

## **Gallions Primary School**

Play school

From statistical blip to beacon of best practice, Gallions Primary School is using string teaching to make a real difference. Andrew Stewart is impressed.

Tales of greedy bankers and predictions of economic Armageddon should suffice to depress us all, even the sorry few who still believe in the free market's powers of correction. If not, there are at least another dozen headline grabbers, from catastrophic climate change to dementia, ready to darken the national mood. Good news stories are in pitifully short supply at present. Those that do exist, though, demand to be told, not buried. Gallions Primary School, its enlightened music programme and transforming achievements, amount to one of the most heartening stories I have covered in over 20 years as a journalist. It is one of the hardest to write about, too, not least because of the need to remain objective about an educational project of such clear significance.

There is something so right about the feel of what is happening here, so fundamentally sound, that it is hard not to become emotionally involved. Fortunately, hard facts offer a clearer snapshot of what Gallions is about than free opinions. The school opened in September 1999, newly built, smartly designed and spacious, on the Winsor Park Estate, Beckton. The surrounding area, framed by roads connecting Docklands and City Airport with main transport arteries and the eastern extension of Docklands Light Railway, was developed by the London Borough of Newham on waste ground in the late 1980s. This is not, it is fair to say, the part of Docklands favoured by boom-time money and private sector regeneration.

Social housing accounts for around 95% of the estates homes. Long-term unemployment and crime statistics remain stubbornly high, despite local authority attempts to alleviate their causes. Around 38% of children attending Gallions Primary School qualify for free school meals, set against a national average of 16.8%; 29% of pupils are recognized as having special educational needs (Newham's SEN average is presently set at 18.3% per school); 30 different languages are spoken by Gallion's ethnically diverse mix of pupils and staff, and 68% of the school's children speak English as a second or additional language.

Bernadette Thompson arrived as the school's first headteacher determined to use the creative arts as a pedagogical driving force. Her teaching ideas and strategy developed to realize them were challenged by many, local.

politicians and parents among them. Art, dance, drama and music looked like flimsy tools for dealing with the problems, many of them linked to so-called challenging behaviour, of children from one of Britain's most deprived areas. Thompson held her nerve, introduced music training for every child in the school, and established a workforce of teaching and ancillary staff committed to turning vision into reality.

Since the spring of 2002, the school's string programme has delivered instrumental tuition to all children from six to 11 years of age. Paul Jackson, who joined the school when it opened and became headteacher in January 2007, takes up the Gallions story. 'We knew we needed to do something different,' he recalls, 'something to capture imaginations and get the children more engaged with school.' Although dance, drama and art underpin the teaching of foundation subjects at Gallions, the school uses music as its most comprehensive educational ally.

Musicianship underpins the music programme at Gallions. Children from nursery classes to Year 6 are taught vital basic skills through a Kodály-based, child-centred approach. Nursery pupils are taught the basics of the Kodály Method from their earliest reception classes and are later introduced to staff notation. The Gallions string programme, based on the effective Colourstrings system, builds on these foundations and further develops musicianship through the experience of playing a string instrument. Many class teachers and support staff learn to play alongside pupils, effectively promoting music's natural place within the school day and curriculum.

Pump-priming sponsorship and subsequent donations from financial services firm JP Morgan has paid for a fleet of violins, violas, cellos and double-basses, not yet large enough to supply one instrument for every child, although more than adequate for the needs of daily classes. Strings were chosen because of the affordability of entry-level instruments and also because of their suitability for use by a classroom group. The Colourstrings approach, developed in Hungary and Finland in the 1970s by Géza Szilvay, connects with and builds upon each child's early experience of the Kodály approach. The mix of singing and playing at Gallions fosters the sustained development of musical skills from the school's nursery classes to Year 6 cohort.

'The vision was very strong here from the start,' Paul Jackson says. 'Once people began to see successful results, they wanted us to continue. But that was not the case at the beginning. There was the sense that, "You can't do that with inner city children – you can't do that with ethnic minorities." Well, yes we can! This is where music and the creative arts

make the biggest impact. Ours is a different approach, but it's a very effective approach. Government began talking more about creativity in schools around 2002, by which time we'd been going for several years. What we did was challenging in the early stages and had its critics, but the difference it has made has been phenomenal.'

Unconventional as the school's music programme at first appeared, it soon proved effective in measurable ways. Behaviour, concentration and attendance noticeably improved, even among the most challenging of children; academic results, meanwhile, have far exceeded expectations for an inner-city primary. The school has developed an ethos of work, aspiration and achievement that thoroughly contradicts emotive political representations of 'Broken Britain' and its feckless youngsters. Staff absenteeism, high on Ofsted's list of state school problems, is strikingly rare at Gallions, especially so among visiting music teachers. The school's impressive staff retention figures likewise contrast sharply with those posted by comparable schools in the Newham area.

'This is the school I wish I'd gone to,' says Paul Jackson. 'My own school experience certainly wasn't like this.' Are there other primary schools like Gallions, using music and the arts across the curriculum? Perhaps, says the headteacher. But he knows of nowhere else that uses the arts as such a fundamental part of teaching. 'Every child should have access to something special like this,' he continues. 'It doesn't have to be led by music: it could be sport, IT, science. But it has to be special and part of everyday school life. Of course this isn't what would normally happen, but it doesn't have to be!' He adds that the school's music programme has already reached out into the community, attracting parents to regular lunchtime concerts by children and generally bringing local people closer together. 'This school could be anywhere,' says Jackson. The fact that it is on the edge of Winsor Park Estate, not Windsor Great Park, is what makes Gallions Primary School so special.

I visit the school on a bright late February morning. The surrounding estate is quiet and appears well maintained, certainly better looking than older council housing developments in nearby Plaistow or Silvertown. Does the place really deserve its rough reputation? Paul Jackson, whose family is East End born and bred, is not one to talk up the bad at good's expense. But he is certain that things beyond the school gates could be better. The headteacher illustrates the matter with a chilling anecdote. 'We went on to the estate to post leaflets and found it was very difficult, almost impossible to get them through letterboxes in many places.' When he asked why it was so hard to post a letter, he was told it was because houses had been given special protection against firebombs. The school's

emphasis on respect, both for the individual and the community, genuinely matters in this place!

'I'm not saying we have no behaviour issues, because we have, or no problems, because there are. Any school that says it has no problems is probably lying! But there's a calm atmosphere here and a real feeling of community.' Jackson notes that the school's music programme has not been pursued at the expense of core academic subjects; rather, the former has been used to reinforce the latter. I saw music lessons ongoing in three classes, Friday morning mathematics in two others, and a supervised session in the school's IT area. I also saw the intensity of concentration and constructive work being done by children who might elsewhere be allowed to run riot. In short, singing and string playing have become as natural as any other school activity at Gallions and, judged on strong first impressions, appear to be more enjoyed than most.

Tasmin Little, who agreed to become patron of Gallions Music Trust at its launch last April, suggests that its music programme amounts to a school-wide version of Venezuela's El Sistema. 'It's a wonderful, wonderful idea,' she says. The violinist speaks eloquently about music's role in providing Gallions children with an outlet for their creativity and a source of individual and collective confidence. 'The fact that there's no truancy and hardly any absenteeism there says everything to me.' During my visit, one of the classes performed a jointly composed song about the physical properties of materials, clear of diction, rhythmically secure and without trace of fear. 'What they're doing,' Little observes, 'shows the effect music can have not just on the children but on the whole community.'

At present, the school receives an annual budget of £1.9m. After deducting staff salaries from the balance sheet's expenditure side, Gallions is left with around £200,000 to cover everything from essential equipment costs to building maintenance. Paul Jackson explains that, thanks to the knowledge and expertise accrued by Gallions staff, the school is able to generate extra income from consultancy placements. Although the revenue source helps offset music programme costs of around £79,000 a year, its bottom-line figures still have to be balanced with fundraising drives, grant applications and appeals for donations. Gallions Music Trust was created last year as a charitable vehicle to raise money and further the school's plans for music.

'Funding is the biggest issue for our music programme, of course,' Jackson observes. 'What we achieve is excellent. But I believe there's still a lot of development potential here. The more money the trust raises, the more we can achieve. We worry about what happens to the children when they

leave us. Will they continue with music at secondary school?' The questions hangs momentarily until the head points to a plot of school land that might yet be developed as an arts-led faculty for secondary pupils. The board of governors, he explains, is already considering the feasibility of building a dedicated music block that could also house Saturday morning music classes, community choirs and orchestras.

'We can see what the children are like here and want to see their good citizenship continue beyond this place.' Jackson's analysis is backed by the experience of instilling order and clear rules within his school. A school uniform policy applies and staff are expected to be smartly dressed; shouting and running are reserved for play breaks, and well-maintained school buildings are decorated with student art works of impressive quality. 'We know this can all be passed on to our children's children and become part of a wider cycle of improvement here. I see how we can create a ripple effect through the music programme and our teaching, watch it move out into the community and make a lasting difference.'

The music programme and arts components of the Gallions curriculum are not optional extras. The school expects children to play, just as it expects them to learn multiplication or English. Music is clearly powerless to solve every urban social problem or create model citizens. It is equally clear, though, that the Gallions music programme has made its mark on the local community and is set to achieve a lot more over the coming years. The school is currently seeking partner organizations within the music world to help develop its activities. It is also eager to share its experience with other schools and educationalists.

'Every child should be entitled to this chance,' says Paul Jackson. 'We want to get the message across that what we're doing works. You couldn't impose the model we're developing elsewhere, but you certainly could transfer the elements of good practice to any school in the country. We're happy to work with other schools to show how we got from where we were, as a challenging school, to where we are now and want to be in the future. We're a very good school, possibly an excellent school, and have been judged to be outstanding by Ofsted. But we have a long way to go. That's the really exciting thing, the biggest story about this place. We believe we can get to that next level and beyond.' Gallions Primary School's string playing, singing children, I suspect, are not going to accept anything less.

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