

Accessing and thriving in education in the UK

Catherine Gladwell

Research shows that significant barriers confront refugee and asylum-seeker children arriving in the UK in terms of them getting into school and thriving in education. Central government, local authorities, schools and colleges and education professionals can take steps to help ensure these children receive timely and appropriate education.

Despite statutory guidance that all looked-after children in England should be placed in education within 20 school days of their entry into care,¹ research from Refugee Support Network and UNICEF UK² shows that none of England's nine regions – nor those of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland – has met this target for all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in local authority care.³ Furthermore, asylum-seeking children who arrive as part of families also often struggle to secure school places rapidly. The most significant delays occur in secondary and further education, where in one instance a quarter of children in one region have had to wait more than three months for a school or college place.

Barriers to access

At a systemic level, access to education is delayed by: long waiting lists (particularly for those in Scotland aged 16 or over who require English for Speakers of Other Languages – ESOL – classes); complex online application processes that family members with low levels of literacy and information technology (IT) skills are unable to navigate; and the challenges of rapidly securing places for children who arrive in the middle of the academic year.

At the school level, entry into education is delayed primarily by three factors. First, there is a reluctance on the part of schools to enrol students at the upper-secondary

level due to fear of negatively influencing the school's overall performance in national examinations.⁴ The majority of schools and education professionals consulted during the research were unaware that schools may apply to exclude from their results those pupils who speak English as a second language who have arrived in the course of the school years being examined. Second, there is a lack of readily available places for children with special educational needs (SEN), a lack which is particularly affecting those children with severe needs who have been resettled through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. The third factor creating this delay is specific to England, where local authorities must apply to the Secretary of State for Education to instruct an academy to accept a looked-after child. Given that as of January 2018 72% of secondary and 27% of primary schools in England were academies,⁵ this requirement presents a significant challenge for many local authorities attempting to place such children.

At the contextual level, the research identifies three key barriers to access. First, significant numbers of children and families report remaining in temporary accommodation, where they are placed on arrival in the UK, for up to six months (meant to be a maximum of three weeks). During this time children typically are not enrolled in school in order to avoid disruption when they move, and they therefore miss a substantial part of their education. Second, a National Transfer Scheme has recently been introduced for unaccompanied children, dispersing them to areas of the UK with fewer unaccompanied minors. Although robust data on the impact

of this scheme on access to education are not available, children and social workers report delays, both because children are not placed in school while awaiting dispersal, and because dispersals take place without an education placement in the receiving locality being secured. Third, of the children interviewed for this study, those who had been subject to ongoing age assessments reported being kept out of school until their status as a minor was confirmed. Practices around age assessment vary – some local authorities treat children as being the age at which they present until it is proved otherwise; others treat those who may be adults as such until they are proved to be children. Just under a quarter of the UASC interviewed had to wait for a school or college place or were told they were not eligible as a result of an age assessment process. In all cases, this was ultimately overturned and the young person was admitted to school or college – but had typically missed several months of education.

The issue of age assessments is complex and teachers, social workers and practitioners repeatedly reported the challenge of balancing children's rights with the need for adequate safeguarding in schools.⁶

Barriers to thriving in education

At a systemic level, refugee and asylum-seeker children's ability to thrive in education is negatively affected primarily by their placement in an academic context that does not facilitate appropriate progression. For many children, this means arriving in the UK at upper-secondary level and being placed on a national examination programme in a mainstream school where they are unable to achieve meaningful results because of their minimal language skills and interrupted



A resettled refugee receives additional IT support at the secondary school where she is a student.

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educational history. For others it means arriving at the same age (14–16) but being placed on a part-time ESOL course and having little opportunity to achieve their full academic potential. Outstanding examples of good practice do exist: school-based provision of study towards a more limited number of national qualifications than would usually be taken, with fully integrated English language support, or college-based provision of full-time ESOL with integrated mathematics, IT and other subjects, offering clear progression routes. However, these are typically found only in large cities that have significant numbers of newly arriving refugee and asylum-seeker children.

At the school level, the ability of these children to remain and thrive in education is negatively affected by insufficient English as an Additional Language (EAL) support in some schools; challenges diagnosing and addressing SEN when combined with EAL needs; bullying and social issues; and a lack of awareness among some teachers and other staff of broader issues affecting refugee and asylum-seeker children. Broader contextual factors include mental health difficulties, particularly those associated with past experiences and those relating to the asylum process, which can lead to increased absences and exclusions; poverty, particularly linked to the ability to afford educational resources, participate in school trips, and travel to and from school; and living in precarious accommodation.

Interim provision and improving access

Several local authorities have developed innovative interim education provision for UASC and resettled children who are awaiting a school place. The Virtual School⁷ in Croydon local authority, for example, has established a programme of interim education for UASC. Based within a local secondary school, it offers three days of face-to-face learning per week, in a variety of subjects in addition to English language provision.

At the systemic level, using the additional payments schools receive to support

children in care innovatively can help in providing interim solutions. In Croydon, for example, Pupil Premium funds (a per-head allowance) were historically used to pay for individual language tutoring but have now been pooled to create more substantial, group-based provision. Our research also found that the level of engagement and dedication of individual local authority and school- or college-based staff makes a significant difference to individual children.

At the school level, the development of a school-wide ethos of welcome for refugee and asylum-seeker children was shown to increase the acceptance of their applications, and substantial liaison with voluntary sector advocates and support workers was a significant factor in helping overcome a variety of barriers to access. Several young people, for example, explained that their attempts to enrol in secondary school or further education had failed but that being accompanied to meetings with school or college staff members by an advocate or support worker had ultimately helped secure them a place.

Thriving in education

The research found that the ability of refugee and asylum-seeker children to thrive in education is facilitated by six key factors:

- the presence of a committed, caring adult, who will support them over an extended period of time (which appears to be particularly important for unaccompanied children)
- the opportunity to participate in education programmes where content and curriculum have been appropriately adapted to meet their needs
- the availability of substantial pastoral care and mental health support within the school setting (particularly important given the long waiting lists and inaccessibility of many out-of-school counselling, therapy and mental health support services)
- partnerships between schools or colleges and specialist voluntary sector

organisations that can facilitate the provision of on-site advice, guidance and support

- creative approaches to peer support within the school or college, including buddy schemes and school-wide awareness raising about forced migration
- the provision of training on meeting the educational needs of refugee and asylum-seeker children for all teachers and other school or college staff as part of continuing professional development.

Our research gives rise to the following recommendations to UK central government policymakers:

- recognise that all children, including asylum-seeker children in temporary accommodation, should receive an education
- encourage the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) – the government-run schools' inspector – to consider and make reference in their inspections to work undertaken by schools to accommodate the needs of refugee and asylum-seeker children
- review, and consider simplifying, the process by which the Secretary of State can require an academy to accept a pupil
- provide better and clearer information to schools on new EAL arrivals at the upper-secondary level, including ensuring that schools are aware of provisions enabling them to exclude these children from their results profiles
- increase the number of available funded ESOL hours for 16–18 year olds
- ensure that training provided to the prospective senior designated mental health leads in schools (posts that all schools are now encouraged to have) will include specific content on supporting refugee and asylum-seeker children.

Central government policymakers and local authorities should seek to build on and raise awareness of existing good practice across England, Scotland and

Wales by improving networking and information-sharing opportunities for professionals working in education for refugee and asylum-seeker children.

Additionally, local authorities should:

- develop initial guidance on appropriate curriculum and good practice for interim provision for UASC
- provide specialist training on the educational needs of UASC for key personnel (social workers, key workers and Leaving Care Personal Advisors) where expert UASC teams no longer exist.

Schools and colleges should:

- ensure teachers at all levels are trained, as a standard part of their continuing professional development, in the educational support needs of refugee and asylum-seeker children
- consider implementing interventions such as peer-support schemes and expert partnerships with external refugee youth charities.

Catherine Gladwell

cgladwell@refugeesupportnetwork.org

Director, Refugee Support Network

www.refugeesupportnetwork.org

1. Department for Education (2014, updated 2018) *Promoting the education of looked-after children* bit.ly/Looked-after-children-education-UK-2018
2. UNICEF UK and Refugee Support Network (2018) *Education for Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children: Access and Equality in England, Scotland and Wales* bit.ly/UNICEF-RNN-Access-to-Education-2018
3. In the UK, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are placed in the care of their local authority. A child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours is known as a looked-after child. Looked-after children are also often referred to as children in care.
4. In the UK, pupils' attainment in national examinations is one of the factors used to rank schools in regularly published league tables.
5. National Audit Office (2018) *Converting maintained schools to academies* bit.ly/NationalAuditOffice-academies-2018
6. See Busler D (2016) 'Psychosocial age assessments in the UK', *Forced Migration Review* issue 52 www.fmreview.org/solutions/busler
7. 'Virtual School' is the term used by local authorities for their provision of education support to all looked-after children in their care.