

Niro

Contributed by Jeannie MacMeekin

Niro arrived from Sri Lanka in 2002 to join her father who had already been working here with his brother for some time. She has an older brother in Y11 at another local school and a younger brother in Y9 at the same school. All three siblings had been in private schools in Sri Lanka with the older two passing scholarships to help with their fees. Niro herself was not the top of her class of 75 but about 9th. She had been having a 45 minute English lesson every day for 4 years before she arrived in the UK, as well as learning Sinhalese as a second language. Her Tamil is highly developed and she continues to read and write in her first language on a regular basis, including writing poetry in Tamil. It took three months for the family to find a school which would admit the children, with her older brother not started at his school for another 2 months. The school is an improving comprehensive close to the M25 with approximately 1000 on the roll. There are large numbers of Italian and Turkish speakers, and some black African and Afro-Caribbean pupils. There are very few Asians. There is one EMA teacher 2 days a week, who liaises with the Learning Support team. Many of the temporary staff are older Commonwealth teachers who are often quite familiar with teaching EAL pupils.

Niro's parents are both well educated and she has aunts and uncles who are engineers and other professional workers. Her grandfather was a headmaster. Her mother does not work, and finds English life rather intimidating, preferring to rarely venture out. Her father has a poorly paid job in a petrol station, having been a district officer in Sri Lanka. The family is highly ambitious, wanting Niro to become a doctor, her older brother an accountant, and the younger brother a computer engineer.

Initially Niro found her new school very frightening and strange. She found the mixed environment hard to cope with and there was an early incident at school where one of the boys touched her in the classroom and she became hysterical. Her father complained to the school and all the boys in her year were harangued in assembly. This rather backfired, as it meant for some months Niro became a reviled pariah and the butt of much unpleasantness. Even many of the otherwise quite supportive staff were enraged, as they felt the incident had been quite harmless, and were unable to appreciate how Niro must have felt, coming from a society where she would not normally have come into any contact at all with boys of her own age. All this has finally subsided, and although the boys remain wary things are more relaxed. She has befriended a newly arrived and very relaxed Zulu speaker, and this relationship has given Niro more confidence.

At first Niro did not speak at all, even when directly asked a question. Eventually most teachers gave up. Gradually she began talking to the group of buddies the Head of Year had supplied her with. These girls have been consistently loyal and supportive. Initially they all found her pronunciation impenetrable, as well as the speed of delivery. Also the "tune" of her English often made Niro seem very blunt and judgemental which others found very off-putting.

Fortunately Niro's ability in Maths has enabled the staff to recognise that she does indeed have great potential. The Maths department have been very encouraging, putting her into the top group immediately, despite the difficulties she had understanding many of the word problems. She has been part of the gifted and talented maths programme. Also the English department has recognised that her understanding was not reflected by her written ability. (she got a level 4 in her English SATs, but a level 7 in her Maths). She was put into one of the parallel top English sets. Before any of the speaking assessments, her teacher very sensitively discussed with the class in Niro's absence, how N. must be feeling and got the potentially very volatile group to give Niro their full support. They positively willed her to succeed. It is also a tribute to Niro that she had the courage to stand up on the first occasion, not long after the problematic Y9 boys' assembly. Recently her group oral presentation on Romeo and Juliet earned her an A* for her English coursework folder.

Unfortunately the Science department felt they could not justify a place for her within the triple Science classes so she was placed in a double science group, although her consistently high marks in the modular exams have caused some heart searching now. Finally after a year in group 7 she was moved into the top set where she clearly belonged from the beginning.

Niro was encouraged initially to write notes and comments in Tamil alongside her English work, and staff went out of their way to praise her for her efforts to keep up in this way. In Science and Geography she was encouraged to keep a glossary of terms in both languages at the back of her book. Her history teacher made a conscious effort to include the role of Asian soldiers in the 1st World War. Her form tutor encouraged the form to look at bilingualism as an exciting asset rather than a handicap denoting stupidity. (Since many pupils in her form have dual heritages, this has in fact raised the self-esteem of others in the class, and they are more willing to admit to speaking other languages at home.)

EMA support for Niro has continued as she initially had so many social problems within the school and felt very marginalized. Because the coursework system is so alien and unfamiliar to her, it was felt that this justified the continued support to raise Niro's projected grades from their initial E to the more realistic C/B. The EMA teacher made home visits to reassure the family, met with Niro's father to report on school progress, and provided material at the early stages of Niro's integration into school, giving background information, and suggestions for ways to make the curriculum more culturally familiar.