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## The ‘tough love’ school that puts its pupils in a boxing ring

For teenagers excluded from mainstream education, an academy in east London offers a fresh start with life skills taught by throwing punches

By Sally Williams

2 September 2023 • 5:00pm



As pupils around the country filter into their school halls for the first assembly of the academic year, at one inner-city secondary school in London, students will be lining up for a slightly different start to the term. Instead of sitting listening to their teachers, they’ll be throwing punches at them.

At The Boxing Academy, an alternative provision free school in Hackney, east London, every student must do 40 minutes of boxing a day, alongside more traditional subjects (GCSE maths, science, English, PE and art). Ironically, many of the teenager pupils have been excluded from mainstream schools because of violence.

Mikeal, 16, slight, skinny arms accentuated by huge boxing gloves, manoeuvres into position. He jabs his left fist, then his right. He looks intensely focused. One, two. Bam! Bam! The sound of the blows echo around the room.

Boxing is the point of the school. On the walls are posters of [greats like Tyson Fury](#). The unofficial school motto is a quote from Mike Tyson: ‘Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face.’

‘It’s not about punching someone in the face,’ says Anna Cain, the headteacher. ‘And the aim is not to turn out boxers. It’s to use boxing – the discipline, focus, self-reliance – to help teach young people, who are often angry, have had terrible experiences, and are vulnerable to mental-health problems, how to manage life. And actually, it’s the opposite of being aggressive. Boxers are so calm. They spend their life managing

their emotions because if you lose your temper in the ring, you lose the fight.’

Or, as one ex-pupil puts it: ‘If you go into the boxing ring angry, you will get knocked out. If you go into society angry you will get knocked out. Thoughtful words are all the ammunition you need.’



Mikeal was sent to the academy after flying into a rage at his previous school | CREDIT: Laura Pannack

The school is small – 48 or so pupils, aged 12 to 16. Many have been excluded several times; half attended more than two secondary schools between the ages of 11 and 14. Overwhelmingly they arrive shaped by rejection and failure.

‘They typically have no direction, no aspirations,’ says Cain. Her job is to break this ‘negative cycle’.

There is cause for hope: all students take five GCSEs, and last year 90 per cent passed maths, 80 per cent passed English. ‘Sometimes they screw up their GCSEs,’ says Cain, ‘but if they leave here wanting to do something, that’s success.’ The Boxing Academy was judged outstanding by Ofsted in 2020.

Mikeal was sent to the academy in December 2021, after flying into a rage at his previous school. He’d spent time in the isolation unit for disruptive pupils. ‘Being trapped made me so mad,’ he recalls. ‘[One day] I just blew.’ After threatening the head of the unit, he was expelled. Since then, Mikeal has learned to channel his aggression into boxing. ‘I’ve matured. I’m much calmer.’ He plans to train as an engineer. Or become a boxer.

Many of the young people at The Boxing Academy have an unstable home life (involving domestic violence or abuse, or parents with mental-health problems or addictions). Many are caught up in youth violence.



Shyian, 16, says that her cousin was stabbed to death | CREDIT: Laura Panack

According to a 2022 report by charity the Youth Endowment Fund, almost two-fifths of young people in England and Wales had either been victims of, or witnesses to, violence in the previous year. In London, the figure rose to almost half.

‘It’s not that these are criminal children,’ Cain says. ‘It’s because of all the stuff that has happened to them in their lives. They all know somebody who has been killed.’

Shyian, 16, one of six girls at the academy, says that her cousin was stabbed to death; another student once stabbed someone in the leg – now he is a reformed character. Thierry, 21, an ex-student who is now a building labourer, used to carry a small knife as a schoolboy. Being threatened was, he says, ‘a regular occurrence’. The knife made him feel safe.

After being kicked out of school for fighting, The Boxing Academy calmed Thierry down. It still does; he returns to train once a week. ‘It’s controlled aggression when you’re hitting the pads. Stress relieving, basically.’





Ex-student Thierry is now a labourer | CREDIT: Laura Pannack

Other students turned to violence for other reasons.

Aaron, 15, has ADHD. He was bullied at primary school for being 'different'. 'I put that in quotation marks,' he explains. 'It's not really different. It's just fidgeting and not being able to focus... Even now, I'm fidgeting with my fingers, clicking them.' By 11, he says he was angry, snappy, quick to start fights. Though he worked hard to control his anger – burning off energy by doing press-ups and sit-ups, and walking away if anyone said anything – the pressure built. Just before the summer holidays last year, Aaron snapped. When someone attacked his friend, he beat them up.

Aaron had a metal ruler; his friend had scissors. Both were expelled for carrying weapons. Last September he joined the academy. It has changed him, says his mother, Gabriela. Now he comes home 'positively tired'; he'll shower, watch a bit of YouTube until 9pm or 10pm. 'Then I'll just fall asleep,' adds Aaron. '[Before] I'd be on my PlayStation, shouting a lot.' 'He's planning his future,' says Gabriela. 'He might join the Army.'

The Boxing Academy started as a community project in a boxing gym in Tottenham in 2007. Three years later, it opened as a school and in 2020 it moved to its current site, a former primary school sandwiched between council blocks. What was once the school hall is now a gym with a ring and punch bags.

Cain got involved in 2008, after her son was expelled from his secondary school and referred there. He was 13 at the time. She had adopted him at three, by which time he had experienced neglect and abuse. 'He had quite complex problems to do with attachment disorder and trauma,' she says. 'Immediately I understood why this would work.'

She started helping out at the academy, teaching lessons and drawing on her degree in IT. Within a year she was running the project, despite having had no teaching training. In her view, this is a plus. 'I am absolutely not interested in how schools normally do things.'



Anna Cain: 'What we are doing differently is taking time to get to know the child' | CREDIT: Laura Parmack

Students are referred by their school or local authority (LA), at a cost to the LA of £13,000 a year per child; more expensive than mainstream school. A 'tough love' regime operates, with clear rules: mobile phones are banned. Children are searched on the way in for knives. Sanctions are boxing related: 25 press-ups for swearing; 50 for rudeness or having your hood up; 100 for play-fighting.

If students don't show up without good reason, teachers phone them to find out why, or knock on their door in person. '[When we tell them we'll do this] they're like, "Yeah, heard that before," says one teacher. 'And when you actually go, they're like, "Woah! Didn't expect you to turn up!"'

Along with a teacher, each class has a boxing instructor who doubles as a classroom assistant. 'What we are doing differently is taking time to get to know the child,' explains Cain.

Harriet Oakland, the academy's art teacher, previously taught in mainstream schools for 20 years. There, she was a 'policewoman. [It was] all about crowd control.' Here, GCSE art is compulsory and though many students are initially unreceptive, Oakland uses art as therapy; students talk about feelings, issues, relationships. A punch-bag is stencilled with all the bad things the student 'wanted to punch out in the world'.

Another teacher, Jermaine Williams, the head of boxing, says that he considers himself a 'professional older brother' to students. He can, in some ways, relate. His own upbringing wasn't easy. He has 25 half-sisters, five half-brothers, and struggled to fit in at his predominantly white secondary school, having arrived in Britain from Jamaica aged 12. He wore 'Adore' trainers from the market, while his peers wore Adidas or Nike. 'I used to get bullied for that.'





The school is small with 48 or so pupils, aged 12 to 16 | CREDIT: Laura Pannack

After dropping out, he drifted into crime, stealing sweets from Woolworths, then turning to mugging. At 16, he spent time in Feltham Young Offender Institution for assault and carrying a knife. He only started boxing to ensure he was ‘top of the food chain’ in prison. But inadvertently it saved his life. ‘You’re able to channel all these fears and aggression and turn it into something positive,’ he says.

His office is full of boxing trophies; he is a three-times London champion and one-time national champion for England Boxing. He was offered the job at the Boxing Academy via a coach at his gym in 2010. By this time, he’d stopped dealing drugs after a narrow escape. ‘I was standing on the corner and [police] arrested everyone. But because I was dressed a bit differently, smarter, they ran by me.’ He took the job.

Back in the boxing ring, Mikeal has finished his session. He leans over the ropes, sweaty and out of breath. ‘I’m feeling good!’ he says.

What does he think about when he’s boxing? ‘Surviving!’ he grins. Since he’s started boxing, he knows what he’s capable of. ‘I haven’t had a fight since being here. I wouldn’t want to. There’s no point. I just know what I could do. There’s no need to prove it.’

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BW

Join the conversation, Betty Willibums

OH

Older Hopefully Wiser Woman

12 HRS AGO

What an uplifting piece. It all makes sense to me. Give the kids, who have challenging starts, who then understandably have mental health issues that come with disruptive behaviours, an environment for them to heal & then hopefully learn. I truly hope it manages to stay open for many years to come & may be even spread their gossip.

REPLY

LIKE 1

0

REPORT

DF

David Forcey

21 HRS AGO

When I was at Public School you had the choice of boxing (with an upper weight limit of 13stone) or having to train and take part in a 10 mile steeplechase. In our House we had to do a five mile run every day irrespective of if we were playing games. How times have changed.

REPLY

LIKE 3

0

REPORT

WF

William Foster

22 HRS AGO

We had boxing school, as well as 2 hours of sport 6 days a week. Along with the cane and school days that lasted from 8am to 9pm, we had no time or inclination for disruption. It offered us structure and guidance. A far cry from the secondary school I teach at today.

REPLY

LIKE 7

0

REPORT

SS

Sally Smith

1 DAY AGO

How totally fabulous.. am going to contact the school to see if I can help fundraising..

REPLY

LIKE 15

0

REPORT

PK

Pr Kaur

1 DAY AGO

Fabulous! Please roll out these schools out nationally

REPLY

LIKE 11

0

REPORT

GD

Gareth Davies

1 DAY AGO

Perhaps everybody should learn. I wish J had.

REPLY

LIKE 6

0

REPORT

SS

Sergeant Serious

1 DAY AGO

Perhaps we could have compulsory daily boxing lessons in Parliament now?

REPLY

LIKE 3

0

REPORT

PH

Peter Hicks

1 DAY AGO

This is such a good idea. Well done!

REPLY

LIKE 12

0

REPORT

OB

Old Bear

1 DAY AGO

Fascinating; one wonders if it could all go horribly wrong in teaching violent pupils a violent sport, but the counter-intuitive experiment seems to be working.

REPLY

1 REPLY

LIKE 7

0

REPORT

PB

Pavel Bubak

1 DAY AGO

Reply to **Old Bear**

I don't think it is that surprising. Controlled strength and anger are safe. It is the uncontrolled unexpressed inner rage coming from despair that is dangerous.

REPLY

LIKE 20

0

REPORT

BW

Add your reply


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