

Extract from

OVER THE STEPS IN VIOLET ROAD: The Langdon Park School-Home Support Service

This Introduction by Bridget Cramp, describes the work which was to become the East London Schools Fund. Written in the summer of 1987, it remains an evocative account of school-home support work, and the issues and responses it identifies are in many ways as relevant today as they were when Bridget founded the Fund.

Two of us share the work of the Service and one or other of us is in the school every day from Mondays to Fridays and we overlap on Wednesdays. We have a nice light office at the top of the Main Building with a fantastic view over London. Our door is always open in term time for the children, their parents, teachers and anyone else who is persistent enough to climb the stairs. Some days we have a constant flow of visits and our telephone seems to ring most of the time. Laughter and tears are there every day and we operate under only one simple rule. This was spelled out to me by the Headmaster in 1974 when I came to work at Langdon Park and holds as fast today as it did then: this is that we put the true interests of the child first, always. In a way this is easy and there can never be any conflict of interests, but we need experience and clear minds and, often, advice and consultation when deciding on the true interests of the child.

The Service was set up in Langdon Park in January 1984, because the then Headmaster and his pastoral staff knew that our sort of school simply had to have its own strong lifeline with the families of its children if it was to progress and grow as a true community school. In order to appreciate this fact, you really have to have a good long look at the area in which the school is situated and to see how great is the deprivation in which some of our children live and how little there is on offer for them locally, except perhaps a life on the streets and all that means. The schools simply must provide them with some measure of security, self-confidence and a chance in life. For far too many of them it is their only hope because they are born without trust in anyone. The school can and must work to provide a basis of trust, a sense of purpose and hope for these children.

The success and strength of a community school must depend largely on the quality of its ties with the local community which it serves. The local community needs to have confidence in its school and, if the school is to achieve anything lasting and worthwhile for its children, it must forge strong links which can be relied upon by them and their families. These links cannot be built by the teaching staff alone though they can, of course, influence the quality and durability to a very large degree.

The school must also have a stable, experienced and committed worker who is free to move out from the school into the homes of its children and into the community which it is there to serve whenever the need arises or a call comes. This worker must work directly to the Headteacher and the Senior Management Team. The worker's response needs to be both swift and sensitive to the demands and needs of the families and the school. He/she must be on constant call in term-time and must provide quick feedback to the school from the homes of its children. The caring ethos of the school is determined by the Headteacher and the staff and it is the task of the School-Home Support Worker to carry this out into the community.

As there do not exist many precedents for the setting up of a truly school-based support service, we found ourselves engaged in a project of a pioneering nature. The necessary qualities of the worker were of paramount importance. I think that it is probably of use to set these out in broad terms. So here they are:

- a) Experience of children and their needs and, if possible, of the East End of London.
- b) A total commitment to the true interest of the children.
- c) A sensitive approach to the school's staff (both teaching and non-teaching) and an ability to work with them in a common cause.
- d) A conviction of the importance of forging good relationships with all the outside helping agencies.
- e) A capacity for hard work, the acceptance that no task is too trivial and an inability to watch the clock.

More simply – conviction that the interest of the children come first; 100% commitment and enthusiasm for the job; possession of the capacity to get on with nearly everyone even if you don't always feel like it and, lastly, not to be afraid of hard work and a change of direction when necessary or to admit that, sometimes, you may just happen to be wrong.

The message to the worker(s) must go something like this:

Get the feeling of the school and, if need be, try and change some of the attitudes of some of the people there, but don't waste time on this if you know that it simply won't work. Get up and out into the streets and homes whenever there is a call for help – be it from a child, parents or the school. Forge good links with the outside agencies so that you can use them for the children, never consider that anything you are asked to do or anything that is there to do is not your job and, finally, remain steady under fire.

It's a great life if you don't weaken and a wonderful job with so many lovely people. And the children...