

Realising Potential

Out of the ordinary: realising the potential of every child

Deeply embedded in articles on what makes a good school you may find a sentence or at most a short paragraph on its provision for the ordinary pupil, but that *genus* deserves further attention. Some of the hardest work a school has to undertake is to care for the pupils who are seen or perceive themselves as “nothing special”. That is, schools need to work hard to ensure they care for those who form what disconcertingly might be described as “the silent majority who make it through school without setting off alarm bells, but who fail to realise their potential”.

Independent schools confidently celebrate the plethora of opportunities available to their pupils but may not work quite hard enough to interrogate who is taking them up. Many a school will take too great a pride in what is achieved by the prodigies (who would have done well anywhere), and every decent school looks after its strugglers, but it's in “the middle of the middle” that there is most value to be added and most to be done. Schools are getting better at understanding this.

At Dulwich our aim is to ensure everyone is supported and heralded. How are we doing this?

1. Through a motivational reward system

Commendations are accessible not only to the elite, but for the improving too, with the focus on effort over attainment. Pupils are able to feel a pride in the progress they make in all their enterprises – the creative, sporting, charitable and adventurous as well as the academic. We ignite a belief that you don't have to be great at something to take deep pleasure in it. The cultivation of an appreciation of music or drama can be a joy for people who will never play or perform. And we do not underestimate the value of a mention in assembly or in the school magazine of somebody who doesn't usually feature in despatches. At Dulwich data and strong tracking systems are employed to distinguish the real middle from the false middle (i.e. the merely indolent or disengaged) and to ensure aspirational target setting as a basis for conversations between tutors and all their pupils.

2. Committed form tutoring

Alley-nians are sponsored by committed form tutors and are well known to their Year Heads, Heads of School and Housemasters. The tutors tease out the hopes and fears of every pupil and nudge the reluctant towards engagement and respect every pupil for who he is. Our tutors are also great role models: adults engaged in and supportive of the school and its ethos (albeit sometimes as critical friends). Form structure is important too; as many boys as possible have

access to acceleration. And we avoid the creation of 'sink' forms for pupils are quick to fall victim to self-fulfilling prophecies.

3. A breadth of activities available to and taken up by all pupils

Many Alleynians have found their platforms and niches at one remove from the mainstream: the boy with a love of reading who has led the book club and creative writing groups; the boy who struggles with ball sports but who in rowing has found a social life as well as a sport to enjoy; the boy who loves the theatre, not as an actor but in doing the lighting or sound. At an early age, at least, there is an opportunity for everyone to 'be and do everything'. Dulwich College Junior School Sport is judged by 100% participation rather than by the win:lose ratio of our A teams. All in Years 3 and 4 learn to play a stringed instrument and a wind instrument. One wise pupil reflected: "It doesn't matter what you are good at, but you have to be good at something". Furthermore Dulwich enjoys multiple hierarchies; colours blazers are available to those who shine in community service or the CCF as well as in sport; the school's prefects represent a cross section of the school population.

4. A well-developed house system

Our house system elicits a strong sense of community and cooperation and provides, through a wide range of competitions (cultural as well as sporting), an opportunity for all to shine. Strong peer relationships and the right kind of peer pressure encourage all the boys to engage and lead activity, while peer mentoring, often evoked through the house system, creates opportunities for pupils to learn from each other's struggles and achievements.

5. Pupil voice opportunities are offered to a broad cross-section of boys

Tutors send a variety of boys to school council meetings or learning forums and sometimes send the more reluctant, those just out of their comfort zone, as representing "the middle voice". We also enable leadership opportunities for the non-stellar pupil, finding, for example, an alternative engagement for those disappointed not to become prefects.

6. Free Learning

Our excellent and flexible teaching ensures that all pupils are equally challenged. Teachers portray 'failure' as a learning opportunity, ensuring that pupils do not seek to hide in the anonymous middle ground for fear of getting things wrong. Embracing free learning rather than creating a curriculum that is wholly exam focused also ensures that middling pupils are engaged, by creating different spaces in which they can all be noticed. Our regular Parent Evenings allow for the triangular discussion of the progress of pupils between the teachers, parents and the pupils themselves.

7. The boarding houses

The boarding house is a big family. And the ideal within families is that every child is a star although this value judgment is not dependent on measurable success. In the boarding setting pupils are encouraged to support each other's learning and the housemasters are directly engaged in ensuring their charges engagement, in and beyond the house. Each has a thorough initial interview with every boy to be able to get a feel for their personal goals and ambitions, and then they come back to those over the course of their years with us. A key to success in the boarding house - as in the school - is the

scope of its prevailing culture; so, if there is a belief that hard work and enthusiasm is at the heart of success, the middle group will accept that.

Every boy matters; every boy differs. What is needed at the end of a school career is not a copious list of achievements, but a sense of what has been learned by and through all the many or few engagements, successful or otherwise.

