Rigid discipline and academic rigour are helping to transform the lives of students at a school in an area scarred by deprivation and gang violence. **Caroline Scott** visits the academy where pupils sign a pledge to behave. Photographs by **Maximiliano Braun**

BLUEPRINT FOR THE FUTURE

Evelyn Grace Academy in Brixton, south London, was designed by Zaha Hadid

It is morning assembly at Evelyn Grace Academy in Brixton, south London, and 12-year-old Maha Salem is reading out a poem about what it feels like to be a Muslim girl in post-7/7 London. Students sit bolt upright; there's no chair-scraping, no fidgeting, no chatting. When Maha has finished, there's a ripple of silent finger tapping – an Evelyn Grace construct to replace a burst of raucous applause. As assembly ends, teachers standing at the back raise their hands wordlessly, and one by one whole classes rise and follow. This is Brixton's first secondary school and the first school the prize-winning Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid (one of whose projects is the Aquatics Centre for the London Olympics) has designed in Britain. Its open, monochrome interior aims to maximise light and minimise what Hadid describes as 'potentially problematic zones'.

The school opened on a temporary site in 2008, moving here in September last year, so it has yet to see its first cohort of students through GCSEs, but its overall principal, Peter Walker, who left his role as a director of the government's national schools strategy to take up the post, has ambitious plans for these children. Coldharbour Ward in the London Borough of Lambeth hits all six categories on the index used to measure social deprivation, and has one of the highest rates of violent crime in Europe. Fifty-five per cent of children at EGA are eligible for free school meals, 57 per cent have special needs, two thirds are Afro-Caribbean and many lack a father figure, but everyone is expected to achieve a minimum of five A*-C grades at GCSE in 2013, and the school has pledged to do whatever it takes to achieve this. In return, each child must sign an extensive home-school agreement, which runs to seven pages and includes such clauses as 'I will arrive on time, prepared for learning and in perfect school uniform' and 'I will hand in my mobile phone every morning or lose it for a fortnight'.

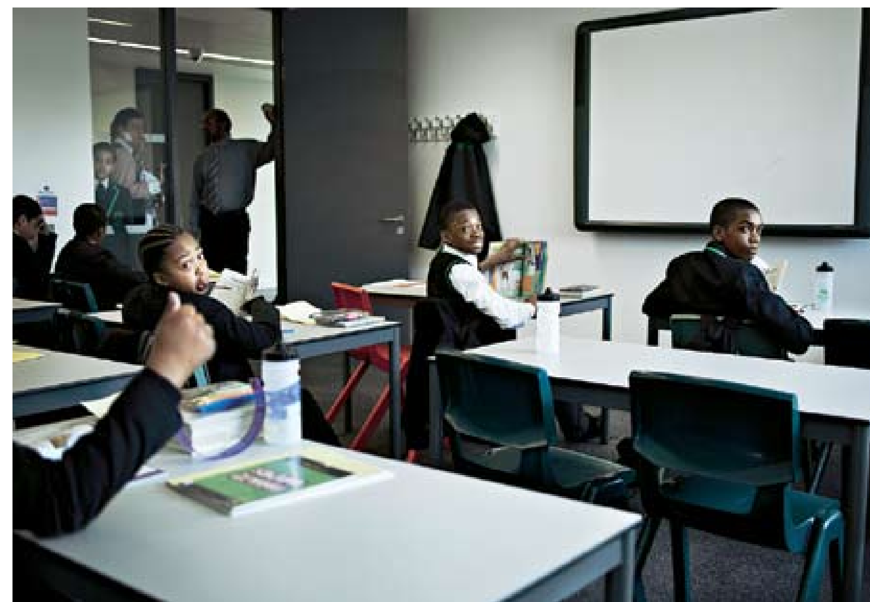
EGA is one of eight academies (six in London and one each in Birmingham and Portsmouth) sponsored by Ark (Absolute Return for Kids), a charity founded 10 years ago by the French financier Arpad Busson to raise the bar for children living in the most disadvantaged communities. Last year Ark received £400 million from its donors to support its children's welfare programmes across the world. In Britain it selects

previously underperforming schools in the poorest wards of the country (others are Walworth Academy and the new Charter Academy in Portsmouth) which, it believes, with the right staff and expertise, it can fix. Lucy Heller, the managing director of Ark Schools (Ark's education charity), talks about the 'apparently ironclad link' between class and achievement. 'It's a scandal that only five per cent of children on free school meals make it to university,' she says. 'The hope is that we can provide a network of schools that will provide a model for the system as a whole.'

Ark schools are designed to be self-sustaining; like all academies, funding for each pupil comes from the Department for Education, with Ark providing extra literacy and music programmes, enrichment activities (debating, chess, museum and theatre trips) and catch-up support for children who are falling behind. They are run according to Ark's ethos: high academic expectation, exemplary behaviour, excellent teaching, a longer school day and the division of large academies into smaller 'schools within schools'.

EGA is divided into two schools, Evelyn and Grace, which are themselves split into two age groups, making four small schools of 270 students, each with a head and deputy, to try to capture some of the intimacy lost when children leave primary school. David Gorton, EGA's key governor and a hedge fund manager, contributed £2 million of his own money towards the £38 million cost of the build, choosing Hadid because he wanted an architect whose work would create a stunning visual statement. Gorton's own father died when he was 13, and he was educated by Christian Brothers in Blackpool. He said, 'I believe profoundly that every child has the right to be taught by teachers who are ambitious for them, who believe they can excel.'

The core values at EGA are self-discipline, endeavour and excellence with an unshakeable belief that deployment of the first two will achieve the last. Ark draws its philosophy, particularly its



Above academy buildings arch over a straight running track. **Left** students Djeny Tudlia and Lamarr Brown sit at the front in EGA's Learning Support Unit. **Far left** the school enforces orderly queues and movement between lessons

'PARENTS MAY SQUEAL ABOUT THE DISCIPLINE, BUT WE ARE TRYING TO ESTABLISH A BASELINE OF BEHAVIOUR'

belief in the small school model, from the American Charter School movement, which has an emphasis on academic rigour, discipline and strong relationships with caring adults.

Before taking up his post at EGA, Walker visited Noble Street Charter School in a primarily Latino neighbourhood of Chicago where 85 per cent of students go on to college. 'Students were smartly dressed, motivated, hard working,' he says. 'A block away at another public high school the atmosphere was quite different. Discipline was poor, the kids had their heads on their desks during lessons, attendance was 40 per cent and the atmosphere was threatening.' Walker spent seven years as the head teacher of Park View Academy in Haringey, north London – under his leadership the school was named as one of the top 100 improved schools in the country – and he has twice moved out of significant strategic roles to go back into secondary headship in challenging areas. As soon as he accepted his post at EGA – and long before the plans for the building were even drawn up – he placed an invitation in the *Times Educational Supplement* to 'change the face of secondary education'.

'I thought we'd get about 60 replies. In fact, 450 teachers responded and from those we selected our founding staff. A lot of people came here because they wanted to do things differently.' Staff are selected by interview with both Walker and a student panel. 'The kids are very rigorous, very professional,' he says. 'And they're never wrong.'

Online local parent forums bristle with indignation at the length of EGA's school day – 8.30am-5pm (most schools finish at 3.15) – and its hardline approach to behaviour and sanctions. Verbal warnings are given for transgressions as small as wearing earrings; three warnings and you are 'timed out' of a lesson and must work alone with a teacher in a designated 'reconciliation room' all day. 'Parents may squeal about the discipline,' Walker says, 'but the truth is, a lot of them struggle to manage their children as they grow up. What we're trying to do

is establish a baseline of behaviour where children can learn and teachers can teach.'

On one side of the railway line that skirts Evelyn Grace, leafy Herne Hill stretches into Dulwich Village. On the other side is a cluster of notorious estates. Karen Weston, an EGA senior learning support assistant, has lived in Brixton all her life, working previously at Hillmead Primary School. 'Last Friday there was a stabbing at Angel Town and some of my boys witnessed that,' she says. 'They've had guns put to their heads, they've lost cousins to knife crime. They're thinking, "Is it me next?"' Six boys she has known since they were infants are serving life sentences. Another, 'a bright, bright child', was murdered. Weston scoops up children like these. 'There's no way they're going to come in on Monday morning and do maths,' she says. 'I take them out of the lesson, see what I can do to help. We let them learn at their own pace.'

Camila Batmanghelidjh's charity Kids Company provides a full-time social worker who 'digs deep', and a floating team of 16 therapists sign in as needed. 'Some children disclose things that we need to act on, others have simply fallen out with their best friend,' Rachel Nichols, who leads the Kids Company team, says. This, coupled with the geography of the building, means there are few places to hide. Children don't gather anywhere in groups of more than two. No one goes to the lavatory unsupervised. It sounds draconian, but it's the structure and discipline that the most troubled children cleave to. 'Take it away and they fall apart,' Weston says. 'I can look after them while they're here, but my heart breaks for them as we head towards the holidays because they're scared.'

In the kitchen, Amelia Hanslow (a chef whose last job was working with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall at River Cottage) is taking a food technology class with a group of 11-year-olds. They are preparing mirepoix – onions, celery and carrots. 'My instinct was to give them the proper tools and teach them to respect them,' she says breezily, as pupils get busy with a battery of sharp knives. Next door, a Year 9 music group is showing Peter Walker a video of a rap they have written, performed and filmed. 'I think we need to think about doing this without the school uniforms,' he beams. They all look at each other nervously. Finally the teacher, Audley Anderson, clears his throat. 'We did, sir, but we thought you wouldn't like it.'

I listen to a group of 13-14-year-olds discussing school rules over lunch. Everyone has a reading book on the table. No one moves towards the pasta and meatballs until a teacher gives the signal, and even then there's an atmosphere of quiet restraint. 'If we didn't have the strict rules we have, I dread what it would be like here,' Xanthe Greenwood, 13, says. I ask if they all feel like that. They nod furiously. 'Children are less likely to misbehave because they know there are consequences,' Jimmy Orena, 14, says solemnly. But is it too strict? 'My dad was worried I wasn't having enough fun,' Keanna Williams, 14, says. 'But actually I really like it.' Enitan Onifade says her mother told her, 'This is a new school, you're making history. It's up to you to make it work.' Keanna wants to be an international human rights barrister. 'Not just for the money, you know, but to make a difference.'

Toby Wells, 14, who lives in a leafy street in Stockwell, finds himself in an ethnic minority here. His mother, Rosemary, who leads the parents' association, was surprised none of her friends chose EGA. They may now be kicking themselves. In 2008 EGA was an unknown entity, now it is oversubscribed by 4:1. 'We thought, "New school, it's bound to have high standards,"' she says. 'One of the other schools we looked at was so big they gave students a map. I really wanted a school where the teachers knew Toby personally. We've been really pleased. He's in the top groups for everything.'

Malachi Vaughan, 14, lives with his mother and older brother, Ramone, on Loughborough Estate. 'I got excluded in Year 7 for getting into a fight,' he says, shuffling in his seat. 'I've had to be more level-headed.' Andrea Angamarca Tandazo, also 14, came to EGA in Year 8. 'My last school was more laidback. People would text during lessons. And if you got a detention and didn't go, no one cared. If you did that here…' She looks around for support. 'You'd get three days of detentions!' Amandine

KEANNA WANTS TO BE AN INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS BARRISTER. 'NOT JUST FOR THE MONEY, YOU KNOW, BUT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE'

From top at lunch books are on the table as well as food trays; students Keanna Williams, Loretta Greenwood and her sister Xanthe; the principal, Peter Walker, talks to students about uniform, locker and other concerns

Guihard, 11, shrieks. They all talk about the level of support they get from teachers. 'In some schools you get called a neek if you work hard, but we're all neeks here,' Andrea says. 'You get teased if you're not a neek. It's kind of a relief.'

Andrea, originally from Ecuador, wants to be a lawyer. 'I take my learning very seriously,' she says. 'I'm hoping to get a scholarship to Oxford.'

Winston Ellis, a maths teacher, remembers hearing Enoch Powell's 1968 Rivers of Blood speech when he was a teenager. 'As a black boy growing up in the Moss Side area of Manchester, the most you were expected to aspire to was managing a supermarket. I just thought, I'm not having this. After I'd finished my degree I met a black guy who was teaching, and my jaw dropped because I didn't even know black people could be teachers.' Ellis left a post at a comfortable school in Eltham because he believed something special was going on at EGA and he wanted to be part of it. 'Here, every student believes university is for them,' he says.

I watch a Grace deputy head, Mareca Laing, teaching maths to the lowest set. Laing is the daughter of a no-nonsense Caribbean teacher who raised five children single-handed. 'Good, Crystal! Now explain exactly what you did to Victoria so she can also progress.' Everything she says is empowering and enabling. 'We have to be much more confident in ourselves today. Solomon! No one else speak. Give him a chance, he'll get there. Yes, well done, absolutely spot on.' Laing regularly discusses with her learning group the draw of 'easy money' earned by gang members compared with working hard for a degree 'which,' she says, eyes flashing, 'no one can take from you.'

Year 9 children who arrived at the school two years earlier with low self-esteem are scattered about, greeting visitors, answering the phone on reception, supporting younger children 'in order to inspire others'. Every fortnight, children are set individual targets and attend weekly 'masterclasses'. Rhoda Fisher, a senior learning support assistant, uses art lessons as a chance to deal with challenging behaviour. 'I have one 14-year-old who's been disruptive since primary school. He wants attention. If he doesn't get it – and he doesn't care if it's positive or negative – he'll kick up a fuss.' The same boy comes up in conversation with an Evelyn head, Marlon Miller. 'It was a real milestone to hear him say, "I want to get better, I just don't know how,"' Miller says, 'because it shows he knows he's got a chance here and he's asking for our help. This is where the small school model is so important. We all know him, we know what the barriers to learning are, and we can begin to break them down.'

EGA's Learning Support Unit (LSU) runs a nine-week inclusion learning programme for students who are falling behind target levels in English and maths or are at risk of exclusion for poor behaviour. The students are expected to reach not only their academic targets but behavioural and social ones too, to give them the 'soft skills' to ease back into their learning groups and cope with the school's rigorous routines and expectations. I meet Maria Rodrigues, the special educational needs coordinator and child protection officer, flying up the stairs to the LSU one morning. She has just come from a court hearing where the mother of a Year 7 child was sectioned. 'Trust me, it was the best thing.' It's 10.30am and a little girl with tight braids is wandering slowly down the corridor. 'Are you hungry? Go and get some breakfast… She's a model student,' Rodrigues says. 'Lovely little girl. But she's been physically abused, she's been in and out of care. There's no mum. She's coping with a lot.' Rodrigues stresses the importance of professional boundaries. 'Children don't need you to be their friend. They need you to be their teacher and mentor.' And then admits to crossing them, often. 'I just replaced a boy's blazer myself, but nobody knows…' She sighs, conscious of the paradox. 'This boy. The first year he was here, he cried and cried. His mum is in prison, his dad's an alcoholic. But he doesn't cry any more. He just gets very, very angry, because he has no one. It's important to show these children you care.'

Reuben, a tiny boy of 13, has just finished a course in the LSU. Verbally quick, when he arrived at EGA at 11 he could neither read nor write and had severe behavioural problems. 'He was basically ungovernable, but it was just a gap in learning,' Rodrigues says. 'After an intensive phonics-based programme, Reuben now reads but still struggles to get his thoughts down on paper. It means his pride in reading has been chased by crashing disappointment, and all this coupled with a difficult home life. I know he'll get there,' Rodrigues insists. 'All our children will achieve, some just have a different time line.'

The shiny new building is important, up to a point – children can be taught effectively in portable buildings – but, as Peter Walker is fond of saying, spending £38 million on a school in a catchment area where the vast majority has so very little says to a child, 'You matter.' Walker likes to tell a story about how the first time a group of EGA children walked through Brixton Market, the stallholders clapped and cheered – and it's worth mentioning that every single member of staff is dressed as formally as the students, as a mark of respect.

Earlier this year, Walker was stung by a 'satisfactory' Ofsted report, rather than the 'outstanding' he was expecting. There was criticism that children are too tightly governed and given implausible targets. A former inspector himself, he suspects racism, or at least a lack of professionalism, and has asked for an inquiry. He is much exercised by the notion that less should be expected of poor children than their middle-class contemporaries.

'An HM schools inspector asked one of my teachers, "What can you expect of children who live round here?" There's an ingrained belief that there's only so much you can do with children who have had a difficult start in life. I just don't believe that. Of course there are voices in the system who will say what we're trying to do here is totally unrealistic, but I cannot understand that mindset. Everything here is governed by the 100 per cent principle – as it is in all the best schools. Work hard and you will achieve. Why should we teach children who are already disadvantaged to settle for less?'

Some names have been changed

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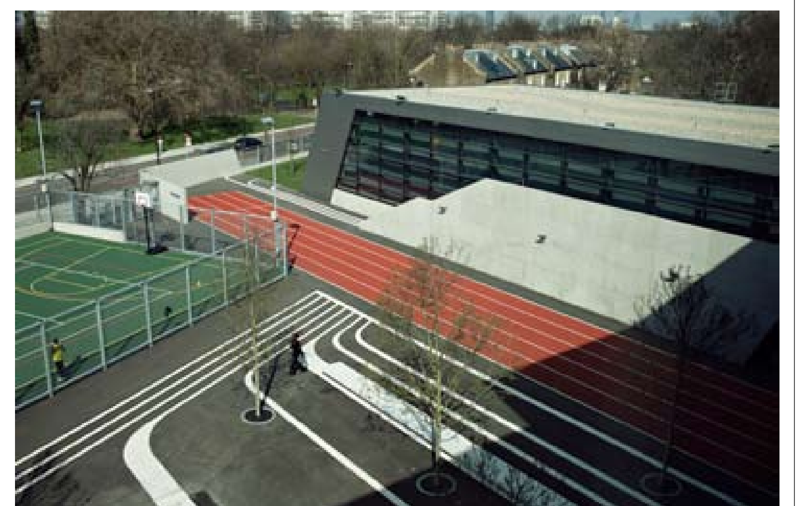

Above students Barin Bamgbose and Jimmy Orena, 14, who says, 'Children are less likely to misbehave because they know there are consequences.' **Right** the academy is close to some of Lambeth borough's most notorious housing estates