

# Polish migrant children's experiences of schooling and home-school relations in Scotland

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*Increasing numbers of Polish migrant families have settled in Scotland in recent years and their children are one of the fastest growing groups of the Scottish school-age population. Although the Polish community seems reasonably well-integrated, particular challenges face migrant children and their families in interacting with schooling. This Briefing draws on research that investigated the role of the school in contributing to the integration of migrant children by exploring their experience of school and of relations between home and school.*

- ▶ Children integrate quickly if they are in full-time schooling, and may act as 'go-betweens' for their parents.
- ▶ The increased migration of Polish families has placed many new learners of English into areas and schools which have little history of receiving such pupils. There is increased pressure on schools and local authorities for places and for English language support services.
- ▶ This research found many examples of good practice in the integration of Polish migrants but schools are not always assessing new pupils' abilities appropriately and judging the correct stage and pace of learning for them.
- ▶ There was limited information on children's background and prior achievement available to teachers. Also, in their own assessment of new pupils, most schools focus on language abilities and do not look at mathematical abilities or personal achievements.
- ▶ Many Polish children and their parents viewed school in Scotland as 'easy': schools' expectations of some pupils may be too low but this view may also reflect differences in teaching and learning approaches in Scottish and Polish schools.
- ▶ Language barriers and lack of understanding of how the system works cause misunderstandings for parents but they appear relatively satisfied with their level of involvement and communication with the school.

## Polish migrant children in Scottish schools

EU enlargement in 2004 brought a rapid increase in Polish migration to the UK, including Scotland. Substantial numbers of Polish people now live in all parts of Scotland and Polish migrant children are one of the fastest growing groups of the Scottish school-age population. Their number has increased every year since 2004 by about one thousand to an overall of 5,460 Polish pupils by 2009, and Polish is now the most common non-English language in schools in Scotland. Cities remain the main centres of concentration although rural areas are increasingly affected by newer flows of migration and often have significantly less capacity than their urban counterparts to meet the needs of migrants.

This *Briefing* outlines key findings from research on the impact of migration on school services in Scotland funded by the European Commission. It addresses a number of gaps in the data, including a lack of knowledge on the question of migrants' use of schools; the schools' role in supporting migrant children; migrant children and parents' perspectives of schooling; and the barriers to, and assistance for, integration into Scotland for Polish arrivals.

## The experiences of migrant children

A distinctive feature of this research is that it pays particular attention to the views of children. Migration research has neglected children's migration principally focusing on the movements of adults or families. But children are also part of the migration process and thus are key participants in intra-European mobility.

As this research found, it is common for a mother and/or father to migrate to Scotland and leave their children behind in the care of relatives or family friends (Moskal 2010). Then, after the parent(s) have achieved some degree of stability the children follow:

*'My dad came here three years ago, my mum 2 years ago, I have been one year here and my sister was born here. I lived one year in Poland with my grand parents after my mum and dad left to go abroad.'*

(Wiktorja, 10 years old)

The experiences of child migrants are not only valid but they are often different from those of adults and need to be considered in their own right. In this study, 41 children ranging from 5 to 17 years old (18 boys and 23 girls) gave their perspectives on the experience of migrations. The views of the children's parents (24 persons) and teachers (16) were also recorded.

## New community, new school

Overall within the EU increased mobility has led to greater levels of cultural and linguistic diversity. In the context of Scotland, these new migration patterns and local demographics have placed many new learners of English into geographical areas, and indeed schools, with little or no history of receiving such pupils.

Special challenges and opportunities face migrant children in school. On the positive side, they are highly motivated to succeed in school (Rumbaut, 2005). This is often because migrants have aspirations to improve their economic or social circumstances by migrating and this attitude is often transferred to their children.

But a number of challenges or issues face pupils, their parents and schools: lack of English proficiency and the related demand for language support; schools' lack of information about their new pupils; differences between teaching and learning approaches in Scottish and Polish schools; and home-school communications.

Many teachers reported that they had limited information on the background of children which made it difficult for them to assess the appropriate level at which to place incoming pupils. This lack of available information about prior achievement was compounded by the fact that formative assessment of new pupils in most schools in Scotland focuses almost entirely on their language abilities and does not look at mathematics or personal achievements. Consequently some teachers may have very low expectations of what the Polish children can achieve, which in turn can lead to misjudgement of the appropriate stage and pace for learning, and hence to the failure of Polish pupils to progress appropriately:

*I go to the first class here [for maths], I should be in the second but they put me in the first because I do not know English enough.'*

(Adam, 13 years old; rural high school)

Certainly many Polish children and their parents said they found school in Scotland 'easy' which gives weight to the view that migrant children are not always effectively assessed and not pushed to reach their potential. But this view of Scottish school as easy may also reflect differences in teaching and learning approaches: there is perhaps a greater focus on the acquisition of knowledge in Polish schools and a greater emphasis on skills in Scottish schools. Pupils and their parents commented on the different atmosphere in Scottish schools:

*'Comparing schools here and there: the level of knowledge is much lower in Scotland however the atmosphere in school is perfect here'*

(Sabina – mother of two children aged 11 and 5, city school)

### Language support for new pupils

One very important area in adjusting to increased numbers of children of migrants is the issue of resources. This study found increased demand for English language tuition to enable pupils to access the curriculum:

*Interviewer: 'What would make life at school easier?'*

*'I would introduce more help to make it easier: right now a support teacher is coming one a week, she should be here all the time to help.'*

(Robert, 11 years old; city primary school)

*'I would like some Polish teacher to assist our lessons all the time and to help us and translate for us what we cannot understand. At the moment the teacher asks Magda (Polish classmate) to help us but she is not always able to help us.'*

(Wiktorija, 11 years old; city primary school)

As the second quote illustrates, teachers sometimes rely on those Polish pupils who have better English language skills, a position that some of them can find onerous. The study confirmed teachers' concerns over the lack of

specialist support and professional development available in schools to assist children who do not have English as their first language. The lack of such support can impact on the learning and teaching process for other pupils in the class, not only native English speakers and also Polish pupils with higher levels of English.

However, the research also identified that equally important as human and material resources, is a supportive atmosphere in the school. This can help the new pupils overcome the language difficulties:

*'When I came to Scotland I didn't know English at all, but the school was very welcoming and nice and I started to learn without problem. I didn't get any support at that time so I had a kind of pressure on me, but in a nice way, to learn.'*

(Robert, 11 years old; city primary school)

### Home-school relations

Communication between the schools and parents can be harder for parents of migrant children: if they have poor language skills they are often not aware of parents' events or issues affecting their children's schooling. Some schools use interpreters to help with this but others do not have the resources and frequently parents have to look for someone to help them to contact the school. Through their children, parents may make contact with other parents, teachers and other service providers. Some of the schools visited in the research organize special meetings for migrant parents to enable them to meet other parents. For some of the parents, especially mothers, this was their only social life:

*'There were some meetings in my son's school organised by the Head Teacher, I had a translator. Every Thursday women from different ethnic groups met there for tea or coffee and for a chat about their country of origin, to learn something together like photography or present their national cuisine.'*

(Ewa 41 years old, mother of 3 children)

Migrant children facilitate processes of settlement and community building, for example, through their work as language and

cultural brokers (Orellana 2001) and the study found that frequently children acted as translators for their parents who are not able to communicate in English:

*'... from September I went to school. We had no problem with enrolment and documents because my brother speaks English'*

(Gosia, 14 years old)

Despite language difficulties, the research found that parents were relatively satisfied with their communication and level of involvement with the school:

*'.. I like the Head teacher here, she is interested in helping, the atmosphere in school is very friendly and they do not produce the problems for children...'*

(Sabina – mother of two children aged 11 and 5, city school)

## Conclusions

The research illustrates that schools have different strategies for addressing the integration of migrant children: some have developed specific language support while others tend to rely on their teachers' abilities to cope and on the Polish-speaking assistants or other Polish-speaking children. The study also revealed a view amongst Polish pupils and parents of the Scottish school as being 'easy' and having lower expectations of pupils than Polish schools, though there was also evidence of greater friendliness and support. Parents were generally positive about Scottish schools and their efforts to integrate new migrants.

A key issue that emerged is the need for schools to have better and more consistent information on migrant children's abilities and achievement.

Standardised documents about the children's background that could be used throughout Europe might be a way forward.

European countries are affected by migration, whether as countries of origin or countries of destination. Most policies that deal with migration are national/regional policies, yet migration is trans-national in its character and requires international governance, as well as trans-national co-operation. A distinct role for the EU would be to identify areas of best practice and exchange in the area of education and migration.

## References

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## About this study

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