

‘Truly amazing’ journey of a unique school

Dallington School in central London turned 35 years old in 2013. Founder and headteacher Mogg Hercules explains the ethos of a school that ‘helps make lovely adults’

Thirty-five years is not a long time in the life of a school but, from the time Dallington opened to pupils in 1978, it has provided confirmation that, on the whole, we have achieved what we set out to achieve and remained true to the reasons for founding our school.

Thirty-five years has allowed our children to grow into adults, have children and then return to us to place their children in our care and include them in activities and experiences, about which their parents still hold such vivid memories. When I say to visitors, looking around Dallington, that we help to make lovely adults, I can say this with absolute confidence that it is true! We feel privileged to have the opportunity to share the gossip with ex-pupils who ‘just happened to be passing by and wanted to call in’.



Most visitors to Dallington tend to ask either my reasons for founding the school, or for an explanation of our ethos. Others comment on the creativity of the children, then question whether there is a greater focus on the arts than on academic subjects, as though they were mutually exclusive!

Dallington is genuinely non-selective. We have ‘high-fliers’ and children who will need ongoing support. A commitment to inclusivity requires a school to be open and friendly, where a child feels nurtured, in an environment that is adaptable to changing needs. A child has to be acknowledged as an individual, but also to understand that, as an individual within a group, mutual respect is only one requirement.

Our expectation is for every child to understand the part it has to play in its learning. We know our children really well and we encourage them to know themselves. The relationships between the staff and the children are informal, but considerate. First names are used and we do not have a school uniform, apart from T-shirts, book bags and fleeces, for example, which have our school logo.

We want children to enjoy their childhood, develop a love of learning, independence of thought and retain their individuality. We want children to go home and enthuse about their day’s activities, then share their new knowledge and interests with adults who listen and become involved. Of course, in an ideal world, this communication would have the power to enhance the child’s experiences and further include our extended community, such as parents and carers, in the day’s events at school.

This is a highly-competitive world and, although we value the diversity of childhood experiences, our children have to be aware of the requirements necessary, to be awarded a place in their next school. Quite often this is the first time that our children have been in open competition with each other and, with the current ratio of candidates to available places, particularly in London, they have to understand that receiving schools may well use different criteria for entry and select their intake accordingly. It is so rewarding to know that our children do well. They have always been offered the school of their choice and transfer happily and productively, accepting any differences, adapting to the changes and welcoming the challenges of new experiences. We know this, because they come back to tell us! The children who have been with us for eight years have built lasting friendships with their peers and a visit, from just one ex-Dallington young person, always includes the ‘low-down’ on how their friends are getting on.



Thirty-five years ago, the children came to us, once they had turned three, with an extensive repertoire of nursery rhymes and songs. They were familiar with traditional tales and used many phrases from these in their imaginative role play. They could count, knew the names of colours and they could dress and undress themselves for gym! They could also be responsible for their personal hygiene and the wet knickers usually happened when they were too engrossed in what they were doing to interrupt their activity. Our building has five floors, but young children used to manage the stairs with ease. They had good muscle tone and fine manual dexterity. They could sit together, calmly listen to a story, retain then re-tell the storyline. Gym and dance sessions confirmed the children's physical stamina!

Have children changed over the years? I am sure that many are aware of the controversy surrounding this question. The media has presented arguments both for and against. If children have not changed, then just what has changed in their lives? Is it because, in this economic climate, most adults have to go to work? Is it because the traditional nuclear family has excluded the diversity of today's family units? Is it

because we have become a more risk-averse society, warning our children that if they run around like that, they will fall and hurt themselves? Is it because children are pushed around in buggies, rather than being encouraged to walk? Is it because 'the screen' has become a childminder to a passive onlooker? Is it quicker to dress and undress our children, rather than spend the time teaching them how to do it? The debate, no doubt, will continue! I do know that parents still want the best for their children and that has not changed. Childhood is so very brief, so we must continue to value that time, listen to our children's ideas and opinions, talk with them and keep intact their optimism and sheer love of life.

When I was presented with the Ted Wragg Lifetime Achievement award (in 2009), it crossed my mind, albeit fleetingly, whether I was expected to throw in the towel, or kick the bucket! As long as I remain passionate about teaching, talking with parents and children, learning something new and interesting from them, I see no point in staying at home!

I set up the school, in the belief that children should be included in their learning, experience and evaluate a rich and varied curriculum, develop self-esteem, an inquisitive mind and not 'be selected' from the age of three. A brave endeavour or a foolhardy venture? It could have been either, but with the help and support from my family, the journey has been truly amazing. I feel privileged to have been a small part in the lives of so many children and included in their rites of passage into lovely adults.

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Jojo Moyes, former pupil

You can learn more at www.dallingtonschool.co.uk. See also page 42

What former pupils say about Dallington School

‘It felt less like going to school than some vast, extended family. We were encouraged to revel in learning, to explore our creativity... Dallington gave me: a place of safety, a love of learning, confidence and friendship.’ Jojo Moyes, former pupil, journalist and writer.

‘Dallington school is like a family, the teachers, your parents and the pupils, your brothers and sisters. There is always pleasure in the air.’ Felix, pupil Year 6

‘Mogg Hercules has created an oasis in the city for the children and their parents alike.’ Esther Gordon, ex-pupil and parent of three Dallington pupils.

‘It was where I learnt to be what I am now. Spontaneous, motivated, erratic and still a little bit naughty ... a charming place that cannot be compared to any other school in the world.’ Emily Allen, former pupil, St. Andrew's University.

Photographs courtesy of David Hews and Peter Marlow