

A chance meeting at the BETT Special Needs Fringe in January 2007 led me to Norfolk, where I found blueprints for the very best practice in inclusion. This includes working with some of the world's most vulnerable children, an example of how parents and the LEA can work closely together, and a Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme with a difference. I met Jennie Price, Senior Teacher in Norfolk's Educational Psychology Department, when she visited the Special Children stand. She invited me to Norfolk for a day, and promised to show me some of the good practice going on in the county. I ended up staying for two days.

First port of call was the education headquarters of Norfolk County Council's remarkable Gateway Refugee Protection Programme. The resettlement programme is Norfolk's response to a Home Office-run scheme which grants full protection and refugee status to people considered by the United Nations Refugee Agency to be living in extremely vulnerable conditions. After months of preparation, inter-agency planning and cooperation, 15 families, with a total of 21 school age children, arrived in Norwich. They had come directly from refugee camps in Zambia, having fled their homes in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo.

Many of the families had experienced or witnessed unspeakable horrors in their homeland. Few of the children had any experience of formal schooling, and some had been born in the refugee camps. Many refugee families suddenly arrive in the UK, and many UK schools find that they suddenly have to deal with children who have been traumatised and with little formal educational experience. What makes the Norwich experience different is the careful planning that was involved by all agencies to ensure that these families and their children were properly catered for, and that the children in particular would have appropriate educational experience.

'Appropriate experience' did not mean going immediately to school. Norwich LEA set up two temporary classrooms in a local health centre, and it was here that I met the remaining 12 children who had not yet been placed in mainstream schools. English language support teachers Lisa Reynolds, Jenny Girvin and their colleagues had transformed the rooms into vibrant workspaces, with attractive displays, a laptop computer, books, games and various pieces of equipment you would find in any classroom. Their aim was to give the children and teenagers as much preparation as they could for life in school, as well as provide them with as much English as possible. This preparation includes learning how to work together in a group, lining up, and putting your hand up before you speak.

Observing the group for the first time, it became clear to me just how many of the skills and abilities that we take for granted in our schools are not learned naturally, but need to be taught. Understandably, most of the children needed help with cutting with scissors, using glue sticks and, quite naturally, writing in English. What was very surprising was the children's genuine inability to make representational drawings. "The children seemed able only to 'draw' using a ruler", explained Lisa. "It seemed that they had had no experience of experimenting with making marks on paper or drawing what they could see."

.As part of my visit I brought along a 'Storysack' to use in a storytelling session, based on Eileen Browne's picture book, 'Handa's Surprise', about a young girl in a Kenyan village who sets off on a walk with a basket of fruit. The children were very enthusiastic about the fruit I brought, the 'Handa' doll, the soft toys and the book. After I left they did some close observational drawing of the fruit, and Lisa reported that this was the first time that many of the children had made drawings that were in any way represented recognisable objects.

As soon as it is judged appropriate, and as soon as a place becomes available, the children are placed in local schools. Staff from the Gateway support the family prior to their initial visit and, where necessary, during the early part of the placement. Five-year-old Mbilia was very fearful and anxious when she arrived at the Gateway, and clung to the adults for comfort. When I visited her at her new school, Mousehold First School and Nursery, I could see that the Gateway staff's careful nurturing had paid off. Head Teacher Cathy Whalen was very enthusiastic about the support that had been offered to Mbilia's family since they had arrived in Norwich. This had undoubtedly helped Mbilia settle in so quickly.

From my own observation however, I could see that much of the success rested on the welcoming and inclusive ethos of the school, the way the curriculum is planned and delivered, and the high standards of behaviour expected throughout the school. The school has a stable population, but Cathy explained that Mbilia's arrival was not seen as a problem. "At Mousehold we encourage children to learn by doing, and to work together on problem solving. This is exactly the right context for children from other cultures to learn English. If they have had little experience of school then they will quickly learn to socialise. We celebrate different cultures and languages as a natural part of our curriculum, even though we have relatively few children who are learning English as an additional language. All of these things have helped Mbilia settle in quickly, make friends and start to speak English."

I saw this for myself the next day when I returned to give a storytelling session to the whole school. Mbilia was keen to get involved, and regularly put her hand up to be chosen. She seemed completely at ease with standing in front of the whole school and joining in the story. In a follow-up close observational drawing session she worked alongside other children, and had clearly been accepted by her peers and was beginning to make friends.

Across the city at a Scout Association centre I was able to see and hear about more examples of best practice. Youngsters from The Clare School's sixth form and year 11 were taking part in the second stage of their Duke of Edinburgh Award. The Clare School is Norfolk's only all-age special school for pupils with physical disabilities; many of whom have complex medical and learning needs. I was quickly surrounded by a large group of youngsters who had been briefed that a journalist was coming. Ian, Wendy and Jonathan

seemed to have elected themselves to be the spokespeople for the group, and were clearly ready to have their say.

“We see today as a trial run for the real thing”, explained 16- year- old Ian. “We have to plan and design a shelter, and then build it for ourselves. If it all goes horribly wrong then we know how to crack it for the next time... apparently” I asked Jonathan why he was getting involved in the scheme. “To have fun really... and to build up your skills and confidence. We have learned to read maps and use a compass. You could do this at school, but it’s fun to do it outside with your mates. “

I assumed that the Bronze level, which everyone had passed in the previous year, would be the easiest level. Wendy soon put me straight. “Not at all. Bronze is the most difficult because you don’t know anything, but at the Gold level you can use information from before and build on it.” Ian described how teamwork would be important for achievement of the Gold Award. “We will go on an eight mile hike, and everyone will have different roles, like map reading. Some of us will walk, while other will wheel themselves or be pushed.”

And had there been any scrapes? We’ll gloss over the melting plastic table incident, which Wendy and Jonathan described in some detail and with a lot of laughter, but I can report on the problem of being in a wheel chair and camping in the rain. “Last year we were setting up tents in the rain”, explained Wendy. “All the ‘wheelchairs’ had to go indoors. Only Ian and the staff could do it. It was well funny. Ian had all the right gear, but not me. I had to wear bin bags!”

Listening in on the conversation were two parents, Ian Middleton and Anna Gill, who were instrumental in setting up another local initiative: Family Voice Norfolk. They described how they and other parents worked closely with officers from Norfolk LEA to ensure that parents of children with additional learning needs and disabilities were properly represented, had a chance to make their views known and could therefore influence decision making.

Before we started our conversation about Family Voice Norfolk they wanted to praise the enormous efforts of all the many staff and volunteers involved in making sure the youngsters at the camp had the best possible experience. “Last year it poured with rain, but the youngsters were adamant that they were going to sleep outside in tents. All the adults made every effort to make sure this happened”.

Family Voice Norfolk was launched only six months ago, and emerged from a number of parent support groups that were initially encouraged by Norfolk LEA. Ian Middleton chaired what was then known as ‘The Approach Group’. Parents were encouraged to come to the group and meet professionals from various agencies who made decisions that affected the education and provision for children with disabilities. “Parents had the opportunity to explain to the decision makers how their decisions had affected the families. Sometimes a lot of steam was let off by the parents, but the Approach Group had an important function,” explained Ian.

The LEA funded four parents to attend a major conference on parent partnership. They were accompanied by Stuart Marpole, then Head of Norfolk's Children and Disability Service. ("Nothing would have happened without Stuart's involvement"). Stuart arranged for the parents to meet a representative from Contact-A-Family, who gave guidance on how to set up and chair effective open meetings, and helped them by giving an overview of what was happening in parents' groups nationally. Although Family Voice Norfolk has only been officially in existence for a few months, they already have a committee of 12 and a rapidly increasing membership.

Wendy and Ian spoke enthusiastically about the way the group has evolved, and how support from the LEA has been vital. "We now have parents-only meetings, where parents can discuss difficulties they are experiencing, like their children's incontinence. Parents will swap ideas, and this may lead to a parent deciding to lead a group on this subject, including doing research. This has led to a workshop on how to deal with incontinence".

Ian, Wendy and other parents are now asked to work on review groups, and participate in projects such as developing services for child and adolescent mental health needs and strategic planning. As much as anything else Ian sees parental involvement as being cost effective: " If professionals are looking at implementing a particular project that will have an impact on families and services, we can say "Hang on a minute! This might be the right decision from your point of view, but from where the parents are sitting, we are not so sure!" "

But do the decision makers listen to the parents? Wendy and Ian were very definite about this point. " We have our 'champions' in the LEA and NHS. We know who they are, and they know that we know. Our local MP, Charles Clarke, has been very supportive as well. He was informed of an issue that apparently couldn't be resolved for at least seven months. He got involved and it was sorted in three hours."

In two days one can only get a snapshot of what is happening in schools and services for children, but I left Norwich having seen what is possible when people with determination and vision work together. To find out more about what is happening in Norfolk to support children and young people with additional needs, and to meet national groups and companies, hear speakers and take part in discussion, readers are invited to attend 'Make a Difference', Norfolk's major annual SEN conference and exhibition, which is held in September every year.

For more details contact Irene Hoare, conference administrator, on 01603 671400 or email irene.hoare@norfolk.gov.uk.

Michael Jones is an educational consultant and writer.

A detailed account of The Clare School's study support programme will appear in a future addition of Special Children.