Maryland Primary School

Pupils use Google Chromebooks to create their own on-line publications – an idea we developed from a research trip to Swedish schools

Maryland's Senior Leadership Team from left to right: Anastasia Boreham, DHT; Lorna Jackson, head teacher; Ola Simisaiye, AHT; Darren Lock, DHT

When Lorna Jackson became head of Maryland Primary School in Stratford, East London, in 2001 she faced a huge problem. All the accepted ways of promoting literacy simply did not work and in a number of instances it got to the extent that some pupils were leaving the school age 11 functionally illiterate. Lorna explains how research-based innovative leadership has transformed this and many other aspects of her school.

Despite trying many intervention strategies available at the time, like *Reading Recovery*, Maryland's English reading results remained at a low level, with only around 43% of students attaining level 4 and above aged 11. The local authority responsible for the school – Newham – expected me as a new head to do something about these below par results.

Everyone else I spoke to claimed that one of the established methods worked for them. My research led me to Ruth Miskin who had recently developed her phonic based literacy programme. I visited her school where the system was operational. I knew immediately that this was something new, different and that it could work at Maryland.

Despite working in a failing school with several change-averse staff, I managed to ensure everyone bought into this by getting every teacher and key support staff to visit the school – you don't need to persuade your staff if you enthuse them. Within a year of starting to teach reading using systematic phonics – against the recommendation of our local authority and other head teachers that I spoke to – no more children were leaving our school functionally illiterate.

REPORT CARD MARYLAND PRIMARY SCHOOL

- Head teacher: Lorna Jackson
- Year Founded: 1968
- Location: Gurney Road, Stratford
- Type of School: Local authority maintained school
- No. of students: 458 pupils (520 including nursery) 85% English as a Second Language
- More than 40 nationalities and 60 languages 20 teachers
- www.maryland.newham.sch.uk

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After we began hosting national and international visitors who had come to see how our systematic phonics worked, we became a model school for Read Write Inc – the programme created by Ruth Miskin.

Our phonic screening tests are consistently above the national average (93 per cent in 2017). This is also in a school where more than 85 per cent of the pupils are from a non-English speaking background.

All well conducted research and innovation starts with a simple question. Sometimes you can’t find the answers in schools around you. So if the best isn’t here, you must find it elsewhere. Fortunately the school’s governors were enthusiasts for this research.

Back in 2013, I asked myself, why our pupils lack resilience when they get stuck, making them so dependent on their teachers? Our successful critical thinking initiative resulted from this. Alongside deputy head teacher, Lorraine Cooper, our research led us to visit private schools in the UK, including Eton, and to innovative schools and institutions in Japan. Our resulting publishing venture – branded Ready Steady Think- with an expert in this field and training for staff, has changed the culture in the school. More recently, Growth Mindset – promoting a positive rather than defeatist attitude to problems – is an added element that helps us continue to develop in this area.

Our current longer-term project addresses the question, why are the schools with the highest number of computers not making the progress expected in integrating computing into the curriculum? We had been very impressed with a trial school in Osaka on that research trip because of the skills even very young pupils showed and how creatively their teachers were embedding computing into all areas of learning.

We also looked for the countries in Europe that were succeeding. Sweden was way ahead of the pack and a trip there revealed why. We saw schools in Stockholm where not a single piece of educational software was used. Their philosophy is simple. Use technology as part of the learning process not as entertainment. Our pupils can teach us much about consumption in technology with their gaming skills. If, however, you use all the software that prepares pupils for adult life, and

Children are challenged through questions and encouraged to be ‘critical thinkers’ at every opportunity – a lesson we learned in Japan

Our visit to Finland inspired us to treasure our Library and bookshop, reviving a love for reading real books

as a result they produce writing, use spreadsheets & apps that demonstrate and enhance their learning, then integration is no longer an issue.

Our wE-PUBLISH website – www.marylandwepublish.org – that resulted from the Sweden research, shows what a powerful tool online publishing can be. It successfully motivated some of the most reluctant pupils to begin writing and hopefully developed a passion for writing that they could carry forward. Of course, empowering staff to become the experts is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one. On a development trip to Singapore, we saw exactly the same principles in place there and we have learned much from their practice too. As a result, we are now leading our borough in embedding the Google Education platform, not just in the curriculum, but also in our efforts to become paperless and streamline our systems and communication.

A research based approach enabled us to be wary and question received wisdom. It takes courage (and evidence!) to challenge accepted views and practice. For example, some years back, Finland was hailed as the highest achieving country in maths in Europe. We wanted to understand why to help us address our stalling maths results. On a research trip to Finland with Lorraine Cooper, we found that the international data source constantly quoted to us (PISA) was applicable to 15 year-olds and had no bearing on the success of primary schools, including ours, in the UK. Much of what we were teaching our pupils, was at least a year ahead of Finnish primary schools. However, what we did discover was that arithmetic is the 'hero' of the Finnish curriculum. As a result, Lorraine wrote and published a book for us to provide free to parents to help develop pupils' speed at the maths basics. It has been highly successful and "*Mental Maths 5 a day*" is being adopted by more and more schools, nationally and internationally, to enlist the help of parents. With the impending KS2 times tables tests, such a resource is extremely valuable and remains highly effective.

As we saw in Singapore schools, research and investigation permeates every area of learning, hence the Maryland outdoor lab was developed

Success breeds success and as our track record has built up, it has become easier to enlist the confidence and enthusiasm of staff , governors and also external agencies, in particular to secure additional funding. The wE-PUBLISH initiative resulted in funding from ESA (European Space Agency) to establish the website and an opportunity for our children to share their writing project and meet astronaut, Captain Tim Peake. Our Outdoor learning and sustainability initiative resulted in commendation from horticulturist Alan Titchmarsh, and a 5 star gold award from the RHS for our nature garden, which has been an outstanding resource for science learning for our own pupils and those from other schools who use it.

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