

**THE SCHOOL
WHERE YOU'RE
ALLOWED TO HIT
THE TEACHER**

From left: Boxing Academy pupils Sunnii-Joel, 15; Harmonie, 14; Jonathan, 15; Muhammad, 14; Kamron, 15



PORTRAITS Tom Jackson

At risk of knife crime, gang culture and street violence, the young lives of excluded and vulnerable children are being transformed at a unique inner city school. By Rachel Sylvester

It's the middle of the day in an inner London school and a teenage boy is punching his teacher as hard as he can. His eyes narrow with concentration as he jabs his fists, left and right, trying to pound the older man. Beside them, two other pupils are sparring – dancing around each other as they wait to strike. In any other school, children would be expelled for this kind of behaviour, but at the Boxing Academy in Hackney fighting is not only encouraged, it is part of the curriculum. All students have a daily bout in the ring, between English, maths and science lessons, as well as regular fitness training. In the classrooms, boxing coaches work alongside academic staff to maintain discipline.

Many of the pupils at this alternative provision free school have been excluded from mainstream education for violence, but here they learn to channel their aggression into boxing. I meet one 14-year-old on his way to the gym in the basement. Neatly dressed in a Boxing Academy tracksuit, he explains that he was sent to the school in September, after a fight that got “seriously out of hand” in which he “flipped out, got a rolling pin and started smashing up a door”. He was also caught carrying a knife.

“I took it from the kitchen drawer,” he explains calmly. “I threw it at someone and that wasn't smart because I got into trouble. There's so much more violence out there now. It's easy to get sucked into county lines and gangs. Everyone has knives – that's their defence mechanism. I know two people who have been shot dead and a lot more who have been stabbed.”

After less than three months, the school has already taught him to manage his temper. “If you're angry here, fights don't escalate because if there's a problem it's controlled. You work it out in the ring ... Now I feel sorry for the people in gangs. You're trapped. Imagine knowing that your mum is at risk if you try to get out.” He says he doesn't carry a weapon any more. “I was lucky, but there's no good that comes from it. You might get stabbed or end up stabbing someone.”

Some of the 40 children at the Boxing Academy are among the most difficult and dangerous in the country, but they are also the most vulnerable. Aged between 14 and 16, many are on the fringes of gangs, or have been caught up in the street violence that is spiralling out of control in this part of east London. On the day I visit, one pupil has gone missing, and is thought to be out selling drugs in the provinces on a gang county line. A few days earlier, a 15-year-old boy turned up in the morning with blood seeping through his shirt. He had been stabbed close to the heart the night before, but his mother had ignored the wound and when he arrived at school, he had



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lost so much blood that he was feeling light-headed. Although he claimed he had hurt himself falling over, a teacher took him to hospital, where the doctors said it could not have been a self-inflicted wound.

Staff and pupils are worryingly used to dealing with such incidents. Last year, a boy arrived with a knife wound in his leg, having been “jooked” (stabbed) on the way to school as he went through a rival gang's territory.

“To these kids that is normal,” says Anna



Cain, the head teacher. “They're so desensitised to violence that in a way they would be worried if it wasn't happening.” They are still children, though, she insists. “People think, ‘They're in a gang; they must be criminals. They deserve what they get.’ But often they are catapulted into it just because of where they live. They're not actually making a decision to join a gang. It's foisted upon them.” One boy, who has been involved in serious violence, still sucks his thumb when he thinks nobody is looking.

These teenagers were all dismissed as troublemakers in mainstream schools, but many of them are damaged or disturbed. One pupil is very bright but severely autistic, and became aggressive when he got stressed. Others are caring for parents with mental health problems or addictions. Many have witnessed domestic violence at home or been abused themselves.

“We've had students in the past who have been caught up in sexual violence initiation rites,” Cain says. “There was a girl who had been raped by a boy who was getting his stripes to join a gang. She was then forced to associate with the rapist socially or she would have become everybody's target. She said to us, ‘The only place I can be myself is at the Boxing Academy, because you don't treat me like there's something wrong with me.’”

Having worked with excluded children for ten years, the head teacher has never known things to be so bad. Across Britain, 37 young people have been stabbed to death so far this year, and knife crime has risen by 22 per cent over 12 months.

Cain says children are being groomed by the criminals. “The older gang members, who may be only 15, will wait around the chicken shops at the end of school and buy the 12-year-olds chicken and chips for £1. Then after a few times, they will say, ‘You've got to do something for me, or I'm going to come and kill your mum.’ And that's that. The younger they are, the more likely they are to do something with less meaning. They have no judgment, no sense of the risk or the consequences. Families are out of their depth.”

Social media is also a major factor, with gangs goading each other online. “These children don't sleep because they don't live in a home where somebody says, ‘Give me your phone before bedtime,’ and everybody knows tiredness affects your ability to learn and to control your emotions. It's not unusual for us to have people sleeping on desks. We leave them for an hour, then start again.”

The Boxing Academy, which is in a converted office block down an alleyway sandwiched between hipster bakeries and run-down estates, is the place to which children get sent when the education system has run out of options. A fifth of the students attended more than two secondary schools between

the ages of 11 and 14, and more than half have been excluded from two or more alternative provision institutions before coming here.

According to Cain, “The starting point is that nothing has worked for these children in education. They don’t get the point of it. It’s as though you take them, you plonk them on a tennis court with a racket and a machine at the other side of the net and it fires balls at them, but they don’t know that there’s a game called tennis or how you get points. They don’t understand what they’re doing. They’re just hitting the balls back and sometimes they can’t even do that, so they get bombarded.”

As violence spreads around the country, a vicious circle has developed that is fuelling the wave of knife crime. Schools, under ever more intense pressure to boost their exam results, are excluding more and more difficult or low-achieving pupils. Often these children have special educational needs, mental health problems or emotional issues, but they are left to wander the streets or sent to pupil referral units, which have become a recruiting ground for gangs. From there, they are on a conveyer belt to the criminal justice system. Around 85 per cent of young offenders in prison have been thrown out of school and only 1 per cent of those in alternative provision get the 5 good GCSEs they need to access employment.

The Boxing Academy – which started as a small community project in a boxing gym in Tottenham in 2007 and opened as a school on its current site three years later – aims to break the link between expulsion and crime. All the students take 6 GCSEs and last year 94 per cent of them passed English and maths, while 11 per cent achieved a grade 5 or above in the subjects. Every leaver went on to either education or employment. Although the school is expensive – it costs around £12,000 for local authorities to send a child here, double the amount they would spend on educating them in a mainstream school – it is a lot cheaper than the £76,000 a year cost of a place at a young offender institution.

Cain got involved in the Boxing Academy when her son was referred to it after being expelled. She had adopted him when he was three, but the traumas he had experienced before then caught up with him as he grew up, and he became an aggressive teenager. “I’ve never excused his behaviour and I don’t for any of the children in this building, but you have to provide them with strategies to turn that around,” she says. “You can’t just say, ‘Don’t behave like that,’ or, ‘Don’t be angry.’ Their behaviour is something that happens as result of their feelings, so what you have to do is get to the bottom of their feelings to help them control their behaviour. I’m sure everybody thinks the Boxing Academy is about controlling children and it’s not. It’s the opposite; it’s about teaching children to control themselves.”



‘I DON’T CARRY A KNIFE ANY MORE. YOU MIGHT GET STABBED – OR END UP STABBING SOMEONE’



As we walk around the school, pupils are sitting quietly in classrooms, listening attentively. In the English lesson, the teacher is discussing pathetic fallacy. In maths, students are completing different tasks on computers. The education is highly personalised. Children are taught in groups of eight, with a teacher and a boxing instructor, who works as a classroom assistant. If somebody is struggling, they will be given one-to-one tuition. Often pupils have missed so much school in the past – because they have either been excluded or repeatedly played truant – that there will be

huge gaps in their knowledge and the teachers say they are in a race against time to catch up before they have to take their exams.

The academy operates a “tough love” regime, with clear rules and consistent disciplinary procedures. Children are searched every morning on the way into the building, to make sure they are not carrying knives. They are also required to say, “Good morning,” politely to staff – if they don’t, then they have to go out and come in again until they do. Before every lesson, they must line up outside the classroom and shake hands with the teacher as they enter. “It’s the little things that create the culture,” Cain explains. “If a child thinks they can walk in with their hood up and an attitude, they will continue like that and chip away at everything else we’re trying to do. They need boundaries. They like the fact that when they walk into this building they are not in charge; we are.”

Sanctions are boxing-related – it’s 25 press-ups for swearing; 50 for general rudeness; 100 for lateness (with 10 for every extra minute) and 250 for insolently “kissing teeth”. If a pupil answers back or refuses to do the punishment, the number is instantly doubled. “Sometimes they make you clean a square of the gym floor with a toothbrush,” says Muhammad, 14, pointing out the area he had to scrub.

But it doesn’t feel like a boot camp. Children can also earn points for good behaviour, which they can convert into cash prizes. Although in their previous schools, many of the pupils frequently played truant, here there is an 87 per cent attendance rate, and if students don’t turn up, one of the boxing instructors will go to their home to bring them in.

“We have the odd temper tantrum, as you would expect, although I would say behaviour in this school is better than in most mainstream schools,” Cain says. “Twice in the past three years I can think of occasions when two pupils have kicked off – I wouldn’t call it a fight because it was broken up so quickly. There are no assaults against staff, although lots of these children have done that in the past. There’s just a different culture in this building.”

Boxing is a key part of the education. A pair of boxing gloves hangs in the head teacher’s office and motivational quotes from Muhammad Ali and Nelson Mandela (who once said his greatest regret was that he never became a heavyweight boxing champion) hang on the walls. The idea is to help children learn teamwork, discipline and anger management through the sport.

“It is about definitions of masculinity. It’s about confidence, self-esteem, being sure you know who you are,” Cain explains. One pupil declared on his first day that it was “stupid” to teach him to fight better when he had just been chucked out of school for fighting. Three months later, he told the head teacher, ■

"I don't understand what's happened. I don't get into fights any more." Having spent hours learning proper boxing skills, he no longer felt he had to prove himself on the streets.

"If you are angry as a boxer you will lose. It's all about control, tactics, discipline, stamina," says Cain. "Think of Mike Tyson biting Evander Holyfield's ear. He lost his temper and he lost the fight."

The bell rings for break time and the students queue up for fruit, before sitting down to play Connect 4 and cards. Some are on the PlayStation in the corner. "They love playing games," says Cain. "Sometimes the biggest problem we have is farting in class and paper aeroplanes. This is supposed to be a bunch of bad men that people would cross the street to get away from, but they're allowed to be children here."

I ask 15-year-old Jonathan how this school is different from his previous one.

"The teachers understand you better," he replies. "They put their time and effort into trying to help you learn." He was excluded from a local academy two years ago for being aggressive. "They started shouting at me, and I don't like being shouted at," he explains. "I got angry, lost my temper and started shouting too. But looking back, I feel in a way I wanted that situation to happen, because without it I never would have ended up here." He was heading for no GCSEs and he hated school. "I was always thinking, 'Things aren't going to go well for me.' Now I want to come to school. When people challenge my behaviour I can see their point of view. Boxing has helped me control my aggression. You can't just go into the ring and get angry; you have to be cool, calm and collected. If someone says something I don't like, I know what I can do. I have nothing to prove to them."

All the children are polite, articulate and self-aware. Kamron, who is also 15, says his life has been transformed by the academy. He was always disruptive in the past, but he finds it much easier to concentrate these days. "In boxing, you have to wait and be patient. It releases the stress. Instead of going out on to the streets, I stay home or go to the gym. I feel there are possibilities for me now."

Sunnii-Joel is autistic and describes a "toxic" environment at his mainstream school, which often felt overwhelming for him. "I like the way everything is structured here," he says.

Harmonie, 14, is one of only three girls currently at the academy, but she doesn't mind. "I used to get into fights with the other girls all the time at my old school. I didn't like to follow instructions. I was always giving attitude, not completing my tasks. I get more help in the classroom here and that makes a big difference. The teachers don't have as much time in mainstream school, because there are more pupils. At first I didn't want to



'I WAS AN ANGRY KID. I HAD LOTS OF FIGHTS. IT WAS HOW I GREW UP. I HAD A KNIFE FOR PROTECTION'



do the boxing, but I enjoy it now. It teaches you to manage your anger."

Several of the children describe the Boxing Academy as their "last chance". At their old schools, the teachers were frightened of them, but that's not true of the boxing instructors, whom they respect and can relate to.

Jermaine Williams, the head of boxing, won the London ABA Elite middleweight title earlier this year and shares many of the experiences of the children he now coaches. With a bullying father, who used to beat him in Jamaica, he came to Britain when he was 12

and soon got sucked into street crime. At 16, he spent time in Feltham Young Offender Institution for assault and carrying a knife. He learnt boxing so that he could defend himself in prison, because he assumed that's where he would end up, but instead the sport gave him a way to turn his life around.

Like him, the students at the Boxing Academy are "looking for a family", he says. "Many of them lack a male role model. That's what we try to provide, a professional older brother and the attention they don't get at home. It's what the gangs are offering, too, but this is a positive light. You are giving them what they need emotionally and physically."

He thinks the physicality is important for children who crave human contact, but the sport is also a form of therapy. "Boxing is like chess," he says. "You have to think and understand yourself. The calmer you are, the more able you are to see and execute your plan. Your only opponent is you."

It's a message that stays with the children even after they leave the school. Two former pupils, both 17, have come back to see their old teachers and practise their boxing. Kevin was one of the school's most difficult students when he first arrived – obsessed with weapons, he was "friendly with all the gangs" and notorious in the neighbourhood for being involved in "all sorts of madness". He had frequently played truant at his old school, and when he first started at the Boxing Academy Jermaine Williams had to go around to his house every morning to collect him. Eventually he persuaded him to come on his own by making hot chocolate for him when he arrived.

Now, 18 months after leaving the academy, Kevin has a job with a financial services company and a good circle of friends. "I'm never sure where I would have ended up," he says. "I was easy to manipulate. Looking back, I think I was vulnerable and this place gave me confidence."

Ali left last year with six GCSEs and is now studying sports sciences at college. He, too, thinks the Boxing Academy saved him.

"I was an angry kid," he says. "When I was young, I had a lot of fights, on the streets, in school, even fights I knew I was going to lose. It was how I grew up – I had family troubles and there were always problems on my estate, with the other gangs coming around. I'd carry a knife for protection."

Many of the people he grew up with on the estate are now in jail. "If I'm honest, if I hadn't come here I could have ended up in prison or I could have just been on the streets right now, doing nothing with myself. Everything I was doing was negative, but here, instead of getting rid of me, they said, 'We're going to help change you and make you the boy that you actually are.' Eventually that's what happened. I can't remember the last time I got angry." ■