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One person's response to the literacy problems in inner city schools

Springboard for Children is a literacy charity based in Peckham, south London. Nine years ago, a local resident and committed Christian, Jane Hastings, approached the head of a local primary school and offered her help as a volunteer to support children learning to read. It was not long before she realised the extent of the need within the school and decided to do some training in order to be more effective. With this inner city context in mind she chose to do the Diploma in Specific Learning Difficulties at the Dyslexia Institute.

Once the course was over Jane enlisted the help of a couple of friends who also volunteered their time to help children learn to read. This was the beginning of Springboard for Children. Nine years later Springboard supports 130 children in 6 schools around Peckham with a teaching staff of 26, a mix of trained specialist teachers and volunteers. Peckham is a diverse, multi-cultural area with complex social needs. The school, in which Springboard for children works, reflects these needs. Many of the children have special needs ranging from emotional behavioural disorders and dyslexia to general learning difficulties. Some come from dysfunctional families, some have come as refugees from strife-torn areas of the world, some have missed chunks of schooling whilst others are severely dyslexic. It is within this context that the school has to provide each child with a sound education, which, at times, is a near-impossible task. With the best will in the world, schools in these areas are struggling to cope. What happens to those children who get left behind their peers? Where are the resources required to give them the intense support they need? There are few options available as private tuition is out of the question for most of them.

This is where Springboard steps in as an independent organisation, funded privately, providing an excellent level of support to children within the state system. There is no doubt that, without the intervention of Springboard, many more children would not have had the opportunity to learn to read and write.

Over the years the organisation has grown and developed into a professional provider of literacy support at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice. Volunteers receive in-house introductory training and on-going intense supervision from the trained staff. It is a model that works extremely well.

Children are withdrawn from class for 20 to 45 minute sessions per week on a 1:1 basis. The never-ending debate about pros and cons of withdrawal is not even entered into. These are children who are unable to

access the curriculum, who might even struggle to write their own name. They are in desperate need of someone to take them right back to the beginning and fill in the missing gaps. This is something that cannot be done in the classroom with all its distractions and demands.

The luxury of working with a child individually is something that is cherished, and has become the ethos of the organisation. The tutor is able to build a relationship with the child, becoming the child's mentor and advocate.

Most of the new recruits are trained to use an infant programme called Soundworks, which is a structured, phonic based programme. Almost without fail, children move forward. Progress is carefully monitored and the odd adjustment made to the programme to suit the individual child ensures tangible rewards. Children who have been unable to grasp the alphabetic code finally read their first words independently. Watching the growing confidence of the child, and knowing that you played a part in giving them that boost is extremely satisfying for all those involved.

Older children are put onto our tailor made Junior Programme, which is based on all the familiar principles of teaching dyslexic children. This is a more challenging programme for both tutor and pupil but has also helped children tremendously.

Volunteer recruitment is surprisingly easy. People come from different backgrounds, for different reasons and generally once they have committed for (he first year, they are hooked' Most do not have a teaching background. The reasons they stay are to do with the high level of support they receive for their teaching, the fact that they are able to see the fruits of their labour and the team spirit within the organisation Most of all, they s(ay because of the relationship they have built up with individual children.

Each year Springboard for children recruits two or three full-time volunteers, who are usually gap year students. They support up to 14 children each. Most of the gap year students go on to pastures new after a year; four of (hem, however, have remained, three of whom have gone on to be trained in the field of SPLD, either at the Dyslexia Institute or the Hornsby Centre for Dyslexia. The opportunity for training is offered to those who show aptitude and interest in this type of teaching and this has resulted in a very strong team which continues to grow. The bank of experience represented by the present Springboard team is now tremendous and is drawn on by class teachers, SENCOs and parents.

Every term parents are invited to an open afternoon to meet with their child's tutor and discuss their progress at Springboard. They can look at the materials used and also find out about the ways in which they can help their child at home. Parents and carers are welcome to come in at any time to see their child's tutor and some have even come in to observe their child's lesson. Many parents have said how much they appreciate the work that Springboard does and comment on the change they have noticed in their child at home. Liasing with parents is not always easy, given the social circumstances of

some of the families, but it is an area that is considered vital and worth persevering to improve that communication.

Springboard's impact has gone beyond the area of 1:1 literacy support although that remains the essence of our work. A pilot scheme has been set up to see whether a similar model can be used for numeracy tuition and this is looking very promising. In recent years Soundworks has been introduced into (the Year 1 classrooms for small group work. Springboard school co-ordinators have begun the training of classroom assistants in order for these groups to take place.

In one primary school a selection of year 6 children were given a chance to develop their learning skills in two after school clubs set up and run by Springboard. Children were able to discuss issues that affected them, such as being allowed out for lunch, at the after school debate club. The after school study skills club introduced the children to note taking, key words, mind mapping and creative ways of memorising facts.

Each year Springboard arranges 2 official trips for the children to spend a day in the country. For many children this might be their very first time to venture out of south London. It is a huge highlight for them and an opportunity to get to know one's children in a more relaxed way. Throughout the year individual tutors take time to arrange informal outings to local museums, parks, cinema or Macdonalds. Many have reported that this interaction has greatly improved motivation and confidence within the lessons.

Funding is an ongoing battle. The schools pay a small proportion of the cost; the rest of the running costs have to be obtained through individual donors, business and charitable trusts. It is immensely gratifying when people acknowledge the value of this work by providing support, thus acknowledging the importance of these individual children.

Springboard for children is unique in many ways. It is a well-resourced organisation providing a high standard of individual support within the school. It is a visionary and creative response to the ever-increasing needs of schools unable to cope with the high number of special needs. No matter how many new government initiatives are taken to address some of these issues, it will never be enough. It is exciting to see that individuals and big business are prepared to invest in the future of children who would otherwise have no chance at all. It is about raising the expectations of children in our inner cities and ultimately it is about hope. Hard work at times and certainly painstaking but as anyone will testify who has seen the look on a child's face, when they have finally grasped the point of it all after years of failure, it is most rewarding and satisfying. Standardised tests are carried out regularly but success is measured by the personal testimonies of the many children who have passed through our hands. In the words of one 8 year old as she triumphantly read her first CVC words after many, many lessons: 'Look, I am just getting cleverer and cleverer!'

Springboard for children is the response of one person to the enormous need for better teaching of literacy and awareness of dyslexia in inner-city schools, and what long lasting effects it has had. Jane Hastings, having toiled her way through the Diploma course, really found a way to spread her vision for literacy. It is a model that surely can be replicated in other parts of London and in the UK.

Alison McMurtrie and Claire Tripp

Alison McMurtrie is a school co-ordinator for Springboard for Children and a supply teacher for the London DI
Claire Tripp is a Springboard volunteer tutor.

For further information about Springboard for children contact: 132 Friary Road, London, SE15 5UW Tel. 02076356797 [wwwspringboard.org.uk](http://www.springboard.org.uk)
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