

Educational needs and experiences of refugee children in Scotland



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Summary: Research Report

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Introduction

The recent arrival of Syrian refugee families has brought the provision of into the public gaze. This is a summary of the key findings and recommendations from the report *Educational needs and experiences of refugee children in Scotland*. In the report we examine how public services, primarily schools but also other services such as health and social care, are meeting their needs.

We do this through documenting the views of the children themselves and their families. The views of this group on the integration process are often absent. The report unpacks what is working best in supporting refugee children, as well as what is not working in order to help inform and improve service provision. It focuses not only on the 'formal' aspects of education, but also the school as a site for integration for refugee children and their families.

The report is based on qualitative research carried out in four local authorities with refugee children, their parents, and representatives from education and other public services. In carrying out this research we talked to 25 children, 21 parents, and 18 stakeholders from a range of organisations.

Findings

- Overall, education appears to be the service that is working best for refugee children and their families. Most of the children we met appeared to be happy and settled in their schools and the families spoke positively about their local school.
- Many schools have made great efforts to welcome refugee children, including those in areas with little or no experience of resettling refugees. Successful initiatives included buddying schemes, induction sessions, and displays designed by other pupils to welcome refugee children.
- There was however some variation between the approaches taken by the schools, even within the same local authorities, and many of these initiatives are not in place in all schools. Disparities were also evident in the amount and types of extracurricular activities designed to support ongoing integration.
- Some children felt relatively isolated initially and in some cases were reluctant to attend school. School demographics appeared to be influential, as the presence of other children from different nationalities (either other refugees or international pupils) with a shared language could help children's communication with their peers.
- There was a strong sense of aspiration amongst refugee children and their parents, who place a great deal of value on schooling and appreciate the opportunities to advance their education. This was particularly the case for older refugee children who may not have expected to have these opportunities in Scotland.

- Language development was the issue most frequently raised by refugee families. There was a clear desire to learn English as quickly as possible because not being able to communicate with pupils and teachers in class or at break time was a source of frustration. A child's grasp of English strongly shapes their experiences of the curriculum more broadly.
- There was a strong sense that better English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) provision would be beneficial, though discussions with English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers highlighted the complexity surrounding language acquisition, as too much focus on learning English can detract from other curriculum and non-curriculum activities that help language development.
- Many schools have successfully facilitated and encouraged parents' engagement and involvement in their children's education through the use of interpreters and other means of 'everyday' communication. The school may also be a site of integration for parents of refugee children through the provision of services to support their needs.
- Where schools are working best to support refugee children's integration, effective partnership working is in place with community organisations and other public services. Conversely, where this is not in place, a lack of coordination can hamper the integration process.
- Relatedly, there is little evidence of a coordinated approach in terms of mentoring and supporting schools who are less experienced in resettling refugees; this appears to be on an ad hoc basis.
- The research found emerging evidence of gender differences in the ways that refugee children experience inclusion. Gender appears to shape participation in particular extracurricular activities, for example, and the girls in our research were more likely to feel a sense of isolation than boys.

Recommendations

- Schools must be effectively resourced if they are to act as a 'hub' for integration, as at present much of this is resourced through the 'goodwill' of individual schools' teaching and non-teaching staff.
- More bilingual support would not only facilitate refugee children's English language development but support their ability to keep up with the broader curriculum. This is especially important for older refugee children who arrive in Scotland close to examination time.
- Education services should explore how refugee children could be supported to achieve qualifications while in the earlier stages of language development, perhaps through the use of interpreters, translated examination papers, or allowing children to take qualifications in their first language.
- Local authorities should consider what happens to refugee children when schools are closed for weekends and holidays, and could support schools to be open during these times to allow activities to take place so that children's language development and integration is not impeded during these times.
- Parental engagement in children's education could be improved further through better provision of interpreters and a formal induction / information sessions to explain the fundamentals of the education system on arrival.
- The issue of gender differences should be taken into account to ensure that all refugee children have equal access to the types of activities known to positively shape integration, language learning, and wellbeing.
- Schools should be encouraged to share learning and learn from best practice in other areas, perhaps through mentoring or support schemes led by more experienced schools.

The full report - *Educational needs and experiences of refugee children in Scotland* - is available on the What Works Scotland website at

whatworksscotland.ac.uk/educational-needs-and-experiences-of-refugee-children-in-scotland/