

Hackney is one of the most diverse places in the UK. In this regular feature, we profile the borough's great & good or just plain interesting

hackneypeople

HALFWAY through my interview with Tom Panagiotopoulos, head teacher at St Paul's with St Michael's C of E Primary School, there is a knock at the door.

Six children appear, wearing waterproofs, wellies and enormous grins, and heaving a plastic bucket full of glistening lettuce leaves.

"Wow, did you just pick those in your gardening session?" asks Tom, standing up to admire their treasure. The children nod.

He adds: "Where are you taking them now?"

The children say they are heading to the kitchens.

"So they'll go straight into your lunches. Isn't that special?" beams Tom.

In fact, there is a lot that can be said to be special about the school in Brougham Road, E8.

This year, Ofsted inspectors pronounced it 'outstanding', heaping praise on the 'excellent subject knowledge' of its teachers, the 'exemplary' behaviour and development of its pupils and a school life that 'broadens their cultural experiences and enables them to set challenging ambitions for their future lives.'

You would think that the school was hideously oversubscribed. Yet despite being just a stone's throw away from Broadway Market, many have not heard of it because it is so tucked away. There is not a single road bordering the school's site.

Instead, you walk down a modest drive and are met with an oasis of green.

There are fruit trees



Tom Panagiotopoulos, head teacher of St Paul's with St Michael's C of E Primary School, with pupils. The school has been rated as Outstanding by Ofsted. Photo: Gary Manhine

Outstanding achievement

“ We want to get children to a place where they themselves believe in their own potential to do extraordinary things ”

and hazelnut trees, a new eco-building for reception children, vast playground for the nursery (separately awarded an outstanding early years status by Ofsted), sports court and Victorian building.

"It's quite a lot for us to maintain, particularly since we are single form entry, so there are just 30 children in each year. But it is so lovely for the kids," says Tom.

It is this atmosphere of warmth and security that

Tom prizes above all.

He explains: "Our staff and children work exceptionally hard to produce outstanding levels of achievement.

"But that's not enough. We want to get children to a place where they themselves believe in their own potential to do extraordinary things."

As well as gardening, every child in the school runs for 15 minutes every day, and twice a term, a

whole day is devoted to a huge art project.

Last year, the school choir was invited to sing in St Paul's Cathedral.

"I joined myself, in order to encourage more boys to take part. Equality is really important here, we encourage girls to take part and excel in activities that are perceived as being 'for boys' and vice versa," says Tom.

Each year, those children voted on to the school

council are taken on a trip 'to experience democracy in action'.

Tom says: "I take them to Whitehall, the Houses of Parliament, we even secured an invitation to 10 Downing Street. I want them to understand that they have power to make real change happen."

That's essential to Tom: "We want to produce children who know how to overcome obstacles with a positive outlook."

It seems to be working. In their report, Ofsted praised a teaching style that gives children 'an unerring positive' attitude to learning.

They are positive about the school, too.

"Students who I taught when I first joined the

school are now sending their own children here," says Tom.

Perhaps that's why he himself has stayed at the school for so long?

"Yes," he agrees.

Adding: "This place just has a special atmosphere. I just want more people to benefit from it now.

We have spaces available in our nursery. Just look at those happy little people, learning in such a beautiful, natural setting." No wonder people never want to leave.

Curriculum Vitae: Tom Panagiotopoulos

- 1998** Joins St Paul's with St Michael's C of E Primary School as a Year 6 teacher
- 2003** Appointed Deputy Head
- 2008** Appointed Head Teacher
- 2017** The school is awarded 'outstanding' status from Ofsted

MORE INFO

To find out more about St Paul's with St Michael's, visit: www.spsm.hackney.sch.uk/web