

Teaching Children from Refugee and Asylum Seeking Families



acknowledgements

This publication is produced by the Educational Institute of Scotland, Glasgow Asylum Seekers Support Project (Glasgow City Council), EIS members, teachers of asylum seekers and refugee children with thanks to National Union of Teachers and Department of Education and Skills.

What is a refugee?

A refugee is defined in international law as someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". Under the 1951 UN Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the signatories are bound to offer protection to refugees and asylum seekers.



"So many good things are happening in schools where Asylum Seekers' children are being educated. You cannot imagine the thrill of visiting award ceremonies where these children are winning prizes in English and Maths." – Maria Walker, Glasgow Asylum Seekers Support Group

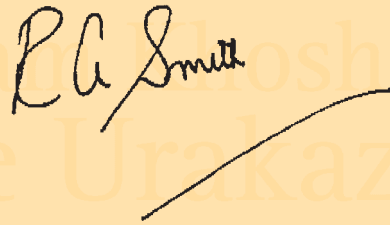
introduction

Very vulnerable children, many of whom have fled from terrible experiences are being educated in mainstream schools in Scotland. Talking to the teachers involved directly with the education of children of asylum seekers reveals what a special job it is and what special children have come to our shores.

The children themselves are largely responsible for the overwhelmingly positive reaction towards them. A wide variety of talents and skills, the sheer enthusiasm for learning tests teachers to the limit. There is a full range of learners and a full range of languages. There are students ready to take exams up to higher grade, talented athletes, musicians, linguists, scientists and mathematicians.

It has been a tremendous learning experience for all concerned. Only good can come out of it. Friendships have been forged and communities are developing. The apprehension that accompanied the first few months after their arrival has gone. Now the task is to maintain progress and look to the future. We are supporting potentially future Scottish citizens who will be living, working, contributing to the economy and culture of Scotland.

There was a great deal of time, effort and resources put in place to welcome the children into schools. We in the EIS hope that the children of future asylum seekers will continue to be educated in mainstream schools and be accorded the same rights to education as their new found friends.



Ronnie Smith,
General Secretary,
The Educational Institute of Scotland

In April 2000, Glasgow City Council signed a five year contract with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to provide accommodation and support for asylum seekers and their families. Glasgow City Council was the first local authority in Britain to contract with NASS. Glasgow City Council Education Services has developed existing services for bilingual pupils to meet the needs of this new group.

Welcoming asylum seekers to the city demonstrates one of the aims of Glasgow City Council – to enable Glasgow to flourish as a multi-cultural, international city where people choose to live, learn, work and play and are valued equally.

For us in Glasgow, the past two and a half years have been challenging, sometimes frustrating, but ultimately rewarding. The challenges have been many, not least of which were the preconceived assumptions that this document will help to dispel. The learning curve has been steep. Staff have often felt frustration, most notably when a child they have seen develop, flourish and grow in confidence over a period of months (or even years) moves to live elsewhere in the U.K. The rewards are becoming increasingly obvious to all concerned. Not only are the vast majority of these children and young people achieving academic success, but the social and cultural benefits that the schools receive can not be underestimated.

Glasgow City Council is committed to the principle that all children should be educated in a school environment. Recent research has proved this position correct by finding that young asylum seekers felt that the best thing about life in Glasgow was school and their teachers. This document provides invaluable advice for teachers, and indeed

other staff, working with children and young people from refugee and asylum seeking families. I am pleased that Glasgow City Council Education Services has been involved in its development, and urge anyone involved or interested in this area of work to take the time to sit down and read it.



Ronnie O'Connor,
Director of Education Services, Glasgow City Council



"It was very strange at first to be in a new country and trying to get used to the language and the way people speak. The cold weather also took a lot of getting used to. Now I'm working hard at school as I want to go on to university and study medicine." – Asylum Seeker, aged 18

imagine

what it is like.

Imagine what it is like to have fled your homeland in terror with your parents or to have fled not knowing what has happened to your mother, father or other family and to end up in a strange country with different cultures and language.

You are trying to find a safe place to live free from war, persecution and fear, from torture or imprisonment.

All children who start a new school will experience some difficulty as they try to make new friends and 'fit in'. Teachers know what to do to make children feel welcome and more secure. Teaching the children of refugee and asylum seekers is based on known, sound educational practice – ensuring children are valued, develop self-esteem and are encouraged to learn.

Children of refugees and asylum seekers have added burdens. The children may have come from a prosperous background in their home country and now experience poverty. They may be suffering deep trauma and a sense of 'loss' as a result of what they have seen or heard in their journey here.

Teachers may hear some harrowing tales and find themselves having to offer support to young people when they don't feel ready to do so. You should not have to cope alone. This is a whole school and authority issue.

"It is heartening to hear from teachers and pupils about the experiences of asylum seekers. It has been an overwhelmingly positive experience both for young asylum seekers and the schools in which they are taught and for the community. We hear of young people with tremendous knowledge, commitment and talents who can only enhance our communities." – Ronnie Smith, General Secretary, The Educational Institute of Scotland

what support should you expect?

Plans should have been put in place before receiving new children. The approach to receiving refugee and asylum seekers' children should be rooted in the authority and schools' anti-racist and equal opportunities policies.

- The school as a whole should be making ready to welcome refugee children.
- Use the support systems set up by your local authority to help you. This should include bilingual and English as an Additional Language support.

Some schools have in-service and anti-racist training for all staff. Meetings are arranged with parents and others in the community. Most importantly, pupils at the school are told what is happening and how to make new children welcome. Welcome signs in different languages are displayed; buddy systems are devised as well as home school links. Suitable educational material is acquired.



"Islam is a peaceful religion. The meaning of Islam is peace. I feel sad that differences in religion are sometimes used to start conflict. Violence is not the solution, as it is always the innocent people who are harmed." – Asylum Seeker, aged 16

issues

to consider.

Do not assume that refugee children have no knowledge. Experience tells us that many are very intelligent and knowledgeable whether through formal education or through their experiences.

Some children -

- have fled from countries where girls are not educated
- were too poor to buy an education
- have their lives and education disrupted because of war
- speak English as a first or second language
- speak three or four languages including English
- will have learning difficulties and disabilities
- may go through a natural 'silent' phase as they come to terms with learning another language
- will take longer to come to terms with their loss and this may manifest itself in certain behaviour e.g. withdrawal

Refugee children will be learning through taking account of their new environment, experiencing different cultural norms, will be trying to make sense of their life and trying to build new networks and friends.

There may be some children who arrive 'unaccompanied' without any support from family. The whereabouts of their family may be unknown. Others may arrive with family friends. These children are very vulnerable.

They may feel they have lost their sense of identity. Their own language and culture is extremely important to them. The routine of school can be a stabilising factor in the life of the child, especially if they are made to feel welcome by teachers and pupils. Parents place great store on education and want their children to be settled in school.

Whatever the background you are not dealing with a 'blank sheet'

"Developing understanding, fostering respect for others, increasing knowledge, giving young people the skills to discern, to think and to engage as citizens are all part of our aims to forge a future for Scotland which is more successful, inclusive and equal. Scotland is today a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, diverse place to live, work and study. We must make equality a reality for all and help build a better future for all children in Scotland." – Margaret Curran MSP, Minister for Social Justice

legal rights to education

Asylum issues are a reserved matter for the UK government but education is devolved to the Scottish Executive.

The terms of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, 2002 excludes the children of asylum seekers from mainstream schools. However, the Secretary of State must consult with Scottish Ministers in relation to the accommodation of asylum seekers.

Refugee children have the same rights to education as other children in respect of the following legislation: -

The Education (Scotland) Act, 1980 (as amended)

The Standards in Scotland's Schools etc (Scotland) Act, 2000 which states that education should be -

"directed to the development of the personality, talents and mental and physical abilities of the child or young person to their fullest potential."

The Children Scotland Act 1995 requires local authorities to take into account children's racial, linguistic, cultural and religious identity.



"Even little things like going up and down the stairs bring back bad memories of past events and remind me of why I had to run from my homeland. The escape, the border crossing, the waiting and the wondering what has happened to friends and relatives. If you cannot protect your family, who can you protect?" – Asylum Seeker, Somalia

what helps refugee children?

Refugee children will have come from countries with a different education system so within the formal setting of a school they will need help to adjust. Their former school environment may have been completely different from what they now face.

Research and experience tell us that children can be helped by having support from immediate family and friends and by having access to other supportive adults, particularly teachers. This can help them understand what has happened to them and their family by always having a supportive, stable 'listening' person.

Do not assume that the children are in a temporary situation. Many will be granted asylum or residency and go on to become valuable citizens, taking up education, training and employment opportunities.

View bilingualism or multilingualism as a positive asset but remember that children are not a homogenous group and will have different levels of language skill in their first and other languages.

Look beyond surface fluency of English. There are different levels of using English or any language for a learner. One is 'functional' where you use the language to survive; the other mode is more complex and allows you to learn in that language.

All classes contain pupils with a wide range of abilities, interests, attitudes, cultural backgrounds and learning needs. Refugee children extend that range but good teaching and learning practice remains the fundamental basis of help and support.

"One of the things that matters most to Asylum Seekers' children is going to school. They are excellent role models for all young people due to their commitment to education. Teachers who work with these children speak in glowing terms of their enthusiasm and desire to learn. The job satisfaction teachers derive from working with these children cannot be overstated. These young people want to learn and they must retain the right to learn." – Alana Ross, President, The Educational Institute of Scotland

checklist

1. Ensure you are knowledgeable about the issues and difficulties facing refugee children.
2. Provide an induction period for children and parents.
3. Create an ethos in which refugee children feel safe and valued.

1. Ensure you are knowledgeable about the issues and difficulties facing refugee children.

- Recognise the feelings of the children and their need for safety and security
- Be knowledgeable about racism and bullying
- Find out through the school and authority what is available to support you
- Find out about the assessment of children
- Find out the religious, cultural, linguistic background
- Find out if mother tongue or bilingual support is available
- Identify resources for use in the classroom
- Identify the level of support the school and you will have or need
- Identify additional support for children's language needs
- Find out what other agencies can help



"Education providers and those who develop learning frameworks must create routes to delivering an inclusive approach. Indeed, this is well-known to many in Scotland. The Educational Institute of Scotland has supported the development of such approaches and many authorities, individual schools and teachers have worked tirelessly to engage young minds and hearts." - Dharmendra Kanani, Head of the Commission for Racial Equality in Scotland

2. An induction period for children and parents.

- Ensure the first contact with the school is welcoming and friendly for parents and teachers
- Provide introductions to key staff they will meet regularly
- Develop good home school links
- Provide 'survival' language for important school and classroom words e.g. toilet, book, pencil, pen, desk, dinner
- Provide a tour of the school and playground
- Encourage parents to continue to use first language for educational development
- Involve other pupils in the welcome
- Provide resources for homework
- Positive links with parents and families or carers

3. An ethos in which refugee children feel safe and valued.

- Respect their religious, dietary or cultural differences
- Ensure the equal opportunities and anti-racist policies of the school are known and used
- Respect home languages e.g. all pupils learning words of greeting
- Use bilingual signs around the school

- Establish a buddy system that is important to all pupils
- Provide displays of words in children's own languages
- Pronounce and spell names properly
- Respect children's right to silence especially in the beginning
- Provide 'private' space for them to talk about their experiences or reflect
- Use the name they wish to be known by
- Look beyond surface fluency of English
- Create a sense of belonging and achievement
- Always check on their well-being

"We are committed to the principle that all children should be educated in a school environment. Recent research has proved this position correct by finding that young asylum seekers felt that the best thing about life in Glasgow was school and their teachers."

- Ronnie O'Connor, Director of Education Services, Glasgow City Council