



Key Considerations for Supporting Refugee Children and Young People in Schools

ELSTA Webinar on Welcoming Newly Arriving Young People
and Families

22 March 2022

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Education for Refugee Children: research findings

- Research tells us that:
 - Schools have an important role to play in resettlement (Taylor and Sidhu, 2012)
 - Access to education is key to fulfilling long-term aspirations (Mohamed and Thomas, 2017)
 - School can provide distraction and give children a sense of security, routine and normality (Sleijpen et al., 2017; Betancourt and Kahn, 2008).
 - Important social function also – build friendships, support from competent adults (Sleijpen et al., 2017; Pastoor, 2015; Betancourt and Kahn, 2008) (from Ní Raghallaigh, Smith and Scholtz, 2019)
- Irish research points to the need for adequate resourcing and training (Ní Raghallaigh, Smith and Scholtz, 2019).
- Careful and considered responses / navigation by school staff also needed.....

Some suggestions....



(1) Understanding the Experiences of Refugee Children

- **Pre- migration stressors**

- Likely to have experienced trauma –witnessed acts of war; seen destruction - experienced lack of food; sleeping in shelters; total disruption to daily routines

- **Stressors of journeys and transit**

- Uncertainty; surrounded by fear; sometimes violence or exploitation during travel or in transit.

- **Stressors post-migration (whether temporary or more permanent)**

- Multiple losses, through death, separation or destruction – family members, friends, homes, schools, teachers, toys, neighbourhood, hobbies, familiar culture and surroundings.....Often loss is ‘ambiguous’ (Boss, 1999)
- Living in an unfamiliar context, perhaps with unfamiliar people.
- Worry about family members
- Impact of parental trauma, loss, and anxiety
- Communication patterns within families may impact the child also
- Different acculturation strategies within the family
- Anxiety about starting in a new school, making new friends etc
- Huge uncertainty
- Navigating bureaucracy
- Precarious living situations

(2) 'Refugee Child' as *Child*

- The conflict or other circumstances from which the child has escaped do not represent the totality of their experience – **'ordinary' life prior to and during the 'extraordinary' experiences** (Kohli, 2006).
- School as a site of escape, a place where ordinariness can be reclaimed through, for example:
 - Routine
 - Education
 - Friendship
 - Fun
 - Extra Curricular activities
 - Supportive relationships for children and for parents
- Consider carefully how a child should be welcomed and supported. Many children will want to just 'fit in', danger of them being 'othered'.
- Continuity important, given so much discontinuity in their lives:
 - Language important in this regard: *"It's good if you have friends who speak Arabic in the school. In the day you can see eight teacher so it's good if you have help from an Arabic speaker who knows what to do ..."* (Ní Raghallaigh, Smith, and Scholtz, 2019)

(3) Child or Young Person as an *Individual*

- High risk of labelling/ stereotyping in the context of war and the media coverage that surrounds it
- People from all walks of life and with various backgrounds (educational and otherwise) escaping Ukraine / Afghanistan / Syria / Ethiopia
- Cultural *sensitivity* should not become cultural *stereotyping* (van der Veer, 1998)- Importance of examining '**the differences within the difference**' (Torode et al, 2001)
- Focus on Ukraine at present: Recognise and keep in mind students from other countries who have fled persecution.
- Some children may be 'unaccompanied' – in Ireland without parents or guardians – in the care of Tusla

(4) The Value of Silence / Privacy

- Silence about what has happened prior to arrival can be a useful coping strategy (Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010)
- Some refugee children and parents may want to talk about their experiences, some will not.
“We make a point of trying not to delve into their past....The curiosity that we all have, or my curious nature would be to ask, ‘well, tell me what has brought you to here’? But, in a sense, we feel that we have to respect their need for privacy ...” (Foster Carer in Ní Raghallaigh, 2013)
- Trust the parent and the child to tell you what is necessary.
- Consider identifying one person who might meet with the parent to tell them about the school and to answer any questions that they might have. This staff member might want to ask something like:
 - ‘Is there anything about Anna’s experiences prior to arriving here that you feel might be helpful for me to know – for example anything about her experiences during the conflict or her experiences in school before the conflict started – but only whatever you feel you would like to share?’
 - Use an interpreter if needed, remembering that many interpreters will be untrained
- If experiences of conflict or loss etc are shared, decide who needs to know this information. Likely, very few people?

(5) Partnership with Parents/Guardians

- Research with refugee children in the UK found that where 'school had policies on promoting contact with parents, such as home school liaison and making interpreters available, the students felt more positive and able to consider themselves part of their school' (Hek, 2005: 167 cited in Martin et al, 2016)
- Devine (2011) in the Irish context highlights the need to recognise the leadership skills and potential of migrant parents.
- Consider what approach you would take when working with Irish children – do you need to do anything differently?

(5) Partnership ... continued

- Research evidence that school staff sometimes communicate with Direct Provision/Reception Centre managers instead of with parents (Martin et al., 2016 ; Ní Raghallaigh et al., 2018) or expect other residents to translate notes if the parent has no English (Martin et al., 2016)
 - Ukrainian children likely to be living with host families or in hotels.
 - Unaccompanied minors in foster care or residential care.
- Parents may feel disempowered – consideration of power relations (within school, within living arrangements)
 - *“...we are concerned about for the level of studying of our kids we don’t know how evaluation happens, we don’t know anything about the curriculum.”*
 - *“And my daughter starts crying because she can’t understand and she can’t do her work. Back in our countries, like, we could help them because we were the same language, but here we can’t.”*

(Ní Raghallaigh, Smith and Scholtz, 2018)

(6) Adopt a Reflective Approach

- Try to find time to reflect on the approach you are taking and the approach your school is taking.
- Adopt a 'not-knowing' stance rather than an 'expert' stance in relation to culture, recognising that everyone is different.
- We all feel the need to do something at the moment. Before acting, ask yourself if what you are doing is serving a need in you or a need that the child or young person has?

Organisations / Resources

- Child and Family Support Network Coordinators in Tusla can provide signposting to supports for children and families. Contacts available [here](#)
- Article by Martin et al (2016):
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248827>
- Report by Ní Raghallaigh, Smith and Scholtz (2019):
<https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/handle/10197/11230>



Go Raibh Maith Agaibh!

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