



Letting bright pupils learn to swim against the stream

Stockwell Park has put its most able students on the grammar pathway to success, writes **Greg Hurst**

A teenage boy calls out across the science laboratory in excitement: "Can't we have a boom lesson?" "It is not going to explode," his chemistry teacher assures him, laughing. Many people would find this comforting; the boy looks disappointed.

Wearing gloves, the teacher, Marilla Wiggins stands for a moment by a glass fume cupboard, using tweezers to extract a small piece of lithium from a bottle of oil.

Placing the dull grey lump of metal on a tile she walks along the work benches, showing it to the expectant class. Then she sets them to work, recording its chemical symbol, appearance and properties and comparing them to sodium and potassium.

Along a corridor and down a flight of stairs, another boy seated at a square table is reading aloud to his class from *Arabian Days and Nights*.

There is real animation in his voice as he recounts a fantastical adventure of Sinbad involving a giant whale that sailors mistook for an island.

Once he has finished, a crop of hands shoots up as their English teacher Grace Anderson, in a firm yet gentle voice, questions the class about the story and its characters.

These children, and others like them at Stockwell Park High School in South London, are lucky. In addition to lessons like these, a host of masterclasses, visiting speakers and educational residential trips are being laid on for them.

They are members of a grammar "stream" introduced this term at the outstanding-rated inner city school to boost their chances of getting to university.

Using the freedom of academy status and £250,000 from the coalition's "pupil premium" of additional funds for children from poor families, the school has devised a new curriculum especially for its brightest pupils.

Most schools group children by ability for individual subjects. A gifted

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mathematician could therefore be in the top set for maths but lower sets for the rest of the timetable. Separating children into ability streams across all academic subjects is more controversial.

What makes Stockwell Park more unusual still is that, like some other schools, it also operates a banded admissions system to ensure that 20 per cent of its students are in the top ability range.

Before arriving, pupils therefore sit two sets of tests: one for the local authority to determine if they are in



Judette Tapper says that her pupils will benefit from working with their peers

the top, middle or lower admissions band and, once offered a place, a second for the school to see if they will join its grammar stream.

This looks like a hybrid form of selection; the school's own test, which children sat in July before being admitted last month, is a verbal reasoning

assessment like the 11-plus used for grammar school entry.

Judette Tapper, the headteacher, is adamant that this is not selection, which is banned by the Government's admissions code.

"We are reversing a situation where there was less emphasis on the bright

children. We are simply trying to give some parity," she says. "They can only do better if they work with their peers."

The school serves a poor area of South London a stone's throw from Stockwell station where Jean Charles de Menezes, a Brazilian electrician, was mistaken for a terrorist and shot dead by police in 2005.

Many pupils arriving aged 11 were so far behind on literacy that ten years ago Ms Tapper introduced a primary-style curriculum: children remained in one classroom and were taught by a single teacher for three quarters of lessons.

She admits the school had to focus on lower-ability children to boost its GCSE results. From 11 per cent achieving a grade C or above in at least five GCSEs including maths and English, the proportion has now risen to 72 per cent of pupils.

The grammar "pathway" will initially provide more in-depth tuition in

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English, maths and science. Its first masterclass will be in genetics; additional activities are organised by the director of admissions Chun yu Lok, who has a PhD in molecular medicine and genetics from the University of Oxford.

More subjects will be introduced later this year, including Latin and Greek — although this is a pragmatic rather than a nostalgic decision: the Stockwell area has a large Portuguese community, whose language draws on classical Latin and ancient Greek.

Grammar stream students are taught academic subjects together but mix with other pupils in all-ability groups for drama, art, technology and physical education. The school's house system also mixes together children of different ages and abilities.

Stockwell Park has no sixth form but wants to give bright students the best preparation for sixth form college or even scholarships to independent schools. And the pupils themselves seem ready to grasp the challenge.

Breno Cancellieri, 14, who is just beginning his GCSEs, says: "I want to be a neurologist. My granddad died from cancer and a lot of neurosurgeons were helping him. I need at least three As or A* in science and maths ... think I will be able to get them."

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