

PLACING PERFORMANCE AT THE HEART OF THE SCHOOL

SCHOOL 21

LONDON BOROUGH OF NEWHAM

ABOUT OUR SCHOOL

School 21 is a new state-funded, free school based in Stratford for 4 to 18 year olds. Established in 2012, it is completing its first year of operation and is already heavily oversubscribed for next year. Currently, it offers Year 7 and Reception classes. For 2013-14, Year 8 class and Year 1 class will be offered. The school takes children from the immediate vicinity. Fifty percent of the children are on free school meals and there are 25 different nationalities in the school. The school is currently housed in a pre-fabricated building but plans for a new school building, adjacent to the site, are well on the way.

The vision for our new school was realised through a founding group of three having similar ideas and views. In addition to setting up a school in a challenging area, we had a vision to challenge ideas around schooling and develop a new school model; one that is genuinely innovative and open to change. We believe in an approach to learning that is linked to learning objectives in a flexible environment; children work both together and independently. We believe in smaller schools; we are currently 75 in each year. We want to be small, flexible and interdependent, reflecting important aspects of the real world children will be moving into. We also believe in authentic assessment – things that demonstrate an output, work that involves children presenting to or perhaps even teaching their parents, school governors and members of the local community.

We're interested in work that links learning to the real world in a meaningful way. We have six



attributes: grit, spark, professionalism, craftsmanship, eloquence and expertise, and the opportunities to master these qualities are threaded through the curriculum.

Above all else we want to be a place where the spark of creativity and innovation is fostered in every child.

OUR APPROACH TO ARTS AND CULTURE

At the centre of our school is drama and oracy (speaking). We want our children to find their voice.

Instead of lining up students in rows in assemblies, we have them standing in a circle. Our assemblies become a forum for performance, speech, collaboration and team work. They are the engine of everything we do: developing the whole child, enhancing each child's well-being.

School 21 possesses two attributes that enable greater cultural engagement; we are small and flexible and we are not tied to the curriculum in

the way others schools are.

The school's approach to increasing engagement in arts and culture includes employing specialists, project based learning, and utilising drama to support teaching and learning and ensure aspects of wellbeing.

For secondary level, we were able to choose six subject specialist teachers and this year, our first, we have made a very conscious choice for Maths, English, Science, Drama and Arts and PE and Dance specialists. This mix of subject specialists ensures that there is an inherent focus on the arts within the school as well as the other core subjects such as English (our specialism), Maths and Science.



We thought recruiting an Art and a Drama teacher was important as they could work with the other disciplines in obvious ways and so when we started to get the teachers collaborating we could quickly combine such subjects as sciences and the arts or drama and English. For next academic year, we will recruit more Humanities and other subject teachers but the balance will still have a strong arts weighting.

Drama is a strong feature within a school day, and there are regular opportunities for students to act out roles, perform and talk in public. Every teacher is taught different pedagogies including a whole day on how to use drama in subjects, taking the children into the role and other techniques.

We put a great emphasis on speaking. We have a dedicated weekly 'oracy hour' in the curriculum and have developed a culture where everyone speaks in front of the class or at other events. For example, all the children did a TED type talk of 4-5 minutes each without notes and then children voted amongst themselves as to who gave the best performance. Twelve presented to the community on various matters important to them.

FEATURED PROJECT

Drama and Wellbeing

School 21 appreciates the importance of pupil wellbeing, believing that children will do well at school if their wellbeing is taken care of. The school incorporates play writing and drama techniques such as 'dramatic immersion' to get the children excited about different subjects and help their sense of belief and wellbeing – that they can do it.

At secondary level, the mechanism that drives wellbeing is through coaching groups. The 75 pupils are split into groupings of 12 or 13, each with their own 'coach'. In the first two weeks of term the group, which includes the children and the coach themselves, spend time getting to know each other, their respective backgrounds and what has happened in their lives. This is a bonding experience and at the end of the two week period the groups create a play, which is then presented to the rest of the school, the parents and the community. Drama is used as a link right across the year group of 75. Everyone becomes one big community.

IMPACT

Through using drama children, parents, teachers and community are linked together. As a new school, we had great flexibility but also a great responsibility as a newly established part of the community to create rituals and rite of passage. We use music and drama to do that.

We are very focussed on the authentic end product and a powerful example is in these performances to parents. The children learn that every time they are performing it really means that everyone is involved.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNT

We believe that many schools are failing to truly prepare children for the future environment in which they will have to live. Fifty years ago, a job was really for life and you would concentrate on one aspect of a process but nowadays work is more project focussed, working in teams, requiring a more interdisciplinary way of working and thinking. The teaching needs to reflect that.

We also believe that schools need to get out of the way of the children's spoken communication and not in the way. We recommend placing speaking and oracy as central to the curriculum as numeracy and literacy. Children innately have the ability to talk at a higher level than their writing skills. After two terms of speaking publicly – prepare to be surprised if you put oracy at the centre.

School 21 has now placed performance as part of the DNA of the school and can see the impacts on staff teaching and children's wellbeing. We think schools should consider training teachers of all subjects in various forms of pedagogy. All subject teachers can learn from each other e.g., immersion techniques from Drama, critiquing from Art and discussion from English.

www.school21.org

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Images courtesy of School 21