

Telegraph magazine

26 January 2002

Great Leap Forward

Middle-class volunteers used to be dismissed as do-gooders but now the school that Damilola Taylor attended in south London welcomes them with open arms. Robert Chesshyre reports on Springboard, the charity helping to teach children that most basic skill of reading.

A small boy fidgets at a desk, tapping his face and rapping his forehead with his pencil. Beside him a teacher explains the task in hand: to write to the council asking for cycle lanes in his neighbourhood. The boy, aged 11, wriggles some more as he is instructed in the correct manner of formal address - 'Dear Sir or Madam...' - and told how to sign off with 'Yours faithfully...'

There are four 'work stations' in the room, self-contained areas with space for one child and a teacher. The walls are brightly decorated with illustrated poems and posters of people such as Albert Einstein and the architect Richard Rogers, who succeeded despite having had difficulty learning to read. A child at a computer matches words that rhyme, and each time she gets one right, she zaps another monster in a spooky castle.

Finally the boy grips his pencil tightly, lowers his head and, concentrating intently, writes notes for the letter. His teacher will later enter these on a word processor, and the boy will complete the letter at his next lesson. 'There are no cycling lanes in are town and cann we please have some... childrens are getting knock over... and people that had to get to work are been late...'

Taking the boy's efforts at face value, a casual observer would be shocked that a child on the verge of secondary school could do no better. But, when one knows a little of this boy's traumatic short life, one's opinion soon changes.

Olu arrived in Britain from Nigeria in November 1998, aged eight. He lost a hand in a car accident, and because of his handicap was rejected by his parents and sent to live with an uncle and aunt in Peckham, south London. A few months later, the uncle and aunt returned to Nigeria. They gave Olu the address of other relations and put him on a bus with a one-way fare. Some days later, his teachers noticed that he was looking even more 'scraggy' and dirty than usual. The new relations had also rejected him, and he had been sleeping rough in an underground car park, getting himself to school every morning. 'Please,' he asked his head teacher, 'can you find me a family who will love me?'

Olu goes to Oliver Goldsmith, a large primary school with nearly 600 children in Peckham, which was also attended by another Nigerian boy of the same age: Damilola Taylor, whose murder last winter on the nearby North Peckham Estate shocked the nation. Damilola and Olu were in the same class, and it doesn't require much imagination to realise that, when Olu was sleeping rough, he might easily have met a similar fate.

When he arrived, his reading and spelling ages were 18 months below his real age. He was placed with Springboard for Children, an educational charity based at Oliver Goldsmith, which takes children with special needs out of class twice a week for one-to-one tuition. In two years his reading has leapt ahead, improving by four-and-a-half years, and is now above his actual age. However, his spelling and writing still lag, and are now two years below his age. He lives happily in a foster home (his parents won't allow him to be adopted).

Springboard, founded at Oliver Goldsmith eight years ago, provides specialist tuition for children with literacy difficulties in seven Peckham schools. It has grown from the solo efforts of one concerned woman looking to make a contribution in the inner city, to an organisation of 10 paid staff and 18 volunteers tutoring 160 children. The demand is so great that Oliver Goldsmith alone would dearly love to send twice the 80 children Springboard now takes from the school.

Despite the huge post-war investment in the inner city, the quality of life for those who live there is, if anything, still declining. The key to Springboard is that, within this landscape of disadvantage, it has isolated one vital area and set itself achievable goals. Twenty years ago its tutors would have been derided as middle-class 'do-gooders'; today Oliver Goldsmith's teachers welcome its highly motivated volunteers with open arms.

Springboard was the inspiration of Jane Hastings, who moved from west London to Peckham in 1992, propelled by her Christian faith to do something to improve the life of an impoverished area. She and her husband, Mike (then a TV reporter and now a BBC executive, chairman of Crime Concern and a member of the Commission for Racial Equality), came to live in Peckham as part of a church group of five like-minded couples. Jane had no plan of action but, listening to parents, she found that education was by far the most discussed issue.

A friend did a stint as a supply teacher at Oliver Goldsmith, and reported that then the school couldn't even get supply teachers. 'It is,' said the friend, 'almost impossibly difficult to work there.' Jane Hastings decided, 'That's where I want to be.' With no qualifications beyond having helped her own daughter to read and write, she approached the head. 'Have you any children I could help to read?' He laughed hollowly. 'Take your pick. You can have half the school.'

She researched special-needs teaching and discovered two things: that she was an instinctive teacher and that she would require both training and volunteers if she was to make an impact. Teachers usually guard their patch jealously, but they rapidly appreciated that Hastings was no fly-by-night Lady Bountiful and that the children she helped made real progress, greatly relieving their own classroom burdens. She studied at the Dyslexia Institute, and decided 'It is amazing how I felt when a child made a bit of progress. All those times when he had been naughty and thrown his pen to the floor didn't matter if at the end he could read and write' that a phonics-based teaching system was the most effective. Any child without an utterly disabling handicap, she believes, can learn the basics of reading and writing so long as a structured, coherent, multi-sensory and, above all, repetitive technique is employed. A child must never move on until he has mastered what he is doing. She also hit on a cost-effective formula by which trained amateurs could work alongside paid professionals.

She attended St Michael's Church, Chester Square, in the heart of Belgravia. Her first recruiting ploy was to stand up after morning service and ask for volunteers. They had to be prepared to commit themselves to two teaching sessions a week for at least a year. So what her husband described as 'bespectacled and bepearled' ladies began a twice-weekly odyssey south of the Thames into Peckham. Two years after her first lone foray into Oliver Goldsmith, Springboard was born. Today, most staff and volunteers live in Peckham.

At the top of three stiff flights of stairs, a visitor is greeted with a notice: 'Books are magic', Past the door, they find themselves in what was the school caretaker's flat, now transformed into the Springboard learning centre high above the Oliver Goldsmith playground. From the window, children skipping in front of the red brick Victorian building or chasing footballs across the asphalt look like tiny LS Lowry figures. St Paul's cathedral and the towers of the City are visible in the distance.

Up and down these stairs every 40 minutes or so pass the Springboard teachers, fetching and returning their pupils. The teachers are mainly white and female and the children predominantly black and of both sexes. Only one in 10 Oliver Goldsmith children is 'ESW' (English, Scottish, Welsh): the code for native white.

Thirty-five different first languages are spoken in the school; the list in the head teacher's office includes Ibo, Urdu, Russian, Spanish and Swahili. Although pupils are assigned to Springboard only once they have mastered English, many inevitably have added difficulties because of language and cultural barriers.

Ideally, Springboard would like to get children in their first two years of schooling. But, with the high rate of inner-city mobility (the turnover at Oliver Goldsmith is 25 per cent a year), many children start, like Olu, far later. Although Springboard does not exist to provide pastoral care, its staff pick up on pupils' problems.

They organise trips and take children to their own homes; they might enrol them in the public library or take them to hospital appointments. The caretaker's flat is by way of a haven.

A Springboard teacher, travelling with two children by bus across London, discovers that they have never heard of (and therefore do not recognise) either Trafalgar Square or the London Eye, and cannot name the Thames, which flows a mile from their homes. At a city farm, another child is terrified of the sheep, fearing that they are wild, dangerous beasts. A child I watch does not know that wool comes from sheep.

Mark Parsons, head teacher at Oliver Goldsmith, says, 'Most schools are saying that, in areas like this, children are arriving with less competence and less support from home than they were. Our baseline on entry is very low.' Jenny Thomson, a speech therapist, adds, 'A child needs adults around him using difficult words and explaining what they mean. If you show some children a vegetable, they can't name it because they have never eaten it.'

One third of Oliver Goldsmith pupils are classified as having special needs, but Parsons believes that the true figure is probably nearer half. Many, like Olu, have great stress in their lives. One boy has witnessed his sisters being sexually abused; the homes of others are torn apart by domestic violence; at one lesson, a seven-year-old girl tells a teacher who won't let her look out of the window, 'I'll put you in the cupboard until you are dead.' A boy is sitting on the steps crying. His mother, he says, has just gone to jail.

At a lesson just before lunch, another boy who has been flagging announces that he has had nothing to eat that day. Even Mother's and Father's Days have, in the context of children in care and single-parent families, to be handled with tact. An Oliver Goldsmith teacher explains, 'We use terms like "the female or male person who looks after you at home".'

Sam Graves, a teacher, tells of going home with an eight-year-old who lives at the top of a grotty tower block. The boy, she says, sensed her nervousness: 'It's OK round here, Miss. I know all these people.' When they reached the lift, which smelt of urine, again he detected her anxiety. 'We can walk up the stairs if you like,' he reassured her. When they finally reached the flat, the boy surveyed the view across London and announced, 'Up here I feel like I'm king of the world.'

Springboard staff derive huge pleasure from their pupils' progress. Kate Holder, a graduate who spent a gap year working at Springboard, says, 'It is amazing how I felt when a child made a tiny bit of progress. All those times when he had been naughty and thrown his pen to the floor didn't matter if at the end he was able to read and write up to standard and to survive in secondary school. It was a humbling experience' Several volunteers tell me how rewarding it is to hear from teachers that their pupils are, for the first time, shooting their hands up in class, eager to contribute.

In Peckham, social disadvantage holds pupils back, but another main reason -as with children everywhere - is dyslexia. It is a slippery concept, in the past dismissed as an excuse for parents whose children struggled academically. But it is real enough, and best understood as a spectrum of disconnections in the brain which make it difficult for a child to translate what he is thinking into written (and sometimes spoken) form.

Most Springboard staff take courses in teaching dyslexic pupils. But they rely also on the proven concept of constant encouragement. The self-esteem of Springboard pupils is fragile, and, by way of compensation, their exercise books are festooned with stars and stickers -the power of a simple sticker to make a child feel a winner amazes me.

Success reduces frustration and improves behaviour. Even when a child is suspended from the main school, he is allowed (and encouraged) to attend his Springboard sessions. Mrs Graves tells of an eight-year-old who used to be picked on and called names: 'He was verbally slow, and when he was upset, he would lose control of his jaw muscles and lash out. He was not an aggressive child, but had no other way of responding to his tormentors. Attending Springboard saved him from permanent exclusion.'

The reputation of Springboard is so positive that few children regard going there as a stigma. Pupils regularly hang around the door asking whether they too can join. Olu tells me, 'I get to talk to my

Springboard teacher about what's bugging me, about when people annoy me and I get into trouble. It calms me down. Springboard teaches me good stuff - history, reading and everything. And I get to use the computer.'

Both school and Springboard seek to involve parents as much as possible. Carol Tinteloo's family is one short of a football team- 'I have been pushing a pram for 24 years,' she says. The first five (now in their late teens and early 20s) are illiterate. but the next four have been Springboard pupils (Mrs Tinteloo is nursing number 10, aged three, when we meet; his leg is broken -the TV fell on it). One daughter finished school without anyone knowing -until the very last lap -that she could not read. 'Teachers said that she was a lovely girl getting on fine.'

Kylie, the first to go to Springboard and now at secondary school, is the family star. According to her mother, her older siblings suffered because, once they had fallen behind, they sank without trace in large classes. Carol Tinteloo herself attended a course for parents of children with reading difficulties. She says it taught her greater patience. 'I used to shout at the kids- "Do this, do that". I could read to them, but, if they didn't listen, I'd throw the book away. I know now that they can't all learn the same.' She has started reading- 'two to three books every week' -to the younger children. The family even has spelling quizzes, though the older children get demoralised by Kylie's proficiency.

Mark Parsons has -by all accounts and by the judgment of Ofsted, the schools inspection agency - transformed Oliver Goldsmith. (One Springboard teacher refers to the pre-Parsons era as 'the dark days'.) His praise for Springboard is unequivocal. 'If it were not here, I don't know what we'd do, and I don't know how other schools in our situation manage without a Springboard.' The school contributes 16 per cent of the cost, but Parsons estimates that it gets back 10 times its outlay. He says, 'Education is a bottomless pit. You could not fund this school to the point at which Springboard would be redundant.'

Like Jane Hastings, most staff are motivated by Christian faith. Several tell me that they had comfortable upbringings and feel that they ought now to 'give something back'. They attend a weekly prayer meeting, but they lean over backwards not to crusade in a school containing children of many faiths. 'Without a missionary spirit, they wouldn't be here. But they don't preach; they get on with teaching literacy,' says Parsons.

Until now, Springboard's income has come mainly from corporate donations, but these tend to be one-off and therefore uncertain, and the charity has launched a 'Friends' scheme aimed at individuals. Fundraising is hard. Some potential donors argue that it ought to be the state's (and not a charity's) responsibility to teach children to read and write, and in a secular society, religious motivation, however much it is soft-pedalled, deters others.

A major Springboard strength is its intimate size, which it would lose if it grew. But the need it addresses in one small corner of London is common to all large cities, and the trustees are exploring ways to 'franchise' the model. Schools in Lambeth and Sheffield are set to follow suit next year. As Parsons says, 'It would be great if all schools of this nature could have a Springboard.'

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