The Oxbridge Project: How do you become a truly educated person in an inner city school?

In a recent speech at Brighton College, Michael Gove asked what it means to be an educated person. He concluded that an educated person, as well as being literate and numerate, will also be historically aware, culturally curious and engaged by science and technology (as well as being an active citizen and ready for the workplace). It would be difficult to disagree with this definition. While Gove is talking on a more general level, someone who consistently excels across these areas is also the sort of person who would be snapped up by Oxbridge or a Russell Group University. Having interviewed prospective candidates at Worcester College, Oxford for four years, I am well aware of the fact that in order to secure a place at a university like Oxford, you not only need the highest grades (all As and A*s nowadays) but you also need to display intellectual curiosity, a good all-round general knowledge and a certain ‘teachability’. Such candidates do not emerge just by virtue of having spent thirteen years in school, far from it. They are the products of many years of hard work and teacherly and in many cases, parental, guidance. The number of students reaching this gold standard of education from the lowest social quintile remains shockingly low. Just 2% of British students from the lowest social quintile go to an elite university such as Oxford.

I have now swapped the Dreaming Spires for the White City and am teaching at Burlington Danes Academy in West London. Burlington Danes has, under the leadership of Dame Sally Coates and through the efforts of a young, dedicated and energetic staff, been transformed from a school in Special Measures in 2006 to one of the highest achieving state schools in London, despite the fact that 84% of its students come from the lowest social quintile. The road to university success has proved more complex. The A Level teaching is excellent and the results are good, particularly for a Sixth Form that is only four years old. But it remains a challenge to secure high numbers of places at top universities. Why is this? What are the impediments still standing in the way of these able, ambitious students? On one level, it is simple. Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge now look not only at the grades students achieve but the percentage breakdowns. Our students’ percentages are not yet quite up there with the top quarter of students invited to Oxbridge interviews who will secure most of the places, one third of whom come from Independent Schools. I must state here that I am absolutely not in favour of Oxbridge or the Russell Group universities lowering their entrance standards or offering places on the basis of ‘potential’. I saw first-hand, as a tutor, the anxiety and distress that being on a university course that you cannot cope with intellectually can cause. Students from the lowest quintiles must be helped to improve, although as will become clear below, this is something that universities can play an active role in.

At Burlington Danes the percentage deficit amongst our A and A* grade students is being addressed, through more intensive teaching, more after-school interventions and so on. We also provide extensive support for personal statement-writing and interview preparation for
those students who do secure interviews. But it started to occur to us (us being Dame Sally, the Head of Sixth Form, Matt Jerred and myself), that we were focusing our attention at the wrong end of their school careers. We were expecting these students to suddenly transform themselves into Oxbridge and Russell Group candidates with excellent grades, excellent general knowledge and a real intellectual curiosity in Year 12 and 13, when perhaps they had not even heard of some or all of these ideals a few months previously. And so the idea for the Burlington Danes Oxbridge Project was born. Instead of focusing all our attention on Years 12 and 13, we would turn the concept on its head, and work more intensively and imaginatively with the very brightest students in Years 7-10.

The programme is modelled in some ways on the extremely successful Pembroke Access Scheme, conceived of by Dr Peter Claus of Pembroke College Oxford. Frustrated by the lack of viable candidates from the lowest social quintiles for his college, and also by the lack of accountability of the ‘widening-participation’ strategies that Oxford currently employs, Claus has taken Oxford to the Inner City and set up several ‘hubs’ in the most deprived areas of the country. The longest running hub (based at BSix Brookehouse Sixth Form College in Hackney) works with carefully selected Year 12s and 13s from the surrounding local state schools. For one year students attend a weekly seminar on the ‘intellectual and cultural facets of the Enlightenment’ (touching on History, Politics, Philosophy and Economics) that aims to widen their intellectual horizons. The course tutors include tutors and graduates of Pembroke College. The programme culminates with an exam and a residential Study Skills School in Oxford, which aims to replicate a week in the life of an Oxbridge undergraduate. Since the programme began in 2008, the hub college has experienced a 500% rise in successful applications Russell Group universities. Claus is however keen to stress that the fundamental point of the programme is to engender a sense of ‘real education’ in these students, one where high-level knowledge, academic rigour and intellectual curiosity cohere and hopefully stay with them for life.

At Burlington Danes, for the reasons specified above, we wanted to institute a more long-term and holistic scheme, designed to make students aware of both their university options and what that would require on their part at a younger age. It seemed crucial to start widening their intellectual horizons earlier, as well as working on their general knowledge (sometimes now referred to as ‘cultural capital’). We launched the Oxbridge Project in April this year. The 127 students in the top sets in Years 7-10 attended a special assembly delivered by myself, Dr Peter Claus and former alumnus of Pembroke College, Foad Mohamed, who is now finishing his medical training at Imperial College. Foad had himself attended a school in Special Measures in South London but had made it to Oxford regardless, testament to his talent and resilience. Having Foad talk to the students certainly piqued their interest in the project, as here was someone who looked and sounded like them who had made it to this wonderful place that Peter was telling them about.
Following the assembly, a comprehensive interview programme was launched in order to recruit the ‘top’ twenty or so students in Years 7-10 for a year-long programme of weekly seminars and talks on a range of intellectually stimulating topics not usually found on the curriculum. The seminars, which in the first term will range from ‘Shakespeare in the Modern World’ to ‘The Ring of Gyges: An Introduction to Plato’ to a talk on the future of Nuclear Energy will also be open to other interested students. There will also be a termly essay on the talk the selected students found the most stimulating, which they will defend ‘tutorial-style’ and a trip to Oxford at the end of the year where they will attend a real-life lecture and seminar. We decided to base the interviews on the ‘Oxbridge’ interview in order to give all students involved the chance to prepare for and experience a challenging interview. Even students who were not successful in securing a place on the programme have got a lot out of this experience and will be welcomed to join the interview process again next year. Every student involved in the project received a personalised letter at the end of the process with a paragraph of feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their interview.

The interview process was a fairly complex logistical operation. Each one of the 127 students was interviewed by a pair of teachers (this required a team of 28 teachers in total). We took care to ensure that no student was interviewed by a teacher they were currently taught by in order to ensure a level of distance. The interviews were carefully designed using my own interviewing experience in the Humanities as well as wider research that I undertook on Maths and Science interviews. Thus each student was given one of four unseen texts (all taken from Worley and Day’s excellent book of Philosophy poems or ‘Thoughtings’) to read 5 minutes before the interview. They were then asked a series of questions about the text designed to test their understanding of the piece and also their ability to think more widely and off the cuff about certain ethical issues including moral laws and the ethics of punishment. This was followed up by a Current Affairs question. The interviewers could then choose two further questions from a larger question bank which included a challenging Maths problem, a Literature question, a speculative question about the future and several questions about the student’s favourite subject and their future career goals. Each interview lasted at least 25 minutes, although many went on for longer due to the debates and discussions that were sparked. The questioning was kept rigorous and the marking strict. The interviewers had all attended a training session, watched a mock interview and followed a standardised mark scheme. It is testament to the dedication of the BDA staff members who volunteered for the scheme that they managed to fit in up to ten interviews in their free time, before, during and after school. The students’ responses to the somewhat stressful interview procedures were mostly very good: they immersed themselves in the process and were quick to show off their knowledge, producing excellent answers and engaging in some very interesting discussions with their interviewers.

Once the four-week window for interviewing was closed, the interview scores were combined with the students’ academic scores for that academic year and a final result
generated. It was important to produce a combined result for the following reason: even a very good interview or personal statement could never overturn average grades in the eyes of Oxbridge and the Russell Group universities. In this way, the importance of all-round excellence was being emphasised. Twenty-two students were selected to be part of the ongoing project and the results were announced in another special assembly where the ‘winners’ were presented with certificates and academic gowns to wear for the day by Lord Stanley Fink, our Chair of Governors, who is himself an alumnus of Trinity Hall Cambridge. It was inspiring for the students to hear of Stanley’s own journey from his own economically deprived Mancunian background to Cambridge and the City.

The first Oxbridge Project cohort at BDA (more than half of whom are students eligible for the Pupil Premium) have already been on a reward trip to the sell-out Pompeii Exhibition at the British Museum and have bonded well. This coming together of the finest minds in the lower school in a vertical group which meets once a week for seminars and talks has taken on an air of exciting possibility. In practical terms the cold hard results of the project lie in the future, in 2017 when the current Year 10s will be applying to university. It is only then that we will be able to measure the effect of the programme on our successful Russell Group applications. However, more importantly, via the interviews and via the ongoing project for the chosen 22 students, we are encouraging engagement with “the best which has been thought and said in the world”, to use one of Gove’s favourite Matthew Arnold quotes, in a meaningful and practical way. And it is through doing this that the students will begin to have mastery of the ‘real education’ that Oxbridge and the Russell Group universities require.

But what of those who cry elitism and argue that the money and resources of an inner city school should not be diverted to the most able students in this way? To them I would say the following. First, the project has been run on a shoestring budget, thanks to the generosity of the staff. But more importantly, this is a comprehensive school and there should be just as much focus on those students at the top as there is on those on the famous C/D borderline and those with SEN. These students should absolutely be exposed to the same type of teaching and experiences as their intellectual peers at Independent schools and suburban State Schools. Moreover, it is my hope that the Oxbridge Project will become a symbol of aspiration for all in the school. The name itself is symbolic as the project is not really about ‘getting people into’ Oxbridge or the Russell Group universities but about expanding their intellectual and academic horizons in order that they might fully capitalise on their existing talent and potential regardless of their social background. And this is something that everyone can aim for. Just as Foad Mohamed lit a visible spark in some of our students when he came to talk to them in April about succeeding at Oxford after attending an inner city school, I hope that our students will inspire their peers to be the very best that they can be and seize all opportunities that are offered.

Dr Natasha O’Hear, July 2013