

Newcomer Children in the Primary Education System



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FOREWORD

A walk down the main street of any Irish town will confirm that Ireland is changing, and that one of the most significant changes is the arrival of people of many different nationalities to all parts of the country. Emigration has been reversed, many former emigrants have returned and they have been joined by people from all over the world who have come to Ireland in the hope of a better life.

The effects of any change in society are often felt first most acutely in schools. Teachers often recognise emerging trends before they become media issues. The local primary school very quickly reflects the community in which it is located and now primary classrooms include children of immigrant workers, refugees and asylum seekers alongside children whose parents and grandparents lived in the area.

A significant change such as this demands a comprehensive and co-ordinated response. Some children require little support and are easily included in school. However, many of the newcomer children do not speak English as their first language and require support so that they can benefit from the education available. Other children, who arrive with particular needs, including special educational needs, require other supports to enable them to fully participate. Equally, parents require support if they are to fulfil their role as partners in education.

But changed times demand changes in schools, and to enable them to respond to these changes, teachers must be supported. The publication of *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* by the NCCA in 2005 was a most welcome development. However, schools require time and support to enable them to put this document into action and become welcoming and inclusive places for all children.

This document sets out the issues INTO has identified in relation to support for newcomer children, and the schools in which they are enrolled. It was prepared by the CEC in response to discussions with members. Thanks are due to Tom O'Sullivan and, in particular, Deirdre O'Connor in INTO Head Office, who compiled the document, Lori Kealy, and Niamh Corduff who prepared it for publication.

It is our hope that this document will provoke discussion and debate in schools and beyond and contribute to the development of an education system which will promote improved educational opportunities for every child in the country

John Carr, MA(Ed)
General Secretary

March 2006

BACKGROUND

POPULATION CHANGE

It is widely acknowledged that the past ten years have seen huge changes in Irish primary schools. These changes reflect wider trends in Irish society. One of the most significant changes in schools is the inclusion of children of many different nationalities who are now resident in Ireland. Addressing the needs of these children has become one of the challenges faced by many schools in the country.

The 2002 Census indicated that of the 3,858,495 people counted, 224,261 or 5.8% of the population was classed as non-Irish.¹ However, even in the three years since the census was taken, there has been an increase in the population (4.13million in April 2005²). This increase has been largely attributed to an increase in immigration. Since 2002, a total of 170,600 immigrants are estimated to have arrived in Ireland. 17,900 of these immigrants were under 14 years of age.³ In the same period, the primary school population has risen by approximately 5,000.⁴

Of the estimated 70,000 immigrants in the year to April 2005, Irish nationals make up a significant group (19,000 or 27%). However, the biggest group (26,400 or 38%) were from the 10 EU accession countries.⁵ Following accession in May 2004, 85,114 people from the accession states (including people who were already in the country prior to accession) were allocated PPS numbers (figures to April 2005). The majority of these were from Poland (40,973), Lithuania (18,063) and Latvia (9,207).

By contrast, the number of new asylum seekers in Ireland has fallen from a high of 11,634 in 2002 to 4,766 in 2004.⁶ The top five countries of origin of new asylum applicants in 2005 were Nigeria, Somalia, Romania, Afghanistan and Sudan.⁷ Since 2000, 6,087 asylum seekers have been given recognition as convention refugees. Convention refugees are defined in Section 2 of the Refugee Act, 1996 as people who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a

1. Central Statistics Office, *Census 2002*

2. Central Statistics Office, *Population and Migration Estimates, April 2005*

3. Central Statistics Office, *Population and Migration Estimates, April 2005*

4. DES Key Education Statistics 1993/4 to 2003/4

5. Central Statistics Office, *Population and Migration Estimates, April 2005*

6. Immigrant Council of Ireland, *Background Information and Statistics of Immigration to Ireland*

7. Irish Refugee Council, *Asylum Statistics for period January to 31 July 2005*

particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country.”

Programme refugees are those admitted to Ireland under various government decisions. These groups have included people from Vietnam, Bosnia and Kosovo. Since 2000, 225 people have been accepted as part of the UNHCR Refugee Resettlement Programme.

EDUCATION PROVISION

All newcomer children, whether asylum seekers, convention or programme refugees or children of migrant workers between four and 18 have a right to the same primary and post-primary education as the rest of the Irish population, and are required to attend school between the ages of six and 16.

The principal additional support provided by DES for newcomer children is English language support teaching. Schools with 14 or more non-English speaking children are entitled to a full-time temporary teacher. There are currently more than 400 such teachers in primary schools. However, this support is capped at the level of two teachers. 350 schools with between three and 13 such pupils receive grant aid to fund part-time teaching. Schools with less than three pupils must make provision for these children from within existing resources. Children are entitled to English language teaching for not more than two years. Integrate Ireland Language and Training provides in-service training for teachers on teaching English as an additional language.

Where schools are close to accommodation centres housing asylum seekers, contacts are established by the Reception and Integration Agency with school principals and boards of management. School transport is arranged if the accommodation centre is located at a distance from the school. Parents are provided with information leaflets (available in nine languages) so that they receive an overview of the Irish education system.

The NCCA has recently published *Guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School* (NCCA, 2005). These *Guidelines* aim to support teachers, school management and other members of the school community in developing a more inclusive classroom environment and to provide children with the knowledge and skills they need to participate in the multi-cultural Ireland of today.

ISSUES ARISING

LANGUAGE SUPPORT

A number of issues have arisen for primary schools in relation to the provision of language teaching.

Firstly, the sharp increase in the number of newcomer children arriving in particular schools means that, in a number of cases, there are in excess of 28 children requiring language support. Some large schools have reported numbers of newcomer children making up 25-30% of the school population. The cap of two teachers in a school means that such schools are unable to provide an adequate service.

Schools also feel that, in many cases, two years of language support is insufficient for certain children and that, due to the cap on the duration of support, many children fail to achieve their potential in the education system. It is the experience of teachers that children may acquire functional language in this two year period, but do not develop the expressive language skills which would allow them to access the full range of the primary curriculum.

The provision of part-time hours in schools where there are less than 14 children means that it is difficult to attract a qualified teacher. The practice of not allowing schools to appoint language support teachers before 1 September, and the temporary nature of such posts also causes difficulty. The anomalous situation where schools on a campus can combine to create a full-time post, while small schools adjacent to each other cannot, also causes irritation to schools and is difficult to understand.

Finally, schools find it difficult to attract teachers with expertise and experience in teaching English as a second language, nor can teachers access a proper system of professional development through which they can enhance their skills in this area. The set up grant provided to schools is also inadequate, particularly where schools have children with a range of ages attending language support, and needing materials which are age/interest appropriate. These factors, combined with the lack of materials and resources to support this teaching combine to project an image of a service which has been allowed to develop in an ad hoc manner and which does not serve the needs of English language learners.

INTO recommends that:

- (a) The cap on the number of language support teachers in a school be lifted.
- (b) Schools would be able to create clusters to create full-time posts. These clusters could also be created using hours allocated for special education posts.
- (c) That language support posts be treated in the same manner as developing schools post, ie, that schools can appoint from 1 September, but that if the children are not present by 30 September, the post is suppressed.
- (d) That all language teachers be fully qualified and probated primary school teachers.
- (e) That language support posts be sanctioned on a permanent basis.
- (f) That a module on teaching English as an additional language be included in primary teachers pre-service education.
- (g) A comprehensive programme of professional development for language support teachers be devised and delivered.
- (h) That child friendly materials for the teaching of English as an additional language be devised and made available to schools.
- (i) That the set up grant for language support teachers be increased.
- (j) That the two year cap on language support be lifted to allow children to develop expressive language which allows them to access the full range of the curriculum.
- (k) That the current system operating in Gaeltacht schools of additional language support through 'cúntóirí teanga' be explored to establish its potential to support young children learning English.

ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Many newcomer children arriving in Ireland adapt well to their new surroundings and integrate into the school community. However, teachers have identified a need for additional support for some children.

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL NEEDS

For many children, school is their first contact with a social context outside of the home. For many newcomer children, their arrival in school coincides with the leaving of a different social context, including wider family and friends. In some cases, particularly with asylum seeker and refugee children, the departure from their home country may have been associated with other traumas.

Schools report, for example, that some newcomer children are excessively anxious when separated from their parents. The lack of support in the Irish school and health service for children with emotional needs affects these children.

Schools also find that cultural differences between what is expected in Ireland and the child's home country make it difficult for the child to settle in an Irish school. These differences may be in relation to different behavioural norms, different treatment of boys and girls, or differences associated with religious practice. The challenges posed by the acceptance and encouragement of loud and boisterous behaviour in some cultures can be very difficult for schools, who have established codes of behaviour which encourage children to take turns and treat others with respect. The issue of the wearing of particular garments associated with religious practice, and the conflict of these requirements with the dress code of a school has arisen in Britain and France. While the problem has not been highlighted here, one might expect that the issue will arise in Ireland, where the vast majority of schools require children to wear uniform.

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Primary schools have an obligation under the Education Act 1998 to communicate with parents. These obligations are difficult to fulfil with parents of newcomer children who are not themselves fluent in English. In the absence of translation or interpretative services to schools, communication with parents can be problematic. A forthcoming report⁸ on an INTO/ UTU/City Bridges Conference on Immigration and Education highlights the needs expressed by immigrant parents in relation to language issues. These needs included support in relation to:

- School choice, enrolment and transfer.
- Contacting schools/teachers.
- Homework.
- The effect on the parent/child relationship of the use of children as the primary interpreter.

In addition to the normal communication in relation to children's progress, schools also find that they must communicate to parents on issues in relation to the expectations of the school, for example that children come to school at a certain time and that they must be picked up promptly. Class teachers may

8. *Immigration and Education, Final Report of a Seminar held on 17 September 2005. (INTO, UTU, City Bridges)*

find themselves trying to explain medical consent forms to newly arrived parents. Teachers also have concerns about communicating with parents where differences arise, for example in relation to sanctions for misbehaviour. The use of physical punishment by some parents is particularly problematic for schools.

Schools are a critical point of contact for adults and children on their arrival in a new country. Schools need adequate facilities to allow parents of newcomer children to be included in the wider parent body and to become active partners in their children's education. If this is achieved, it may lessen the isolation which many newly arrived people feel and guard against the ghettoisation of newcomers which has been the source of difficulties in other countries with large immigrant populations.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

The identification of special educational needs in the newcomer children population can be problematic. Services are not available to schools to assess children in their own language. Where children are assessed in a language other than their first language, doubts have arisen as to whether the difficulties identified arise from linguistic difficulties or other needs. When children arrive with assessments in their own language, the absence of a translation service means that schools may be unable to access resources needed for the child, or to identify strategies for support.

In the absence of a proper language support service, and an adequate NEPS service throughout the country, schools are struggling to identify where a child's needs might be best met through language support and where they require special education services. In addition, the communications difficulties with parents outlined above contribute to teachers' frustration in relation to this issue.

A paper presented by Mary Carrig at the City Bridges Immigration and Education Seminar⁹ in September 2005 highlighted issues which had been identified in recent research on newcomer children with special educational needs. These issues included communications difficulties experienced by their children, who in some cases were learning alternative means of communication such as PECS in school as well as English, difficulties in assessing the children and difficulty in getting information about the education options open to their children. It is clear that newcomer children with special educational needs and their parents are in particular need of support.

9. *Immigration and Education, Final Report of a Seminar held on 17 September 2005 (INTO, UTU, City Bridges)*

INTO recommends:

- (a) The setting up of a support service for schools in relation to the inclusion of newcomer children. This service might include a Visiting Teacher Service, which might be used to liaise with parents of newcomer children.
- (b) That schools would have access to funding which would allow them to provide translation and interpretative services where necessary.
- (c) That the onus be placed on the HSE and other groups who communicate with parents through schools to provide translated documents.
- (d) The extension of the Home School Community Liaison Service, in terms of personnel and remit, to encompass the needs of newcomer children and parents.
- (e) The extension of the NEPS service to provide a comprehensive psychological service to all schools.
- (f) The extension of the Support Teacher Scheme currently in place in some disadvantaged schools to schools with a large newcomer population, and a return of the focus of this scheme to the management of challenging behaviour.
- (g) The provision of SNA support for severe challenging behaviour which is not associated with a particular disability.

ENROLMENT AND DISPERSAL

DISPERSAL

Reliable statistics on the dispersal of refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers throughout the country are difficult to find. The Refugee Integration Agency has a total of seventy-one centres consisting of the following:

- Three reception centres: All located in Dublin.
- 64 direct provision accommodation centres: Located throughout 24 counties.
- Eight self-catering accommodation centres: Six are located in Dublin, one in Mallow and one in Ballaghadereen.

It is acknowledged that many persons granted refugee status tend to remain close to where they were placed as asylum seekers. There is also a trend, which follows that apparent in other countries with a large immigrant population,

for people from one country to settle close to others from the same country.

Immigrant workers are concentrated in areas of high employment opportunities in the services area, but are also dispersed in some rural areas, taking up jobs in agriculture and food production.

There are a number of issues in relation to the numbers of newcomers in an area which affect schools. In areas close to reception and accommodation centres schools have to cope with a large influx of newcomer children. It is acknowledged that the Refugee Integration Agency supports and advises schools in this situation. However, the temporary nature of people's stay in such centres poses problems in providing continuity in children's education. The particular issues related to families on direct provision will be addressed further in this paper.

A number of areas, for example West Dublin, have seen an increase in the newcomer population in their schools, with a high number of people from certain countries. Some schools in this area have reported up to 40% of this year's intake as being newcomer children. In some cases, these schools are situated in areas which have levels of socio-economic disadvantage, with the attendant demands that this brings on the school. In these areas, the already stretched resources of schools, in terms of buildings, teaching staff and other supports are unable to adequately meet the needs of the increased school population.

A growing phenomenon is that of the small rural school which has one or two families of migrant worker families enrolled. Because of the constraints placed on the availability of language support services, schools may be unable to offer any language or other support to these children.

ENROLMENT

All primary schools have enrolment policies and many require prior enrolment from parents. Some newcomer families are unaware of the need to pre-enrol their children and in some cases, a number of children arrived at schools on the 1 September seeking places in schools which were already full.

Many Catholic schools have enrolment policies which give priority to Catholic children. Notwithstanding this, many Catholic schools welcome children of other faiths. However, the unavailability of schools other than those with a Catholic ethos restricts the choice of parents who may wish to send their children to a school which reflects their own faith, or has a more inclusive ethos.

INTO recommends that:

- (a) The accommodation needs of schools with growing populations be met promptly, and with permanent buildings.
- (b) Consideration be given to the opening of community primary schools in areas of large population growth.
- (c) Communication between the Refugee Integration Agency and schools be improved, and that substitute cover be put in place for teachers to engage in consultations with the Agency.

CHILDREN OF FAMILIES ON DIRECT PROVISION

At the end of July 2005, the capacity of reception and accommodation centres for asylum seekers was 8,893 places. Occupancy is normally around 90%, so at any one time it is likely that around 8,000 people are relying on direct provision. The Irish Refugee Council has stated that 25% of these people are under four years of age, with a further 10% being between five and 16 years of age.¹⁰

These families are provided with their accommodation and three meals per day. In addition, they receive a weekly payment of €19.10 per adult and €9.60 per child. This payment has not changed since 1999. Since May 2004, all immigrants, including asylum seekers are denied child benefit. The Irish Refugee Council has stated that as a result of this decision “many children are experiencing severe hardship and are failing to have their nutritional and clothing needs addressed.”¹¹

Schools located near accommodation and reception centres report the effects of this poverty. Asylum seeker families do not have money for school books and clothes. Schools report that the school book grant is inadequate to provide books for these children. They are unable to pay for extra-curricular activities, which may further exclude them from the normal life of the school.

Schools which include pupils who are asylum seekers also have concerns about the processes surrounding the deportation of failed asylum seekers. The practice of Gardaí coming to schools to find children who are to be deported has caused great concern. Teachers have worked hard to make schools safe havens for children and this is entirely undermined by Gardaí and immigration officials entering schools in these circumstances and causes great fear to children. In his address to INTO Congress 2005, INTO President Austin Corcoran stated “Parents should have an assurance that when their children are placed in a school they will not be abducted from their place of learning by the state. I believe that this new aggressive deportation policy is wrong and

is harming the world view of our country as one where human and civil rights are upheld and defended. Students should not have to protest to change the mind of a Minister for Justice.”

INTO recommends:

- (a) That direct provision payments to asylum seeker children be increased to a minimum of €24 per child, as proposed by the Irish Refugee Council.
- (b) That school book grants be increased.
- (c) That child benefit payments are restored to immigrant families.
- (d) That schools in the vicinity of reception and accommodation centres receive grants to enable them to include asylum seeker children in all activities.
- (e) That gardaí and immigration officials cease to enter schools in connection with deportation orders.

INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

In *Guidelines on Intercultural Education in the Primary School* (NCCA 2005), intercultural education is defined as having two focal points:

- It is education which respects, celebrates and recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us.
- It is education, which promotes equality and human rights, challenges unfair discrimination, and promotes the values upon which equality is built.

The *Guidelines* also state that intercultural education is not an addition to the Primary School Curriculum, since the curriculum itself is an intercultural curriculum, as the key characteristics of intercultural education are derived from the Primary School Curriculum. While these are laudable and worthy sentiments, schools have not received any support, beyond the receipt of a 175 page document, in implementing an intercultural approach. Schools are facing very basic questions about how other cultures should be recognised and affirmed in their schools without practical guidance or time to adopt a planned whole school approach. Teachers receive little or no pre-service education in relation to the implementation of an intercultural curriculum.

10. *Irish Refugee Council, Asylum Statistics for period 1 January to 31 July 2005*

11. *Irish Refugee Council, Press release, 23 November 2005, Asylum seekers face poverty in modern Ireland*

INTO recommends:

- (a) That a module on intercultural education form part of every teacher's pre-service education.
- (b) That a systematic programme of in-service training be established to support the implementation of the Intercultural Education in the Primary Schools Guidelines.
- (c) That the proposed support service for newcomer children would incorporate school planning expertise which would be available to schools to allow them to plan an intercultural approach on a whole school basis.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

INTO recommends that:

1. The cap on the number of language support teachers in a school be lifted.
2. Schools should be able to create clusters to create full-time posts. These clusters could also be created using hours allocated for special education posts.
3. Language support posts should be treated in the same manner as developing schools post, i.e. that schools can appoint from 1 September, but that if the children are not present by 30 September, the post is suppressed.
4. All language teachers should be fully qualified and probated primary school teachers.
5. Language support posts should be sanctioned on a permanent basis.
6. A module on teaching English as an additional language should be included in teachers pre-service education.
7. A comprehensive programme of professional development for language support teachers should be devised and delivered.
8. Child friendly materials for the teaching of English as an additional language should be devised and made available to schools.
9. The set up grant for language support teachers should be increased.
10. The two year cap on language support should be lifted to allow children to develop expressive language which allows them to access the full range of the curriculum.
11. The current system operating in Gaeltacht schools of additional language support through 'cúntóirí teanga' should be explored to establish its potential to support young children learning English.
12. A support service for schools in relation to the inclusion of newcomer children should be set up. This service might include a Visiting Teacher Service, which might be used to liaise with parents of newcomer children.
13. Schools should have access to funding which would allow them to provide translation and interpretative services where necessary.

14. The onus should be placed on the HSE and other groups who communicate with parents through schools to provide translated documents.
15. The Home School Community Liaison Service should be expanded, in terms of personnel and remit, to encompass the needs of newcomer children and parents.
16. The NEPS service should be expanded to provide a comprehensive psychological service to all schools
17. The Support Teacher Scheme currently in place in some disadvantaged schools should be extended to schools with a large newcomer population, and the focus of this scheme should return to the management of challenging behaviour.
18. SNA support for severe challenging behaviour which is not associated with a particular disability should be provided.
19. The accommodation needs of schools with growing populations should be met promptly, and with permanent buildings.
20. Consideration should be given to the opening of community primary schools in areas of large population growth.
21. Communication between the Refugee Integration Agency and schools should be improved, and substitute cover should be put in place for teachers to engage in consultations with the Agency.
22. Direct provision payments to asylum seeker children should be increased to a minimum of €24 per child, as proposed by the Irish Refugee Council.
23. School book grants should be increased.
24. Child benefit payments should be restored to immigrant families.
25. Schools in the vicinity of reception and accommodation centres should receive grants to enable them to include asylum seeker children in all activities.
26. Gardaí and immigration officials should cease to enter schools in connection with deportation orders.
27. A module on intercultural education should form part of every teacher's pre-service education.
28. A systematic programme of in-service training should be established to support the implementation of the Intercultural Education in the Primary Schools Guidelines.

29. The support service for newcomer children proposed above should incorporate school planning expertise which would be available to schools to allow them to plan an intercultural approach on a whole school basis.

CONCLUSION

Irish primary schools have risen to the many challenges presented to them by a changing society. While it is important to remember that societal change cannot be managed by schools alone, it is also vital that the role of the primary school at the heart of a community is recognised. If Ireland is to become an inclusive country, which truly values every child, regardless of their place of birth, then policies and resources must be put in place which allow schools to play their part in creating that society.

