

Supporting and Including Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children in Education

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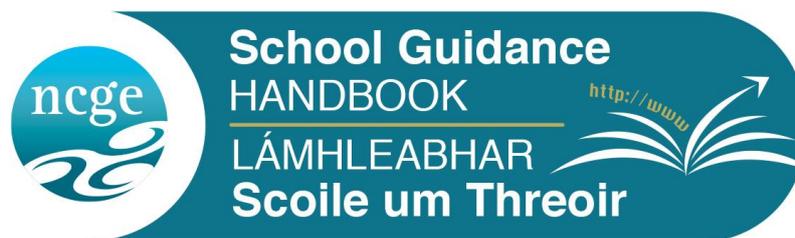


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Summary

The growing global refugee crisis continued in 2016 with 1.5 million people-seeking asylum in EU Member States. More than quarter of a million of those seeking asylum were children. Globally, only 50 per cent of refugee children have access to primary level education, and fewer than one in four are enrolled in secondary school. We know that above all else children want to go to school.

Ireland has committed to accepting 4,000 refugees and to prioritising children as part of this commitment. To date, 840 refugee and asylum-seeking children have arrived in Ireland as part of relocation and resettlement programmes. This is in addition to the 1,420 asylum-seeking children currently living in Direct Provision centres around the country.

This article provides a brief overview of the current refugee crisis in Europe; the experiences of child refugees and; subsequent impacts on their lives and education. It examines current issues and challenges for refugee and asylum seeking children in Ireland today and concludes by discussing best practice approaches, which support the inclusion of refugee and asylum seeking children in education settings.

Key Words

Education; Refugees; Asylum –Seekers; Integration; Diversity; Inclusion; Racism; Discrimination; Mental Health; Psycho Social Needs; Poverty; Minorities; Cultural Identity; Belonging; Whole School Approach; Best Practice; EAL; English as an Additional Language Ireland; Leadership.

Introduction

Globally, there are now more displaced people than ever before. There are over 22.5 million refugees across the world - over half of whom are under the age of 18. Six million are of primary and secondary school-going age (UNHCR, 2016, p.3). Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees worldwide (2.9 million) followed by Pakistan (1.4 million), Lebanon (1 million), Iran (979,400) and Uganda (940,000) (UNHCR, 2017, p.15).

In 2016, 1.5 million people sought asylum in EU Member States including more than quarter of a million children (European Asylum Support Office, 2016). These children are extremely vulnerable: many have lost parents and siblings, experienced significant trauma or witnessed severe acts of violence. Throughout their journey to Europe they face significant risks including forced labour, violence, kidnapping, sexual exploitation, and detention (European Commission, 2017, p 77-78). Nearly 70 per cent of these children are fleeing conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (Council of Europe, 2017, p.1).

Despite the hazardous nature of this journey, many children travel on their own without a parent or guardian. Since 2010 the number of children travelling alone has increased fivefold (UNICEF, 2017, p.12) with more than 65,000 unaccompanied minors applying for asylum in EU Member States in 2016 (European Asylum Support Office, 2017, p.128).

On average, the UNHCR estimates that refugees miss three to four years of schooling because of forced displacement (UNHCR, 2016, p.14).

Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children in Ireland

In September 2015, Ireland committed to accepting 4,000 refugees and to prioritising refugee children as part of this commitment. By February 2018 1,680 refugees had arrived in Ireland through this programme, approximately 840 of whom are children (Response to Parliamentary Question, 2018).¹

In addition to the refugees accepted as part of the IRPP, each year families and children present spontaneously at Irish ports of entry or the International Protection Office in Dublin seeking asylum. The majority of these asylum seekers live in Direct Provision centres in various locations around the country. There are approximately 1,420 asylum-seeking children living in Direct Provision (Department of Justice & Equality, 2017, p.5).

Refugees who arrive in the country from Lebanon through the resettlement programme have refugee status before they arrive in Ireland. Asylum seekers who arrive in the country through the relocation programme from Greece or who spontaneously present in Ireland have to apply to the International Protection Office for refugee status; this process can be quite lengthy (IHREC, 2014, p.9).

The asylum seeking population in Ireland is diverse and includes people from Syria, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Malawi (Department of Justice & Equality, 2017, p.15).

¹ It is important to note that the number of refugee and asylum seeking children in Ireland varies monthly. The cited figures reflect the number refugee and asylum-seeking children in the State in February 2018.

Child Refugees and Education

We know that above all else refugee children want to go to school. Families regularly cite children's education needs as one of their strongest motivations to flee conflict (Save the Children, 2016, p.8). For child refugees, school and education represent safety, inclusion and a chance for a better future. However only 50 per cent of refugee children worldwide have access to primary level education, and fewer than one in four are enrolled in secondary school (UNHCR, 2016, p.8).

Children in refugee reception centres do not always have access to mainstream schooling, adequate psychosocial support or regular recreational facilities. In the first reception and identification centres (hotspots) on the Greek Islands, where children may have to stay for several months, asylum-seeking children cannot attend regular school (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), 2017 p.9). In refugee hotspots and emergency camps where educational opportunities exist, availability can be limited; staff are often underqualified; or teacher-pupil ratios so high as to limit quality instruction (Ahlen, 2015, p.12). The processing times for unaccompanied children's asylum requests can be lengthy due to their complex nature resulting in children spending significant time out of school.

Experiences of formal education vary considerably dependent on the pre-settlement experience of refugee children. Many refugee children will have significant experience of a formal education system; however, others may never have experienced a school environment before, had disrupted school attendance or low educational attainment. For example, prior to the war in Syria almost 100 per cent of children were enrolled in school and there was a 95 per cent literacy rate (UNESCO, Syrian Arab Republic Profile, 2017); comparatively, the youth literacy rate in Afghanistan is currently 58.15 per cent (UNESCO, Afghanistan Profile, 2017). For refugee children that have never participated in formal education or who have experienced significant disruption to their education, the formality and rigid structure of the school environment often proves challenging as they adjust to life in their country of resettlement.

Along with a significantly disrupted education experience, refugee children often experience psychosocial trauma, which affects their capacity to perform and engage in education settings. Child refugees exhibit higher levels of anxiety and depression. Research undertaken with Syrian families found that 89 per cent of children's behaviour had become more fearful and nervous and 80 per cent of children had become more aggressive (Save the Children, 2017, p.13). These mental health problems continued after children left their country of origin, with 45 per cent of Syrian children in Turkey showing symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and 44 per cent showing signs of depression (Özer, Şirin & Oppedal, 2016, p.28).

Child refugees not only endure significant physical and mental challenges during displacement but these challenges frequently continue after arrival at their destination. Reception facilities for refugees can compound the trauma experienced especially when children are placed in detention (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Lengthy asylum procedures can result in children living in inappropriate and often inhospitable situations.

The unstable and insecure nature of their daily lives and uncertainty about the future leads to considerable anxiety and stress, which is further compounded, by high levels of poverty. One of the primary causes of psychosocial distress among refugee children is the dire economic conditions and social exclusion they face (Save the Children, 2015, p.17). In recognition of this, the UNHCR involved more than 250,000 children in Lebanon and Jordan in psychosocial support activities with the aim of addressing social exclusion (UNHCR, 2013).

All of these factors have a combined and significant impact on the educational outcomes and attainment of child refugees. Among the many consequences of trauma, refugee children often struggle to develop or hold a positive outlook on the future (Fazel et al., 2012) and this can affect how young people view their future careers and/or their ambitions after formal education. To this end guidance, counsellors have a crucial role in supporting refugee children to explore possibilities, develop a positive self-image and, re-imagine their futures. It is telling that only one per cent of refugee youth go on to third level education (UNHCR, 2016, p.30).

Key Issues for Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children in Ireland

Experiences in countries of origin, throughout their journey and on arrival at their destination can have a significant impact on refugee children's education and academic success. Trauma can impede a pupil's ability to 'fit in', and uncertainty about their status causes further distress (FRA, 2017, p.11). The following outlines some of the key issues faced by refugee and asylum seeking children in Ireland.

Mental Health

As outlined above, refugee children often experience significant trauma. Hodes (2000) noted that the stresses to which most refugees are exposed can be understood as occurring at three different stages: while in their country of origin; during the flight to safety; and when having to settle in a country of refuge.

Many traumatised children show particular behaviours, ranging from aggressive conduct to social withdrawal (FRA, 2017, p11). The trauma and resettlement issues experienced by their parents (Charboti & Berg, 2017) often affect accompanied children. This can result in strained family relationships at home (Arney et.al, 2009, p.34). Cultural and family beliefs about mental health problems may also prevent children, young people and/or their parents from seeking professional help (O'Shea et. al, 2000, p.191).

Parents may have limited capacity to provide psychosocial support for their children due to their own mental health problems (Charboti & Berg, 2017). A recent report by the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) raised concerns regarding asylum seeking children's mental health in Direct Provision and the impact of parent's mental health problems on their capacity to care for their children (HIQA, 2015, p.14).

The process of adjusting to a new language, culture, norms and values upon arrival in their country of resettlement can place a significant strain on refugee families and children. This new situation can have a significant impact on family dynamics, roles and relationships as families adjust to their new environment and can result in intergenerational conflict (Arney et.al, 2009, p.34).

English as an Additional Language

The ‘deficit model’ of English language support continues to prevail in Irish education settings, (Ward, 2004; Devine, 2005; Horgan, 2017). This model tends not to value linguistic diversity or further learning of mother tongue languages. Students may be referred to as ‘non-English speaking’ and the accompanying narrative is that when students learn English they will be able to access the curriculum the same as any other student.

This approach fails to acknowledge the advantages of bilingualism and can problematize the student in the eyes of their peers. It also undermines the child’s existing skills and capacity as a learner. Research shows that nurturing the bilingual capabilities of students leads to more positive educational outcomes and positive self-identity for minority students (Cummins, 2015 p. 461). Child and adolescent refugees derive significant psychological benefit from feeling they ‘belong’ in a school however this can be significantly compromised if they have limited knowledge of the local language (Fazel & Stein, 2002) and/or their capacities as a bilingual learner are undermined.

Racism

Irish schools are often reluctant to address racism proactively, with racism often being ‘dealt with within an anti-bullying, rather than an anti-racism framework’ (Devine, 2005 p.59). It is clear that minorities in Ireland do experience racism in their daily lives (Michael, 2016; Ní Chonaill & Buczkowska, 2016) and therefore that this is reproduced to varying extents in the education system (Devine, 2004; Bryan, 2012; Kitching, 2016). Ignoring racism or failing to address it proactively with students and teachers is not in line with best practice regarding intercultural education. ‘Diversity blind’, ‘Colour blind’ or ‘neutral ethos’ schools do not support the inclusion of minority students and can contribute to the festering of damaging prejudices and attitudes on the part of students and teachers (Bryan, 2012; p.8).

A whole-of-school approach should be adopted which includes the development and implementation of robust equality and anti-bullying policies, regular anti-racism and intercultural training and initiatives to examine and address the attitudes of the general student population towards refugees and migrants. These steps are crucial to supporting the inclusion of minority students and foster the integration of minority students with the general student population.

Navigating the Education System

Child and adolescent refugees derive significant psychological benefit from feeling they ‘belong’ to a school. However this can prove challenging when they may have limited knowledge of the language, culture and a school system which may have different learning styles and expectations (Tyrer & Fazel 2012). Supports which enable families and children to navigate the educate system, empower parents to advocate for their child, and familiarise parents and children with expectation and learning styles can support the acculturation process for both parents and children. Refugee children arriving in a new country, either with or without their families, are likely to benefit from schools and services that can enable them to settle in their new environment (Tyrer & Fazel, 2012).

Poverty

Research (Arnold, 2012; FLAC, 2009; HIQA, 2015) tells us asylum-seeking children living in Direct Provision are an extremely vulnerable group experiencing high rates of poverty and social exclusion. Unlike other parents, people in the protection process are not entitled to receive the Child Benefit payment and are not entitled to work so they have no opportunity to supplement their small weekly income (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2017, p.78).

This significantly affects asylum-seeking children's lives and their integration into Irish society. Simply put, it means that children living in Direct Provision often cannot take part in activities like running clubs, swimming lessons and friends' birthday parties. This not only impinges on the development of friendships with peers and integration into the wider community, it also contributes to significant anxiety as children attempt to hide their economic situation from peers (Arney et.al, 2009, p.36).

Best Practice Approaches

Schools can play a vital part in the integration of refugee children and families not only through supporting the educational, social and emotional development of children and young people but also by providing essential links and contact with the local community for children and parents. Substantial research has been undertaken on effective methodologies and best practice approaches to supporting the inclusion of refugee and asylum seeking children. The following outlines key approaches, which have been shown to ensure successful multi-ethnic schools.

A Whole School Approach

A whole school approach involves all members of the school community including school management, students, parents and the wider community. It is widely acknowledged as the most successful way to ensure inclusion and support a sense of belonging for minority students (Arnot et.al 2014, p.105). This approach should seek to examine and reflect on how *all* elements in the school environment support and foster inclusion.

A comprehensive way to instigate this approach is to undertake a whole school audit, which encompasses the views and experiences of all students and staff. The most effective schools have been shown to listen to and learn from students and their parents (Blair & Bourne, 1998, p.4).

In particular, whole school approaches and schools with strong and dynamic ties to the local community have great potential for promoting cohesion. They create a sustainable positive school atmosphere, as well as a stronger sense of belonging. School policies that encourage ethnic mixing create conditions for inter-ethnic cooperation and fostering tolerance. There are a number of programmes, which support schools to address diversity and equality and embed an intercultural approach in the school.²

However, simply bringing young people from different backgrounds together physically is not sufficient to reduce prejudice and develop positive intercultural relations; schools need to create the conditions for all children and school staff to develop their intercultural competence (Van Driel, Darmody & Kerzil, 2016). Intrinsic to an effective whole school approach are robust equality and anti-bullying policies, which proactively address racism and discrimination.

Key focus areas should include the curriculum; teaching methodologies including intercultural pedagogies; decision-making procedures; students voice, representation and participation and proactive measures to support a sense of belonging among minority students.

² The Yellow Flag project provides a structured support programme for schools that wish to address interculturalism from a whole school perspective <http://www.yellowflag.ie/home>

Example

Where: Wakefield College, UK

How it works? The approach combines an inclusive approach to education through strong leadership and teacher training to promote effective learning strategies and manage behaviour.

This approach involves:

- Developing and implementing a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation framework for equality and diversity.
- Addressing any issues or challenges that arise as quickly and as comprehensively as possible.
- Establish a formal structure whereby stakeholders steer work related to specific equality strands and are involved in key decisions.
- Ensuring staff understand expectations in terms of equality and diversity and providing them with support to access resources and training that will support them in meeting that required standard.
- Working in partnership with schools and other organisations to support learners with disabilities.

Extracted from Van Driel et.al, 2016, p.29

Supporting positive mental health for refugee and asylum seeking children

Many asylum-seeking children will experience mental health problems because of previous trauma or current stressors including financial problems or uncertainty about their status (Hodes, 2000, p. 59). However, it is important that adults working with them do not make assumptions regarding their psychosocial needs, particularly given that their life experiences will often have contributed to significant levels of resilience (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010; Murray, 2017). It is also important to note that just because a student does not exhibit an obvious sign of stress or trauma does not mean that they have or are not experiencing mental health problems. It is important that school staff are aware and understand how issues may manifest. Research (Save the Children, 2016; Fazel & Betancourt, 2017; Murray 2017) shows us that refugee children can experience a range of mental health problems, which can manifest in a number of ways including:

- Increased levels of aggression;
- Withdrawn behaviour;
- Anxiety;
- Lack of energy, appetite or self-confidence or;
- Lack of self-regulation strategies, resorting to “fight or flight” responses in the face of perceived threat.

Where these issues do manifest it is important that students be linked in with appropriate supports which take into account their specific needs. Guidance Counsellors can support refugee students through the development of Individual Career plans, which identify ways to build on their strengths, address additional needs and map their future academic route.

Schools can provide an excellent forum for enhancing resilient behaviours in children and young people and addressing challenging behaviours. According to Fazel and Stein (2002), one of the key protective factors in influencing this outcome is the school that acts as a stable social support. This support helps to develop children's resilience by enhancing their individual competencies, in turn adding to their self-worth and sense of control over their environment. Schools and guidance counsellors are well placed to act as stable social supports for child refugees and their families. Guidance counsellors can seek to improve children's resilience by supporting children to develop their individual competencies and sense of self-worth (Fazel and Stein, 2002, p.368).

Among the many consequences of trauma, refugee children often struggle to develop or hold a positive outlook on the future (Fazel et al. 2012, p. 271). As highlighted by Dryden-Peterson (2017) refugee children are often preparing for an 'unknowable future' this can affect how young people view their future careers and/or their ambitions after formal education. There is a crucial role for guidance counsellors in supporting refugee children to re-imagine their future career and to develop a career plan, which will allow them to set and reach goals.

Parental Engagement

Asylum seeking students continue to face challenges during the resettlement process. Given the limited financial resources of many asylum-seeking families, it is important to be sensitive about activities or excursions, which may have cost implications.

Although there continues to be a perception that asylum seeking families are 'hard to reach' (Horgan, 2017) building relationships with parents and families is crucial to ensuring children's success and wellbeing in school. There can be a number of reasons why parents may be uncomfortable engaging in a new education setting including language insecurity, cultural insecurity and/or a limited understanding of the systems and structure in place (Wideman- Johnston, 2014; Arney et.al, 2009).

It is important to use professional interpreters to facilitate appropriate, respectful communication and contact with the family (Arney et.al, 2009 p. 35). It is not appropriate to use intermediaries, which have not been agreed or discussed with, the family i.e. staff in Direct Provision or emergency reception centre as this can serve to undermine a parent's autonomy

Brewer and McCabe (2012) found that a 'Parenting in a New Society Discussion Group' held in a school setting provided a useful forum for parents to share their immigration experience, practice their English and learn how to navigate the education system. The discussion group provided an opportunity for parents to share and address concerns, and access information about community services. It also facilitated greater engagement with teachers and school staff.

This model could be replicated in schools with the support and assistance of community services to support schools to work with parents in relation to their children's educational progress and development.

Navigating the Education System

Navigating the education system can prove particularly challenging for refugee and asylum-seeking children. Guidance counsellors can support refugee students to adapt and manage the transition into a new education system, assist them with their subject choice and in identifying work-related interests, skills, knowledge and values.

A disrupted education can prove particularly problematic when refugee students are in secondary school as gaps in their education may limit their subject choice and/or their capacity to study subjects at higher or ordinary level (Yau, 1995). Given the impact that this can have on both their future education and career options, it is clear that guidance counselling has an important role to play in assisting students to identify the subject choices and academic supports necessary to fulfil their future career and further education ambitions.

Preserving and supporting the Cultural Identity of Students from a Minority Background

A crucial element in ensuring that children from a minority background engage and succeed in education settings is fostering a sense of belonging. Children with a strong sense of belonging are less likely to leave school early and are more likely to succeed in education and develop positive relationships (Willims, 2014, p.25). Children from a minority background often find it difficult to identify and engage with the learning process and the content of a mono-cultural curriculum (Van Driel et. al, 2016, p.40). Addressing religious, ethnic and other forms of diversity is a critical aspect of education. Supporting a sense of belonging in minority students involves:

- Including the culture and histories of both minority and majority students in the curriculum. This reduces prejudice and discrimination, develops critical thinking, and supports students to engage multiple perspectives in their learning.
- Providing mother tongue or bilingual education has a profound impact on a person's sense of identity and well-being nurturing positive self-identity and belonging and;
- Embedding teaching methodologies, which highlight the strengths and contributions of all students and support, encourage inter-ethnic cooperation. Bringing young people from different backgrounds together physically is not sufficient to reduce prejudice and develop positive intercultural relations; schools need to create the conditions for all children to work together to develop their intercultural competence i.e. problem-based learning, cooperative learning and peer education (Van Driel et. al, 2016 p.40).

Guidance counsellors are well positioned to support refugee students identify and engage with supports, which nurture their capabilities and value linguistic diversity.

Strong Leadership

School principals and management play a crucial role in fostering and supporting a positive school ethos (Billot, Goddard and Cranston, 2007, p.15).

Diversity needs to be visibly valued by school management and intercultural approaches encouraged ensuring a positive example is modelled for students and teachers alike. There is a clear correlation between the attitudes and behaviour of school management and positive intercultural relationships between students (Pica-Smith & Poynton, 2014, p.88).

Billot et. al identified four principles which have been shown to support a positive intercultural ethos including:

- a strong commitment to social justice principles, with these embedded in school practices and culture;
- an acceptance of difference and the capacity to work across various cultures, accommodating differences and using these as strengths;
- the setting of high learning expectations for all students and avoiding an ‘excuse culture’;
- the celebration of the diverse ethno cultural nature of schools, with cultural and sporting activities that respect and highlight individual and group differences (p.17).

Monitoring and Tracking

Clear systems of targeting, tracking and monitoring individual students progress is crucial to ensuring that all children are benefitting equally from the education system (Abdikeeva, 2014, p.19). The collection and analysis of data assists schools and teachers to identify gaps or weaknesses in the provision of education supports and to identify students and teachers’ needs. Positive intercultural approaches should include reflective analysis and interrogation of existing practice to ensure it is successfully achieving its aims.

Further Information

Resources

- Amnesty International UK: <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/resources-secondary-schools-and-further-education>.
- European Commission, Supporting Teacher Competence Development: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/school/doc/teachercomp_en.pdf
- Equality in Second-level Schools: A Training Manual for Educators and Trainers: <http://developmenteducation.ie/media/documents/Equality-in-Second-Level-Schools.pdf>.
- Equality and Diversity: Building a culture of equality in our society: <http://developmenteducation.ie/media/documents/Equality%20and%20Diversity.pdf>.
- Forced to Flee: Exploring the Refugee Crisis: https://www.trocaire.org/sites/default/files/resources/edu/resource_refugee_crisis.pdf.
- Guidelines for Educators on Countering Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims 2011: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/84495?download=true>
- Integrate Ireland Language and Training: http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Inclusion/English_as_an_Additional_Language/IILT_Materials/
- Know My World: <http://knowmyworld.org/>.
- Mix it Up: Initiative of the Teaching Tolerance Institute: <http://www.tolerance.org/mix-it-up/what-is-mix>
- School Without Racism Website: <http://www.schoolzonderracisme.be/>
- Show Racism the Red Card Teaching Resources: <http://www.theredcard.org/resources-and-activities/>
- Tackling Controversial issues in the Citizenship Classroom:
- <http://www.ubuntu.ie/media/controversial-issues.pdf>
- The Big Myth: <http://www.bigmyth.com/>.
- UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/teaching-resources.html>
- UNESCO Guidelines on Intercultural Education: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001478/147878e.pdf>.
- Immigration Status in Ireland: What do I need to know? Immigrant Council of Ireland: <https://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/2018-01/FINAL%20ICI%20Young%20People%20Info%20Resource-A5-WEB-FA.pdf>

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Appendix 1

Terminology

Refugee: Someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group.

Asylum seeker: Someone who is seeking to be recognised as a refugee. If they are granted this recognition they are declared a refugee.

Separated Children: A child who has been separated from both parents or from their legal guardian but may be travelling with other relatives including siblings.

Unaccompanied Minor: A child under 18 years of age travelling completely alone or in a group without the support of an adult relative.

Direct Provision: The system of accommodation provided by the State to people seeking asylum or protection in Ireland who are awaiting recognition of their refugee status.