

# **SOSTRIS STAGE TWO AGENCY REPORT**

## **Valuing refugees – developing multicultural services: the development of the Camden refugee education project**

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### **1. Introduction**

This report describes the development and activities of the Refugee Education Project, a project based within the Education Services in Camden, an inner city borough in London with wealthy as well as extremely deprived areas. The report is part of a wider European funded study of ‘flagship’ agencies, which have taken an innovative approach in their delivery of services to the community and demonstrated exceptional qualities and achievements in their development. The Project described here may serve as a model for other agencies working with refugees and in particular refugee children. The term ‘refugee’ used in this report encompasses those who applied for asylum as well as those who have obtained either a temporary status (exceptional leave to remain) or full refugee status.

The Refugee Education Project (REP), concerned with support of refugee children and their families, is such a vital agency whose service development matches closely the emerging needs of a population that finds itself marginalised or even ‘excluded’ from mainstream provision. ‘Social Exclusion’ is the underlying theme of the SOSTRIS\* study, one that is reflected in the way REP is struggling to become firmly established and recognised within the Education Services.

More sadly, it is a theme that mirrors the experience of many refugee children and young people in schools, and in communities at large. Living in exile coupled by severe emotional stress, even trauma, experienced in their home country, this group of young people face a multitude of difficulties which require urgent attention. REP by building links and networking extensively with the statutory and voluntary sector works towards making the experience of refugee children and their families into one that offers mutual learning and support. It negotiates resources in support of a process of adjustment for both, refugee communities and the service providers responding to the communities’ particular needs.

The study draws on the views and perceptions of key people who in the process of their work or as members of refugee communities connected, liaised or engaged in some way with the Project. They shared their experience of working with the project, but also commented on the immense complexity of addressing the multiple needs of refugee children and their families. It also reflects the experience of the 4 REP workers who shared knowledge and feelings about their work with the researcher. Participatory observation and researching relevant documents supplement the views of those interviewed to provide a sense as well as accurate data on the development of this Project and the multi-faceted activities and services characteristic of REP. The voices of refugee children and young people are only present through those working closely with them; there was a sense that interviewing young people for the purpose of the research may be intrusive to them, especially when questioned by an ‘outsider’.

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\* Social Strategies in Risk Societies

The REP is viewed in the wider context of political and social change in the UK which affect education services in general and the settlement of refugees in particular. Changing attitudes in the UK, and at a European level at large, are mirrored in the legislation that underpins those settlement conditions. They are the fierce elements, which the 'flagship' is facing in a sea of uncertainty and hostility towards the refugee population. Its destination remains uncertain as resources in support of refugees' settlement are being curtailed and funding pressures for the Project's own survival persist. Yet, the Project's energy and determination reflects hope for a more humane and respectful approach towards those seeking asylum. It demonstrates that responsive services for refugee children and their families can be established and should be readily available in a society that claims to be caring and willing to provide new opportunities to those who seek them.

The development of the REP is traced from its modest beginning in autumn 1990 with one temporary teaching post within the Camden Language and Support Services to a dynamic and complex Project that has joined forces with other agencies to meet the diverse needs of refugee children and their families. Through practical support such as after school support, home/school/community links, counselling services, training provision and policy development the Project has made an impact that begins to be appreciated and recognised more widely. The nomination of REP for the prestigious Commission for Racial Equality Race Award in 1997 and the recent presentation of the 'Certificate of Recognition' from the Somali Parent Association in Camden provide convincing evidence.

There are 'key players' steering the 'flagship' through organisational structures and barriers, some to do with funding resources, a lot with the level of awareness of the issues involved. It appears that service development within the statutory sector often lags behind the needs of the increasing refugee population. The REP developing within the structure of the Education Services is at times constrained other times supported by a Service that defines its goals in terms of educational attainment placing little emphasis on the wider context that enables and promotes a good learning environment.

Yet, the project is able to stretch beyond those confining structures and cooperate with refugee communities and voluntary agencies supporting refugees to evolve a service that is responsive to the newly emerging needs. Those emerging needs are in part the result of better understanding and analysis of the providers, in part they reflect the increasing crisis and instability at a global level forcing many people to abandon their home country and settle in the UK. At a local level, that is Camden, this crisis is experienced as an accommodation crisis, despair in refugee communities, lack of adequate resources to meet basic material needs which has been accelerated by government policies and inadequate responses by local authorities.

The issues and themes emerging from the study are addressed, often only briefly, to illustrate the complexity which the Project has had to face over the years, and the responses or solution it has been able to find in the process.

The key elements, which make this Project so special, which are summarised in a concluding section, may serve as an inspiration for other agencies and refugee community groups to build on the REP experience in their development of services and support to refugees.

## 2. Main Refugee Education Project Activities

This section describes the various activities that the Project is involved in at this point, activities that have steadily expanded in the eight years of its existence. The Project operates at many levels providing practical support to refugee children in the school environment to engaging in policy development and dissemination of experience at borough and national level. What makes this Project so special is its commitment to responding to the needs of refugee children and families as they emerge and translate those needs into accessible services and support structures. Then, take the learning into the political structures to ensure the long-term commitment towards this group is reflected in the policies of relevant statutory and voluntary service providers. Its stated aims are to:

- Provide schools, governors and other services with In Service Training on meeting the educational needs of refugee children.
- Offer support with assessment and induction of newly arrived refugee pupils
- Develop home-school-community links
- Develop educational support for unaccompanied children and young people
- Develop policy, resources and curriculum materials which reflect refugee and human rights issues

### 2.1 Support to Refugee Students, Parents and Teachers.

#### Refugee Children and Young People

Support for refugee children and young people happens mainly within the school environment provided in a joint effort by statutory and voluntary services and refugee parents. All Camden schools can draw on the support of REP, some of the project's work focuses on particular schools, those with a high refugee children population.

REP has been involved in 14 **primary schools** helping to develop better links between refugee parents and the school. Two home/school/community link workers are based in selected primary schools, encouraging refugee parents to become involved in the school and providing a space through coffee mornings to meet other parents where they can share concerns and have access to information. It also means advising and assisting with emerging problems to do with the uncertain living circumstances that many refugees find themselves in, such as accommodation, sorting out immigration matters, getting access to benefits. The REP workers also train teachers in the particular situation that a refugee child may be affected by. By providing individual assessments of refugee children and networking the school with relevant agencies the workers ensure appropriate responses to the children's need. More recently REP has joined with refugee parents in initiating 'Africa Week', a celebration of African culture in one of the primary schools where a large proportion of children are African. In a performance of music, drama and story telling all children, teachers and parents joined to celebrate the cultural diversity of the continent.

To support **secondary school** students REP collaborates with the refugee coordinators in five local secondary schools. It offers after school support, provide advice sessions,

facilitating girl's and boy's groups and helping students in the transition from primary to secondary school either within the class room or outside in 'transitional' groups for those just moving into their secondary schooling. Supporting children in the transition to secondary school may involve working alongside the teacher within the class room and preparing learning materials with specific reference to a child's country and experience to enable the child to adapt and gain confidence within the new environment.

The **after school support** is a space for students where on two days a week they have access to an after school provision where they get support for particular curriculum subjects, help with home work or any other advice on issues that may be of concern to them. This support is particularly relevant for unaccompanied young refugees who are less likely to have the necessary kinds of learning and emotional support to assist them in their learning. The after school provision is staffed by volunteers, some of them teachers including refugees who have trained as teachers in their country of origin.

During **school holidays** REP together with the Camden Family Services Unit organise outings for refugee children and young refugees many of whom have not had the opportunity to venture outside the local authority boundaries. It is an important provision, which enables the children to have some time of ease and fun away from often difficult living circumstances. This provision also ensures a continuation in the language support during the school holiday period.

### **Refugee Parents and Communities**

The Project has an active role in supporting refugee parents to be more involved in the schools. It explains how the British education system operates, its underlying principles, the possibilities of being involved in the school through parents associations or as school governors on the School Management Board. The project provides an important vehicle for improving relationships between school and parents. In one school Somali parents have formed a Somali Parent Association to formulate their concerns and make use of resources available within the school. For example, recognising that mother-tongue teaching as a vital aspect for refugee students' cognitive development the Somali Parent Association established a Saturday school where Somali children can further their first language and learn about their own culture and history.

The communication between schools and refugee parents has developed into a broader system of support facilitating links with other services. For example, refugee parents were concerned about social workers access to their children and their assessment of them. By bringing together various parties and come to a mutual understanding of concerns more collaborative approaches have developed.

## **2.2 Training for Awareness**

Over the years REP has developed a range of training services for different settings such as schools, play services, colleges etc. It has successfully involved refugee communities in the delivery of some of the training in terms of providing training materials, and more recently, refugee parents have become involved in the presentation of some training aspects.

## **Schools/Individual Support**

REP provides teacher/staff training within schools either as part of teachers INSET training (in service training) when REP contributes to the training programmes which schools offer to the teaching staff or alternatively, as a package of training at their own premises or the education development centre. Training for newly qualified teachers is offered through the Education Services Central Training Programme.

Training off-site is provided after school and is aimed at teachers interested in learning more about the way the education systems in the refugee countries of origin operate, and the history of those countries. Such training enables teachers to better understand the students' cultural background and respond in culturally sensitive ways to the needs of their students.

Individual follow-up support is provided by a REP worker who is available during school break time to discuss any concerns a teacher may have in relation to refugee children.

## **Working with Colleges**

Over the last 3 years REP has provided training to experienced teachers as part of further professional development courses at the University of North London. REP joint Kingsway College in developing an introduction to the British Education system for newly arrived asylum seekers and assisting new parents in understanding the local education system.

## **Telephone Helpline**

A telephone help line is available for teachers and staff requiring information or support in their work with refugee children and young people. This line is also available to young refugees, refugee parents and community groups.

## **2.3 Therapeutic Support**

REP has built relationships with two organisations well known in the psychotherapeutic field, the Medical Foundation and the Tavistock Clinic. Both provide therapeutic support to refugee children, teachers and people working with refugees and have regular consultation and individual supervision meetings with REP workers. They have become important partners in developing a comprehensive approach towards the support of refugee children and young people addressing the emotional needs of the children and offering counselling to teachers facing difficult class room situations because of disruptive behaviour of some of the refugee children. REP links with both organisations through a system of referral and consultation over refugee children and their families.

The **Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture** has a long history of providing psychotherapeutic support to refugees, especially those who have survived torture. It also has a children and adolescence unit specialising in therapeutic work with the young. REP participates in the support group for people working with refugee children to share difficult experiences, information and knowledge gained from working with refugees. Through weekly supervision sessions it provides vital support for REP workers to cope with often extremely upsetting situation in their daily work with

refugees.

The **Tavistock Clinic** is an organisation providing psychotherapeutic support to a wide range of clients and has a unit specialising in the therapeutic work with refugee children and their families which is funded by the Camden and Islington Health Authority. In addition it provides support to teachers and staff on a fortnightly basis in two of Camden's secondary schools and offers individual supervision to the REP coordinator each school term.

**Young refugee support groups** are on offer at the South Camden Community School which has been developed with funding support from Camden Social Services and facilitated by four social workers from Great Ormond Street Children Hospital. It is an important provision for young women who may be less assertive in the class room context and may have issues that can only be raised in a single sex environment.

## **2.4 Agency Links and Networking**

One of REP's great strength is its ability to identify relevant partners with whom to engage closely in joint work and activities. The value of networking lies not only in strengthening working links, but also providing a more sensitive and responsive service. In addition, it increases the volume of the voices that advocate on behalf of the refugee children and young people.

Within the statutory sector strong working links exists between the **Education Social Work Service**, a special provision within the Education Service to address the social needs of children within education. One worker has special responsibility for refugee children, a post that was established as a result of REP drawing attention to the particular needs of refugee children. **The Camden Under 25's Services**, also part of the Education Services, collaborates with REP over refugee student's referrals.

There are also important links with **Social Service Department Children and Family Division** and **Children Looked After Division** with whom REP liaises over individual refugee children and their families. REP joins with the **Equality Unit** in developing policies relevant to refugee communities and conducts joint training sessions with **Camden Play Services**.

REP's main working links within the voluntary sector are Camden Refugee Network and Camden Family Service Unit. For example, **Camden Refugee Network (CRN)** has been an important resource for people working with refugees who in the early days of service development needed mutual support and a place to share experiences and ideas. It developed into a strong voice for the refugee communities ensuring refugees' needs are taken into account in the development of policies and services. The Care of Children and Education Sub-Group of the CRN, chaired by the REP coordinator, has become an important vehicle to advocate on behalf of refugee children and been essential in drawing attention to the needs of providing mother-tongue classes for which it sought funding. In 1998, 18 different mother-tongues are being taught in a variety of locations in Camden including the Saturday School for Somali children mentioned above. Most of the mother-tongue classes are run by volunteers and remain as yet unfunded.

The **Camden Family Service (CFSU)** which provides support to families has also

developed provision specifically for refugee families. REP joins CFSU in various activities such as organising holiday schemes and refers refugee children and young people to the services for advice and specialist support. CFSU and REP collaborate on the assessment of refugee children in terms of their situation and possible support needs to ensure that the schools have comprehensive information on children. The work of CFSU has been vital in carrying over some aspects that REP can not deal with within its education remit. For example, it provides a regular support group for young refugee carers, those young people who arrived unaccompanied by a parent, but left with the responsibility of caring for younger siblings.

There are many other links that REP has made over the years, which have been important in raising awareness and initiating action. At a national level its links at a policy level to the **Refugee Council** and the **World University Service UK**, both non-governmental organisation working in the interest of refugees.

## **2.5 Policy Development**

REP has been vital in pursuing the development of a Refugee Education Policy, which finally went to the Education Committee in September 1998. The policy reflects some of REP's experience in providing services, and takes a comprehensive approach towards addressing refugee children's wider needs. However it is waiting to be implemented and given support necessary for putting it into practice.

As part of a working group on the health needs of refugee children REP took a leading role in developing and contributed to the publication *'Meeting the Needs of Refugee children, a Checklist for all Staff who Work with Refugee Children in Schools'* jointly funded by Camden Education Services and Camden & Islington Health Authority. Since it was launched in November 1996 interest in the document has been growing and an up-dated version is being planned for national dissemination.

REP has actively participated in the Camden's Corporate Working Group on Asylum Seekers which has met regularly over the last two years to identify the Council's legal obligations towards the refugee population. The Corporate Group is lead by Social Services and comprises officers from the Housing, Education, Environmental Services and sections of the Chief Executive including the Equality Unit, Finance and Legal Services.

REP has work with Camden's Equality Unit on policy issues concerning refugees. In September 1998 a report to the Equalities Committee *'Briefing on the Government's White Paper – Fairer, Firmer and Faster'* expresses concern over the effects of the proposed new legislation on Asylum and Immigration. It particularly mentions the possibility of reversing the *'positive impact that the Refugee Education Project has made on the lives of asylum seekers'*, a recognition of REP's valuable support to refugee communities.

## **2.6 Research Initiatives**

The beginning of 1998 has seen an increased academic interest in capturing some of the experiences, concerns and issues arising in the work with refugee children and young people. REP has been facilitating a number of research studies to assess needs, create awareness and gain support for work with refugee children.

For example, Camden Equality Unit provided REP with funding for a study on the *'Needs of the 15-19 year Old Refugees in Camden'* (McDonald J., 1998), which is based on a survey of 27 young refugees. It highlights the difficulties young refugees face in continuing their often severely disrupted education, and receiving some recognition for what education they have obtained in their country of origin.

Another study looks at the exclusion of refugee children from schools. The extent of school exclusions has been of great concern to the refugee communities. It is a sensitive issue that REP has been raising within the Education Services over the years, without much support for looking at different responses to difficult behaviour in refugee children. The research analysed statistics on 'exclusions' gathered by the Education Department and looked at the number of refugee children identified in the special need category stages 1-3 to inform the debate on whether refugees children needs are 'additional' or 'special' needs, the latter being defined by education policies. The research was supervised by the Tavistock Clinic conducted in fulfilment of a dissertation.

A study of refugee parents relationship to the education system looking at the home/school/community link that REP is developing. The research was disseminated at a workshop *'Supporting Refugee Children in Schools: A Focus on Home-School Link'* in summer 1998 at the Institute of Education at Warwick University. (Vincent C. and Warren V., 1998)

## **2.7 Dissemination of Knowledge and Experience**

There are many other ways in which REP disseminates its knowledge and experience some of which are outlined below:

- participation in working groups such Refugee Council's Steering Group on Refugee Education,
- two seminars on the health check list developed by a Camden Health Working Group
- two local conferences, one to discuss proposals for a refugee education policy in 1996, another in late 1997 when REP facilitates a workshop at the London Local Authority Conference 'When is a Deodorant a Luxury' hosted by Camden Social Services
- participation in national conference organised by the Refugee Council
- International Symposium on Schools and Community Involvement organised by the Intercultural Studies Centre
- Camden Community Health Council
- Joint presentation with the Educational Psychologist Services on *'Refugee children and Stress'* to University of London Institute of Obstetrics

### **Refugee Week**

An event that drew together the many strands of the work around refugee children was the Refugee Week in November 98. The event showed another aspect of how REP joins forces with other agencies, statutory and voluntary, and refugee communities to raise



awareness of the situation refugees face. The workshops aimed at primary and secondary school children to explore culture, human rights and convey some of the experiences that refugee children have lived through. A seminar, jointly facilitated by the Medical Foundation, CFSU and REP, entitled '*Between the Generations in Exile*' aimed at refugee parents and those working with them provided a space for the many and diverse concerns that parents living with adolescents face.

The Refugee Week initiated by the Refugee Council, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and RefAid aimed at presenting the achievements and experiences of refugees in an attempt to counter the negative stereotyping of refugees that is so prevalent in the UK media. In Camden it culminated in a cultural festival where different refugee communities shared their culture of music, dance and poetry, exhibited their craft and nourished the participants with the tastes of various countries.

### 3□ The Political and Social Context

The context most relevant for understanding the development and shaping of the REP is the legal framework with regard to arrival and settlement of refugees as well as changes in the Education system and their implementation at a local level.

#### **Asylum and Immigration Policies**

Despite much talk about refugee's settlement, in 1998 the UK still has no clear settlement policy for those seeking asylum and a safe place to reconstruct the lives that have been uprooted by conflict and wars. In its briefing paper on the government's White Paper '*Fairer, Faster and Firmer*' the Refugee Council notes with regret that '*this new White Paper fails to address the urgent need for a comprehensive settlement policy for refugees in the UK. The lack of such a thought-through policy, backed by strategic services, leaves the majority of refugees struggling alone or with limited resources to rebuild their lives and make a success here in the UK.*' (Refugee Council, July 1998)

The hope for a more supportive policy towards those seeking asylum has not been realised with the White Paper (1998). In many ways it is merely continuing the trend already visible in Europe in the 1980's and reenforced in the UK by consecutive asylum and immigration legislation in 1993 and 1996 which restricted asylum seekers' right to public housing and state benefits and tightening immigration controls.

Yet, refugees have kept arriving in the UK. While 26,205 asylum applications were lodged in the UK in 1990, by 1998 the figure was 31,615 in the first 9 months of the year. Inefficient and slow asylum procedures create a backlog of applications with many applicants having to wait for years to get a decision. According to the Refugee Council there are over 52,000 asylum seekers awaiting a first decision on their case in 1998 and another 21,000 are waiting for appeal decisions. The average processing time is 14 months, but for some it can be years. (Refugee Council, 1998)

With the introduction of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1996 the UK affirms the European trend. Only those asylum seekers who apply at the port of entry, are now entitled to state benefits. Those applying for asylum from within the country, about half of the asylum seekers population, are denied the right to benefits; instead they have to rely on 'hand outs' from local authorities which under this legislation becomes responsible for providing accommodation and basic necessities for asylum seekers.

The 1996 Act throws local authorities in disarray, especially Social Service Departments who are forced into a new role of provider. Under the National Assistance Act 1948 Social Services are required to provide minimal material support and shelter while the Children's Act 1989 ascribes responsibility for support of families and their children.

The consequences are many-fold. In Camden the local authority faces an accommodation crisis and struggles for resources to meet basic needs of refugees; tensions in the local communities rise as new arrivals are seen to compete for scarce resources, especially housing.

## **Education System**

Alongside the restrictive policies with regard to refugees' reception and settlement in the UK, the Conservative Government introduces major changes in the Education System in the late 1980's, early 1990's. The Inner London Education Authority, at the time a flagship of progressive education policies and responsible for the management of London's education was devolved to borough level. The Camden Local Education Authority thus originated in 1990.

The changes in the education services set out in the 1992 Education Act created local management of schools with more funding decisions and control going to individual schools. While Camden's Education Services were restructured and staff re-deployed, public expenditure cuts threatened vital services. The financial crisis recurred in 1996 prompting Camden Council to freeze the education budget temporarily, with fewer resources available for initiatives outside mainstream education.

Meanwhile, Home Office funding criteria for supporting ethnic minority communities, in particular English language teaching were broadened in 1993. Initially Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 was introduced in support of communities from the New Commonwealth settling in the UK. By widening the scope of the legislation to include all ethnic minority communities, it opened funding opportunities for refugee projects which up to then had few statutory funding sources to draw on.

## **Local Responses to Refugee Crisis**

While changes in the education services took their course, the numbers of refugee children and young people in Camden schools were rising steadily. In November 1990 there were 153 refugee children across all Camden schools, four years later, in 1994, this figure had increased to 722, and in late 1998, there were over 2000 refugee children and young people in Camden schools. In summer 1998 the crisis has been intensified through the arrival of a large number of refugees from Eastern Europe, many of whom are Romas, which are accommodated in a disused school building because of lack of temporary housing in the Borough. 64 of the 100 new arrivals are children.

Camden Council feels the pressure and seems unable to cope. Each week local newspapers report on the accelerating crisis. The headlines of the Camden New Journal (CNJ) may feed into fears of local residents expressing their concerns in letter to the Journal.

*'Rise in Asylum Seekers due to war in Kosova'* heading CNJ 17 September

*'Refugees sleep in Town Hall'* heading CNJ 24 September

*'Schools in Camden are taking in extra four children a week whose families have been forced to flee war-torn Kosova and have seen a tenfold increase in refugee pupils since 1990'* starts an article in CNJ 1 October 98

*'Record numbers of refugees approaching Camden Council to be housed has forced a dramatic shake-up in the way hundreds of Council homes are allocated.'* starts an article in CNJ on 8 October 98

*'We are a small islands and with the influx of hundreds of refugees, we are in danger of sinking into the sea.'* letter from local resident CNJ 8 October

*'Refugee Crisis out of Control Council Leader tells Home Secretary'* headline CNJ 15 October

*'Camden is, however, facing unprecedented demand for temporary accommodation from asylum seekers and other homeless households which is forcing us to take emergency action such as bringing in an empty school into use'* letter from assistant director of housing CNJ 15 October 98

*'On the subject of priority housing for asylum seekers. Apart from the inequity of depriving legitimate applicants for housing they are entitled to, has anyone on the housing committee given a thought to the results of giving asylum seekers a permanent address'* letter of local resident CNJ 15 October 98

Thus, the REP emerges in the midst of an accelerating crisis, identifying and meeting the needs of those settling in Camden and trying to deal with the challenges that the new arrivals pose.

#### 4. A Glimpse at the Refugee Education Project's 'Biography'

This section takes a glimpse at the Refugee Education Project's development from its '*humble beginnings to a sophisticated network of people*' (education professional). It traces its emergence, focuses on actions of key players and relates its development to events that have influenced it. It is a story of innovative practice as well as policy development in the context of statutory services in Britain in the 1990's.

Such is life that it starts with birth, in this case of a project whose beginning is marked by uncertainty about its future, yet offering a service that is desperately needed. It starts in **autumn 1990** with a temporary teaching post to coordinate language provision in secondary school based within the Camden Language and Support Service (CLASS). At the time CLASS itself is a new education provision which results from the abolition of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1990 and the transfer of responsibilities to the new Camden's Local Education Authority (LEA) including its English as additional language provision. The abolition of ILEA, which some people saw as the Conservative Government's attempt to undermine progressive education policies, is accompanied by intense struggles and negotiations over the transfer of services and posts. In Camden the relevant trade unions play an active part in these negotiations developing a dynamic, sometimes troubled relationship with the new Education Service Management.

It is the beginning of a continuous struggle for resources, amidst a climate of public expenditure cuts in the early 1990's and a rapidly growing population of refugee children in Camden. The needs are immense and varied, but initially remain vague and undefined because statutory agencies have not faced the issues this group poses. Needs for language support, general education, basic accommodation and material assistance require a range of services and support that has not developed yet. An increasing number of unaccompanied young refugees require a thought out strategy to assist their settlement in the UK, but lack of resources means that support for these young people is minimal.

The local trade unions alarmed by the large number of children who through homelessness or non-attendance of school are excluded from education in Camden, demand a working group on the issue. The 'Homelessness and Education' Working Group is set up to address educational needs of homeless and 'out-of-school' children which is chaired by the Director of Education suggesting the issue is considered a priority. The 'teacher' in post (later the REP coordinator) joins the Working Group as a union representative and takes the opportunity to raise the particular needs of unaccompanied young refugees within the Group. She combines her two roles, that as a trade union representative and a teacher to ensure the refugee children and young people are being placed on the Education Services agenda. The Group is a first contact with the Health, Social and Play Services which later become important working partners within the statutory services.

In November 1990 there are 153 refugee children in Camden's, by 1993 the number has more than trebled to 505, a pattern that is to continue into 1998. The pressure on services becomes evident with an urgent call from a social worker asking CLASS for language support for young unaccompanied refugees in her care. The need to identify more clearly how many refugee children and young refugees are in Camden schools prompts the first survey of refugee children in 1990 which has been repeated annually. Meanwhile other

statutory services are being drawn into discussing the needs of refugee children. **Early 1991** the REP worker joins with officers from the Education Social Work and Play Services to develop services for refugee children. . *“She got them to look at interdepartmental work”* an interviewee comments on the REP worker’s initiative. The needs of refugee children are beginning to be addressed within the statutory services.

At a London wide level other Local Authorities are seeking to develop appropriate education support for refugee children. Workers come together to form the London Refugee Steering Group which becomes an important support structure for those working in the field and a vital platform to exchange information and ideas, amongst them funding proposals for refugee education projects.

Concerns for the welfare of refugee children and their families are mounting in Camden, schools seek support for the emotional needs of the children recognising that many children cannot focus on learning unless the emotional issues they are coping with are dealt with appropriately. These may be to do with disruption of their early education, trauma experienced in their homeland, or the trauma of living in exile which, more often than not, adds to the uncertainties and hardship in their young lives. Many face hostility in the communities they live in, often amounting to outright racism.

The difficulties experienced by refugee children prompt one school to engage the help of a well-known Clinic, the Tavistock, which begins to provide therapeutic support to children. It also begins to identify the needs of teachers and staff who at times become overwhelmed by difficult behaviour of some of the refugee children. One interviewee recalls that *“teachers were proving themselves extremely distressed and anxious about a lot of the refugee kids in the school”*. Language and wider educational needs are overlaid by the emotional needs of those children which cannot be met in the class room or resolved through better class room management.

Already, at this point, the REP worker becomes important in highlighting the wider needs of refugee children *“she was somebody who was picking up extremely painful cases and very very hard situations and trying very stalwartly to deal with it, but against enormous odds and without any backup or support within her own structure”* (health professional). A fruitful relationship with the Tavistock and the Medical Foundation, an organisation specialising in therapeutic work with refugees, develops who become important allies in stressing the needs for children as well as those working with them.

The Education Services receive cries for help from local schools who are unable to cope with the differing needs of the refugee children, which go well beyond educational requirements. School governors concerned about the developing crisis in their school send an urgent resolution to the Education Services asking for support in *October 1991*:

*‘The governors believe that the school cannot meet the needs of the pupils without the extra funding and call for emergency funding to be made available for the ESL Dept (now CLASS) to cover short term needs and for learning support and counselling in the long-term’.* (Governors of Hampstead School Resolution, October 1991)

Camden’s Education Services respond by extending the temporary post of the REP worker for another fixed period, still avoiding to acknowledge the long-term needs of refugee children that require attention.

**In autumn 1991** the REP post is extended for another year and now includes responsibility for refugees. At the time the 'Children into School' Project is set up within the Education Social Work Services with funding for an education social worker to address the needs of homeless children, an outcome of the 'Homelessness and Education' Working Group discussions that started in 1990. The REP worker links up with the Project as a member of the Project's Steering Group which ensure that the specific needs of refugee children are being considered, many being homeless and temporarily placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, including unaccompanied young refugees.

A year later, **September 1992**, a report entitled 'The Need for a Corporate Refugee Policy in Camden Council' is presented to the Equalities Committee and '*informs members of issues faced by Camden's refugee community with a view to developing a corporate policy for refugee services in Camden*' (16 September 1992). So far the REP worker has engaged at a grass root level, but is now accessing the policy makers. The need for a policy has been acknowledged within the Council. **In early 1993** another report goes to the Equality Committee, providing more detailed information on issues raised in the previous report, but no clearer view on services needed. It recommends, however, the funding of the teacher coordinator post (REP post) for a 3 year period.

There are the beginnings of collaboration and networking with the voluntary sector. Known for its capacity for responding to emerging needs in an innovative and flexible way the voluntary sector may play a vital part in this story at a time when the statutory services are still slow to respond. The Camden Family Service Unit (CFSU), a local branch of a national organisation supporting families in need, becomes a close partner in the work of the REP, which at this point still has only one worker on an temporary contract. With the help of the REP worker a post is established in the CFSU funded for a 3 year period "*...because she has identified the gap that existed in the support services for refugee children*" (voluntary agency worker). A close working relationship evolves providing mutual support and strengthening the resolve to fight for better resourcing. They seek joint funding for holiday schemes for the refugee children which becomes a recurrent collaborative venture in the time ahead.

Refugee communities themselves begin to organise. "*...we saw the needs for refugee groups in Camden that had no access to the mainstream, so we decided to set up a network.*" (Refugee Network member). The Camden Refugee Network provides a supportive structure for those working with refugees and a forum for parents to express their concerns about what is happening to their children within the British education system. Many parents find it difficult to understand how the systems works, but equally feel that there is a lack of understanding of their culture and the education experience their children had in the home country. The Somali Parent Association comes into existence with a focus on developing links with secondary schools with a large refugee children population.

**In 1994** the refugee communities find a channel for their concerns with the arrival of the teacher advisor at REP. REP is a team of two workers now with the REP coordinator finally being placed on a permanent contract. It is the first refugee coordinator post funded centrally by a Local Education Authority and earns Camden a reputation of advancing service development for refugee children. The Education Services seem to acknowledge the need for addressing issues relating to refugee children and young people, at least to some extent. The new post of teacher advisor has its own budget and

independent steering group that draws in different agencies from the education, social work, the voluntary sector and refugee community representatives. In contrast the REP coordinator has no budget for the refugee work she is doing, although she can draw on resources from within CLASS.

However, the post of teacher advisor is funded under special statutory provision for 'people in special accommodation' and his brief relates specifically to the increasing number of unaccompanied young refugees defined as those not living with a parent who arrive either with relatives, other siblings or alone. Because of this particular remit working in school creates conflict for the worker, who has to prioritise the group of children he is funded to work with. Unaccompanied young refugees are a group who need more than a roof over the head and access to education. The multiple needs of these young people pose new challenges to service providers and REP plays a key role in identifying those needs and seeking to address them. The links with the statutory services are firming up because of the local authorities' responsibility of addressing the needs of children in children's homes.

The closure of a children's home in 1994 highlights the differences in the approach towards this population by statutory services and REP. The home is being closed with no consultation of the young refugee that are affected. "*...they were very very upset, very angry, the children.*" (REP worker). The networking of workers concerned with refugee children allows for quick action. A meeting between the young refugees, REP, CFSU and a social worker results in a better understanding of how those young people could be supported. The young refugees are clear about their needs: advice on a range of issues including education, support with homework, and access to resources to pursue their educational goals, needs which are met subsequently by collaboration between different service providers. Vital services such as the after school support are beginning to take shape.

The situation also highlights concerns over fostering of refugee children. Refugee communities are worried that refugee children's culture may be undermined by placing them in families from a different cultural background. The alternative of accommodating young refugees in small units raises concerns too, because of the isolation they may face. Also unaccompanied young refugees caring for younger siblings can become overwhelming; questions about the parenting role of young refugees need addressing. Where REP cannot meet the needs directly, the links with other agencies ensure that help is available. Camden Family Service Units by setting up a 'young carers' project' providing regular support to young carers.

**By 1995** the number of refugee children in Camden's schools has risen to 1086 children, seven times more than in 1990, when the refugee education work started. Two more workers join the REP, both responsible for developing the links between primary schools and refugee parents, both on temporary contract because of funding restrictions. The need for better home/school/community links has been voiced by refugee parents before. Yet the work in schools, although successful from the refugee parents point of view, is not without problems. The interface between different education structures clash. REP, although 'loosely' based in the education system, is not closely linked to the mainstream structure, but is located within specialist service provision, CLASS. Issues of power and influence are inevitably emerging. Although head of schools have a choice in accepting the home/school/community link worker, not all schools feel they have the time or maybe the motivation to feed into this new service or make use of the resources that the



home/link workers offer. Developing the home/school/community link is a struggle, which nevertheless results in 14 Camden primary schools benefiting from the services by 1998.

Also in 1995 two refugee coordinator posts are established in 2 secondary schools for which REP provides joint line management with the school and weekly support and supervision sessions. These posts provide a crucial working link for REP's work within the school; they jointly set up an after school support. When the school's refugee coordinator identifies difficulties for children transferring from primary to secondary school, REP collaborates in establishing a 'transitional group' which support refugee children with challenging behaviour. Refugee parents begin to engage more confidently in school matters and provide essential information about their countries' education system, values and approaches which feed into the training of teachers and staff at the schools. Teacher training, transitional groups, after school support, home/school/community link, welcome evening for refugee are emerging and form the core activity of the REP. The Somali Parent Association have now a presence in one of the secondary school and establish a Saturday School for Somali children where they have access to mother-tongue classes and learn about the culture and history of their country.

Thus, five years after the Refugee Education Project has started, it has become a team of 4 workers. REP has widened its remit in response to emerging and expressed needs and with it has broadened the network of partners and allies inside as well as outside Education and Social services. REP's presence and the workers determination to assert some influence at a policy level begin to bear fruit. Education is beginning to look at a refugee education policy, the policy statement made in early 1994 has by now developed into a broad framework with considerable input from REP. This is represented to a conference 'Meeting the Needs of Refugee children in Camden Schools' in **January 1996**, jointly organised by Camden Education authority and the REP. The stated aims are to:

- *develop an understanding of refugee children's educational needs*
- *provide information about refugee children's backgrounds*
- *provide a framework for those who have a management responsibility for meeting the educational needs of refugee children*
- *provide an opportunity for participants to consider the implications of the policy within multi-disciplinary groups*

The conference is attended by about 90 professionals working in Camden's statutory and voluntary sector, refugee parents and communities and is seen to be a success.

While the conference marks an important achievement for REP and refugee organisations in putting the needs of refugee children on the Education Service agenda, the lack of follow up and failure to take the policy framework to the Education Committee suggests that the urgency of the situation has not reached those in power. Some call the Services attempts in responding to requests from the refugee communities and their advocates as tokenism. *"I think there was a kind of tokenism about Camden Education's enthusiasm about refugee kids....they wanted it to be on the agenda but they didn't actually put hearts and minds and resources behind it" (health professional)*

This is to change with the introduction of the 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act which forces local authorities to develop a respond. The Act which removes the rights to state benefits from a considerable number of asylum seekers, namely those that apply for

asylum from within the UK, now become the responsibility of Social Service Departments who have to provide accommodation and basic material necessities. *“Social Services were forced to take a role in relation to refugees because of legislative changes, like support for refugees under the Children Act 1989 and National Assistance Act 1948. They became providers. This was a change in role”* (voluntary agency worker).

Camden, like many other authorities with a substantial refugee population, face a crisis. Lack of appropriate accommodation and resources to support material needs put enormous pressure on Council budgets. Camden establishes the ‘Asylum Seekers Corporate Group’ to have a clearer understanding of the obligations arising from the Act. The Group is convened by Social Services and brings together officers from Housing, Chief Executive including Equality Unit, Finance and Legal Department and Environmental Services. REP becomes an important member of this group engaging confidently at a policy level. However, the focus on adult refugees concerns the REP workers who highlight the effect, which the new legislation has on resources for refugee children, a concern that is also voiced by the Camden Refugee Network. *“REP and the Network were very important in highlighting the effects of cuts on children, especially cuts in school lunch provision”* recalls a network member.

Amidst crisis there are positive developments too. As a result of a seminar on refugee children’s health held back in 1995, REP together with a range of health professionals draws up a list of health related issues concerning refugee children. The Health Check List is published in June 96 and launched at a conference in **November 1996** and followed up with training sessions for health professionals in Camden in which REP is engaged. The Working Group itself plays an important role in demonstrating constructive collaborative working. It brings together Health and Education Services, those working at a policy level as well as those working with refugee children on the ground. The collaborative work of a committed team of workers from different backgrounds and levels of responsibility demonstrates that working across hierarchies and boundaries can be successful and result in output that reflect the complexity of the issue addressed as well as the different perspectives of its contributors. *‘Meeting the Needs of Refugee Children, a Check List for all Staff Working with Refugee Children in Schools’* has attracted national interest suggesting growing awareness amongst service providers.

**1997** is a critical time for the statutory sector’s joint financing strategies for children and families in Camden. The Child and Families Liaison Group brings together Health, Social and Education Services to look at joint funding proposals. The Group is chaired by a local liberal councillor whose personal interest in and understanding of the emotional needs of refugee children and young people becomes an important source of support for REP and the much needed political backup its work.

In this year REP makes vital contributions to several seminars, conferences and training to refugee communities, reflecting its growing confidence and importance in the work on refugee children. Early 1997 REP makes an input into the seminar on *‘Refugee and Asylum Seekers in Camden’* organised by the Equality Unit. It provides training for refugee community groups who need to access information on education for refugee children. In July of the year it is involved in a joint seminar with the Medical Foundation on *‘Memories against Forgetfulness’*. In November it plays a significant part in day workshop aimed at London’s Authorities *‘When is a deodorant a luxury?’* hosted by Camden Social Services and an outcome of Camden’s Corporate Group discussions and concerns. REP’s work is seen to be ground breaking, a model for other Authorities

engaging in the refugee work.

1997 is also the year when REP earns public recognition. The Equality Unit with which REP has developed a sound working relationship, nominates the Project for the prestigious Commission for Racial Equality 'Race Award' presented for outstanding work done on racial equality issues within local government departments. REP's commitment to Equal Opportunity Policies is evident in its input into the Education Department's 'Valuing Diversity' progress report. The Education Department recognises the need for reviewing its departmental work on refugee children and initiates the Refugee Focus Group with a brief of developing a departmental response to refugee children. The Group is chaired by the Inspector with responsibility for refugees of the Education Services.

The presentation of the Award in **early 1998** reveals, however, that within the local authority structures there remains confusion over REP's position and contribution to the work with refugee children. There is no representation from the Education Service. While the Award is clearly earmarked for the Refugee Education Project, Camden's political structures appear confused. When the Government Minister Hilary Armstrong presents the Award the chair of the Equality Committee advances to receive it. A brief moment of bewilderment, capturing the ambiguities of REP's position within the council structures. Then REP asserts itself, approaches to take the Award from the Minister presenting it. It seems a recurrent theme of REP's story of having to assert itself within the local authority structure, while gaining greater recognition in the community. The absence of the Education Department from the Award ceremony prompts a strong reaction from REP worker and a subsequent meeting with the Director of Education results in a local ceremony which may mark a change in the relationship between the Education Department and REP. The liberal councillor who has shown herself committed to the issues of refugee children and supportive of REP, attends the local ceremony. She voices her appreciation of REP's work and insists that the new Assistant Director of Education takes note of REP's work.

Amidst the critical encounter with the Education Department REP pushes ahead with its resolve to bring more refugee parents into the education equation. The training of refugee community groups on the vital role of school governors results in 5 Somali parents becoming school governors with one parent becoming the chair of the governing board at South Camden Community School.

**1998** is possibly a turning point for the Project. 'Possibly' because the funding of 3 out of the four REP posts is uncertain, but the work of the project has received acknowledgement and is seen to be crucial at a service as well as a policy level. A Report entitled '*Support for Refugee Children in Camden Schools*' from Director of Education to the Education Committee suggests 'refugee pupils now make up the largest group of newly arriving ethnic minority pupils in the borough. Effective support requires the coordination of a wide range of services and agencies. The Refugee Education Project contributes to this coordination in a number of ways' (23 September 1998). Attached to the report are the '*Camden Refugee Education Policy Guidelines - 'Developing a School Policy to Meet the Educational needs of Refugee Children'*'. The guidelines cover the range of issues that REP has drawn attention to over the years and take a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of refugee children and their families as well as unaccompanied young refugees.

A meeting between REP, refugee communities and the new Assistant Director of Education in autumn 1998 feels like a step forward. Refugee Communities feel they are being heard, a seminar is planned to further the discussion on education concerns and agreement for a forum on ethnic minority children within the Education Services is reached. In October 1998 REP's hard work receives recognition from the Somali Parent Association who presents a 'Certificate of Recognition' to the REP workers which says:

*'This is to certify that the Somali Parents' Association and Somali Community Organisations in Camden value and recognise the endless efforts by the Camden Refugee Project in helping the refugee families and their children. Because of you we feel not excluded and because of you our mother tongue and identity are valued' (October 1998)*

Early November 1998 is refugee week when REP's joins forces with refugee communities, voluntary sector agencies and the Equality Unit to celebrate positive images of refugees as well as promoting a better understanding of the situation that refugees face. An exhibition at the REP premises, workshops for school children and a seminar for refugee parents and workers provide an opportunity to share experiences, enjoy cultural diversity and ensure the voices of the refugee community are being heard.

The week culminates in a festival of culture where refugee communities share their music, dance poetry and varied experience of leaving their country and being in exile. At a local primary school the REP home/link worker collaborates with teachers and refugee parents to celebrate the diverse culture of Africa. The children perform music, drama and dance for the parents and friends, which provides a different insight into REP's work, one that reflects the hope for an encompassing, multi-cultural society.

## **5. Emerging Themes and Issues**

This section tries to reflect the complexity of issues that the REP has been addressing and struggling with over the years, and in many ways, shaped the Project. These issues were elaborated by those interviewed for the purpose of this research, however, not all issues touched upon or mentioned are included here.

One of the prominent themes emerging in the development of the Refugee Education Project is the frustration and constant struggle of being 'heard' and acknowledged within the Education Services and be adequately resourced for the delivery of its services. Uncertainty of employment caused by the funding of REP workers special funding headings (SEC 11 and SEC 488) create an unsettled future almost mirroring the uncertainties and unsettling conditions of the population its serves. The multitude of issues REP targets and deals with reflect the multitude of the needs of the refugee communities which require a level of commitment from the project workers which goes beyond job specifications. As one health professional observes *"People that begin to care a lot about refugee children tend to move over their boundaries...their boundaries are pushed."* While drawing these parallels between the project and the population it serves, the extreme experiences and heavy pressures on refugees should not be diminished by this comparison.

Thus, it may be helpful to reflect on the experiences which refugee children and young people go through and think of the immensity and intensity of the precarious situations they had to face in their young lives. For many those become overwhelming experiences some of which may be responsible for the problems they experience and which have informed those aiming to find ways of supporting these young people.

Many have experienced death of a parent, relative or friend, been in life threatening situations with the theme of loss ever present. The Family Service Unit report (1998) *'Giving Refugee Children and Young People a Voice: Refugee Children and Young People's Experiences of Local Services'* provides the refugee children and young people's own account of what happened to them. Some of those voices are presented below:

*"there was a lot of fighting and people were being murdered. My dad thought we were not safe because the Zairian army did not like him. He used to help people who were in trouble, or they would have killed him."*

*"My sister had a political problem. I was arrested by the police and beaten. I was arrested with my sister. We were set free and then left the country"*

*"One night four persons came to the house dressed in dark clothing, searching for my brother, broke windows of the house, threaten to kill us. Then they left. We went to stay with mother's friends. We were very worried and frightened."*

*"We escaped to Kismayo then to Kenya. It was very hard: no food; no water. When we came to Mombasa, the Kenyans treated us very badly. We lived in a camp where my grandmother died. I miss her very much"*

Live in exile brings new problems.

*"Accommodation was difficult. We had to live in bed and breakfast hotel for several months before we moved."*

*"I face a lot of difficulties. For example, when you get into trouble with fights at school, it's difficult to explain what happened to teachers and you get the blame for it"*

*“There are a lot of people from Zaire but white people don’t like us and are racist. They call us names and stuff”*

Living in Exile under present circumstances created by asylum legislation and inadequate public resources to meet the needs of the refugee population may contribute to the emotional stress and difficulty in rebuilding life in exile. Such pressures can become so overwhelming that some mental health professionals working with refugees are now referring to a process of ‘retraumatisation’ (Refugee Council, 1997, p.26)

However, the difficult experience refugees had and may still have in exile affect refugee children and young people in different ways and may not necessarily have serious consequences on their well-being. Many have coping resources that help them find ways of surviving most horrific events caused by war and persecution and enable them to adjust to the host country despite the often unsettling conditions they have to put up with such as inadequate housing, lack of financial support or racism.

In term of education it is important to remember that many refugee children and young people may have had their education disrupted. The system of study may have been vastly different from that they are introduced to in Britain. There will also be cultural differences between those who provide services and the recipients, which may contribute to misunderstandings and be a barrier to good communication. These factors will add to the difficulties of settling into schools and for children to achieve their full potential.

There may also be discrepancy between a young refugee’s educational achievements in her/his country of origin and the value given in Britain with implication for educational progression. This problem has been identified in research of young refugees education in Camden *‘In addition, young refugees face other barriers due to the fact that previous educational achievements and qualifications taken abroad are seldom recognised in this country, they may have to repeat educational stages, requalify in the UK system, or restart at a lower level on the progression ladder’*. (McDonald J.,1998, p.157)

Nevertheless, the school environment is important in facilitating the process of settlement as the Family Service Unit report points out: *‘School becomes an important source of stability and structure as well as point of entry to their new community and to services that might be needed by the child and their families’*. (FSU 1998, p.14) In many ways the school environment has been the starting point for much of the development of the work with refugee children and young people.

## **5.1 Learning from Users**

### **Being Responsive, Building Trust**

One of the REP’s strength lies with its approach to consulting and eliciting from users what is needed. For example, when a children’s home accommodating unaccompanied young refugees closed down in 1994 REP brought other agencies together and talked to the young refugees who identified their advice needs on education and financial matters

and the need for support for homework. As a result the after school support was set up in the secondary schools to meet those expressed needs. The REP coordinator recalls working with young Eritrean refugees whose family members join over time *“that family has continued through the whole life of the Project and has quite a sort of effect on some of the more ? provision we’ve had, thinking about them helped us to develop things”*.

This approach to service development requires sensitivity, responsiveness and an ability to build trust, qualities which the REP workers was able to bring into their work. *“The Refugee Education Project, they are very close to the Somali parents, very close, at least they understand what are the concerns, what are their needs and they are trying to help and liaise with the school, so that is very important”* (Somali Parent Association Member)

### **Involvement of refugee communities**

Linking successfully with the refugee communities has brought enormous benefits to the REP work and has enabled the communities to channel their voices into relevant structures. For example, the introduction of mother-tongue classes into the school environment has been important to the refugee communities “quote”. Further getting community languages recognised as a GCSE subject in one of the secondary schools has been a remarkable achievement resulting from the collaboration with refugee community, the refugee coordinator in the school and REP.

The involvement of refugee communities in teachers’ training has been another approach with positive outcomes for both those trained and the communities themselves which had an opportunity to input their expertise into the education system. *“So what we do is, we talk to the community groups...so they are a real resource, that is where we get the information”* reports a project worker. Recognising teachers’ difficulty in accessing information he continues *“the teachers are very much appreciating anything you give them because this is such a hard thing for them to go through.”* Using refugee communities as a resource values their experience while at the same time facilitating communication between schools and refugee communities.

## **5.2 Working in Schools**

### **Transition from primary to secondary schooling**

The transition groups support children, who move from primary into secondary school and was set up in response to serious problems some refugee children had in settling in the new school environment. It aims at refugee children who have been brought to the attention of teachers because of difficult or withdrawn behaviour and been identified as needing support. It is a provision, which is available when needed, that is, if there is a sufficient number of refugee children to form a group. The transition group helps children to build relationships and *“to develop a cohesiveness within the group, a close feeling, and because the issue for them is that they need to work on cooperation and listening skills and negotiating...less confrontational”* explains a teacher.

There may have been different expectations of the transitional group amongst professionals which were not met by this service. Some teachers thought it may help children to develop self-esteem, others were more concerned about children learning to

collaborate. Despite differences in expectations the group had a value in that it *“enabled people to get to know them in a different kind of way and enabled kids to have a place two hours a week where they could be more in a different kind of way”* comments a health professional and referring to an individual child she adds *“he went to the transition group, has survived in a way that nobody thought he would for a second actually .. and because he was in the group, because staff were alerted to his worrying behaviours, and the fact that he has difficulties rather than being stroppy, he has actually survived and has managed to grow and develop in a way that we thought was quite surprising”*.

### **After school support**

The after school support was set up in response to young unaccompanied refugees expressing the need for more support in their educational development, but had no one to turn to for support. A Project worker explains *“So to support those children who had really no other support for their education, what we did have an after school support....which is still popular and well attended.”* But there were also refugee parents who expressed concern about the level of achievement in some of the subject areas. *“We recognised their underachievement in math and science”* remembers a Somali parent, who is involved in the after school support as a volunteer.

Thus, the after school support provides a space for refugee children and young people to get help with home work, but also bring up issues of concern to them. An interviewee comments on the value of this wider remit *“..to help them with their home work, but to do a lot more than that, and again, I think that’s an excellent model, really”* (health professional).

### **Home/school/community link**

The home/school/community link has been important in improving communication and encouraging dialogue between parents and schools. For the home/school/community link work at primary level the two Project workers responsible for this work target schools with a high number of refugee children where they are based for an agreed period of time. At the secondary level the REP worker with responsibility for unaccompanied young refugees liaises with the part-time refugee coordinator in promoting the home/school/community links.

At the primary schools the work with parents depends on how settled children are in a particular school. In a ‘high mobility’ school the support is practical, giving parents advice, liaising with other agencies for specific queries or support etc. In a school where children are settled the work of the home/school/community link worker focuses more on curriculum activities, preparing resource materials for teachers etc.

‘Coffee mornings’ on school premises provide a drop-in for parents and an opportunity for teachers and staff to talk to parents in an informal setting, if needed with interpreting support. Refugee parents are made to feel that ‘there is a place for them’ where they are able to raise issues of concern to them.

Although heads of school do have a choice about having the project based in their particular school, not all engage actively in the work. Where head teachers have played an active part in welcoming parents and positively encouraged the home/school/ community



link Project refugee parents have become more involved in the school. For example, refugee parents were pivotal in organising the Africa Week in Argyle Primary School. They assisted children in their performance of African music, drama and poetry. The large number of parents and friends attending the performance was convincing evidence of successful collaboration.

There is certainly an issue of power. The home/school/community link workers cannot be effective, if there is no acknowledgement of the work they do and no power of enforcing good practice. It can be a frustrating experience for the Project workers to witness inappropriate practice, but not to be able to do something about it because of the lack of power. It seems there is a recurrent theme of REP's position in the education structures.

Promoting an understanding amongst teachers of exactly the kind of situation refugee parents and their children face will affect teachers understanding and may increase a teachers' ability to respond to refugee children appropriately and prevent misinterpretation of behaviour or attitudes. *"It is just to understand that it is very complicated for the children, just to be here, without knowing what's going on, because most of the children don't know what they are here."* (REP worker)

There is also an issue concerning refugee parents' role in supporting their children's learning. Many are burdened by uncertain living conditions such as waiting to hear about the outcome of their asylum application and severe material hardship. Refugee parents dealing with an unsettled existence may find supporting the children's learning difficult. Trying to understand the different approaches and underlying values of the British education system puts additional demands on them. Often sorting out their legal situation or accommodation problems takes priority over engaging in the education matters for their children. The link worker becomes important in supporting parents, but equally help teachers in understanding the difficulties that refugee parents face. *"It is not always possible for parents to come in; so I am trying to pass that on to the school as well. So it works both ways, the school has a better understanding of what the refugee parents' lives are actually like"* (REP worker)

At one of the secondary school, the role as a mediator between other service provider became important in dealing with very sensitive issues of fostering of refugee children and child protection issues. *"I think the Somali Parent Association sees the school as an ally and social services are not always seen as ally certainly in child protection cases...hopefully our role can be to ease tension"* a teacher explains *"we also approached social service and invited them to the meeting...when the school can play a role as an intermediary between parents and social services as somebody who is familiar territory, neutral territory to every one"* (teacher)

The REP worker responsible for working with unaccompanied young refugees plays a particular vital role in advocating on behalf of these young people. Linking with the schools and facilitating young refugees involvement in their own communities provides a kind of 'parenting support' which they would otherwise miss.

### **Mother-tongue Teaching**

REP's role in getting mother-tongue classes set up in Camden schools has been vital, in particular collaborating in the development of the Somali language as a GCSE subject. The significance of this activity is best expressed by the words of the Somali Parent

Association in the Certificate given in recognition of REP's effort '*...Because of you we feel not excluded and because of you our mother tongue and identity are valued*' (October 1998). The classes are a response to refugee parents demands for mother-tongue teaching, at the same time they supports education theories, which emphasise the importance of mother tongue learning for cognitive development of bi-lingual children. However, most mother-tongue classes in Camden are conducted by volunteers, only few have access to funding. Adequate resourcing remains an issue to be resolved.

### **Counselling**

The links that the REP has been able to make with two organisations in the psychotherapeutic field has been of immense value. The counselling support provided to refugee children, young people and their families as well as to teachers and people working with refugees has been a vital resource in handling extreme situations arising in schools as well as individual circumstances. The REP coordinator receives weekly supervision from the Medical Foundation for the counselling work she is undertaking with a small number of refugee children.

One of the issues that needed addressing most sensitively before counselling support could be offered is the prejudice towards counselling or therapy within many of the refugee communities. In many cultures therapy is associated with extreme mental health disorders requiring hospitalisation. Thus, getting refugee parents to accept that their children and may be the family as a whole may need therapy, is difficult.

REP's role in making therapeutic services more accessible to refugee children and their families has been valued by the provider who suggests that "*their (REP workers) input into cases has made a vast difference, it has enable the therapeutic work that we have been doing with the child here to take place because without them putting in what we need to be put into the home situation the kids certainly wouldn't have benefited to the extent to which they've done or even got across the threshold when it started*".

REP has also played a part in heightening awareness of the needs of teachers and people working with refugees. Talking about the REP coordinator an interviewee commented "*she recognised the need for support of staff*". It appears there is a growing awareness for the need of such services within schools who asked for counselling help for refugee children as well as the staff: "*what they were saying is that they need in school support in doing this work...in a way there is a big plus to that, I mean it is good news that people are becoming more sensitised and aware and picking it up, the lack of resources*" (health professional)

### **Teacher training**

The important aspect in teachers' training on refugee issues is access to knowledge and information about the refugee children's cultural and education background to enable them to respond more appropriately to their refugee student population. "*The problem that teachers face is about the experience of refugees and how to interpret it. They are afraid they are not really confident about it*" (REP worker). Feeling unsure about a refugee child's behaviour or attitude may result in teachers avoiding dealing with a child appropriately or ignoring the refugee child altogether.

REP is a vital resource that teachers can draw on for obtaining information or be directed

to relevant sources of information. With an increasingly diverse refugee community in Camden, speaking more than 60 languages, teacher training becomes more and more important. However, time and resources for training are being squeezed. This has meant that some of REP's training sessions have been attended on a voluntary basis, relying on individual teachers interest and commitment to acquire an understanding of refugee issues. *"So, teachers who are interested may turn up when we are doing it in their own free time, mostly after school. So even if it is less attended, it's not because it is less needed, it's just a kind of lack of integration of this kind of support which is very vital"* (REP worker). The recent Camden Refugee Education Policy Guidelines may not deal with the lack of integration of training, however, they encourage schools to review their in-service training and suggest 'regular training of all staff' on issues relating to refugee children.

There may be a greater incentives for schools to introduce such training as concerns over academic achievement rise. The Camden Education Development Plan 2001 sets standards that many refugee children may not achieve and schools are forced to address the under-achievement of refugee students. A REP worker points out *"if you say that refugees are about 10% of the pupils, and if 10% are failing in the school performance, than you are not a performing school, you are a failing school, and that is our initial work with teachers, you have to do something about it"*.

### **5.3 Multi-agency work**

One of REP's prominent features is its capacity to draw in other agencies into its work and much of the innovative approaches developed through its multi-agency work such as after-school support, holiday schemes, young carers project and counselling support for refugee children and teachers.

Throughout its history making links with voluntary agencies and other parts of the statutory sector resulted in more comprehensive service provision. Issues of responsibility and limited resources may have contributed to the weaker links with sections of the Education Services. However, the problem of collaboration across agencies may not be uncommon in this area of work, as a health professionals notes: *"What we know about refugee children is that they highlight conflicts that already exists between different agencies in the community or any new group, particularly refugee children highlight problems between Education and Social Services, in between Health and Education, between non-governmental organisations and governmental organisations, because they have a range of needs that cut across the boundaries that his society has, these artificial boundaries and because they have a range of needs that are not met by statutory services"* .

There is recognition in parts of the statutory service that REP's expertise helps reflecting on the delivery of services. *"They have also, I think, brought to our attention particular things that could have been better, been handled more sensitively, more flexible"*. (statutory service worker). Yet, REP's experience of 'cutting across boundaries' has been positive which the comment of a worker in another part of the Education Service suggests *"I think, we together provide good value service, I think that the value and the quality of work is so good, because we work as a team even though we are a different department, the communication between us is absolutely clear and not blocked or smudged by bureaucracy, and I think we are all totally committed."* (statutory service

worker). Another example is the Refugee Children's Health Working Group. The group was composed of workers in direct contact with refugee children as well as policy makers and involved both Health and Education Services including REP. It required political will and a collaborative team to produce a tangible outcome, a health check list for staff working with refugee children that is unique and has generated wider interest.

#### **5.4 Working within the Education Service Structure**

REP is part of the Camden Language and Support Services of the Camden LEA, a specialist provision within Camden Education Services. At times, REP's work may have been hampered by being within the Education Services, but with few powers of enforcing its work such as training of teachers or the home/school/community link. It had to rely on the interest and cooperation of individual schools to develop the work with refugee children. Other times REP appears to take advantage of having access to the policy making structures within the Education Services and access those from within.

Initially, the Education Services did not recognise the need for specialised work on refugee children and somewhat was slow in responding to requests for help, thus the REP coordinators post remained temporary for over 3 years. Only five years into the project does the REP receive its own budget. The reasons for the modest support are unclear, given the urgent need for appropriate services was apparent. One interviewee reflecting on the schools reluctance of prioritising refugee children suggests *"I think to some extent there's a lack of understanding, I think there's a fear of understanding as well because it is so upsetting and daunting and feels so endless like a bottomless pit"* (health professional). However, Camden Education was the first LEA to fund a refugee coordinator post centrally, i.e. from its core funding in 1994, when other Authorities had not even begun to think about the needs of refugee children.

The implication of taking on board the needs of refugee children beyond curriculum matters are most of all investment of time and resources. However, there may also be a lack of desire to adjust methods of teaching and the school environment to assist the integration of refugee children. *"There is quite a drive to get the kids to fit into their system rather than a kind of substantial accommodation of their needs in order to change the system to make what these young people require"* comments an interviewee. The need for a coherent policy for refugee children had been apparent to those working in the education system and certainly REP work would have been facilitated by such a policy.

The Refugee Education Policy, first discussed in 1994, was developed by a working group consisting of a primary and secondary teacher, a voluntary agency worker, a school refugee coordinator, REP workers and the education inspector and went to the Education Committee in autumn 1998 as a comprehensive set of guidelines reflecting many aspects of REP's work over the years. But the pressure for the Education Services to address the education needs of refugee children may finally come about by its setting of ambitious targets for educational achievements. The Education Development Plan 2001 sets out these targets which may not be realisable given refugee children are underachieving in schools.

## 6 □ Conclusion

The need for a comprehensive system of supporting refugee children, young refugees and their families is apparent. Learning support alone is insufficient to deal with the complex situation facing the refugee communities. Teachers and those working with refugee children and young people have recognised that the learning environment has to be redefined to take account of past learning, the process of adjustment in terms of education and culture and the difficult experiences these young people carry, those faced in their home country as well as arising from living in exile.

A process of mutual learning and understanding becomes a necessary element in developing structures and networks able to respond not just instantly, but with a degree of flexibility and cultural sensitivity. During the eight years of its existence the Refugee Education Project has been able to translate a multitude of needs into accessible services and support structures which this report tried to introduce and reflect upon.

There has been much appreciation and little critical review of the REP's work. This is not to say weaknesses do not exist. Not all its endeavours have been fruitful or developed into more recognisable services. Inevitably, there will be difficulties when developing new services, especially under the kind of condition that the Project had to face – a 'sea of uncertainty' over resources for its work, little recognition by statutory providers of the urgent need for special services, a growing refugee children population arriving from different parts of the world with differing needs.

However, from interviews conducted there do not appear to be any major criticisms of REP's work that could provide useful learning material in the context of this report. Instead there are many voices which show appreciation of the work REP has done over time. As the comment of a Camden officer suggests *"whatever the shortcomings of the work they do, it's in many respects unique to have such a dedicated and coherent approach towards the settlement of refugee children...and the active attempt to involve refugee communities in terms of educating our existing staff and other Camden employees about the circumstances from which they have fled"*.

*"from 1996 we see changes in achievement: mother-tongue classes, cultural background, curriculum achievements. These achievements came about through combined effort of parents, REP and the school. That is encouraging and we can still develop on this to achieve better results in Camden, but other schools too can learn how we achieved this, how we collaborated"* (Somali Parent Association Member)

*"The best thing about REP is that it is constantly changing, because refugees are changing, they are flexible, it is truly unique. I have worked with refugee for 17 years and I have not come across a Project where users feel an ownership, it is theirs.... there is a level of trust."* (Statutory Service Worker)

*"an enormous amount has been achieved for the young people, really, I think it has enabled, I'd say, quite a lot of these youngsters to survive in school who otherwise may well not have survived and certainly would not have survived as well as this, as they have done"* (Health Professional)

*“they just plough on regardless of political changes and the pressure of being between the authority and the community....”* (Statutory Service Worker)

*“..extremely productive for the refugee kids and also the school as a whole because I think it has raised the profile of refugee children, but even more important than that is raising the issues and also as somebody who would take on the complexity of the issues around refugees kids which most teachers on an ordinary busy day just don't have the time for”* (Health Professional)

The focus is thus on the good practice identified through the research, which may assist future developments and help others to think about what may be needed in developing services for refugees. To summarise, the strong point of the Project are:

- Developing services in response to needs in consultation with users.
- Creating an environment that enables understanding and awareness of refugee children experiences in their home country, their culture and what it means for them to live in exile.
- Providing practical support to refugee children and young people and listening to their concerns.
- Recognising Teachers/staff working with refugee children need support/ counselling services.
- Involving of parents in schools and training of teachers and staff.
- Collaborating with refugee communities.
- Multi-agency work - A network of support that encompasses education, emotional considerations and positive experiences, including statutory service committed to working collaboratively
- Engage in policy development to back-up service development
- Project workers commitment despite tight resources and own insecurity

Maybe the Project has arrived at a point in its struggle where its work and the importance of the services developed impact on the awareness of the statutory service providers and encourage the Authority to allocate adequate resources to the work. The report to the Equality Committee in September 1998 suggests *‘it is vital to retain and widely disseminate the valuable lessons to be learned from the refugee Education Project's experience’* in the face of new asylum and immigration policies which are likely to increase the hardship for many refugees.

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