

“I am here and this is who I am!”

Amina and her family are a success story. Amina came from Islamabad, Pakistan, in 1984 as a young bride and today has three successful children all of whom have been, are or going to University. The eldest has become a Doctor via Bristol University and the youngest is due to start to read Dentistry in the coming year. The third is at the University of West of England.

Amina has worked in a local primary school since 1994, as a nursery nurse, receptionist and, for the last six years with year 1 children. Through a mixture of work appraisals, her husband's, children's (and siblings') success, she felt she was somehow missing out. Having left school at 15, with no qualifications other than GCSE English Literature, she felt unqualified, unsure of what to do and where to go - only that she was not fulfilling her potential.

Somehow, and she is not sure quite how, she found herself researching the City of Bristol College's Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree in Early Years (SEFDEY) programme. She found the available information clearly written, informative and helpful. Further, she recognised herself in the course profile but was still unsure of whether or not she could join the programme.

The interview process, for the programme, includes a group discussion on set questions and a written comprehension using a current journal article asking questions which require the ability to extract meaning from text and apply the key points to the candidate's own practice through the process of reflection. This latter is very daunting at the best of times but particularly so to someone with little or no formal education to fall back on with a resultant lack of confidence. However, her experiences as a mother and through work were considered during the process and were deemed sufficient to support her application. She also had real encouragement from her family - a feature throughout her studies - on the one hand, and her tutors on the other.

Amina is candid. She found the first year a struggle which was to some extent demotivating. The problems were two fold, firstly her unfamiliarity with the British school system as she had no direct personal experience and secondly language issues. Although her written English was good, her familiarity with the nuances and the spoken word were not so well-developed. Like any new student she was exposed to a variety of new experiences, concepts and expressions of which she had no intuitive understanding. This is a sensation not unfamiliar to those who

move between countries and cultures – there is lack of instinctive background knowledge.

In addition, as she had not completed her education, she lacked study skills and note taking expertise as well as not appreciating the need for hard evidence to support key points – the key feature of academic study.

Unsurprisingly, panic set in and she did not do well and almost left. She discussed the situation with her tutor, Isobel MacDougall. Isobel empathised and understood where the problem lay. She suggested Amina gave herself a break, do her GCSE in English language and come back for the second year. This she duly did, achieving a much coveted Grade C, a boost to her confidence and the courage to continue.

This second year has been an outstanding success. Her presentational skills have come on by leaps and bounds as she uses her knowledge and experience of her own difficulties to explain to others on her programme – including lecturers – the difficulties of integrating into a multi-cultural society and its educational system, particularly for young children.

Children with English as an Additional Language are disadvantaged. She should know – she has seen and experienced first hand the difficulties faced when taking the first steps towards the future. It is tough for an adult from a strong and supportive background, but imagine the disorientation, if not fear, in a child left with strangers and being unable to communicate?

So what are the lessons identified from Amina's and her tutor's experience?

For the children there is an identified need for bilingual support staff to be qualified to degree level to raise the achievement levels of young children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) within Early Years education and care settings, as without this, these children are disadvantaged before they even start.

For practitioners, for those with EAL, if not to say other "mature" students, there is a need for a bridging course to address study skills, note taking as well as clarifying the language used - how many of us actually know what we mean by "pedagogy"? In addition, this bridging course may be insufficient for those who may need more specific support throughout the duration of the programme to make sure they are understand the content, do not become isolated and are kept engaged.

For Amina, there is a clear sense of pride in her achievement. Where does she go from here? Its early days. Success is still so new. She would like to "top up" to a full degree but there are, in these days of credit crunch funding issues as

well as finding the right programme. From a professional standpoint view, she would like to step into a more leadership focused role, but just at the moment she is savouring the sweet smell of success - *"I am here and this is who I am!"*