

Salisbury WORLD: a triumph in the face of diversity

Ahlam is an Iraqi Kurd brought up in Kuwait. She moved to London from Holland, where the family had become citizens, to be closer to her sick mother. Her children were upset – they had just started to feel at home in Holland, and were getting to grips with the Dutch language. Now they were back to square one: another new school, another new language and another new home. Two weeks after moving into a new flat they were burgled.

“It was awful,” she says, “But Salisbury WORLD helped me with the letters and made telephone calls. Without it, I would not have known what to do. It helps my children with their English, gives them a place to do their homework and talk with other children from their background. When a letter comes, I bring it to Salisbury WORLD so someone can explain it. Now, I am trying to get a place to learn English and they’re helping with that.”



Salisbury School has served, and in all likelihood will always serve, an area with a wide and changing ethnic mix. In the 1930s, it offered German as a second language in response to a wave of Jewish immigration; today, over forty different first languages are spoken within the school. It is, as the saying goes, rich in cultural diversity, but in Salisbury School’s case the tired old phrase is invested with real meaning. Salisbury WORLD has a central role in this.

Salisbury WORLD is unique. From the outset it was conceived as a centre operating inside the school that would offer support both to refugee children and their parents. Spend any time there, and it quickly becomes apparent why.

“It arose out of a necessity,” Head Teacher Carol Munro says. “We take a lot of refugees in this school, and as they arrived, we were trying to help families with little English and enormous needs on a case by case basis. The idea behind Salisbury WORLD was to create a resource dedicated to helping families not only acclimatise, but deal with very real and pressing problems that come up on a regular basis. It’s one thing to have an inclusion policy - quite another to make it work.”



Such a broad remit - homework to housing – is ambitious but Salisbury WORLD succeeds because it is clear about what it wants to do, is realistic about what it can do,

and decisions are guided by a set of stable principles.

The centre was set up with a National Lottery grant in 1998. This funded a full-time project manager, a part-time EAL teacher (English as an Additional Language) and crucially, the conversion of the old school music room into a dedicated space. Today the centre has grown, adding a part time Project/Play Leader, a second part time EAL teacher and a part time Home-School Liaison worker. Every week home visits, face to face interviews, or the after school club let the centre work with over a hundred people on issues as varied as English language support, sewing, home visits, recreation and homework support.

It's a triumph in the face of diversity. Already extensively featured in a Save the Children video, it has just secured funding for the next three years with a new Lottery grant. Through a link-up with Brent education, it is running training sessions for schools and teachers throughout the borough as a model of good practice.

The project works on three fronts: educational, social, and emotional.

Educational support ranges from special coaching in English to providing space for homework, arts and crafts - many families live in single rooms in hostels. It also helps bridge the gap between home and school - it became clear that some parents were missing key dates and meetings simply because they did not know what was expected of them. "Just think about secondary transfer deadlines which are a nightmare for everyone," Nina Chohda, the Project Manager, says. "We try to make sure that our families have the same opportunities as everyone else."



Social help is practical, helping parents negotiate the maze of bureaucracy, and deal

with emergencies. As importantly, it's a crucial referral point for all kinds of services and support – welfare, education, training and employment.



The emotional support stems from the acknowledgement that many of the families have suffered trauma, loss, live in stressful conditions, or, as often, all three. "We are not counsellors and wouldn't pretend to be," Nina says, "but if we don't take the whole person into account, we can't do our job properly. And because we have one-to-one contact with the children, we're in a very good position to pick up on issues that might get lost otherwise."

Remaining responsive is also important. "One of the most challenging aspects of the work is that nothing stays still," Nina points out. "Population groups, each with their sensitivities and needs, change, and families move on – all the time. The nature of the work is that we're continually starting from scratch."

Salisbury WORLD's relationship with Salisbury School is crucial to its success.

To an outsider, it seems to sit very happily within the school while maintaining a strong independent identity. Both this closeness and independence are vital – the centre does not support the school, but the

children, parents and teachers of the school – a crucial distinction. For example: by helping a child with their English, pressure is clearly going to be lifted from classroom teachers.

The relationship works both ways. School may be one of the first British institutions a refugee is exposed to on arrival, and so offers a perfect access point for support. Because it is local, and parents and children are there five days a week, issues can be dealt with as they arise.



Culturally too, school and centre feel the benefits. When Ahlam arrived in the school playground with her two children, the sheer size of the place made their hearts sink, but then the upside kicked in. “There were people speaking my language, and it was so mixed, I didn’t feel we stood out,” she said.

Another parent suggests that a centre like Salusbury WORLD could only work in a place like Salusbury School. Now on the board of Trustees, three of his children went to Salusbury, two going on to their secondary school of choice, the third still attending. “They’ve made incredible progress,” he says. “After the ordeal of leaving our home and coming here, the school made a real effort to see that they fitted in. Now the two eldest have gone on to another very good school. It’s tremendous.” If that is the spirit of the school, Salusbury WORLD is the embodiment of that spirit.

Abdi Farah sees other advantages. Through Salusbury WORLD, his children have been able to explore their Somali culture, and gain a great deal from that. “Quite apart from what they can tell other people about their background, it makes them more self-confident,” he says. “They take that into the classroom, and into their lives.”

Without denying the negatives, Salusbury WORLD’s way is to accentuate the positives. Doris Bancroft, the Chair of Trustees at Salusbury WORLD, is adamant about that. “Salusbury WORLD gives children the chance to explore their stories, and helps create understanding in the next generation of adults. It really is important. There are a lot of people moving around the world and that’s not going to change. At Salusbury WORLD we don’t see that as a problem, we don’t even see it as a challenge. We see it as a chance to bring the best out of people - a real opportunity.”



by Jamie Buxton

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