

## **Teach effectively**

### **Descendants Supplementary School National Excellence Awards Shortlisted 2008**

#### **Background**

Descendants supplementary school has come a long way in the last 15 years. From what started as a perceived 'novelty' in a church hall, they have battled through to having their own space at Priory Community Centre in Acton. Margaret Noel, the school's coordinator, decided one day to put together an African and Caribbean day to celebrate black culture. She put together a range of performances, from dancing to songs to art, to promote African and Caribbean culture to the wider community.

After positive noises from the community, she realised that this could work as a long-term project for the local African Caribbean community. And so, Descendants was born. Margaret found teachers, secured premises in a church hall and met with parents and local community leaders to develop the ethos of the school. When they first started, they implemented an arts focus, charging 50p to students for art supplies, hosting visiting poets and teaching traditional African folk dances, amongst other activities.

At present, they have 40 students working in three different age groups (4-7, 8-11 and 12-upwards) and older children working towards an ASDAN qualification. The children help to decide their own activities and have worked on a major fashion project, a film about slavery and plays recalling pivotal events in African and Caribbean history, in the '*hope you can give them confidence*', Margaret says.

#### **Teach effectively**

Descendants School employs an arts-based curriculum to engage the students through their interests and creativity. There is subtle use of maths, English, science, geography and history within their learning, as skills from these subjects are used in projects. Whether it is geography and history through learning about slavery or English through developing poems and plays, the overall message is that teaching these subjects does not have to be so rigid. There are other ways of engaging children. Margaret gives the example of a normally shy boy who had participated in a Descendants project about Africa. He was then asked by his mainstream teacher whether he'd '*swallowed an atlas overnight*' as he was able to answer all her questions about the continent.

By engaging their imaginations, as well as their skills and knowledge, Descendants is able to keep their attendance high and enthusiasm levels even higher. The school's art-based curriculum stems partly from Margaret's own love of the arts, and her daughter's desire to learn African folk-dancing. '*The arts engage all children. You lose them when things are too formal. If you allow them to express themselves, you get the best work out of them. We've been going for so long because they all enjoy it so much*', Margaret explains with pride. The school has become so successful that they were invited to do a performance with Patty Boulaye at Royal Albert Hall.

#### **Challenges and solutions**

Being a voluntary organisation, there is only so much you can get your volunteers to do. Also, holding on to volunteers can be a problem. The way to overcome this is to advertise thoroughly for volunteers and send them on mentoring courses. Encourage parents to volunteer and actively participate in their child's development. Keep up training for volunteers; keep current CRB checks on file. There are a lot of expectations on supplementary schools and occasionally people can let you down. Make them feel part of the project, make them feel valued.

### **Top Tips**

- If you believe in what you do, don't be put off. Seek out people from the government or local authority to help you.
- Publicise the school through newspapers.
- Listen to the children.
- Most importantly, don't be negative. This is what destroys organisations. Everything is possible. You can always do it and a lot can be done with very little.