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## How a little extra can go a long way

Supplementary schools providing Saturday classes are giving children the extra skills they need to reach their goals

Sarah Richardson

NAMITA Dey could not be more proud of her 15-year-old son Nirmol, who has just got an A\* in GCSE maths.

"I'm really pleased because he took the exam a year early," she smiles. "He has always done well at school but I felt that he would do better if he had some extra lessons. So when I heard about The Sanaton School, which runs on Saturday mornings, from other local parents I wanted him to go along. And now my eight-year-old Nandita also attends."

Sanaton Saturday School in Bethnal Green is one of 18 supplementary schools run by the think-tank Civitas, in which they seek to help children reach their full academic potential by teaching them essential skills, raising their aspirations and opening up opportunities to give them a better future. Most are in London, in areas including King's Cross, Hammersmith, Camberwell and Kilburn, and two more are due to open this week.

Eleanor Rogerson is the Civitas project director. "We first became involved in supplementary schools when Luke Geoghegan, warden of Toynbee Hall, told us of a group of Hindu Bengali parents who were so concerned about the conditions in local schools that they had tried to start a Saturday school," she says.

"It collapsed after a few months, largely owing to lack of funds to pay the teachers.

"These parents are members of the Sanaton Association which serves the Bengali-speaking Hindu community of greater London by providing education, community work and cultural events. The parents are aspirational, and well aware of the importance of education for their children, but they earn low wages.

"We therefore decided to use donated funds to revive the Saturday classes. We started in January 2005 and have continued ever since."

Mrs Dey credits Nirmol's success and academic ambition to his attendance as these weekly sessions: he now wants to study natural sciences at Cambridge. But not every child who attends these schools is thriving in the classroom.

Eleanor is robust on the topic of why these schools are needed.

"Many primary schools in inner-city areas fail to teach the basics," she says. "On Saturdays and after school hours during weekdays we provide lessons in English and maths for children who have fallen behind. We use a no-frills approach which concentrates on high-quality teaching along traditional lines to enable children to master essential skills quickly. We emphasise small class sizes, reading through synthetic phonics and mental arithmetic.

"We hope and expect that the children will do better at school and find



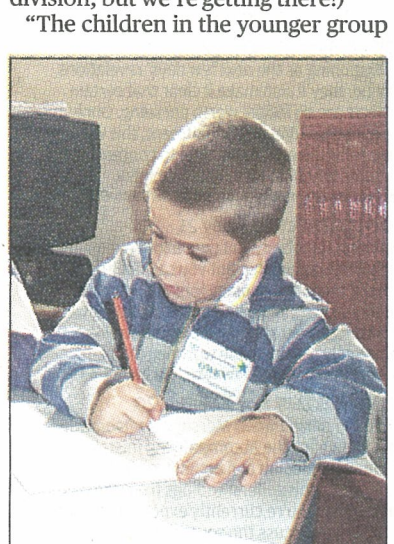
London calling: children from supplementary schools across the capital gather for a trip to Greenwich Observatory as part of their summer school programme

themselves with more options when they join the world of work," she adds. "We regard it as the main aim of education to offer children the prospect of richer and fuller lives, and we hope the classes contribute to that.

"The supplementary classes take place in the heart of communities: in church halls, school and community centres. Most of the children are under-achieving academically, some significantly so, but they are very attentive and eager to learn.

One of the maths teachers at the Wapping Saturday School explains what happens in his lessons: "One of my main aims as a teacher is to convince the students that learning is fun and very rewarding," he says.

"At the Wapping classes we have hit a nice balance between enjoying ourselves and getting down to some serious work. We have been concentrating on the main operations of maths. This includes addition, subtraction and multiplication (we haven't yet reached division, but we're getting there!)"



Helping hand: Owen attends a Hammersmith supplementary school while Ayub is studying at one in King's Cross

are struggling quite significantly," he adds. "However, the group is very well behaved and have started to prove over the past few weeks that they are extremely smart, too.

"Seven-year-old Tanya came into my class working at a very low level, with very little understanding of addition, and no concept of subtraction, multiplication or division. However, I am delighted with her fantastic progress. We're making sure she's fully confident with addition before moving on to subtraction and then eventually to tackle multiplication and division.

"Because the classes are small, I am able to deal very quickly and effectively with any problems individuals may have. Children don't walk away feeling ignored or helpless. In fact, I'd like to believe they walk away inspired and confident."

The supplementary schools are not free, though. "We charge parents between £2 and £4 per session, with a half-price reduction for subsequent children from the same family, to ensure that the classes are accessible

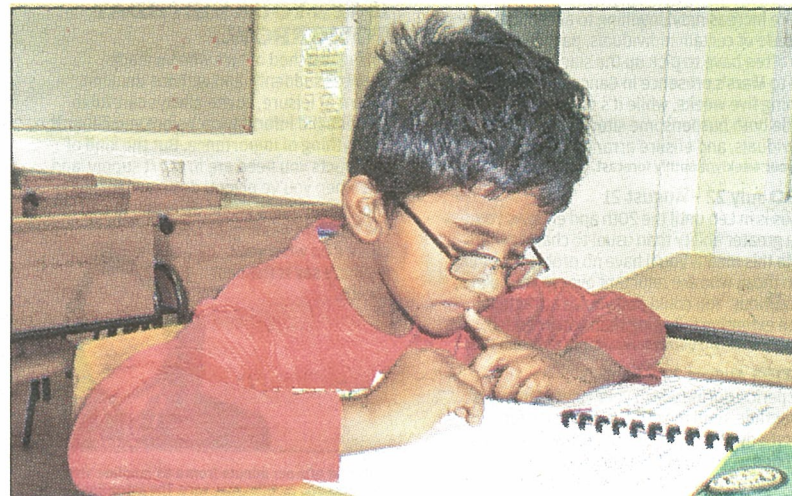
for all," explains Eleanor. "However, these fees cover only a fraction of the costs. We rely on voluntary donations to keep the schools going as we do not accept any funding from the Government in order to preserve our complete independence. The demand for supplementary schools is virtually limitless."

Currently the projects provide for more than 400 children a week.

Because there is a limit to what can be achieved in two or three hours, once a week, Civitas also run holiday schools. Mornings are given over to English language, literature and comprehension and arithmetic. Afternoons are taken up with a programme of cultural activities.

The main summer school this year was in Wapping for two weeks in August.

"The children in the youngest group showed an average increase of one year and seven months in their reading ages," says Eleanor. "We took an outing to the Natural History Museum, who put on a day of activities for us under



their community outreach programme.

"We use the University of Durham's InCAS test to measure improvement in each child's academic standards over the course of a year," she adds. "In July 2009 a group of eight children at our King's Cross centre took the test for the second time – one year since their first test. The average improvement in their 'English age' was two years and four months, in just one calendar year."

Eleanor believes there is nothing magical about how these results are achieved.

"They entail good, committed teachers who turn up, week after week, often improvising makeshift classrooms in community centres, to teach the children the rudiments of literacy and numeracy," she says.

"The effect of the supplementary schools on the lives of the children is noticeable in the short term, and in the long term it is incalculable. We are delighted by the results we see at the classes. As well as helping to boost the knowledge, skills and opportunities for all the pupils, there are individual children who make such drastic progress at the classes that it gives them a whole new outlook on education."

Civitas is looking to recruit both class teachers and support assistants for its supplementary schools. Successful applicants will have experience of teaching primary-aged children and the roles include planning and delivering high-quality lessons using traditional teaching methods, preparing the classroom for lessons, writing end-of-term reports and providing regular updates for the project director.

For more information, visit [www.civitas.org.uk](http://www.civitas.org.uk)

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