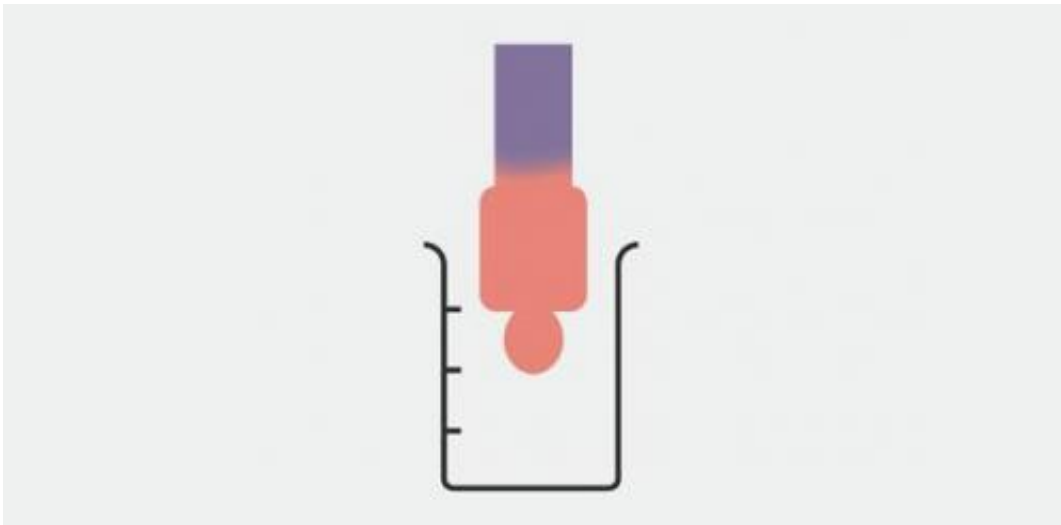


Migrant children are the litmus test of the education system

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We live in a multilingual society. More than a million children attending British schools speak more than 360 languages between them in addition to English. An exploratory study is looking at the needs of these children and their schools within and beyond the classroom.

The dominance of English as a global language can mask the fact that many different languages are spoken in homes across the UK. The million-plus [children](#) attending British schools who have English as an additional language (EAL children) face particular challenges – as do the teachers supporting them to integrate into the school environment and

reach their educational potential.

Much of the existing research into the performance of EAL [pupils](#) has focused on the acquisition of a good level of English language. But this is only one indicator – though certainly a vital one – of their engagement and educational performance. The ways in which EAL pupils are able to access and respond to key subject areas right across the curriculum, and to feel included in school life, are also significant factors in their development.

Now, a pioneering study, instigated and funded by the Bell Foundation, is taking a look at the relationships between linguistic development, academic performance and social integration of EAL children, across the curriculum and beyond the classroom.

Led by Professor Madeleine Arnot from the University's Faculty of Education and Dr Claudia Schneider from Anglia Ruskin University, the Bell Foundation Research Partnership includes Michael Evans, Yongcan Liu and Oakleigh Welply from the Faculty and Deb Davies-Tutt from Anglia Ruskin, bringing together expertise in second language education with sociological theories of migration. Both Arnot and Schneider have extensive experience of researching the issues that affect those children seen as outsiders and the schools they are placed in, and are experts in immigration theory, asylum policy and migration.

It's a timely project – in the UK, the number of EAL children almost doubled between 1997 and 2010 from 505,200 to 905,620, including Eastern European migrants and refugees. "Migrant children represent the litmus test of the values underlying an educational system within a democracy," Arnot said. "Their presence in a school highlights the degree to which compassion, caring and justice shape our education system."

Drawing its information from real-life school environments in the East of England, the study explores the contribution that schools make in addressing the linguistic and non-linguistic needs of EAL pupils, and uncovers the links between language development, achievement and social integration at classroom level.

The researchers carried out group and individual interviews with some 40 young people, their parents and teachers as well as EAL coordinators, experts and local authority advisors. This first part of the study, which has just been completed, exposes the problems of knowing 'what works' for such children, how to communicate with non-English-speaking parents, how new arrivals should be assessed and supported, and whether speaking their own language in school helps or hinders.

Recent research by Dr Welply on the experience of immigrant children in France and England found that immigrant children in both countries experience school as monocultural and monolingual spaces, in which they can feel excluded but for different reasons. French primary school pupils felt excluded by the schools' approach to linguistic or cultural differences; one pupil commented that she was not allowed to speak Arabic or practise her religion... "apparently it can attract problems," she said. In England, it was peer-group relations that created such exclusion, despite the school's support for linguistic diversity.

Lack of 'belonging' was pinpointed as a significant issue for educating refugee children in previous work by Arnot, which culminated in the publication, with co-authors Halleli Pinson and Mano Candappa, of *Education, Asylum and the 'Non-Citizen' Child*. The book highlights the experiences of refugee children and their teachers in a context that all too often demonises strangers. As one Afghani pupil said: "Some English people, they just don't like us. If you argue with them they just tell you 'go back to your country, why are you in England?'"

The second part of the Bell Foundation Research Partnership study has just begun. Directed jointly by Evans and Schneider, it will focus on a longitudinal tracking of linguistic and academic skills and the progress of a sample of recently arrived pupils, looking at how achievement in these areas correlates with [social integration](#).

The densely populated East of England has a high proportion of migrant workers from the European Union and neighbouring countries. Many play a vital role in sectors such as healthcare, hospitality and agriculture. Figures for 2013 from the Department for Education show that in Cambridgeshire schools some 10% of primary pupils were EAL pupils, with a lower proportion (7.6%) of secondary pupils falling into this category. Within the East of England region as a whole, these figures were higher (12% and 8.9% respectively), reflecting the concentration of EAL pupils at schools in and around Peterborough.

"Children of these incomers enter local schools with the desire to fit in and make the most of their educational opportunities," explained Evans. "Schools, however, often have little information about the education these new pupils have received in their home countries and the children themselves often choose not to disclose information about their previous schooling." Whether and how this kind of information should be gathered – and whether and how it might be shared between staff within a school – is just one example of the aspects of schools' management of EAL pupils that the current research is addressing.

To flourish, EAL students need to feel welcome and secure; an outwardly confident pupil may in reality be easily discouraged by differences in teaching methods. EAL pupils may come to the maths curriculum, for example, having learnt a particular method of calculating percentages and, on entering a different school, are confronted with an unfamiliar way of working. Many schools report that diversity in pupils significantly enriches the [school](#) environment: children of migrant

families tend to be highly motivated to learn and make huge efforts to join in. Although these schools emphasise that they need additional resources to fulfil their roles in providing access to the curriculum for children whose first language is not English, their experiences of migrant children contradict the stereotyping by a sector of the media that portrays migrants as a drain on resources.

Research shows that schools can play a vital role in uniting communities and fostering understanding between different groups. "If migrant children have access to a good education in this country, even if their stay here is temporary, they will carry the experience with them wherever they live in the future," added Arnot. "That can only be a good thing for all of us."

More information: *Education, asylum and the 'non-citizen' child: The politics of compassion and belonging*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. Reid, A., Gill, J., & Sears, A. (Eds.). (2010)

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