

# Insight 38

## **Education and Schooling for Asylum-seeking and Refugee Students in Scotland: an exploratory study**



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ISSN 1478-6796 (Online)

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## Education and Schooling for Asylum-seeking and Refugee Students in Scotland: an exploratory study

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### Introduction

This study was commissioned to take stock of issues relating to the education of asylum-seeking and refugee<sup>1</sup> pupils. There are no accurate statistics on the numbers of asylum-seeking and refugee children in UK schools since people are not obliged to disclose their immigration status, but Scottish Executive data for 2005 (the year in which the main fieldwork was carried out) indicate this figure to be approximately 2,250<sup>2</sup>; in 2006, the approximate figure was estimated at 2,300<sup>3</sup>. The education authority with the highest number of asylum-seeking and refugee students in their schools estimated this to be approximately 1,970, while some authorities have recorded less than 5, and some have not recorded any.

The aims of the research were to:

- provide an overview of current education provision for asylum-seeking and refugee children in primary and secondary settings; and
- identify what might constitute 'best practice' within the context of Scottish education for the integration of asylum-seeking and refugee pupils into schools.

The study comprised two main strands:

(a) *background survey of Scottish Education Authorities* – which explored types of data collected, specific policies for, and streams of funding available in relation to specific pupil groups such as bilingual learners, mid-term-arrivals and asylum-seeking and refugee children; and

(b) *field research in two Scottish and in two English education authorities* – comprising research in schools, interviews with children and young people, and interviews with parents. Two primary and two secondary schools each in the two Scottish education authorities, and one primary and one secondary school each in the two English education authorities were selected for case study, on the basis of their reputation for good practice. The Head or a senior teacher was interviewed in each of these schools.

A total of 28 asylum-seeking/refugee students, aged from 7–18 years, and 14 parents were also interviewed for the study. Interviewees came from Turkey and middle eastern countries; south and central Asian countries; and from African countries, and represented major refugee community groups in Scotland.

1 The Refugee Council definition is used in this summary report: 'In the UK, a person is a refugee only when their application for asylum has been accepted by the Home Office. When a person has lodged an asylum claim with the Immigration and Nationality Directorate at the Home Office and is waiting for a decision on their claim, s/he is called an 'asylum seeker' ([http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/infocentre/asylumlaw/seeking\\_asylum.html](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/infocentre/asylumlaw/seeking_asylum.html))

2 Pupils in Scotland 2005 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/02/28083932/0>

3 Pupils in Scotland 2006 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/02/27083941/0>

## Bilingual learners, student diversity and Scottish Education Authorities

Responses were received from 14 of the 32 education authorities (44%) by the close of the survey, making generalisation from the data difficult. However, five authorities indicated collecting information on the asylum-seeking or refugee status of pupils; 13 gathered data on bilingual learners; and 12 on a range of special needs. Six authorities collected data on unplanned admissions, and in one other this data was collected by schools but not held centrally.

What policies and supports are available in Education Authorities?

Policies and support structures directed specifically towards asylum-seeking and refugee students were not available in the majority of responding authorities, perhaps reflecting the low numbers of these students in their schools. Only four, for example, had any policies relating to asylum-seeking and refugee children. But 11 authorities reported having either specific policies towards bilingual learners, or related policies that were part of wider policy such as on additional support needs. Additionally, 13 authorities indicated having structures, such as a dedicated post, for supporting bilingual learners. Most responding authorities reported having either specific policies toward vulnerable children, or that this area was part of wider policy or guidance; seven indicated having policies relating to new arrivals. Most respondents indicated having anti-racist and anti-bullying policies.

In relation to specific funding for the above areas, seven authorities indicated specific funding to support bilingual learners, and two others noted the possibility of drawing on wider funding to support this work if the need arose. Few authorities had funding available to support new arrivals (3), and refugee children (3), but an additional six and five respondents respectively indicated the possibility of drawing on wider funding for this work if required. Anti-racist and anti-bullying work was better supported, either with specific funding or as part of wider funding streams, but around a third of responding authorities did not indicate having recourse to funding in these areas.

## Studying and living in Scotland: experiences of asylum-seeking and refugee students and families in two cities

The two cities where the study was located present very different profiles in relation to people seeking asylum and refugees. City 2 has had a longer history of hosting these communities, but at the time of the study just 32 asylum-seeking and 33 refugee children were known to be enrolled in the city's schools. By contrast City 1 has the contract under the UK Government's dispersal programme to receive asylum seekers and so, since 2000, has seen large numbers of asylum-seeking families housed in the city, where previously few refugees had resided. Thus in 2005, 1,507 asylum-seeking and 397 refugee children were known to be enrolled in the city's schools. At school level this meant that while around 100 asylum-seeking and refugee children might be enrolled in a secondary school in City 1, just three might be found in a similar-sized school in City 2. Indeed, some schools in City 1 had changed almost overnight from being mono-cultural and mono-lingual to being multi-cultural and multi-lingual, mainly as a result of dispersal policies. In terms of cultural diversity more broadly, both cities had a higher proportion of minority ethnic communities than the average for Scotland (2%) at the 2001 census, but considerably lower than the UK average of 7.9%. The experiences of children and young people and parents in the two cities must therefore be understood in this context.

## Experiences in City 1

In City 1, case study schools, for the most part, have played a positive part in the lives of their students, but overall, life in City 1 for asylum-seeking and refugee children and their families provided a range of experiences, from the very positive to the very negative. One secondary school, in particular, had been very successful with its inclusive practice, seen in the achievements of a number of its asylum-seeking/refugee students; and a primary school had successfully supported parents in becoming involved with their children's education.

In general, schools had been welcoming and provided support with settling pupils in. The 'buddy' system was experienced as helpful for both primary- and secondary-age students, easing settling-in and helping with making friends. The support provided by schools to students new to English was appreciated by students and parents alike, and most young people reported being able to cope with the school curriculum once they had a sufficient grasp of English. The provision of interpreters in all schools by the city council, as required, was appreciated by parents, but complaints were made about letters from schools routinely arriving in English only, creating difficulties for them.

Career issues presented problems for young people, however, at the time of the study UK government policies restricted access to further and higher education, a major difficulty being that asylum-seeking students were often required to pay overseas fees, and bursaries were not available to them. Some support for further education was however available to asylum-seeking students, funded by the Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education (SFC).

Schools had recognised the importance of friendships for children's well-being, and various clubs had been organised to encourage socialising; though there was evidence from one school of an ethnic group being excluded from play by other students. A number of students reported danger on the streets, especially in deprived areas, which seems to have negatively impacted on asylum-seeking and refugee children's lives outside the school, and which could in turn have implications for their educational progress.

Racism and bullying, within and outside the school, was discussed with interviewees. All case study schools had anti-racist and anti-bullying policies, and many young people reported their schools taking a stern stance on bullying. However, interview evidence suggests that action taken against bullies was not always effective.

Racism was a particular problem, and there was evidence that some of this, particularly verbal abuse, goes unreported, for fear of worsening the situation. Racist attacks are experienced more frequently outside the school, especially in one deprived area. Unaccompanied minors attending a college of further education reported high levels of racist abuse on a regular basis in the city centre and on public transport. However, racist abuse of asylum-seeking and refugee communities does not seem to be restricted to indigenous White Scots, and appears to be multi-faceted. The study found evidence of inter-ethnic racist bullying between different groups; intra-faith racist bullying between different ethnic groups; and inter-faith bullying of minority-faith groups of asylum-seeking young people by majority-faith asylum-seeking young people.

What is it like to be an asylum-seeking or refugee young person living in a Scottish city?

## Experiences in City 2

Asylum-seeking and refugee students form a very small minority of the school population in this city. Interview data suggest that students are made to feel welcome in schools and receive the support of their teachers. Peer support with settling in and learning was appreciated by interviewees. Students new to English received special support with learning the language, and reported being able to cope with the curriculum when language skills had been acquired. Career issues did not raise concerns: secondary-age students interviewed had gained leave to remain which meant that they could access further and higher education and job opportunities as residents, and therefore did not have the same problems as students with asylum-seeking status.

The issue of friendships was discussed, particularly in the context of young people from asylum-seeking/refugee backgrounds probably having few of their own number in schools from whom to draw support. All students reported having friends from different backgrounds, including White Scottish, from their schools. Racism and bullying, in and outside the school, was discussed, and whilst schools did have anti-bullying and anti-racist policies, interview data suggest that more work needs to be done in this area. Racist bullying outside the school was reported by one primary student only, and other interviewees had not experienced racism in their neighbourhoods.

## Overarching issues in supporting asylum-seeking and refugee pupils

A number of general issues concerning education and support for asylum-seeking and refugee students were raised in interviews. These included:

- the relative merits of mainstreaming versus withdrawal from mainstream classes for English language support, including implications for forming friendships, and potential stigmatising effects of withdrawal
- schools not always having a sufficient understanding of refugee experience, sometimes leading to a child's difficulties with the curriculum or manifestations of aggression not being seen in this context, and teachers sometimes also having low expectations of asylum-seeking and refugee students
- the need for understanding that the stress of insecure immigration status of asylum-seeking families could negatively impact on their children's educational performance.

## Beyond integration: good practice from study schools

The study considered what might constitute 'best practice' in education for supporting asylum-seeking and refugee students. Two concepts – 'integration' and 'inclusion' – were examined, and the report argues that inclusive practice, where the school adapts to respond to the needs of its pupils within a culture that celebrates diversity, is good practice.

A range of inclusive practice was found in study schools. These included:

- *Welcome*: This begins prior to the initial admission interview, and from the moment the child and parent/s cross the school's threshold. This is demonstrated in the approach of one school –

*The entrance lobby to the school displays a 'welcome wall' with a map of the world, marking out where new arrivals to the school come from. Around the*

*map are pictures or photos of the new arrivals, with information about themselves that they have given, about their home language and class. On display below the map are a range of books, with pictures and information on children in different countries, different religions, stories from different cultures... Just beyond that are clocks showing school start and finish times, (free) breakfast club time, and after-school club time.*  
(Primary school, fieldnotes)

Other schools had other emphases:

*We are a Catholic school – we have a welcoming ethos, it's about the dignity and value of every individual in school – reaching out to children is an important element of what we do...*  
(Secondary school, interview with Head)

Various aspects of admissions, which can be seen as part of the initial welcome, are handled differently by different schools. The Heads of two schools and the Ethnic Minority Achievement (EMA) Co-ordinator of another explained practice at their respective schools:

*The admissions form is in all community languages – we give a copy to the parent in her own language, so she can see what I am filling in in English...*  
(Primary school, interview with Head)

*Parents are not in receipt of clothing grants, but the school gives them the uniform to start, so that the child arrives as part of the school. At registration they are given the school handbook and told about the breakfast club, which is free of charge and open to everyone...*  
(Primary school, interview with Head)

*Part of our admissions procedure is to take parents round the school, especially the playground, to the spot where parents collect the children – it alleviates parents' and children's anxiety.*  
(Primary school, interview with EMA Co-ordinator)

- *Support for students new to English – withdrawal or mainstreaming?* The question of the merits of withdrawal versus mainstreaming has been raised above, as well as potential stigma attached to withdrawal for continued English language support. Two possible models of good practice were presented in the fieldwork. In the first model, a school had been asked to 'house' a bilingual unit for 30 children. The school was asked to put the children on class registers, though in reality they would work in the bilingual unit. The school had been a multi-ethnic school prior to dispersal, and found this approach contrary to its usual way of working. The headteacher stated:

*..we very quickly moved away from that and began to refine our thinking – we asked, what can children do that the class was doing, e.g., expressive art, environmental studies, behind that maths, then language. We've got to get teachers and children to seek ways around that. And we also began to get peer support...*

*Now.. we work on a completely different basis... the two ASR support teachers with the EAL teachers work in classrooms across the school, mainly at language times. Teachers work with groups of children, which include asylum seekers and refugees, local bilingual and monolingual pupils... We feel that all children benefit from this..*

What can schools be doing to support asylum-seeking and refugee students?

*We had a debate within the school about 'withdrawal' ..for limited times in corners ..With joint planning with the class teacher and the support teacher .. where the support teacher takes the group becomes irrelevant..*  
(Primary school, interview with Head)

Another school took a different approach:

*We have admissions day every Monday afternoon.. very rarely a week passes when we didn't have a new child.. Children move straightaway into [mainstream] classes.. Assessment is carried out within the first two weeks of admission – short and sharp sessions are found to work better..*  
(Primary school, interview with EMA Co-ordinator)

In these two examples any stigma that could attach to withdrawal is absent, and children spend classtime with their peers, in a situation that is more conducive to forming friendships and socialising.

- *Monitoring students' progress:* the importance of monitoring the progress of asylum-seeking and refugee pupils in the school is recognised in most schools. The system used in one school, as described by the Head, deserves mention –

*We .. keep an overview of every child in school within a grid, which is colour-coded, so we can see where the ASR children are, where the local bilingual children are..*  
(Primary school, interview with Head)

- *Achievements and attainment:* Both achievement and attainment is important in being a 'successful learner'. The achievement of one school in including its asylum-seeking and refugee pupils in all aspects of school life, where they formed the majority among school captains, deserves special mention. The Head of that school described their system for supporting pupils through the school:

*We take information about the child and parents and make a Personal Learning Plan... We don't get all information at the first meeting, we get more later after confidence is developed in the school by the parents.. Every child spends a period of time in the International Unit and there details of the learning plan are completed and developed. .. Pupils [also] have a Pupil Support Teacher, who is assigned to each year group, and moves up with them through the school..*  
(Secondary school, interview with Head)

On a related issue, another case study school seeks to raise pupils' educational attainment by supporting home languages:

*Our students can do home languages at GCSE – if it is not a taught modern foreign language, the department pays for an external examiner..*  
(Secondary school, interview with EMA Co-ordinator)

- *Valuing asylum-seeking and refugee children:* Valuing student diversity is an integral part of inclusive practice. In many of the study schools asylum-seeking pupils were valued, and were at times seen to bring added-value to the school, as the following comments indicate:

*[taking in asylum-seeking pupils was] very new for staff and children, a lot of learning has happened.. Scottish children are now used to having a variety of children in the school – the vision has completely widened. At first some*

*teachers were apprehensive, but the children have won them over, because they are so keen to learn, and been supported by their parents. They are a good example, a good influence on local children...*

(Primary school, interview with Head)

*For the first [ASR] group, when the children were just acquiring English, the school suffered in terms of attainment levels. Now the ASR children are pulling up the school's attainment levels...*

(Primary school, interview with Head)

- *Peer support and fostering friendships:* Peer support and friendships are other key aspects of inclusive schools. The value of peer support and friendships was recognised in study schools, as the following demonstrate:

*The teacher will try to nominate a 'buddy' for them – teachers are very good with 'putting a smile' on their faces... Some of them [ASR children] amaze me the way they settle in... Whether or not they can speak English, they can be settled if they have children who speak their own language... We have after-school clubs for all children, mainly for sport... some are already good at sport – they can all play even with limited language...*

(Primary school, interview with Head)

*We encourage children to participate in extra-curricular activities,... residential courses...all to encourage development of friendships...*

(Primary school, interview with Head)

- *Parental involvement:* Encouraging and supporting parental involvement in their children's education is recognised as part of good practice in inclusive schools. One study school was particularly successful in its efforts to encourage parent participation:

*We try to get parents involved in PTA and School Board... [Also] last year we had a sewing group [of mothers] for the X'mas show.. now we have a cookery class programme with children and parents, in school time.. We have an asylum-seeker parent on our School Board..*

(Primary school, interview with Head)

*Supporting the whole child, raising awareness, understanding equality:*

Supporting the needs of the whole child is similarly significant. One study school with small numbers of asylum-seeking pupils emphasised the importance of supporting more than the child's educational progress:

*We provide not just academic support, but also emotional support... we found 'X' was not happy, she had no friends... we had more contact with the mother, and actively engaged her [pupil] with friendships, and in activities she might enjoy...*

(Secondary school, interview with Deputy Head)

Likewise, a denominational school with a small number of asylum-seeking pupils has developed specialist support for meeting pupils' emotional and other non-academic needs, recognising the importance of supporting the needs of the whole child:

*We try not to see young people in slots and categories.... Unique to this school is a well-resourced chaplaincy team, which is part of our pupil support structure. Asylum-seeking and refugee children could access this support – it is a place for them to talk, to get support...*

(Secondary school, interview with Head)

Another school with low numbers of asylum-seeking pupils had developed a game to promote debate on equal opportunities and anti-racist issues:

*Equal opportunities and anti-racism is a high priority... We have an .. Equality Game, which we now sell.. we use that game to work with young ones to provoke discussion. The objective is to show that life is not fair, not equal chances..*

(Secondary school, interview with Head)

Similarly, at a school with high numbers of asylum-seeking pupils, the curriculum was used to raise awareness of refugee issues among pupils and parents:

*A drama production on refugee experiences was being rehearsed at the school. The script had been written by pupils, drawing on first-hand knowledge within the school, and with the help and support of a local drama company engaged by the school, who were also helping with choreography. The production included song and dance, and the cast included talented refugee and non-refugee pupils of both majority and minority ethnic groups.*

(Secondary school, fieldnotes)

In sum, a range of inclusive practice was found in study schools. These include practices that sought to:

- address the whole child (rather than just the child's educational needs) in the school's welcome
- address the concerns of parents, and include parents in their children's education
- address the child's English-language needs whilst not withdrawing him/her from mainstream education
- develop pupil support strategies that indicate high expectations of all pupils; and
- foster friendships among all pupils.

## Conclusions

The research has highlighted areas for further action at different levels.

### (i) The Scottish Executive and Education Authorities

The survey indicated a need for better support for wider policies relating to work with asylum-seeking and refugee pupils. In particular:

- on-going anti-bullying and anti-racist work in schools and communities, more information about available resources, and adequate funding to all authorities for this, and for supporting different categories of vulnerable children
- on-going and suitably resourced training in this area for staff.

Case study data suggest that schools may not be fully aware of how the refugee experience could impact on a child's educational performance:

- further training and support needs to be provided for teachers on helping asylum-seeking and refugee pupils in the classroom, in particular in relation to behaviours and obstacles to learning resulting from past traumatic experiences.

What needs to be done, and who should be doing it?

The study identified many examples of inclusive practice in case study schools in Scotland and in England:

- such good practice needs to be celebrated through workshops and training sessions, and disseminated to and promoted in all schools, with easy access provided through web-based documents.

The study raised concerns with regard to further and higher education prospects for asylum-seeking students:

- it is recommended that the Scottish Executive in association with the Scottish Funding Council for Further and Higher Education (SFC) works to amend existing regulations to allow asylum-seeking young people access to higher education.

Study data indicate high levels of racism and racist bullying, mostly outside of schools, and some under-reporting of these for fear of repercussions. In recognition of the negative impact racist abuse can have on pupils' educational experiences:

- it is recommended that the Scottish Executive and local authorities work through and with various community organisations to build and foster better community relations.

## (ii) Schools

The efforts made by schools in supporting asylum-seeking and refugee pupils were recognised in the study. However, some areas were felt to require further action. In particular, if not part of current practice:

- asylum-seeking and refugee pupils, and other pupils new to English, need to be provided further and continuing help with academic English in order to access the curriculum, even after pupils seem to have gained competence with the language
- mainstream teachers need to be provided training to help them support the development of academic language among asylum-seeking, refugee, and other pupils new to English
- schools need to examine their practice on inclusion with vigilance, to ensure that particular ethnic groups within the school community are not experiencing isolation
- policies on bullying and racism in schools are reviewed on a regular and on-going basis, and reinforced through assemblies and PSE
- additional and on-going staff training on bullying and racism is provided, to make staff more able to spot signs, and competent to deal with incidents
- schools should actively seek to share and learn from inclusive practice developed in other schools, as highlighted in this study, and elsewhere, to improve the support they provide to asylum-seeking and refugee pupils.

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RR DONNELLEY B53129 09/07

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ISSN 1478-6796 (Online)