



James Allen's Girls' School Year 9 pupil Sarah Fretwell corrects the fingering of English teacher Anna Jones.

Role reversal strikes a chord

Pupils prove tough task-masters as they prepare teachers for grade 1 music exams

By Adi Bloom

HOMEWORK REMAINS unfinished, music practice incomplete. Chronic lateness means that lessons are regularly cut short. It is, the pupils conclude, just not good enough.

Indeed, if teachers at James Allen's Girls' School in East Dulwich, south London, are to pass their forthcoming exams, they need to knuckle down and do some serious work.

The teachers are preparing to take their grade 1 music exams, as part of a scheme to raise money for a new community music centre at the £4,095-a-term school. And they are being taught by their pupils.

Sixty-nine teachers have volunteered to take instrumental lessons from pupils, learning everything from the flugelhorn to the ukulele, trombone, cello and double bass. They will then be sponsored to take their grade 1 exam.

Andrew Hicklenon, the head of physics, is learning flugelhorn with one of his Year 11 physics pupils. "I chose it because it's unusual," he said. "And it has a mellow sound."

But he was unprepared for the commitment that learning an instrument involved. "My teacher took it very seriously, very professionally," he said.

"I forgot a lesson more than once, and there was a note in my pigeon-hole, demanding to know where I was. She said I would be sanctioned if I missed lessons again."

English teacher Anna Jones also found herself reverting to adolescent type during her cello lessons. She regularly giggled to cover up embarrassment, and struggled to keep up with her weekly practice.

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Anna Jones, cello 'pupil'

enough work in," she said. "On one occasion, she said, 'Now, Mrs Jones, how much are you practising?' And I heard myself coming out with excuses, not wanting to admit it had been a bad week."

Her teacher, Year 9 pupil Sarah Fretwell, similarly struggled with the

role reversal. "Correcting her was a bit weird," she said. "I found myself using phrases she uses with me."

But, she conceded, having dealt with a recalcitrant pupil of her own, she now has greater sympathy for her teachers: "Before, I'd have thought, 'It's out of order for Mrs Jones to tell us off for turning up late.' But now I see where she's coming from."

While pupils sit their exams this month, their tutees have been dutifully trooping off to take their grade 1 exams. It was the first exam Mr Hicklenon had taken for about 10 years.

"Being asked to deliver on a particular day, you live or die by your results," he said. "That's a rare experience for a teacher."

Stuart Byfield, a biology teacher, agrees. His grade 1 exams in piano and trombone provided a valuable insight into his pupils' annual ordeal. "It was very stressful," he said. "I found the whole exercise quite traumatising. You're uncertain of your ability, your hands become quite shaky and you get flustered."

"I came out the exam room thinking I hadn't performed to the best of my ability. So I feel more sympathy for girls who don't do well in exams now. You can perform well during the year, but still go to pieces during the exam."

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