

RESEARCH REPORT

# THE EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF THE HARMONY PROJECT RESEARCH REPORT



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# BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH: THE HARMONY PROJECT

Inspired by HRH The Prince of Wales' book 'Harmony, a new way of looking at our world', Richard Dunne, an educator with more than 30-years' experience, developed an approach to learning that integrates Harmony principles into the curriculum. These principles include Interdependence, Cycles, Diversity, Adaptation, Health, Geometry and Oneness.

The approach involves re-framing learning around project-based enquiries or themes which use principles of Harmony to teach young people how to live and work in ways that are sustainable.

This approach to learning has generated considerable interest both nationally and internationally and The Harmony Project is now a major educational initiative supported by the Sustainable Food Trust. It aims to integrate Harmony principles into mainstream education and to transform the way education is delivered. In 2019, a Harmony teachers' guide was developed to enable educators to better understand how this approach to learning works and how it can be adapted and applied to a range of school contexts.

The aim of this project, funded by Canterbury Christ Church University, was to explore the educational potential of a Harmony approach in different school contexts. The research built on an earlier project funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund, which involved an ethnographic study of Ashley Primary School where the principles of Harmony were first applied.

The growing profile of The Harmony Project, together with the focus on curriculum intent in the new Ofsted school inspection framework in England and the educational focus in the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals means that this research is particularly timely.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research, funded by Canterbury Christ Church University, involved semi-structured interviews with senior leaders from ten schools in England who are engaging with principles of Harmony. Interviews were conducted between May and July 2019 by research intern Julie Marshall and the project was led by Nicola Kemp and Alan Pagden. The aim was to explore the educational potential of the Harmony approach in different school contexts.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The Harmony Project appeals to schools in very diverse contexts, although a common feature is their existing 'good' or 'outstanding' OFSTED grading.
- It is currently understood as synonymous with Ashley Primary School (and former headteacher, Richard Dunne,) and whilst it is valuable that educators can see it in practice, a single example is limiting.
- There is broad agreement that a Harmony approach to learning offers 'something schools will want.'
- For headteachers, the appeal can be at different levels, from pragmatic (meeting new OFSTED requirements, developing an outstanding curriculum) to idealistic (confirming a sense of moral purpose).
- For teachers, engaging with the principles of Harmony provides a new opportunity to connect with their educational values but they need support to implement it. For children, it is perceived to be inclusive and supportive of their agency.
- Implementing the principles of Harmony in practice requires headteachers to negotiate between national educational policy drivers and local needs. However, the variable ways in which they are being implemented creates a danger that the integrity of the project could be undermined, particularly as a form of sustainability education.

## IMPLICATIONS

1. The new OFSTED focus on curriculum intent, implementation and impact seems to offer a specific opportunity to upscale and extend the Harmony Project across different educational phases and contexts (early years, primary, secondary, independent and mainstream).
2. There are now at least ten schools, situated in different contexts and at different points in their engagement with the principles of Harmony. This presents an opportunity to develop a network of demonstration schools to support the upscaling process.
3. The sense of excitement and passion captured in the interviews suggests that the benefits of a Harmony approach to learning extend beyond children to teaching staff. There is a need to understand more about how it might support teacher well-being in challenging times.

## CONCLUSIONS

Since many of the schools are in the very early stages of engagement, more research is needed on how the principles of Harmony are implemented in practice and whether there is the potential for this approach to go beyond these early adopters and be a valuable approach for schools more broadly.

# 1. WHAT WE DID

This research involved semi-structured interviews with senior leaders from ten schools in England who are engaging with principles of Harmony.

The research project was developed and led by two academics from within the Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU). Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Faculty's ethics committee on 16th May 2019. Data collection was undertaken by a student research intern between mid-May and mid-July 2019. Potential participants were identified during a meeting with Richard Dunne, who was the Ashley Primary School headteacher at the time. Our interest was in schools with which he had had contact and a spreadsheet of 13 schools/ clusters was drawn up. All were contacted and asked if they wished to participate in the research. Following a very positive response, a schedule was drawn up and ten schools participated in the research. The research involved interviewing the headteacher of each school using a semi-structured approach.

## The interviews focused on:

- Role of participants and brief biography
- The context of the school
- How they had become aware of the Harmony approach and their understanding of it
- The nature and extent of their engagement with the principles of Harmony
- Perceived potential of a Harmony approach in their school context
- The challenges and barriers to implementation

The majority of these were conducted face-to-face with the headteacher on the school site although one was conducted via skype and one via telephone due to practical constraints. In some cases, the headteacher invited other members of staff to take part in the interview. There were 16 participants in total and all gave written consent for the data they provided to be used for the purposes of the research.



# 2. ABOUT THE SCHOOLS

The Harmony project appeals to schools in very diverse contexts, although a common feature is their existing 'good' or 'outstanding' OFSTED grading.

The ten schools are diverse in terms of their size, geographical location and governance. The names and identities of all schools and participants have been anonymised and are referred to in the text by code (see appendix 1).

There is a fairly even spread between academies (all but one being part of a Multi Academy Trust) and Local Authority-controlled schools as well as one independent faith-based school. The majority are single form primaries although there are two infant or first schools and one junior school. The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) overall ranking shows that the socio-economic context of the schools is varied and includes schools in the most deprived (1) and least deprived (10) locations. A note of caution is required as the school catchments do not always correspond with the postcode location of the school. Interestingly, at the point at which the interviews were undertaken, all participating schools were rated as good or outstanding by OFSTED. This may be significant as one head explained, "we've also got a good grip on our sort of the maths teaching, the English teaching anyway, that's made it potentially easier for us to be able to bring this [Harmony] in". HT-A

# 3. WHAT WE FOUND

## 3.1 ENCOUNTERING HARMONY

A Harmony approach to learning is currently understood as synonymous with Ashley Primary School (and its former headteacher, Richard Dunne) and whilst it is valuable that educators can see it in practice, a single example is limiting.

The headteachers had initially found out about The Harmony Project in diverse ways. One had searched ‘best practice in sustainability and social responsibility in schools’, another had found Ashley Primary School by searching for schools with an ‘outstanding curriculum.’ One headteacher had done a course at the Prince’s School of Traditional Arts, others had been introduced to it by colleagues who had either trained or taught at Ashley Primary School or via networks where they met Richard Dunne (e.g. Values Based Schools).

This highlights the current conflation between a Harmony approach to learning, Ashley Primary School and its headteacher. All the participants had visited Ashley Primary School and/or met Richard and they emphasised the importance of being able to talk about and see how principles of Harmony could work in practice given their abstract nature.

*you can use the term Harmony, but actually what does that really mean? And that’s a hard thing to explain isn’t it? (HT-C)*

At present Ashley Primary School acts “as a sort of base model” (HT-D) and as headteacher, Richard, a role-model of purposeful and principled leadership. One head described her reaction,

*absolutely mind-blowingly brilliant and awe-inspiring. It made me feel quite humbled actually to see what he’s done and what he and the school community were really working on in a very principled way (HT-F)*

However, since most participants have only seen the principles in practice in Ashley Primary School, this is what they equate with the approach. There seems to be a tendency for teaching staff to hold their school up against Ashley Primary School and use this as a mirror to assess if and how they will engage. For some schools, the apparent similarity of their context with Ashley Primary School was noted as being a particular reason for its appeal.

*The grounds are amazing...extensive, large playing field, playground, access to surrounding land...The environment we are in lends itself well to it (HT-A)*

In other cases, an obvious difference in context raises questions about how it could fit.

*Ashley have got a very different community to us. So, I was intrigued to see what it would be like to introduce something like Harmony within our community, and whether there would be differences (HT-C)*

The danger is two-fold. Firstly, that schools that already perceive themselves as similar choose to engage with principles of Harmony superficially. The second is that those that are very different may feel it is beyond their reach to engage at all.

## 3.2 WHAT DOES A HARMONY APPROACH TO LEARNING OFFER SCHOOLS?

For headteachers, the appeal can be at different levels, from pragmatic (meeting new OFSTED requirements) to idealistic (confirming a sense of moral purpose)

The connection described by participants when they encountered Harmony was powerful and emotive.

*all the bells went off...chime, chime, chime... HT-H  
a bit like a Damascus road experience HT-I  
it was a kind of a lightbulb moment HT-C*

There was agreement that a Harmony approach is “something schools will want” HT-E. This raises the question of what it is that schools want and what the principles of Harmony offers their leaders?

### 3.2.1 An ‘outstanding’ curriculum

Participants contextualised their discussion about a Harmony approach to learning within the contemporary educational policy context:

*you’re always being judged against standards and results HT-A  
You’ve got to have good results at the end of it HT-E*

At the simplest level, schools want to ensure pupils get good results and to be judged as effective by OFSTED. This is exemplified by HT-I who encountered the approach not because of its focus on sustainability, but as an example of an 'outstanding curriculum'. However, at the same time, there was recognition that one of the reasons for the appeal of Harmony is that it broadens the narrow educational focus of the mainstream.

*maybe, perhaps another reason as to why everybody's actually embraced it, its one of those areas where for once you're not having to look at an emerging grade to an expected, to a greater depth...this is very different...the successes of the joys of watching the achievements in class and the enthusiasm the children have for their learning, that just says it all really (D-A)*

It is interesting that the new OFSTED focus on a distinctive curriculum was identified by school leaders as a driver for engagement with Harmony.

*we've got a perfect opportunity, dare I say it, with the research that's coming out on curriculum, and mastery learning and the new OFSTED framework... the fact that we have the freedom and autonomy to design a curriculum that is right for our communities and our children and I think that permissions thing means that we can be a little bit more risk-taking with that than perhaps previously would have been the case (HT-F)*

Specifically, the OFSTED requirement for schools to be explicit about curriculum intent has reignited an interest in the question of purpose which Harmony seems to address. A number of school leaders felt they were already doing very similar things (to those seen at Ashley) but that they hadn't connected them with an overall rationale. Harmony was variously described as "glue", "an umbrella", "packaging", a way of "tying things together".

### 3.2.2 Moral purpose

The point above might give the misleading impression that school leaders perceive principles of Harmony in a very instrumentalist way. In fact, one of the most notable features of the interviews was the passion, commitment and drive of the participants. They referred frequently to their concern about the approach being adopted superficially and the need for in-depth engagement.

*I think for Harmony, you've got to be really connected and understand that to make it work. Otherwise it will just be a twee curriculum tool that OFSTED would love but schools won't use properly. (HT-E)*

A Harmony approach to learning, for these school leaders, was understood as offering an enduring sense of purpose,

*...a real sort of benchmark for what an outstandingly comprehensive curriculum, when it's driven by core moral purpose (HT-I)  
it's like gold dust to me, it feels like it's just kind of made things make sense (HT-C)*

Leaders in the faith-based schools used different language but conveyed a similar sense of moral purpose.

*underpinned by everything for us as a faith school would be, well, this is the best way we can get children to really engage with God's creation and see him and recognise him...it's about children understanding their place in the universe (HT-H)*

## 3.3 CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING THE PRINCIPLES OF HARMONY

**Implementing the principles of Harmony in practice requires headteachers to negotiate between national educational policy drivers and local needs.**

Harmony is a complex, multi-layered approach to learning and the entry point for schools is very diverse, as is their journey. The schools in this study were all at very different stages in both the length of time they had engaged with the approach and the depth of their engagement. One participant explained that even though the approach "resonates", he is in the process of "wrestling with this" to see how it can fit into his particular school context (HT-JK). Another felt that whilst the rationale is clear, he has questions about the "bit in the middle" (HT-I) which relates to implementation of principles of Harmony in practice. The teachers' guide was identified as a very helpful resource for staff and offers a framework for implementation, although there are still questions to be worked through in practice.

### 3.3.1 Harmony and the National Curriculum

One issue raised by several participants concerns the extent to which Harmony supports the delivery of the National Curriculum

*a big problem is the National Curriculum, isn't it? Making sure we've met all the programmes of study (HT-H)*

*we've got a question here as school leaders, in terms of how much of the National Curriculum is covered and achieved by the curriculum progression that's laid out from Harmony? (HT-I)*

It was particularly felt that certain areas of the National Curriculum (such as languages) need further consideration.

### 3.3.2 The fit of Harmony in different school contexts

Another issue relates to the perceived fit between Harmony as an approach to learning and the particular context of each school. Headteachers were keen to emphasise the distinctiveness of their school (in terms of location, site, intake and ethos) and a primary concern was how the approach could work in practice given their context. The research findings indicate that however seemingly similar or different each school, the way in which the Harmony principles are being implemented is distinctive and particular. The majority of headteachers seem to be involved in a process of negotiation between existing structures, commitments and values and the principles to find a "best of both" (HT-JK) and "make it personal to our context and our community" (HT-F).

There are a number of points to note here. Firstly, there was a general sense of wanting to take things very slowly and to bring key stakeholders (particularly teaching colleagues) on board throughout the implementation process. One head noted how she has shared the principles with staff "to consider where there were opportunities they could bring those principles in" (HT-F). Another commented her approach was "so the teachers can really get under the skin of that principle" (HT-H). Secondly, there was a concern to not "lose sight of what already exists" (HT-JK). Existing approaches to the curriculum such as SOLO taxonomy (HT-B), active curriculum (HT-JK), values-based curriculum (HT-I) are already in place in some schools and the challenge is to work out the way in which these fit with Harmony principles.

## 3.4 APPROACHES TO HARMONY

The way in which principles of Harmony are being implemented varies considerably and there is a danger that the integrity of the approach could be undermined, particularly as a form of sustainability education.

The research identified very different approaches in the way schools are choosing to engage with principles of Harmony. Two of the schools specifically refer to 'our Harmony curriculum' on their websites and they seemed the most established in their approach which closely mirrors the Ashley Primary School model. This 'branding' contrasts with other schools which do not make reference to Harmony in their online material and are taking a more cautious approach (see Appendix 1).

The principle of Geometry seems to have particular appeal and is the one that several schools have chosen to start with. There are likely to be a number of reasons for this. Geometry is perceived as being inclusive and something all children can participate in and benefit from.

*what's so amazing is how inclusive it is for children who have ADHD...it's very calm and focused. HT-D*

*mindfulness, spiritualism, calming them down, producing high quality work which is actually inclusive HT-JK*

It is also clearly connected to mathematical knowledge and understanding which is an area some of the schools stated that they want to develop, particularly if it has been identified in their OFSTED reports.

At other schools in the earlier stages of engagement, Harmony principles are being reinterpreted to map onto existing school values providing "...our take on it" (HT-JK). In this case, Oneness is understood as the overarching idea with Interdependence as part of this rather than a separate principle and Geometry is "more of a doing than a principle." This raises a challenging question about how the integrity of a Harmony approach can be maintained whilst supporting headteachers as they seek to make sense of Harmony principles in the light of their school context. This is a very similar dilemma to that being faced by the Forest School movement and there is potential to learn from this example.

Even headteachers who are fully committed to developing a Harmony approach to learning have not necessarily perceived the wider significance of the approach as a form of education for sustainability.

*The next step is sustainability. ...in reality what's happened is that people are focused on the Harmony principle and sort of haven't had time for the sustainability theme (HT-D)*

This suggests the schools and their staff need ongoing support to maximise the potential of a Harmony approach to learning.

### **3.5 BENEFITS OF DEVELOPING A HARMONY APPROACH TO LEARNING**

**For teachers, a Harmony approach to learning provides a new opportunity to connect with their educational values but they need support to implement it. For children, it is perceived to be inclusive and supportive of their agency.**

#### **3.5.1 Supporting teachers**

There was a very strong sense among all the teaching staff we spoke to that a Harmony approach to learning offers as much to the adults involved as the children. One head explained that she felt it brings "the creativity and joy of teaching back for teachers" (HT-H). Others spoke of the excitement it had created within the staff team.

*there's a buzz, there's an excitement about this, it's not being viewed by other teachers as it's another thing we have to do, it's completely the opposite... everyone is just wanting to embrace this (HT-A)*

The headteachers recognised the intense pressures that teaching staff are under and acknowledged the benefits of engaging with principles of Harmony. One described the impact of starting staff meetings with a Geometry activity.

*we chilled out completely, no matter what's happened during the day, but it definitely had that impact. And we're saying, that's the moment where you feel it and you think, I want the children to feel that as well. (HT-C)*

Headteachers recognised that developing a Harmony approach to learning offers them something which is valuable connected to their sense of agency.

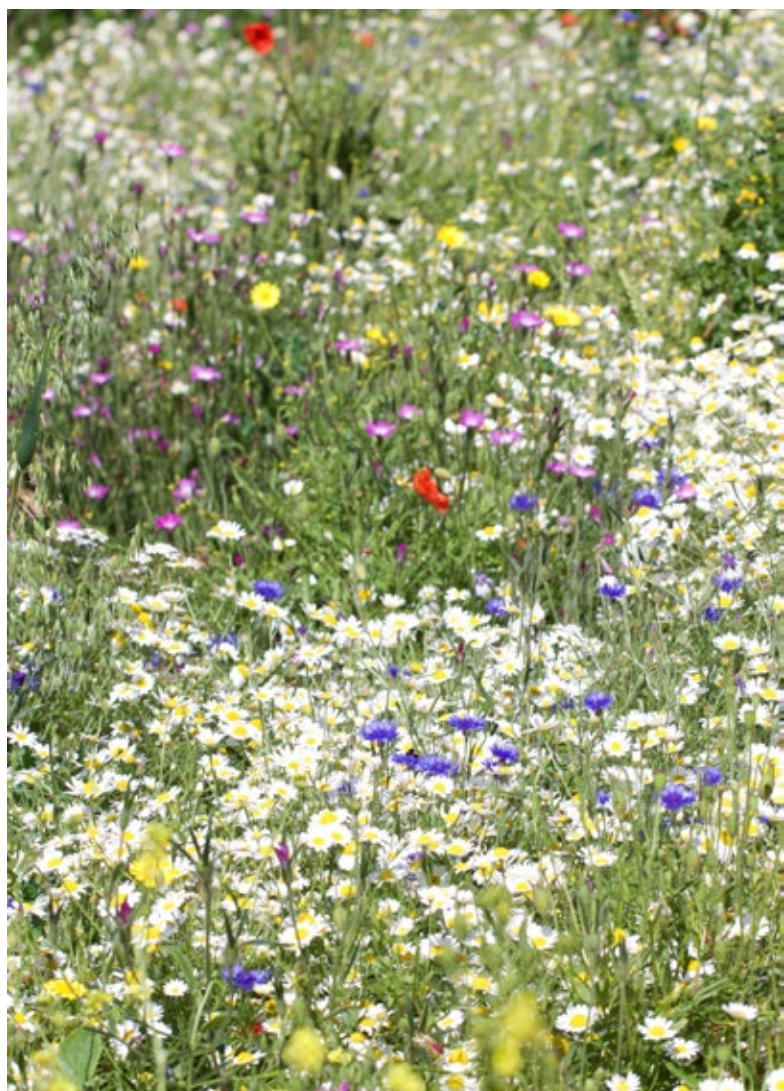
*it's exciting because I can lead it (HT-JK)*

#### **3.5.2. Developing agency in children**

Similarly, the benefits that headteachers highlighted in relation to children were very much about developing their 'voice' and sense of agency

*the children are getting that opportunity to realise that they have got a voice and that people are listening to them (HT-C)*

One headteacher spoke of how it provides them with "strategies to make a difference" and provided examples of how students are taking on leadership roles and influencing the local community (e.g. through plastic-free campaigning). Student voice and leadership was strong within all the participating schools. In one school KS2 students train as forest school leaders for the younger children. Another headteacher emphasised her interest in pupil leadership of Harmony (HT-F). A common understanding was that engaging with principles of Harmony helped "children to understand their place in the world" (HT-G)





# 4. IMPLICATIONS

## 4.1 TIMELINESS TO UPSCALE THE HARMONY PROJECT

The new OFSTED focus on curriculum intent, implementation and impact seems to offer a specific opportunity to upscale and extend The Harmony Project across different educational phases and contexts (early years, primary, secondary, independent and mainstream).

All participants within this study were very aware of the need to clarify their curriculum intent and this creates a particular opportunity to develop a Harmony approach to learning. The challenge is how to avoid 'Harmony' becoming a brand which schools engage with superficially (there are parallels here with Forest School). Participants in this study emphasised the importance of scaffolding as they start to engage with Harmony principles. The teachers' guide and the Prince's School of Traditional Arts training and resources are clearly valuable and consideration needs to be given to how more teaching staff can access high quality training and support in a more accessible manner.

A second driver is the UN Sustainable Development Goals and, in particular, SDG 4.7, which places a commitment on schools to deliver education for sustainability and education for global citizenship. Some schools are developing a Harmony approach to learning without a clear understanding of its sustainability orientation and there is the potential to make a clearer, more explicit connection beyond the curriculum itself.

## 4.2 THE OPPORTUNITY TO DEVELOP A NETWORK OF HARMONY PROJECT SCHOOLS

There are now at least ten schools, situated in different contexts and at different points in their journey of developing a Harmony approach to learning. This presents an opportunity to develop a network of demonstration schools to support the upscaling process.

Headteachers find the concept of a Harmony approach to learning appealing but it is challenging to implement in practice. Up until this point the approach has been associated with one primary school (Ashley) and this has provided an important point of reference for other

schools. However, its relatively privileged context is also a potential limitation as it only offers one example of Harmony in practice. Participants noted the need for more support/networking to strengthen and equip schools that wish to engage with The Harmony Project and the creation of a formal network could be the next step in offering this. This study has shown that there are considerable opportunities, and an appetite for, peer learning between schools. Participating schools could also form a demonstration network to extend the reach of The Harmony Project further (drawing upon the Linking Environment and Agriculture Farms (LEAF) network principle). The fact that a number of schools in this study are part of Multi Academy Trusts is also important. Several of the participants have a role and responsibilities beyond the headship of the school within the MAT. One participant explained the intention to pilot a Harmony approach at one of the schools in the Trust and then to roll it out across all schools. This offers particular opportunities to use the MAT network as a further means of developing and expanding the reach of The Harmony Project.

## 4.3 THERE IS A NEED TO UNDERSTAND MORE ABOUT HOW A HARMONY APPROACH TO LEARNING CAN SUPPORT TEACHER WELL-BEING

The sense of excitement and passion captured in the interviews suggests that the benefits of a Harmony approach extend beyond children to teaching staff. It seems to offer teachers and headteachers the opportunity to reflect on their educational values and to reconnect with a sense of moral purpose.

There was an extremely positive reaction to this research and all participants expressed an interest in us returning to the school to document how things progress (particularly those in the very early stages of engagement). This is of particular significance in the current context where headteacher recruitment and retention is increasingly challenging. Interestingly, the benefits of developing a Harmony approach to learning seem to extend to members of the wider teaching staff who discussed their own experiences. It is important to understand more about how the well-being of teachers and headteachers could be supported in a challenging educational policy context.



## CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates that Harmony is understood by headteachers as a coherent and comprehensive approach to learning and curriculum design. However, many of the schools are in the very early stages of engagement so more research is needed on the ways in which principles of Harmony are implemented by different schools. The research also raises questions about the potential of a Harmony approach to learning within the educational mainstream beyond these initial early adopters.

## APPENDIX 1 SUMMARY OF PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

School/ Participants	Website presence of Harmony	Size	Governance	Most recent OFSTED rating	IMD (decile)
A Headteacher (HT -A & Deputy D-A)	Harmony mentioned in children's zone	234 pupils; single-form entry; ages 2-11	Single academy	Outstanding	6
B Headteacher (HT -B)	No specific reference to Harmony but sustainability at core of curriculum	350 pupils; four-form entry	LA	Good	1
C Headteacher (HT- C), deputy (D-C), Year 2 lead (T-C) and eco-coordinator (EC-C)	No Harmony reference	450 pupils; three-form entry; first school	LA	Good	7
D Headteacher (HT-D)	Clear section 'our Harmony curriculum'	257 pupils; single-form entry; ages 3-11	MAT	Good	3
E Headteacher (HT-E)	No reference to Harmony – values-based school	210 pupils; single-form entry	LA	Good	5
F Headteacher (also has role as assistant chief executive for MAT) – HT-F  Specialist Art, Design & Technology teacher (T-F)	No reference to Harmony – dream big curriculum	521 pupils; ages 3-11	MAT	Good	1
G Headteacher (HT-G)& Sustainability lead (S-G)	Our unique Harmony curriculum	330 pupils; four-form entry; infant school	LA	Outstanding	7
H Headteacher (HT-H)	No reference to Harmony. Curriculum underpinned by Islamic values	265 pupils; ages 4-11	Independent moving to LA	Good	5
I Headteacher (HT- I)	No reference to Harmony	202 pupils; ages 4-11	MAT	Good	10
J & K Director of performance & partnership in MAT (will be headteacher of J from Sept 2019) (HT-JK)	No reference to Harmony at either school.	280 pupils; ages 3-11  286 pupils; ages 5-11	MAT	Good  Good	3  8

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