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Learning in resettlement

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Education is a central element of resettled families' lives, and providing support to parents and children to learn about and integrate into the education system is essential.

When parents tell me and my colleagues – practitioners within a refugee resettlement support service – why they decided to bring their family to the UK, most say that it was for their children. We know that therefore some of the first questions asked by both parents and children from a newly resettled family will be about schools. Children will ask when school starts and which class they will be in; parents will want to know, for example, how far the school is from their new home and whether it contains any speakers of their mother tongue. Most children that we support have not had a supportive learning environment following their displacement. Accounts of bullying and cruelty towards Syrian pupils in Jordanian and Lebanese schools, for example, are very common; children and parents arrive, therefore, with assumptions about teachers and apprehensions about corporal punishment.

An admissions appointment – the first meeting between family and school representatives – is the foundation of a family's relationship with the education system in the UK. During this appointment they can ask all the questions they wish to ask and also share their concerns about potential challenges for their children. It is essential to have a bilingual practitioner present at this appointment to ensure that parents understand how the school operates. This includes the uniforms required and where to procure them, the types of curriculum that will be taught, drop-off and pick-up places and timings, school holidays, and the policies governing absences, anti-bullying and violence. The first meeting with the school should also introduce the small details that are important to the child's experience, such as through a guided tour of the school to show parents and child what the classrooms are like, where the canteen is and what types of food are offered.

Once a child puts on their uniform and enters school, they are like any other child. Many children and parents are therefore nervous about the possible 'othering' impact of differentiated provision where the child is extracted from the regular classroom to attend separate English as an Additional Language (EAL) classes. We have therefore set up meetings with parents to help them to understand the need to support the children through a transitional period catering to their additional needs so they will ultimately integrate with the other children. However, the acronyms and specialised vocabulary that are used by professionals in these discussions can seem alien and threatening. Organisations who provide support can help by providing clear explanations of these seemingly complicated terms and processes.

Receiving praise and support

A question often asked by parents relates to how best to track their children's educational progress. Some parents are used to teachers in their home country setting homework on a daily basis and complain that teachers in the UK rarely set homework. Rewards and appraisal systems, however, can help parents to follow their children's progress from different angles; for example, teachers can issue stars and certificates to demonstrate that the child had been respectful, helpful and so forth.

In addition, parents' evenings, which children attend alongside their parents, can help parents gather feedback from teachers, especially at secondary level, as it is one of the few times parents get to see their children's exercise books and hear about their lessons. The child is praised in front of the parents and more details are given about their progress and how the parents can encourage this at home. Again, it is strongly advisable to ensure a bilingual practitioner attends



A recently resettled three-year-old from Aleppo, Syria, paints at the nursery school which he has just started attending in London.

those meetings. Additionally, as parents with very little understanding of English may struggle to understand their children's homework, these meetings with teachers can help a support worker to better understand the needs of the child and consider how to find appropriate ways to support them, such as through homework clubs, mentoring and other projects that may be offered by local and national organisations to support refugees and asylum seekers with their education.

Giving children a voice

At admissions appointments and parents' evenings, children should also be given a chance to have their voices heard, to speak of their previous experiences of education and also to meet – early on – people who will be important in their day-to-day school life. Schools are also a good place in which to encourage host-community children to develop empathy towards their new classmates and to be involved in making school a caring, welcoming environment. Small things that can make a big difference include having a lunch partner or play buddy, and ideally introducing or identifying a staff member who speaks the same language to enable the child to communicate with his/her peers. This can also ensure parents feel confident that their child is capable of expressing themselves in times of crisis.

Among good practice shown by schools is providing children with a visual resource

pack to help them to express their emotions, and to equip the spaces of learning and socialising with rules set out in picture or symbol form. Allowing pupils to consult dictionaries or access tablets to use online translation tools or providing small whiteboards where they can draw or sketch answers (and correct them as they go without leaving a permanent trace of their errors) are other ways that can help children to convey meaning despite language difficulties.

We cannot stress enough the importance of children continuing to use and learn their mother tongue. This allows children to maintain the link with their heritage and their sense of identity, to link up with their previous years of learning and to ensure parents can maintain a clear channel of communication. We have noticed children refraining from speaking their mother tongue once they start school, or asking their parents not to address them in it. This has been linked to feelings of shame around an element of their identity that sets them apart from the rest of their classmates – or can simply be a reproduction of the rules inside the English-speaking classroom. We have supported parents to register their children in weekend classes where they are taught their mother tongue. When possible, teachers should encourage students to talk or write in their first language when planning and offering responses. If there is a bilingual teaching assistant or a pupil who speaks

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the same language, interpreting should be facilitated in order to enable the child to participate more fully in the conversation.

Southfields Academy in south-west London provides a good example of how a school can champion pupil diversity.¹ Its International Group comprises about 150 pupils who have arrived in the English school system from abroad, and includes migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and unaccompanied minors. Newly resettled children can share – as a group – their experience of transitioning into the learning environment. An entire area of the school is reserved for this group of children where they can feel part of the norm, not the exception. Each staff member who teaches them is made aware of the challenges these children face in terms of language and different experience of methods of learning. Volunteers serve as mentors to the students to help them with their English language learning but also with their learning outside school and with planning for the future in terms of career advice and higher education pathways.

School as a wider source of empowerment

Learning spaces also have the potential to empower other family members, especially women. Since women are the primary care givers in the refugee families we support, they are fully involved in the practical preparations of getting to and from school and are very aware of what their children are learning, following up with children on their day at school, seeking feedback from teachers and attending meetings. This involvement is one of their major motivations to learn English. Children have young brains capable of absorbing more information and are immersed in an English-speaking environment, and they also enjoy acting as teachers for their elders.

Schools can have many further positive impacts on the family's life beyond the provision of education to their children. For example, morning coffee gatherings at school, held after parents have dropped off their children, can provide opportunities for parents to meet. This can help to ease the isolation some may experience,

create links between communities and offer parents the opportunity to share similar experiences and to get to know the school and its staff. Some schools also offer parents English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. The learning space is already familiar and, as the parent is already known to the school, they do not have to go through a process of assessment and form-filling to prove their eligibility. Classes run by their children's school may also fit better with parents' schedules.

Finally, schools are a safe space in which women can explore new training and work opportunities. Organisations supporting parents can help them to see that the experience they have of providing patient, consistent care to their children is a sought-after skill in childcare and teaching. For example, Single Homeless Project has recently brokered school-based employment opportunities for two refugee women, one as a lunch supervisor in a primary school and another as a teaching assistant – the first paid role both women have obtained since settling.²

Parents in displacement focus much of their energy on the upbringing and education of their children but they may have experience of trauma, have had bad experiences with schooling, or may simply have fears and apprehensions about the education of their children in their country of settlement. Parents should be accompanied in the process of learning about the school system, and children's voices should remain at the centre of the process. As their journey through school helps children to blossom and develop meaningful bonds with their peers and the world around them, parents will also start considering their own learning and growth.

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www.shp.org.uk/welcoming-refugees/

1. www.southfieldsacademy.com

2. See also Belghazi M (2018) 'Supporting recently resettled refugees in the UK' *Forced Migration Review* issue 58
www.fmreview.org/economies/belghazi