave them a depth of understanding about what it means to make a profit and meet a social need. Many felt this experience had made entrepreneurship more relevant to their lives and gave them an engaging 'case study' to discuss when back in the classroom. Some felt inspired by the innovative approaches to tackling poverty, homelessness and unemployment.

The visit to the supported housing for the homeless and the opportunity to volunteer at the food distribution centre gave them insights into what it means to support your community. Many students said the experience had given them a greater appreciation of the sense of community, state education and welfare safety-net at home.

While the students were surprised to see schools set up in supermarkets and in office blocks, they were impressed by the students' pride and enthusiasm and the emphasis placed on education as a means of lifting people out of poverty. Many said they felt it made them reassess their view of education and what they could gain from school.

One student said: "I am really glad I went. I now understand more about why some people cannot get out of difficulties and it was rewarding to see where people are giving time to make their communities better. Otherwise I would have thought everything in New York was about success and money. Education and learning seems to be more respected here than in the UK."

The DACA staff said they had gained first hand experience of an education provision designed to secure the best outcomes in the most challenging communities. While there were aspects of the Charter School system that concerned staff, for instance what appeared in places to be extreme and authoritarian approaches to imposing self-discipline rather than promoting student responsibility, there were many ideas that they thought could be taken back to the UK as best practice. In particular, staff noticed the high profile celebration of every teacher's personal education and qualifications, the visible and practical approaches to assessing pupil progress and the collective celebration of every pupil achievement, no matter how small, in the classroom.

They were also impressed by the methods used to engage the parent and community. Gaining the support of parents and young people committed to working with teachers in a shared educational goal seemed to be the key. They were struck by the level of student motivation and what had been achieved with very few resources.

One of the student's parents said on her return: "Our daughter had never wanted to go on a school trip before. She has returned more confident and enthusiastic about going to school."

A school visit like this provides an opportunity for students and teachers to challenge and change their

preconceptions of New York. They had not realised that that contrasts in wealth could exist in a city. They saw deprived neighbourhoods located side by side with Manhattan skyscrapers, department stores and art museums. For some it provoked questions about their home town, Darwen, and raised awareness of social issues that span the globe.

“Visiting the social enterprises gave us a contrast with all the money spent on food and shopping in New York,” said one student. “Most of us have bought at least three pairs of trainers here! It has meant our visit was not just like being a tourist. We saw something about what goes on outside Manhattan and so we will have more to say and more to remember about New York.”

The DACA students’ eagerness to remain in contact with some of the American pupils they met bears testimony to the benefits of cultural exchange. The Academy in Darwen is hoping to develop this contact further in future.

The Opening Eyes programme is an example of the added value a sponsor can bring to students in the Academy system. Changing mindsets is fundamental to Rod Aldridge’s chosen specialism of entrepreneurship and the experiences gained by students on this trip are directly relevant to an entrepreneurial curriculum. Modern technology means that the relationships made with partners and organisations can be maintained and there are opportunities to share best practices or student/teacher exchanges. Taking education outside of the classroom, the school, the locality and in this case the country helps nurture confidence, maturity and awareness in the students and arguably more likely to consider different options for their future.

Finally, the visit to New York enabled the students to expand their skills and understanding of the six entrepreneurship themes that DACA seeks to instil: determination, creativity, problem solving, risk taking, team work, and passion.

	Determination - The determination of both helpers and those being helped to try and make a better life for themselves, their families and the community made a clear impression on the students.		Risk Taking - For many students they had taken a risk coming on the trip by merely facing the challenges of being in an unknown environment and away from families and familiarity. They were also able to see that in the US there is far more entrepreneurial activity and an acceptance of failure. Risk taking is integral to US culture and the lesson to learn is how much risk to take.
	Creativity - The variety of sights and architecture and choice of cultural activity in New York encouraged discussion with students about the energy created by innovation and original ideas.		Teamwork - Students learned the importance of working with others and respecting that an individual’s actions affects the team. Punctuality, listening to others and learning to lead groups and be led are all part of team work.
	Problem Solving - Travelling in a big group necessitated daily planning and identifying potential problems and students learnt how to navigate the New York Metro system and to deal with daily unforeseen circumstances.		Passion - The staff at the two schools and the volunteers at the community based projects demonstrated to students the importance of putting your heart and soul into something you really believe in.

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