Beyond Integration: Supporting meaningful engagement of migrant pupils in a diverse Britain

MiCREATE
Migrant Children and Communities in a Transforming Europe

Abstract

This policy brief is concerned with the integration of migrant children into educational settings in Britain's diverse and multicultural society. The findings are drawn from research carried out at Manchester Metropolitan University as part of the Horizon 2020 funded project 'Migrant children in a transforming Europe' (MiCREATE).

MiCREATE actively involved children from 6 schools across Manchester through a child-centred approach, using surveys, art-based interviews, and focus groups. We found that although overall migrant children had positive experiences at their school and embraced the attempts made to celebrate their cultures, disparities remained. Furthermore, it became evident that Britain is still far from being a haven for those who have left their home countries, whether because of conflict or economic reasons. More needs to be done so that these marginalised groups of children can feel a sense of belonging, safety, and attachment to the UK ensuring their full participation in society. This policy brief focuses on key issues, including diversity management and curriculum, language policies, bullying and discrimination, and school-parent relationships.

Introduction

The diversity of UK communities is routinely changing; for instance, in 2018, Poland was the top country of birth for foreign-born nationals, but in 2019 India overtook Poland (Vergas-Silva & Rienzo, 2020).

Also, due to global conflicts, certain regions of the UK receive migrants and refugees of different backgrounds, creating new challenges for educational settings. For example, recently, the war in Afghanistan has led many Afghans to flee to the UK. They have been housed in regions across the country, with Manchester being one of them. The schools where these children were placed had to rethink their integration strategy.

Likewise, the UK is expecting an influx of migrants from Ukraine due to the current conflicts meaning that the regions in which these migrants arrive will need to consider their integration practices and strategies. These examples show that as diversity increases and changes across the UK, it is essential that educational systems provide an inclusive education that fosters cultural diversity to prevent discrimination, bullying, and racism and ensure equal outcomes for all social groups.

Our research identified varying experiences of educational inclusion among groups of migrants, such as new arrivals, long-term migrants, and local children with migrant backgrounds

Main findings and recommendations

A. Managing Diversity

Our research found that schools used a range of methods to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of their student body. However, many of these practices addressed diversity at a superficial level. Schools must take an approach to the diversity curriculum that will enable pupils to understand their multiple and complex identities and how their lives are influenced by globalisation (Banks, 2014).

If inclusivity is to be promoted, then cultural diversity topics must be discussed explicitly and, the curriculum should be reflective of a child's background (Hanna, 2020) and cultural understanding (Ngana, 2015). Additionally, our findings alluded to a lack of confidence and some hesitancy in teachers being able to discuss specific topics due to perceptions of political correctness and lack of knowledge about certain cultures for example the Roma community (See Badwan et al, 2021)

> It seems that although diversity is a part of everyday life in schools, the lack of training and critical engagement on diversity means that it is not adequately addressed (Badwan et al., 2021).

Recommendations:

National Level: Teacher training programmes should contain elements of training on how teachers can address topics regarding diversity within the classroom.

Local Level: Experts such as researchers as well as charities and NGOs that support the Roma community should provide resources and cultural competency events for teachers on how to support Roma children and their parents.

School Level: The diversity curriculum provided to children should be differentiated according to the type of migrant children.

B. Discrimination and forms of new racism

Previous research has pointed to structural forms of racism and its outcomes for individuals of Black, Asian, and Other ethnic minority backgrounds. However, our research acknowledges persistent racial inequalities and new forms of racism through lived experiences, stereotypes, and unconscious biases.

Worryingly, there are no official statistics to gauge the true extent of bullying within British schools, as schools do not need to record data on bullying cases according to governmental guidelines. Instead, schools are asked to exercise judgment as to whether incidents of bullying should be recorded (Department for Education, 2017).

Recommendations:

National Level: The government should make the collection of data on racist incidents of bullying mandatory.

Local Level: School staff in leadership positions need to be trained on tackling old and new forms of racism, stereotypes and unconscious bias.

School Level: Schools should create diversity management groups that are formed entirely of pupils from diverse backgrounds through an intersectional lens. Doing this will enable different groups such as those who are highly stigmatised, especially those of a Roma background, to speak about their experiences, provide suggestions for improvement and take action with the help of teachers where needed.

C. Language (As both capital & barrier)

The language was identified as both capital and a barrier. It was a barrier for newly arrived children as they struggled in acclimatising to the education system due to a lack of proficiency in speaking English. Support provided by interpreters, whether official (teachers) or informal (peers), was instrumental.

Schools benefited from multicultural and multilingual teaching staff, but not all schools had this privilege due to funding limitations.

Home languages can be seen as a capital that enrich migrant children's lives, providing them with the benefits of bilingualism, that support migrant integration including essential employability skills. However, if not used, home languages can be easily forgotten. We argue that home languages should be supported and further cultivated in schools rather than being seen as a hindrance.

Recommendations:

National Level: Increase funding allocated to EAL departments so that they can adequately support EAL pupils. This is particularly important given the further disparities migrant pupils faced as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Arun, Batool and Szymczuk, 2021).

Local Level: Local councils should fund and facilitate language workshops by migrant parents for migrant children wanting to retain their mother tongue.

School Level: Pupils should be provided with a wider range of language classes in primary and secondary schools so that migrant children can undertake some education in their home language (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, 2019).

D. Educational attainment

Schools provided many initiatives to support migrant children's educational attainment, but certain children still need more tailored support. For example, those who arrived too late in the UK to prepare for their GCSE and second and third-generation boys of Caribbean descent who persistently have low attainment rate at GCSE.

The pandemic also posed many additional challenges for migrant children as they suffered significantly in their learning, whereby some had even regressed in their English-speaking abilities, and upon return to school, they had to begin learning the language again. However, due to limited proficiency in English language skills, migrant parents were unable to support their children. Additionally, newly arrived migrant pupils were not allocated school places, leading to gaps in learning (See Arun et al, 2021).
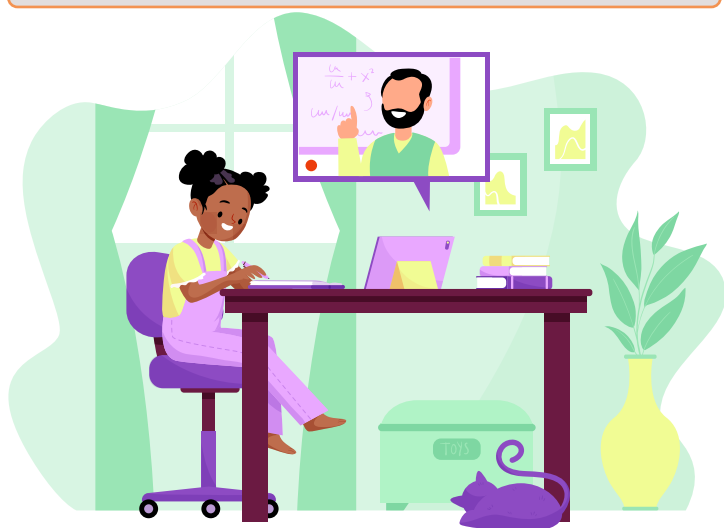
Recommendations:

National Level: To improve academic performance and sustain migrant pupils' motivation towards education, children should be mentored by older students from Higher Education Institutions (HEI) who can guide and motivate the learners.

Ideally, mentors should have a similar ethnic background to that of the child they are supporting as this may allow children to better relate to them. HEI's, as part of their impact work, should also provide courses to immigrant parents to strengthen their English literacy skills which would enable the parents to support their child's education

School Level: schools should run practical classes with older migrant pupils who are at risk of leaving school with little qualifications with subjects and classes that may help them to navigate the society once they leave school.

Schools also need to work with families and siblings to improve reading practices as research shows that enjoyment in reading is more important to their educational success than even the family's socioeconomic status (Department for Education, 2012).

E. Targeted parental involvement in education

Schools recognised a need for parents to be involved within the school environment; it was thought that this was especially important in less diverse schools as, for some communities, it is difficult to know how the system works. Schools attempted to increase parental engagement through a range of activities, however, it was felt that some groups of parents are harder to reach than others. Previous programmes targeting EAL families show low take-up due to challenges in targeting a diverse group, the inability to reach working parents, or those with childcare needs (Morris, Wishart, Husain, Marshall and Vojtkova, 2019).

Recommendations:

National Level: Non-profit organisations and charities should share information about the importance of parent/school relationships, this may help to reach hard-to-reach migrant parents.

School Level: Increase engagement with different groups of migrant parents through providing language training and hosting group meetings run by parents.

Authors

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Migrant Children and Communities in Transforming Europe (MICREATE)

You can find more information about the project and the documents that were used as a source at http://micreate.eu. Feel free to contact us at info@micreate.eu
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