LEARNING AND EMPOWERING DIFFERENTLY

At Gesher School in London, the project-based learning pedagogy is present not only in the curriculum, but also in the very design of the spaces and places of the building, explains co-founder Ali Durban.

Gesher is an all-through school for children and young people who are differently able and who learn differently.

Our ambition is to transform how children and young people are educated in the UK by offering an all-through learning community that functions differently – from its relationships, pedagogy, and canvas for learning to its engagement with the community and partnerships with parents. At Gesher, there are clear, accessible progression pathways which enable children to leave school as young adults with their self-esteem enhanced and with skills and qualifications equipping them not only to get jobs and lead independent, meaningful, and active lives but also to contribute their gifts to the world.

Individualised learning

At Gesher we believe that every young person should be 'profoundly well-known' and, as such, their learning should be personalised and informed by their passions and interests. Therefore, we use a trans-disciplinary approach to learning, meaning that our teachers, therapists, teaching assistants, parents and carers work very closely together. This approach ensures that each young person has an individually tailored provision of care throughout their school day. The learning team commits to equally and continually discussing the needs of each young person and providing the most effective education and therapeutic model of practice. Furthermore, the therapy team works alongside teachers in the classrooms to provide the appropriate equipment, environment, and provision of care for each young person.

A project-based approach

Our curriculum is rooted in project-based learning approaches; through these, our young people are supported to engage in rigorous and authentic learning experiences, thus connecting them to the world beyond our school's gates.

Project-based learning is a pedagogical approach where students work to develop solutions and create products that address a real-world problem, challenge, or question. Projects (which can be both products and processes) combine the head, hands and heart while engaging students in authentic and meaningful work that matters. Through this approach, students collaborate to use knowledge, skills, and feedback to improve their work. Students document their work in a portfolio and formally reflect on their learning during the project. At the end of the project students present and share their work.

Gesher's maker culture

Because of the school's unique approach and our children's profiles, the spaces and places where they learn in the school are critical. To design an innovative learning environment to enable experiences that foster curiosity, develop deeper learning and nurture community is as important as curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. A key part of our design thinking is that it places children and young people at the heart of the process and as a result our approach is to co-construct spaces and places with them. An example of this is Gesher's maker culture which is an integral part of our learners' experiences, at every stage of their development. Learning by doing and developing design thinking skills starts through tinkering and exploratory activity during the early primary years. We want our learners to be qualified for their next stage of development when they will acquire deep knowledge in academic and vocational disciplines.

Establishing a maker-culture as part of all learners' experiences at every stage of their development is central to achieving the outcomes, ambitions and the preparation for a successful life-long journey for all young people at Gesher.

Wolfson Makerspace

Our Wolfson Makerspace helps to expedite that learning experience. It supports primary project-based approaches for multidisciplinary learning and enables our secondary learners to design, experiment, build and invent in science, computing and engineering through real-life project activities. The makerspace acts as a hub for our school and community, enhances the richness and depth of our curriculum through more STEAM-focused approaches, and acts as a catalyst to encourage relevant and real-life projects. Digital technology is a critical enabler for the makerspace; it allows the sharing of ideas, projects and activities, across the school campus, with our parents and to work in partnership with local projects and the business community.

The Wolfson Makerspace has been zoned to support and share the process of design thinking across the whole school curriculum. It also recognises the importance of progression in an all-through school where more specialist facilities need to be available to develop successful learning pathways and the skills for adult life. The zoning also recognises that some specialist areas demand safety and support around certain learning activities and equipment where good levels of visual connection are required.

The Wolfson makerspace is structured around four dynamic, functionally complementary and visually connected zones. Sliding, floor to ceiling glass panels enable both visual connection and ease of movement between the zones. Adaptability is a key design feature of the makerspace in order to respond to project based and multidisciplinary inquiry across the school curriculum and as a hub for community engagement.

THE WOLFSON MAKERSPACE WILL ACT AS A HUB FOR SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY AND WILL PROMOTE THE SHARING OF IDEAS, PROJECTS, AND ACTIVITIES.

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The Wolfson Makerspace has been a truly collaborative project – through both its design, delivery and implementation, and from the support across a wide range of voices including children, young people, the Gesher learning community, design professionals, and The Wolfson Family Charitable Trust.

Gesher is a relational school and community. The relationship between Gesher and Terry White and the Planning Learning Spaces in Practice (PLSiP) Team is critical to our children and young people having the right spaces and places to thrive. From the beginning of our learning conversations, it was clear that we shared the same value proposition: that a great learning environment is the physical representation of a well- functioning, inclusive learning culture, expressed through the values, beliefs and pedagogical practices shared by all learners (including staff) and the community. ■

Ali Durban is the co-founder of the Gesher School, London

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