

The Venturists - The Big Idea for SEND



The
Venturists



Introduction

'What 'The BIG Idea for SEND' has provided is an opportunity to explore the transformative potential of social action within inclusive education.

The Venturist builds on professional experience and a growing interest in how purposeful, community-focused learning can support individual needs while strengthening wider school communities. The Venturists harnesses social action as a meaningful and engaging intervention.

Rationale

Pupils with SEND often have fewer opportunities to engage in real-world, project-based learning that develops both academic and life skills. Social action projects offer a structured way to address this gap by encouraging creativity, collaboration, leadership and community engagement.

The rationale for this study is to examine whether a structured social action programme can be a measurable and replicable intervention that supports learning, responds to individual needs and fosters thriving communities.

Evidence from this project could inform future SEND provision in schools and provide a model for other settings seeking to deliver meaningful, inclusive interventions.

Context

The Venturists programme has been delivered across Bradford and rural areas of the East Riding, primarily in primary schools, but also in partnership with a local college and a Special School.

Participants are often from deprived socio-economic backgrounds and marginalised communities, though the programme has reached a wide range of educational settings.

For this project, delivery took place at Clayton Village Primary School, a school of 200 pupils. The school has a higher-than-average SEND profile, with 9% of pupils holding an EHCP compared to the national average of 4.8%, making it an ideal context to explore the impact of social action interventions on SEND outcomes.



Our BIG Idea

The Venturists engages young people, including those with social, emotional, and mental health needs, in social enterprise projects, promoting wellbeing, confidence, communication and leadership skills. Participants are entrepreneurial, imaginative and motivated to make positive changes in their communities.

For this study, the intervention involved two groups of eight pupils at Clayton Village Primary School, each completing the programme over 10 weeks. Sessions were delivered one hour per week, with the project tailored to meet the specific needs of both the young people and the school. While project timescales may vary across different settings, the minimum engagement is eight consecutive weekly sessions.

During the programme, participants explore local issues, plan and develop their own social action projects, and access tools and resources to implement their ideas. They engage with community charities and business volunteers, gaining practical experience in project planning, budgeting, branding, and pitching. These experiences allow pupils to take ownership of their projects, generating real positive impact in their community.

As participants navigate these new challenges and opportunities, they develop confidence, self-esteem, and social-emotional skills, which contribute to improved wellbeing and academic outcomes. The Venturists programme is delivered by an experienced team of teachers and Social Enterprise coaches and has been implemented across over 20 schools, supporting more than 300 students aged 7–20 years.



Methodology

The Venturists is a structured social action programme designed to engage young people in meaningful community projects while developing skills in leadership, communication, and enterprise. Although the core components of the programme remain consistent, each delivery is tailored to the needs of the school and participants, making every cohort unique.

Key Components

1. Assessment (Explore and Prepare Phase):
2. Pre- and post-project questionnaires are completed; this data is analysed by the project lead to evaluate impact and inform next steps for individual learners.
3. Project Delivery:
4. A series of bespoke lesson plans guides young people in planning and delivering a social action project aimed at creating positive change within their community. Planning is informed by assessment data to ensure activities meet the needs and interests of participants.
5. Celebration (The Showcase)
6. Throughout the programme, participants engage with community champions and business leaders who support their projects. Achievements are celebrated at a Showcase event attended by families, school staff, and community partners, where students present their projects and receive recognition.

Implementation Process

- Initial planning meetings are held with school staff to identify participant needs and determine the cohort of Venturists.
- Sessions are delivered by the Venturists teacher in-school, providing new experiences that engage learners in social action.
- Pupils interact with charities and business volunteers to develop their projects, including budgeting, branding, and pitching ideas to a Dragon's Den panel to secure funding.
- Projects are then implemented, generating real-world impact in the community.

The Venturists also supports schools in embedding social action and enterprise into the curriculum, offering training and guidance to ensure sustainable, in-house delivery. This approach ensures that social enterprise and community engagement become part of the school ethos and culture.



Based in Reserach

Social action and project-based learning have a powerful positive impact on young people, boosting confidence, resilience and social skills while reducing anxiety. When embedded in learning, these programmes can also improve academic outcomes and engagement. Pupils gain teamwork, leadership, and a sense of purpose, with SEND learners benefiting particularly from structured support. Overall, social action provides an effective, scalable approach to enhancing wellbeing, personal development, and meaningful participation in school and community life.

	Key Impacts	Supporting Evidence
Wellbeing & Confidence	↑ Self-esteem ↑ Confidence ↓ Anxiety Improved emotional regulation	Ipsos MORI (2017); Pye & Michelmores (2016); Behavioural Insights Team (2016)
Personal & Social Skills	↑ Empathy ↑ Resilience ↑ Cooperation ↑ Problem-solving ↑ Leadership ↑ Communication	Behavioural Insights Team (2016); Celio, Durlak & Dymnicki (2011); UTwente, n.d.
Academic Outcomes	↑ Engagement in learning ↑ Persistence measurable Improvements in reading & maths	Education Endowment Foundation (2017); Celio, Durlak & Dymnicki (2011)
Sense of Agency & Community Engagement	Taking initiative Making tangible contributions Civic responsibility	Ipsos MORI (2017); UTwente, n.d.
SEND / SEMH Impact	↑ Inclusion ↑ Participation ↑ Confidence ↑ Resilience Improved social interaction	DfE (2018); Behavioural Insights Team (2016)
Overall Outcomes	Enhanced personal development Stronger social-emotional skills Improved academic readiness Long-term life skills	All sources above

Impact

When analysing the data, it is important to note that 25% of participants were on the SEN register, all with SEMH identified as a specific need, and 38% had additional social care involvement. All learners were identified by their teachers as having low confidence and self-esteem, which was confirmed by the questionnaire, where 13 out of 16 pupils (81%) reported significantly low confidence and self-esteem.

Despite these challenges, teachers and parents observed positive improvements across key skills and qualities for all participants. Areas of development included communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity, resilience, questioning, listening, co-operation, confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of strong morals. Teachers reported 100% improvement across all targeted areas, with notable progress in dealing with challenges, problem-solving, resilience, confidence, and self-esteem.

Participants themselves also identified significant personal growth, particularly in morals, innovation, creativity, tackling problems, communication, public speaking, confidence, and self-esteem. These improvements are likely to have a positive impact on future academic achievement, engagement, and long-term educational and career outcomes.

Some participants may still need support to fully recognise their own progress, highlighting the value of reflective activities and ongoing practitioner support. Overall, the data demonstrates that The Venturists programme had a meaningful impact on both personal and social development, particularly for pupils with SEND and SEMH needs.

Observations throughout the programme demonstrated that Our Venturists showed significant growth in confidence, taking risks and collaborating effectively to present their work, ideas, and thoughts to peers and adults. These experiences provided opportunities for pupils to engage meaningfully in group problem-solving, creative tasks, and public speaking, allowing them to flourish both personally and socially.

Participants reflected positively on their experiences, highlighting the impact of the programme on their confidence, social skills, and perseverance. Representative quotes include:

- “The best thing about The Venturists is when I wanted to give in but J kept telling me to keep going. I thought I wouldn’t do taking on challenges but it is important because you can accomplish them.”
- “The Venturists has helped me get more involved.”
- “The Venturists has helped me develop the ability to talk to new people more.”
- “I have found The Venturists has helped me gain confidence.”
- “I believe in myself.”
- “I feel braver talking in front of people which has impacted my social skills.”
- “I feel like The Venturists has boosted my self-esteem and my social skills.”

These reflections, alongside practitioner observations, highlight the programme’s effectiveness in enhancing confidence, resilience, communication, and social-emotional skills, particularly for pupils with SEND and SEMH needs.

The Project

Bespoke planning was developed to provide Our Venturists with opportunities to practise essential skills such as teamwork, communication in small and large groups, resilience, problem-solving, and cooperation. Most sessions were delivered within individual Venturist groups, with selected activities designed to bring all participants together, further developing collaborative and leadership skills.

During the programme, participants engaged with Community Champions and local charities to explore community issues and identify problems they wanted to address. Ten project groups were formed, with most learners working in pairs or small teams, and one learner working independently. Groups applied “Blue-Sky Thinking” to generate project ideas, create logos and branding, budget for resources, and develop detailed implementation plans.

Each group then pitched their proposals to a Dragon’s Den panel consisting of the SENDCo, a pupil representative, business leaders, and a local council leader. All groups were awarded funding to implement their projects, allowing ideas to come to life and generate tangible community impact.

Activities undertaken by Our Venturists included:

- A Year 6 rugby transition workshop to support wellbeing and transition to secondary school.
- Planting trees, creating a wildlife garden, and upcycling wellies as planters.
- Preparing and distributing soup and essentials for the homeless.
- Assembling wellbeing packs for shelter dogs.
- Fundraising initiatives, including one learner raising £78 for Save the Children.

Through these experiences, learners applied new skills in real-world contexts, developing confidence, independence, and a sense of agency, while making meaningful contributions to their community.

Timings

As a minimum, the project needs to be delivered for 1 hour per session over 8 weeks, when working with small group numbers. Usually, Our Venturist teacher delivers the project between 8 to 10 weeks with each session being 1.5 to 2hrs to 15 students.

The planning is bespoke though and will be tailored to meet school timetables, length of terms etc. In this study we used 2 groups of 8 children completing the project for 1 hour per week for 10 weeks. This was a reflection on the SEMH needs of the particular cohort.

Resources

Participate Projects provide all the resources needed to deliver The Venturists project. They will source all the volunteers and provide all the materials that the young people will need to deliver their projects. Many schools allocate a LSA to the project and this always has a huge impact. Staff are inspired by the project and this helps develop curriculum change and develop a social enterprise ethos in school and most importantly, staff see the impact first-hand that the project is having on the learners.

If the project cannot be delivered by our Venturist teacher a LSA or school-based teacher will be required to deliver the project following on from training. It is recommended that they have a small amount of planning and preparation time in order for the project to be well planned and so that impact can be maximised. If a school is delivering the project in-house, they will be responsible for the resources needed for each project. Participate Projects will help with this through the training that will be delivered and we can help source the Community Champions and Business Leaders to further enrich your project.



Staff Training

To support sustainable delivery, bespoke training can be provided to school staff so that The Venturists programme can be implemented in-house if required. Training typically consists of six hours of initial training and three hours of ongoing coaching throughout the project.

Our Venturist teacher remains available for additional support and coaching as needed, ensuring staff are confident in delivering the programme. Schools also have access to supplementary resources, guidance, and planning materials via the project portal. Planning is co-developed with the Venturist teacher, including identification of experiences, opportunities, and resources tailored to the needs of the pupils and the school.

Through this approach, schools are supported throughout their Venturist journey, embedding social action and enterprise within the school's ethos and practice.

Sustainability

Participate Projects is actively seeking funding to establish The Venturists as a continuous provision for pupils with SEMH needs. This would ensure that social action and social enterprise opportunities are consistently available, providing ongoing support for personal development, confidence, and skill-building.

School leaders are also exploring the possibility of extending the programme to all Upper Key Stage 2 pupils, embedding social enterprise within the curriculum. This approach aims to support the development of key skills and qualities, as well as confidence and self-esteem, for all KS2 learners, preparing them for future education and career pathways while fostering a culture of innovation, collaboration, and community engagement within the school.

Scalability & Up-Scaling

The Venturists is a bespoke and flexible programme that has been delivered to over 600 young people across more than 20 settings, including primary schools, colleges, Special Schools, and even family settings. Its adaptability ensures that any learner can access the project and benefit from the personal, social, and academic opportunities it offers.

Participate Projects will continue to support “Venturist Schools” through consultancy, project delivery, and ongoing monitoring by Participate and its Board. The programme offers flexible pathways for implementation in schools, colleges, and universities, enabling it to be scaled effectively and efficiently across diverse educational contexts.

At Clayton Village Primary School, the programme will now be embedded across the entire academic year, forming a core part of curriculum enhancements for all Upper Key Stage 2 pupils. This approach ensures that social enterprise and social action become an integral, sustained part of school life, providing long-term benefits for pupils’ skills, confidence, and future readiness.



When structured and supported, Social Action provides a powerful tool for developing personal and academic success. Schools should actively embed it within their curriculum and ethos to foster confident, resilient, and socially responsible learners.

Embed Social Action into the Curriculum

- Integrate social enterprise and social action projects into curriculum planning, particularly in Upper Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3, to support the development of confidence, resilience, and leadership skills.
- Use project-based learning to connect academic content with real-world challenges, enhancing engagement and relevance.

Provide Targeted Support for SEND and SEMH Pupils

- Ensure interventions are flexible and bespoke to meet the needs of pupils with SEND or SEMH challenges.
- Pair social action activities with structured reflection to reinforce personal growth and skill development.

Foster Community Partnerships

- Engage local charities, businesses, and community leaders as mentors or “Community Champions” to provide real-world context, guidance, and inspiration.
- Encourage pupils to design projects that have tangible community impact, building a sense of agency and civic responsibility.

Invest in Staff Training and Development

- Provide staff with training in social enterprise, project management, and coaching strategies to enable sustainable delivery of social action projects in-house.
- Support ongoing staff reflection and coaching to ensure fidelity and responsiveness of interventions.

Monitor and Evaluate Impact

- Use pre- and post-intervention questionnaires, teacher observations, and parental feedback to track pupils’ development in confidence, self-esteem, communication, and social-emotional skills.
- Evaluate academic and personal outcomes to identify areas for improvement and justify ongoing programme investment.

Promote Whole-School Engagement

- Encourage cross-year or cross-class collaboration to develop teamwork and leadership skills across the school.
- Celebrate achievements through showcases or assemblies to reinforce pupil confidence and school-wide culture of social action.

Plan for Sustainability and Scalability

- Consider long-term implementation strategies, including year-round provision, integration into school ethos, and partnerships with external organisations for support and funding.
- Use evidence from pilot projects to inform policy and share successful approaches with other schools.

Why Social Action Fits

Every child should participate, belong and thrive in mainstream education. Social action programmes create the conditions that make that possible.

1. Early, Inclusive Support

Embedded in mainstream schools

Builds confidence, communication, resilience

Strengthens universal provision and reduces escalation

2. Whole-Child Development

Develops wellbeing, teamwork, and self-esteem

Supports engagement in learning and school life

Aligns with broader SEND outcomes beyond academics

3. Builds School Capacity

Provides structured frameworks and staff development

Enhances in-school support rather than reliance on external services

4. Promotes Participation and Agency

Positions pupils as active contributors

Increases motivation, voice, and aspiration

Reduces barriers to sustained engagement



Conclusion

The research shows that The Venturists programme delivers measurable improvements in confidence, wellbeing, and life skills for young people—particularly those with SEND and SEMH needs—while fostering agency, purpose, and meaningful engagement with their schools and communities.

Measured Skill Development

- Increased confidence and self-esteem
- Improved communication and teamwork
- Stronger problem-solving and creativity
- Greater resilience and perseverance

Enhanced Personal Growth

- Growth in independence
- Improved public speaking skills
- Increased pupil voice and agency
- Stronger sense of purpose and contribution

Wellbeing and Engagement

- Improved social-emotional wellbeing
- Higher levels of engagement in learning
- Greater readiness to participate in school life

Effective for SEND and SEMH Pupils

- Tailored approach meets individual needs
- Structured reflection supports emotional development
- Builds protective factors that underpin academic progress

Sustainable Whole-School Impact

- Embeddable within the curriculum
- Strengthens inclusive school culture
- Scalable through staff training and consultancy support



