



## **MAORI DANCE UNITES PRIMARY PUPILS**

By Hannah Goff - BBC News education reporter

Every morning the children of Oxley Park Primary join together to perform their own version of Maori dance the Haka.

Unlike its most famous proponents, the All Blacks, the youngsters are not going to war with another rugby team.

Instead they use a particular combination of speech and movement to prepare their brains for the challenges of another day of learning.

But like the Maoris before them, the pupils also use the dance and the words of the song to express their passion, vigour and identity not as members of a race but as Oxley Parkers.

'Sense of belonging'

"As we are a new school in a new community in Milton Keynes, fostering a sense of belonging is even more important," says head teacher Cathy Higgins.

"Children arrive every day - so a pupil that's been here a few weeks is classed as an older pupil," she explains.

"We have a variety of children with different backgrounds.

"There are children who come from a large number of different schools, different education authorities, different areas and different countries.

"There are children from Africa, China, America and Canada whose parents have come to Milton Keynes for work. They have experiences of very different education systems.

"So there is a real need to establish a sense of belonging very quickly."

The melting pot that is Oxley Park is not so different from other areas of Britain that have seen high levels of immigration.

This 280-strong school welcomes all newcomers, celebrating their diversity along the way.

And there is no sense that by doing this the inherent nature of the school will be squashed or compromised by "outsiders" - as opponents of multiculturalism suggest.

## **School song**

This sense of inclusion is well expressed in the words of one of the school's songs: "I am special, you are special, we are special can't you see."

"This," says Mrs Higgins, "is really all about saying it doesn't matter if you are fat or thin, tall or short, black or white, we are all different and we are all special."

The posters and photographs that dot the school's walls, show black and white faces along with children with disabilities.

But they don't look staged like so many public service information leaflets do - they reflect what is happening in the classroom.

There are also drawings, cultural trinkets and religious statues from countries all around the world in special displays.

## **Links with South Africa**

Especially prominent are colourful items from South Africa with which the school has a particular tie following a visit there by the head-teacher and her deputy in June 2006.

Mrs Higgins and her deputy worked with teachers at farm schools in the impoverished but beautiful Kwena Basin in Mpumalanga province.

They brought with them football kits, pencils and hair ornaments bought with money raised by the Oxley Park pupils for their South African peers.

"Things our children would put in a bin were a treasure for these children," says Mrs Higgins.

The following month, nine student teachers came back to Oxley Park to work at the school.

They stayed with pupils and were welcomed into their family and community for the duration of their stay.

Georgia, 11, remembers her special guests: "They were very, very nice and became some of my best friends.

"They told me about what language they spoke and what money they used and what it was like to live there."

Seven-year-old Amy remembers being taught a special dance.

"I didn't exactly get the hang of it but it was good," she says.

While Sam, eight, remembers how the student teacher who stayed in his house helped him make a lion costume for a school event.

Angela Bailey, who teaches nine and 10-year-olds at Oxley Park, says: "My class were very interested in the background history of South Africa particularly.

"They learned quite a lot about the apartheid system and they have quite a strong sense of justice."

## **Life in the community**

But it's not all about black and white. The youngsters are encouraged to stand up for their local community as well.

Mrs Bailey tells how the pupils have been encouraged to conserve water and how many are writing to the local council to urge them to hurry up and put cycle lanes in place so they can cycle to school.

Practical lessons grounded in the community are all part of showing the children that with rights come responsibility.

Making the youngsters aware of the role they can play in their local community fosters good citizenship, says Mrs Higgins.

She adds: "It's the golden thread that runs through what we do.

"It's not a curricular subject but it happens in every area. This is just something that we do - full stop.

"The children have a commitment to do these things and it goes beyond learning."

"And the hope is that as they grow up they become active members of society and active citizens as well."