



# Addressing inequalities in schools in East London

## Establishing a Somali Parent Liaison Officer position at Morpeth School

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INCLUSION

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## 1.0 Introduction

This report provides an overview of an intervention that was rolled out in Morpeth Secondary School (MSS) in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets (LBTH), East London, as a collaboration between the school and Women's Inclusive Team (WIT)[1]. It highlights how the intervention came about, what made and continues to make it successful and suggests what may be necessary going forward to both continue to roll it out within MSS and potentially replicate it in other schools in LBTH and beyond.

To document the experiences of this intervention, WIT worked closely with a researcher from Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), the author of this short report. Working with communities and community-based organisations in LBTH is at the heart of QMUL's engagement strategy, hence this process fitted well with QMUL's overall strategy and its focus on addressing inequalities and working locally [2].

In collaboration between WIT and the lead researcher, a set of people were identified who were then interviewed by the lead researcher. Those interviewed included teachers, students, parents and members of WIT - a total of 8 people were interviewed. Through using a semi-structured interview guide, similar questions were asked to the different kinds of respondents, with differing emphases based on their knowledge and experiences of the intervention and its background.

All respondents gave their informed consent to be interviewed. Interspersed in this document are quotes from the respondents; additionally, words or sentences written within quotation marks in the main narrative represent the expressions used by the respondents.



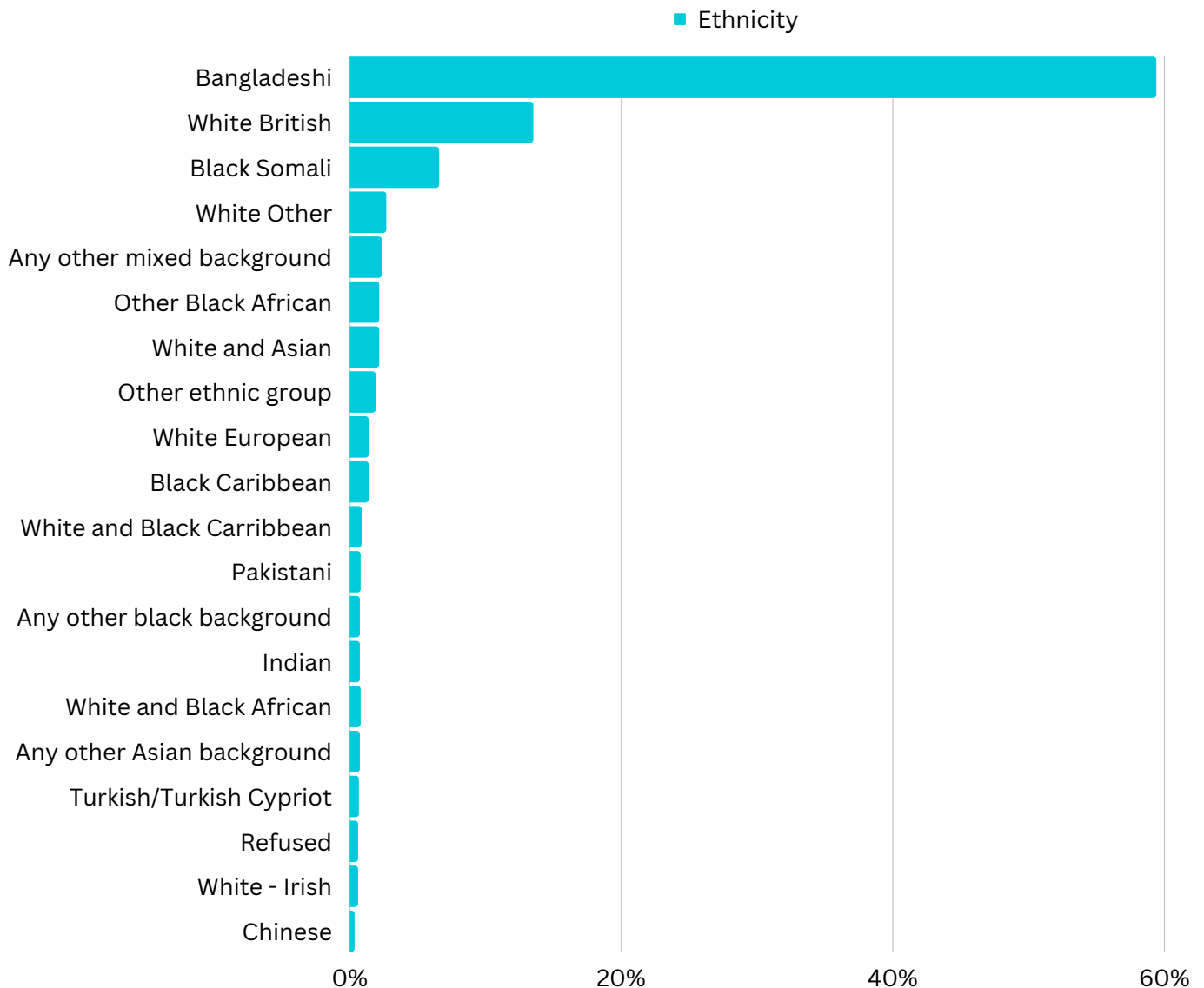
Coffee morning at Morpeth School © Morpeth School



### 1.1 Morpeth Students

To briefly situate MSS [3], based in Bethnal Green, the school includes a sixth form and covers ages 11-18. Reflecting the diversity of the neighbourhood, MSS has a majority of students from Bangladeshi backgrounds (approximately 59%), followed by White British (13%) with the Somali students representing 7% of the student population (see Chart 1). It has approximately 1500 students and a total of 261 staff (including teaching and non-teaching staff).

Chart 1: Student ethnicity breakdown (years 7 -13) (March 2023)



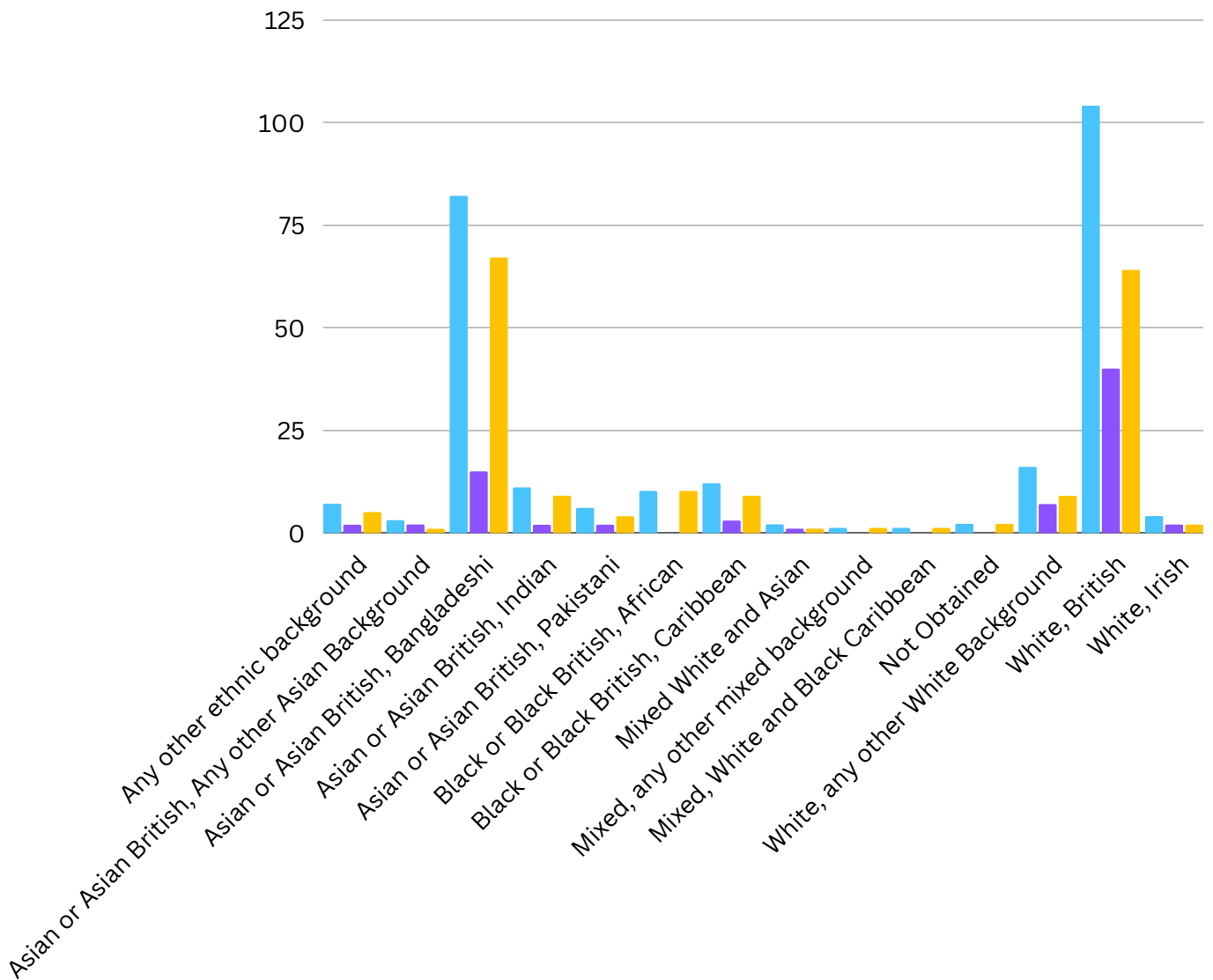


## 1.2 Morpeth Staff

See Chart 2 for ethnicity and gender breakdown of staff. Given the focus of this short report, it is useful to note that the Somali staff are included within the 10 female 'Black or Black British, African' category and there are 4 of them. In addition to having thematic departments, MSS also has a Student Development Suite (SDS) which provides wellbeing support to students, including through externally funded projects (e.g. Place2Be [4]).

Chart 2: Ethnicity and gender breakdown of MSS staff (2023)

Ethnicity | All - Blue | Male - Purple | Female -Yellow



In the next section the background to the intervention is briefly described. The report then moves on to outline what the parent-liaison officer does, the ingredients that make the position successful and going forward, what is necessary to sustain, improve and replicate the intervention.

## 2.0 Background to intervention

In 2021, WIT conducted a survey on racism in response to complaints from children and their parents about racist incidents in schools. The survey found that 74% of the 252 children and young people in East London between the ages of 5 and 16 who participated in it, felt they were not treated fairly in comparison to their peers and 41% reported having encountered racism. In response to these shocking results, WIT co-hosted a conference with Barnardos where local schools were invited to discuss possible solutions and recommendations. The collaboration between WIT and MSS began when the school contracted WIT services in response to ongoing incidents.

According to respondents, the specific intervention at MSS came about because of a small group of students in 2019/2020 - mostly from the Somali community and mostly girls from sixth form - speaking out about the bullying they had been facing. This was happening in and out of school, largely from other students and especially from Bangladeshi students. They spoke about 'name calling', 'being discriminated' and being 'targeted'.

These experiences had been going on for some time and had been affecting their academic as well as personal life. Students reported that they were 'scared of being confronted', that they just went straight to their classes and then went home and that things were so bad that 'they wanted to leave Tower Hamlets as soon as they finished school'.

Parents also reported that their children stopped going to school, 'they (their children) felt intimidated' and their (school) 'performance wasn't there'. Parents also observed that what happened had a large effect on their children's confidence ('till this day [name] still talks about it...[name] is still not back to where they were').

It had reached a stage, therefore, when the students felt they needed to 'speak out', to make their voices heard more loudly. Students felt that their concerns had not been taken seriously enough and that the measures put in place (e.g. a separate space was provided for the students in question to take their breaks away from the rest of the 6th form students) were not sufficient ('nothing was being done').

Students also wanted more of a concerted response from the school authorities and wanted it to 'live up to its zero tolerance policy'. Similarly, they 'did not want to see younger kids going through (what they had gone through)' and, according to parents, they 'wanted some answers'. They bravely approached the senior leadership team (SLT) at the school and spoke about the difficulties they had been facing.

*'it was an outpouring of frustration and emotion .. (the students) very articulately put forward the frustrations they had and were very clear on where they think the school had not supported them in the way that they could have done ..' (MSS)*

The SLT listened and were shocked by their accounts and started discussing and reflecting on what could be done to address these issues. This also built on other efforts that had already been underway at MSS, e.g. the Active Bystander programme, given to all students and teachers, which trains in how to intervene when instances of harmful and abusive behaviour are observed [5].

It is also important to note that this came at a time when other MSS students had also spoken out about other forms of discrimination, including homophobia and sexual harassment they had been facing. It was also a moment in time where, beyond the school, both nationally and globally, anti-racist movements were gaining prominence including, for instance, the Black Lives Matter Movement. It was also when the 'Everyone's invited' [6] website was set up, when the Sara Everard case happened, and it was also at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic and going into the first lockdown.

With these experiences coalescing and as part of their response to the situation, MSS dealt with the immediate needs of the girls (e.g. mental health and mentoring support), including meeting with the families, but they also reflected on longer term support that was needed and reached out to WIT for help. WIT was already known to MSS, members of WIT had children attending MSS and WIT had been approached previously to intervene when the school had faced difficulties with Somali students.

This reaching out was seen as very welcome by WIT. Not only did it mean admitting there was a problem, but in reaching out to WIT, an organisation which is firmly embedded in, and has the trust of, ethnic minority communities in LBTH, the school acknowledged the role that community-based organisations can play in supporting teachers, students as well as parents.

*'We wanted to hear from someone in the community, because we felt under-equipped when dealing with racism between Bengali and Somali, and other students, we felt we wanted some other input around that ..' (MSS)*

*'(WIT) was very supportive and incredibly pleased that we had been honest enough to say we need help .. they (WIT) had done a lot of thinking in dealing with brown on black racism, an issue not specific to our school but across Tower Hamlets' (MSS)*

*'We wanted to support the individuals but also use the learning as a school to move forward ..' (MSS)*

At the time WIT supported the students in getting their voices heard; they also listened to their parents, who were also deeply shocked by what had been happening. Consultations thus started with WIT and MSS to discuss what could be done on a more permanent basis to address these problems. The voices and opinions of the students and the parents were also included in these consultations. This led to the establishment of the Somali parent liaison officer (SPLO).

### 3.0 The Somali Parent Liaison Officer (SPLO)

The foremost aim of the SPLO position, as the name implies, was to act as a go-between for Somali parents, students and teachers. As identified by both teachers and parents, prior to this position, it appears that communication between teachers and parents, and especially those from the Somali community, was limited – and this was not always about language as many parents speak English. It was suggested that this limited communication led to, amongst other things, problems with Somali school children escalating when they may not have done otherwise.

It was also thought that better communication might also encourage the parents themselves to engage more with their children to understand what was happening in the school environment (why, for instance, ‘their child might be getting detentions every week’). More broadly, it was hoped that improved communication could also be another element or tool to support the prevention of racism within MSS that some students were experiencing.

Thus in September 2021 the SPLO position was initiated. WIT identified the person to take up this position from amongst their existing staff. Criteria for their selection included that they had to be from the Somali community, they had to be trusted, have good communication skills and have some experience of working with youth. The person they identified had all of these and was also working in a Somali female youth project at the same time as taking on the SPLO position. Some of these female youth were also in MSS.

Currently, there is no fixed job description for this post - there are plans to have the job description in place by the start of the third year of operation (September 2023). Given that this position, focusing specifically on the Somali community (to the knowledge of MSS and WIT), had not existed in other locations in LBTH, it was very much based on the spirit of learning and adapting to circumstances and situations as and when they were faced. This co-construction and adaptation of the post came about through discussion and reflection between MSS, WIT, the SPLO as well as the Somali families through the coffee mornings.

*'It (the role/job description) was co-constructed, it involved lots of meetings, lots of discussions, lots of checking-in, from all sides, how is this working, does this feel the right thing to do, we made tweaks along the way, lots of reviews ... the community also wanted to contribute so (we got feedback) from them during coffee mornings on how to improve ...' (MSS)*

#### 3.1 Who the SPLO sees and how they support

The SPLO sees parents, students and teachers. Communication with parents is through a WhatsApp group and it is often about setting up a meeting between teachers (including the head teacher) and parents, with parents requesting the SPLO's support during the meeting.



The SPLO speaks to parents on behalf of the teacher and/or school. The WhatsApp group is also a platform through which the SPLO shares other school-related information. Teachers also see parents at the coffee mornings (see below) and other activities, such as fundraising events, are organised with Somali parents.

The SPLO meets the students directly through being in the school during breaks, seeing them in the playground and 'greeting them and saying hello, how are you guys, remember I'm here if you need anything'. This also results now in students directly approaching them and saying they want to speak to them, including during class time. Teachers also get in touch directly (usually by email or phone) with the SPLO including to set up a meeting to discuss a particular student, including with the student's family if necessary.

The SPLO sees between 2 to 10 cases per week where they are contacted by a combination of students, parents and teachers. Often the same teacher will contact them a number of times if it is about the ongoing behaviour of a student or group of students in their class. According to respondents, MSS draws on the support of the SPLO when other interventions have not worked or have not had a sustained benefit. Equally the school contacts the SPLO when the issues are more severe. Although both boys and girls face difficulties at schools, it appears that when the SPLO is involved, it is mostly related to boys. It also appears that the students the SPLO deals with often come from homes when the father and mother are no longer together.

Thus the SPLO provides support to students, parents and teachers as separate groups, but also, importantly, facilitates communication between these 3 groups of people. The SPLO also links students up with other service providers outside the school including, for instance, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).



Morpeth 6th Form, Wessex canteen @ Ilham Yusuf

### 3.2 Conditions / features of the work

Here we outline a few conditions of the work, focusing on the processes and how it functions.

#### Service level agreement (SLA)

A service level agreement has been set up between WIT and MSS where WIT invoices MSS for the work carried out by the SPLO. MSS also funds management time for other WIT staff to engage in regular discussion and reflection. The post is viewed as a form of secondment, partly based in WIT and partly in MSS, with the post benefiting from both institutions (e.g. the SPLO has email addresses from both WIT and MSS). The position was referred to as 'bridging the gap between a mainstream provider and a community-based organisation'.

#### Length of contract

In the first instance the contract / service level agreement was for 2 terms; it was then extended for another term. After the first year it was extended annually.

#### Place of work

Currently there is no fixed office in MSS for the SPLO (see way forward), so they use the careers office when it is free. The SPLO also walks around during the break times observing and checking-in informally with students, and, as mentioned above, parents get in touch with them through their mobile phone and through a WhatsApp group.

#### Working hours / days

The SPLO's working hours at the time of this briefing were 15 hours per week, of which 9 hours were based at the MSS and the rest worked from home or at the WIT offices [7]. Usually the SPLO works 3 days a week in MSS for 3 hours each day; the days worked are usually Mondays (09.30-12.30), Wednesdays (11.30-14.30) and Fridays (09.30-12.30).

These hours at MSS coincide with break or lunch times, so students can approach the SPLO if necessary, without missing class. The SPLO is also flexible so if, for instance, a teacher is teaching during the SPLO's working hours but requests to see them, the SPLO can change their hours and arrange to come in at another time. The remaining 6 hours (not based at MSS) are spread evenly throughout the week responding to emails, WhatsApp messages, making calls, doing other paperwork.

WIT was given flexibility in deciding the days and times, and these were agreed by the SPLO and their WIT supervisor so that it could also fit in with the SPLO's other work and commitments.

*'Parents said this is not enough ... during one coffee morning ... they gave examples of what (the SPLO) did ..(which led to) the school increasing the hours...' (MSS)*

Originally the contract (in September 2021) was 5 hours a week and 2 days per week in MSS (2.5 hours per day), but because of demand and as pushed by parents, the days/time were increased from 5 to 10 hours and then to 15 hours per week.

### Management and supervision

The SPLO is supervised and managed directly by WIT and has meetings with their WIT line manager every 2 weeks. They also have a line manager at MSS, the deputy head teacher, and has regular meetings with them as well as the headteacher, to whom they can also bring issues whenever they arise. Senior management of WIT and the MSS SLT also meet regularly to discuss progress, challenges, emerging opportunities and other areas of mutual interest.

### Advertising / raising awareness about the position

When first starting in post, the role was announced at an inset day for MSS staff and the SPLO also recorded a message for students which was shown during assembly. This message included giving an indication of where and when they could be found and how they could support.

Additionally, the SPLO has sent out regular notification emails to staff with their working hours and contact details and has also reminded staff of their role at the start of each year and during other staff training events.

Box 1 contains quotes from the respondents on the change they have seen in themselves, amongst parents or amongst students at MSS, largely, though not solely, as a result of the SPLO position.



Coffee morning at Morpeth School ©Ilham Yusuf

## Box 1: Change since the SPLO has been in place

*'Communication between schools and family is better, there are less escalations than previously, there's more support, teachers and families understand each other a bit more now.. because someone can actually tell them, hang on, your child is not being targeted because they're Somali or black.. this is the policy from the school, it's how everyone is treated ...' (MSS)*

*'(the SPLO is able to) bridge the gap between the families and the school so communication is clear, making sure they know what's expected from their child, what families can expect from the school and vice versa ..' (MSS)*

*'It's really opened my eyes to how the mind of a teenager works, how parents are dealing with lots of different issues, and sometimes in nice to be supportive of those who can't really support themselves' (SPLO)*

*'Key changes are good will from families, that we have opened up communication in this way, (there is) huge appreciation from them and good will to try and make the school a better place .. can see this clearly in the coffee mornings .. when think back 4, 5 years ago (we were) having a lot of conversations with families that were problematic, they took a long time to resolve .. that's relatively rare now' (MSS)*

*'Working relationships with families are much stronger and a tangible outcome of this is their involvement in all kinds of school events .. they really are part of the fabric of the school now ..Families have more trust in us so the working partnership is much better... ' (MSS)*

*'Previously (Somali students) had been overrepresented in suspension figures, now they are no longer ... Somali attendance is the highest in the school .. is about commitment to their education and school' (MSS)*

*'After this experience (we) did a survey across the school.. after that have been much more explicit about discriminatory behaviour .. what we accept and don't accept .. shifted things related to consequence, sanctions .... Also ongoing training, awareness raising, for all school staff (not just teachers).. ' (MSS)*

*'Before the SPLO came people used to say things were very bad (for Somali kids)(people did not want to send their children to this school).. we never had communication; all the Somali parents had anxiety' (parent).*

*'Now I will automatically send my (younger) daughter to this school, many parents are like me now .. before said Morpeth, forget about it, because had siblings who left this school in a bad situation, but now it has changed' (parent)*

*'Previously (parents) could not handle the anxiety during work, too many phone calls, meetings, luckily God sent [the SPLO] ... Since they've come, they've done a brilliant job. All the families calm down... tension has now gone...' (parent)*

*'They have started building up relationships between the parents and schools, now the school and parents are tight, they sort out all the differences now between .. [the SPLO] has built a bridge between the school and the parents where they can communicate nicely, they make our life easy' (parent)*

*'The way teachers conduct themselves has changed massively, parents get more involved in school, in coffee mornings .. parents are listened to more, before they weren't..' (parent)*

#### 4.0 Ingredients for a successful intervention

In this section we highlight, in no order of priority, ingredients or elements that have made this position successful. As will be seen below, many of these elements are inter-related, building and drawing on each other. This success has been seen especially, as communicated by respondents, as a result of the SPLO acting as a catalyst to neutralise and de-escalate problems which otherwise may have become more serious.

*'To nip problems when they are in the bud .. to deal with students in lower year groups so that the problems don't get worse when they move onto year 10 and year 11 .. we don't want to see them getting expelled, missing out on their education...'* (SPLO)

It is important to mention again, as also communicated by respondents, that this intervention came about at a time when people were acutely aware of racism and other forms of discrimination. Covid-19 also highlighted the stark inequalities between communities, especially in areas such as LBTH which has some of the highest health inequalities in the country [8]. Thus, in a sense, it was fertile ground for this intervention to come about.

#### Established relationship between MSS and WIT

There was an existing and good relationship of mutual respect and trust between MSS and WIT prior to the development of the SPLO position. The MSS SLT were seen as willing to listen and accept that they were facing challenges for which they needed help. At the same time WIT's first response was not to 'put the school down' if parents voiced their concerns but get to at the heart of the issue and support the school to find a way through it.

*'I do admire the head teacher ... she's always been a head teacher that will accept and listen full-heartedly ... and that relationship enabled her to approach us'* (WIT)

*'...and when they heard the young people, they then approached us to say we need your external help ..'* (WIT)

*'It was Morpeth that trusted us as Somali's, as experts, and that the next step needed the involvement of a Somali-led organisation ...'* (WIT)

In addition, given that the SPLO continues to be managed by both WIT and MSS, and more senior staff at WIT are also part of the SLA, space has been created for regular dialogue and reflection between the MSS SLT and senior staff from WIT. All of this contributes to consolidating the relationship.

## Building and consolidating trust

This was mentioned by all respondents as being a critical component and at the heart of making this position successful. Thus the SPLO gained the trust of MSS staff and teachers as well as parents and students. This did not happen overnight, but was a gradual process brought about by the officer being around in the school, responding (often on the spot / immediately) to issues brought by students, teachers and parents, or by the officer just observing happenings in the school environment.

This trust-building was facilitated by the SPLO knowing some students from the youth project and they were also known amongst the wider Somali community in LBTH for other WIT-related work. The continuing emphasis placed on the confidential nature of their work was also critical for winning people's trust. There is, nevertheless, still work to be done with some Somali parents who fear the stigma of their child being labelled as 'naughty' and are therefore also reluctant to reach out to the SPLO for support.

The fact that the SPLO was both in the school but also from an independent third party, WIT, a community-based organisation with deep roots in the Somali community in LBTH, allowed them to have some kind of neutrality. This arguably also enabled these different kinds of people to approach them. As will be seen from the next sections, the SPLO being from the Somali culture and being extremely approachable, also facilitated this.

*'The most important part, is the kids would not have listened, the parents would not have engaged and come in with an open mind, had they not trusted WIT, that's 20 years of building rapport and connections, connecting and supporting, and witnessing the work that (WIT) is doing ...' (WIT)*

*'It (the work of the SPLO) was a slow start but slowly it picked up to the point when I was overwhelmed with work. ..Most parents are supported (saying) I would like you there as a third party .. ' (SPLO)*

*'Trust is building up (between parents and the school), [the SPLO] is the key, they're the centre of that trust' (parent)*

## Understanding culture

A key criteria when selecting the person for this position was that they needed to be from the Somali community. Being part of the same culture and background of parents and students ('looking like them') contributed to establishing trust. Being able to speak the same language, both literally and figuratively, led to the officer being able to dialogue and communicate with parents and students in appropriate ways. This ensured, amongst other things, that misunderstandings did not arise and that parents and students needs were being met.

At the same time, being fully embedded within the mixed environment of LBTH / East London, allowed the SPLO also to engage with teachers from different ethnic backgrounds in MSS. This also ensured that misunderstandings did not arise across the ethnicity line. The fact that there are relatively few teachers and other staff at MSS from a Somali background also meant that the SPLO provided students and parents with a sense that their specific needs were being met and that they were represented in the school.

*'it was felt that) a face, connection from the Somali community was needed ...'  
(MSS)*

*'There are quite a few staff at the school) who are Bangladeshi, but its important to have a someone who can represent you .. having [the SPLO] there is so amazing' (parent)*

*'The kids feel safe when they have someone who can speak their language .. it's a form of protection' (parent)*

### Providing calm and reassurance

Respondents spoke about the calm, reassuring and non-judgmental presence of the SPLO, allowing everyone to easily approach them. Similarly, their 'humbleness' and 'kindness' gave parents a sense that someone is caring.

Along with the ability to listen to everyone's perspectives, this non-judgemental manner is vital for de-escalating problems, neutralising the situation, instilling a sense of calm into potentially volatile situations and is also vital for building trust.

*'They appear completely non-judgemental, they never takes the side of the school or the parent' (MSS)*

*'When (they) stands in the middle of the school, in the playground, our kids see them, and all the pressure goes down .. the kids feel happy, they come home and say there's someone we can talk to' (parent)*

*'The environment has changed .. parents are able to relax now .. they finds out what's going on, they make things easier for us ...they pass on messages calmly to us ..' (parent)*

This kind of behaviour is difficult to teach, but it comes with experience (hence one of the criteria being that the officer had worked with youth before) and is also an individual personality trait.

## Being responsive, flexible, accessible and showing initiative

Linked to the above, a further set of characteristics of the SPLO was their responsiveness, their flexibility, accessibility and ability to take initiative. Although there are specified working hours/ days, the SPLO responds to requests, especially from parents, as and when necessarily, including sometimes during weekends. They also shift their working hours around to accommodate teachers' schedules. This all shows their responsiveness and commitment - though this also creates challenges in terms of their work-life balance.

Not only does their manner allow people to approach and trust them, but the fact that they are more junior than the MSS SLT as well as the WIT CEO and other WIT staff, also means that the SPLO is seen as less threatening or intimidating and therefore also more accessible to parents, teachers and students.

*'..(the SPLO) goes above and beyond... the passion is what drives them .. is what drives all of us...'* (WIT)

*'People find their input really valuable, it really supports with the relationships with the pupils and the families .. people recognise the importance of ensuring they are involved'* (MSS)



Coffee morning at Wessex, Morpeth 6th Form © WIT



## Having regular communication

The fact that the SPLO is in regular touch with parents contributes to the success of this intervention. A key component of this is the parents' WhatsApp group which was established by WIT, prior to the SPLO being in post. The WhatsApp group consists of 60 parents, all of whom have children at MSS school [9]. The SPLO regularly posts messages to this group, raising awareness amongst parents about a range of school related topics including: parents' evenings, events at school, exams, when there may be an issue, etc.

The SPLO usually posts a text message in English and follows-up with a voicemail in Somali for parents who are less proficient in English. They also follow-up with individuals if it is something to do with their child. Parents also call the SPLO on this number should they be facing an issue with their child, asking for their help and/or to follow-up. The fact that parents have this person they trust and a way of reaching them immediately, has taken the burden off many parents and again has increased the trust environment.

The SPLO has a work phone and number (which is at the bottom of their email signature), though it seems they use more their personal phone and number due to convenience. In principle they should just receive and send messages during their working hours. However, this has proven difficult given that sometimes they need to be in touch with parents outside their working hours/days including during weekends. This again points to the committed and flexible nature of the current SPLO, though whether this is sustainable remains to be seen.

*'The WhatsApp group has hugely improved our communication .. communication is 95% of the trick in schools, and .. now have much better communication because families know they can get in touch with the SPLO ..and equally if we have particular issues with a young person we know we can work with the SPLO to make sure that it's a much more positive discussion than it might otherwise have been... (MSS)*

## Deep and continued commitment and leadership by MSS SLT

The SLT at MSS as well as other teachers and staff (including staff from the SDS) have shown great commitment to address the challenges faced at MSS. This was first evident through the SLT actively reaching out for support from WIT. This continued commitment is also evident through the SLT finding scarce funds to cover the costs of the SPLO and through extending the service agreement as well as the days / hours of operation, all of which have budgetary implications. Not only are members of the SLT extremely approachable and available to advise and support the SPLO whenever necessary, but they have shown their commitment through advocating and engaging in other related activities. As discussed below, members of the SLT have actively encouraged and attended events led by WIT including the regular parents' coffee mornings.

*'In the coffee mornings the SLT was there, they listened to the parents... (WIT)*

*'The (head teacher) was the only head teacher that had attended the anti-racism conference that we (WIT) had ran the year before..' (WIT)*

*'..She (the head teacher) was open minded, happy to learn and change...' (WIT)*

## Supporting a multi-pronged approach to raise awareness amongst teachers and encourage dialogue between teachers and parents

Although the SPLO is a critical and innovative component of addressing inequalities faced by students in MSS and the focus of this report, it is not the only activity happening at MSS. Other activities focused on building trust and an inclusive environment are taking place simultaneously at MSS. Amongst other things, and initiated by the school, showing again its commitment to address challenges in the school, the SLT called on WIT to provide awareness raising and training sessions for teachers in the school on Somali culture. This increased understanding about the Somali community living in LBTH, including aspects of Somali history, culture and language as well the journey many had undergone (e.g. as refugees fleeing from conflict) to arrive in the UK, of which most teachers at the school were unaware [10].

In addition, the SPLO organises regular twice-termly coffee mornings at the school for Somali parents: between 5 to 30 parents attend the coffee mornings, most of whom are mothers (there are only around 4 fathers who regularly attend meetings). Members of the MSS SLT attend these coffee mornings, with the coffee mornings scheduled around their availability. These are relaxed spaces for parents to share and discuss with each other, the SPLO and the MSS SLT. This again improves relationships and communication between MSS and parents, it allows parents to interact with the SLT in-person and in turn allows the SLT to listen to parents and interact with them directly. All of this builds trust and understanding across what had been seen as insurmountable divides.

*'The coffee mornings are key, it's where the parents and teachers can meet ..' (parent)*

### 5.0 What is necessary going forward

There is no doubt that the SPLO has been a success and that both MSS and WIT are keen to continue the collaboration. Below are a number of inter-related elements that would support the continuation as well as the scaling up of the approach both within MSS and beyond. Suggestions for systematising and consolidating further the position are also provided, given that it has been largely a-learning-by-doing approach so far. However, the ability to be flexible and responsive, has also been at the heart of this position's success and it would be important to try and keep these elements. Some elements proposed below are currently under discussion between MSS and WIT and/or in the process of being implemented, nevertheless it is still helpful to have all these suggestions together in one place.

#### Create a permanent (more embedded) SPLO position or a position with a longer-term time frame

Currently the position is renewed on an annual basis. Having either a permanent position or one with a longer-term timeframe (e.g. lasting for 2 to 3 years) would provide more stability both for the individual as well as WIT as an organisation. This would also allow WIT, the SPLO as well as MSS to plan using a longer-term planning horizon. Clearly this has budgetary implications, though it does not necessarily have to be a full-time position, but could continue the hours / days per week that the officer currently works. It was also suggested by a parent that all schools in LBTH should have a SPLO position ('we need an [SPLO] in all the schools in Tower Hamlets', parent).

### Identify a fixed place of work

It would be helpful if MSS could provide a permanent location for the SPLO and if more PLOs for different ethnic communities join, they could also share this space. This is important since if a student or teacher needs to find the SPLO, and if they are unable to call, they can go directly to their office (clearly they also have to be aware of the working hours of the SPLO for this to be effective, see below). In the event that the SPLO is not there, having a box outside the room where students and teachers can leave confidential messages for the SPLO, might also be considered.

### Develop a job description and person specification for the SPLO position

This can be based on the existing tasks that the current SPLO is doing, and should also include details around line management, supervision and expected outputs (e.g. regular reports). WIT is currently developing this for the SPLO, but consideration of how this might work for PLOs from different ethnic groups (see below) should also be taken into account.

### Ensure the SPLO has sufficient support and training

This includes supervision and line management, but also the SPLO should have space to discuss challenging situations and have the capacity and knowledge to deal with them [11]. This support may include regular mentoring support, but also taking part in trainings and / or workshops covering topics of relevance to their work (see also below and linking with the SDS). To lessen the burden on the SPLO, someone could also stand in for them during parents' evenings, for instance; this was already happening with a 'parent volunteer', a Somali mother, also a member and volunteer for WIT, who during the parents' evenings was acting as a translator.

It was also suggested that the SPLO listen to both younger and older students, including those who may not be currently facing issues, but may have in the past. This would allow the SPLO to address potential triggers of e.g. bullying before they become more serious.

### Remind teachers, students and parents on a regular basis of the role of SPLO

Raising awareness about the SPLO position needs to happen regularly (e.g. on a monthly basis) so that students, teachers and parents are reminded of the support that the SPLO can provide, as well as how and where they can find them, their working hours, their email address and phone number. Regular attendance at parents' evenings by the SPLO would also remind people of their role.

### Create other PLO positions targeting other ethnic communities in the school

This could follow the model of the SPLO and importantly have a link with a community-based organisation external to the school. Other PLOs could target the Bangladeshi community but also potentially other minority communities within MSS (including the white community). Discussions are underway between MSS and WIT about appointing a Bangladeshi PLO at MSS, since WIT also has members of staff from Bangladeshi and Sylheti backgrounds.

### Continue the multi-pronged approach to raise awareness amongst teachers and encourage dialogue between parents and teachers

It is important to continue to carry out a range of activities to address inequalities in schools. Thus the coffee mornings should continue as well as the cultural awareness raising activities. The latter could be carried out on a regular basis, they should not be one-off events. They should be made mandatory for all school staff, and especially for the new joiners. They should also cover a range of topics of relevance and be agreed jointly by MSS and WIT. Other teachers beyond just the SLT should be encouraged (possibly making it mandatory?) to attend the coffee mornings. Other activities should also be carried out with groups from the other ethnic backgrounds, including those of mixed heritage, represented at MSS. Finally other ways of engaging with parents should also be considered, especially from minority groups such as the Somali community, e.g. they could become school governors, as suggested by a parent.

### Raise capacity and awareness amongst teachers

It was suggested by respondents (students and parents) that teachers could also be trained and/or their awareness raised on how to dialogue and communicate with students as they get older. They noted that there is a difference between a year 7 and a 6th former – the latter are no longer children, they want to be treated with respect and listened to especially in cases where accounts of bullying and/or racism may arise. Separate sessions for teachers could be held (including with support from the SDS, see below) on issues related to bullying, discrimination and racism, amongst other things. It was also suggested that a former student who had faced these issues could come to the school and speak to teachers, so they hear it from a 'student's perspective'.

### Consider having female and male SPLOs

Currently the SPLO is a female and while she is very capable of dealing with both girls and boys, there is a sense that a male SPLO may be helpful on certain occasions and may allow the boys to 'open up more'. Additionally, having a male around would also function as a positive male role model for Somali boys, something which, according to respondents, appears to be relatively lacking in the school environment as well as in many homes. A male SPLO does not necessarily need to be recruited on the same basis or hours/days as the lead / female SPLO, but could be available on a regular basis, especially to support the Somali male students.

### Work/engage more with Somali fathers

Linked to the above, it appears that Somali fathers have little engagement with their children's schooling, with mothers usually taking on this role. This results not only in mothers being overstretched, but often due to lack of time, according to respondents, they leave their children to 'fend for themselves'. These children often end up feeling that they do not have a voice, are not listened to and, especially boys, do not have positive male role models.

The lack of engagement of Somali fathers is evident from their limited attendance at the coffee mornings, for instance and other events organised by MSS and WIT for the Somali community. This was explained as being a cultural trait ('mothers are the engine of the family') but one which was felt could be addressed, also since some Somali fathers are actively engaged with their children's schooling and with positive results.

Working with Somali fathers who are currently more involved, could provide some ideas of how to encourage other fathers to engage more. One possibility, as suggested by a father, is to encourage mothers to, in turn, encourage their husbands to attend events; a mother also suggested inviting fathers to discussions or sharing sessions to hear their suggestions on future career options for their children, especially their sons.

### Continue to foster linkages between the SPLO, the SDS and the Special Education Needs (SEN) Department

Given the vast amount of expertise within the SDS and SEN departments, it would be important that the SPLO link up further with them to share learning and information, including ways of working with difficult students. The SPLO could attend some of the sessions run by the SDS for students (clearly, upon agreement of these students)[12]. The SPLO could also be an additional resource for SDS staff, given that there are few of them and they are relatively stretched with the ever-increasing demands of their work. A key area that the SPLO could contribute to the SDS is through their direct and effective link with parents, something that is not the focus of the SDS, but is a vital part of ensuring the wellbeing of the student.



Coffee morning at MSS, led by WIT and SPLO © Sahra Mire

## 6.0 Concluding thoughts

The SPLO intervention, developed as a collaboration between WIT and MSS, has been a success. Through acting as a trusted go-between for parents, teachers and children, the SPLO has eased tensions, de-escalated problems and improved communication.

Similarly, the officer, with full support from the school, has brought these 3 groups of people together in a mutually beneficial way, also showing how this triadic relationship - between the school, the family / home and the children themselves - is vital for creating a conducive environment for children to grow, learn and reach their full potential.

The model has also shown the power of partnerships and collaborations between educational establishments and community-based organisations – with each bringing their comparative advantages to the table with their shared aim of addressing inequalities.

Going forward, it is critical that this position is continued within MSS, that it is further systematised, appropriately resourced as well as adapted for different ethnic groups. It is also hoped that other schools in LBTH and beyond will take-up this model and appoint SPLOs as well as PLOs from other ethnic minority backgrounds, with adaptations where necessary.

This report provides a step for informing parents, schools and other education and council authorities of this intervention, however it is hoped that further work to disseminate and publicise the effectiveness of this approach will take place.



Mini Somali Museum - WIT Mayfield Wellbeing Hub © Madeleine Waller

## 7.0 End notes

[1] WIT is a Somali led organisation working in LBTH to support the Black and ethnic minority communities through youth programmes, women's empowerment projects, mental health support and a food bank and community kitchen <https://wit.org.uk/>

[2] Available from: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/strategy-2030/>

[3] <https://www.morpethschool.org.uk/187/welcome-to-morpeth-school-1>

[4] <https://www.place2be.org.uk/>

[5] <https://www.activebystander.co.uk/>

[6] <https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/>

[7] The SPLO works a further 10 hours per week for WIT as the youth project lead.

[8] <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/static-reports/health-profiles/2019/e09000030.html?area-name=tower%20hamlets>

[9] It seems there are other Somali families at MSS who are not part of the WhatsApp group; it was estimated that perhaps the WhatsApp group covers around half of the total number of Somali families in the school.

[10] At the time of writing the brief, WIT had done 3 of these trainings at MSS. However other schools in LBTH heard about the sessions and have invited WIT to run similar sessions in their schools.

[11] The SPLO has received some training through Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets (VCTH) services e.g. on mental health, wellbeing and safeguarding, but further training would be helpful.

[12] These include sessions on homophobia, sexism and violence against women, discrimination, bullying, positive thinking and conflict resolution. As a separate endeavour, although some evaluations have been carried out of these sessions, it would be helpful to carry further evaluations of them.

## 8.0 Contact us

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