



'Diversity in the classroom': Event Summary

On 23rd June 2004 a 'public conversation' was held in East Oxford School organised by COMPAS (Centre on Migration, Policy and Society) and ESRC Social Sciences Week. Chaired by Kim Catchside, the open discussion focussed on the challenges and opportunities posed by diversity in the classroom.

Representatives from various Oxford schools and other education-related organisations were approached in advance to contribute to a small research project that aimed to investigate two main questions: 'What do migrant children bring to the classroom?' And 'What are the particular needs of migrant children?' A short questionnaire elicited views and actual examples from those with first hand experience of dealing with the impacts of migration on education provision. The findings from the interviews contributed to a short discussion paper that formed the focus for the evening.



Key invited representatives gave short responses on the night about their priorities by way of introduction to the discussion.. Comments were taken by the chairperson from various people, including: parents, teachers and local authority workers.

Social scientists, policy makers and the media often use the term 'migrant' to refer to various types of people, but it is rarely a term applied to children or within a school setting. It is also a term that is often ambiguous and can be easily misunderstood, but for this purpose we defined 'migrant children' as being children born outside of the UK. This broad definition encompasses children from a wide range of family backgrounds, with a variety reasons for migrating who need a range of types and levels of support to integrate into the British school system.

We chose to locate our event in the East Oxford area. This is a part of Oxford with a history of migration and one in which people from many backgrounds have made their home. This is reflected in the school populations. In the same class, children from: Rwanda, Kosovo, Bangladesh, UK, Ireland and Pakistan, will be playing and learning together. Migrant children are not a homogenous group: the children of asylum seekers, temporary workers or families intending to settle in the UK have different needs and experiences. The subject of was of interest to many people, not only education providers, and this was proved by media interest that the event attracted.

Summary of Key Messages:

The discussions before and during the event highlighted several key messages for policy makers:

- **League tables and SATS exams need re-examination** - Having a large number of migrant children can make SATS results look poor. This is not because migrant children are any less able, indeed teachers report that migrant children are apt to learn quickly, especially those who enter the British school system higher up and have developed linguistic capabilities. However, the testing and evaluation systems prioritise academic achievement and those who are able to understand and follow through the system.
- **Funding sources for addressing the needs of migrant children could be improved** - While there are resources that can be tapped for the teaching needs of migrant children these are limited. This provision does not recognise requirements such as playground work and working with parents and the broader community. The retrospective nature of funding means that when newcomers arrive there are no funds immediately available though this is the time when they are most vulnerable and in need of support.
- **Schools, children and parents should be included and rewarded for creating a good school ethos** - Schools are operating in a social climate that is often hostile to asylum seekers, to Islam and to migrants. Within this context they must both build the confidence of individual children and develop a strong and inclusive school community. Developing a school ethos that is caring and respectful benefits all pupils. It requires a whole school approach, supported by anti racist policies, materials and teaching.
- **Diversity in the classroom can be very beneficial** - Teachers are using children's backgrounds and experiences in very innovative ways that add to the learning experience and prepare the children for living in a multicultural world.
- **Existing research should be capitalised upon and further studies carried out** - Judging by the media and public interest that this subject created there is a demand for further knowledge and best practices exchange. More could be done to consolidate existing research and address the findings raised above.

The detailed discussion:

'Migrant children bring the richness of their diversity, a different culture and a different dimension to the classroom'



Diversity and difference brought to and by migrant children was genuinely viewed as enhancing possibilities for learning and enriching the classroom rather than principally being a cause for concern.

Schools were keen to emphasise the positive benefits that individual migrant children bring. Gaynor Sey, head of East Oxford school noted that the education of migrants as an ongoing process of struggle and communication which requires commitment. In particular the discussion drew attention to the institutional difficulties

confronted by schools trying to respond to their needs. These barriers include:

- **League tables and SATS results** - Having a large number of migrant children in a school can make SATS results look poor. This is not because migrant children are any less able, indeed teachers report that migrant children are apt to learn quickly, especially those who enter the British school system higher up and have developed linguistic capabilities. They may also be

motivated learners who are keen to work and take initiative. However, migrant children have typically not been in the school system for their whole schooling, SATS results are therefore neither a reflection of the children's ability nor the school's teaching.

- The national curriculum - this requires a very structured approach to the curriculum and it becomes more difficult to fit a child informally into the classroom.
- Funding - while there are resources available for the teaching needs of migrant children these are limited. This provision does not recognise requirements such as playground work and working with parents and the broader community. The retrospective nature of funding means that when newcomers arrive there are no funds immediately available though this is the time when they are most vulnerable and in need of support.

Within the discussion issues were raised about the general climate in which the children were being educated. As Bridget Anderson noted when introducing the discussion, education workers have to overcome very real obstacles within a hostile environment. This can be exacerbated by the media that tends to focus on 'the problems' associated with immigration. Participants in the discussion argued that whatever work is done within school has to be mirrored by work in the general public to change those attitudes. The discussion went on to ask about the transferability of the experiences of Oxford City schools to other areas and especially more remote parts of the UK. Such areas may not have such a large demand, but in turn may have less experience in dealing with it. Many teachers are already beginning to share best practise and embark on exchange schemes which are working well but could be extended further.

Any child coming into a new school requires attention. They are likely to feel overwhelmed by finding new friends, adjusting to new teacher and for those coming from abroad, a new school system. Those who come from families that have experienced conflict or abuse may be withdrawn or traumatised. Some may not speak at all, and require considerable encouragement and support. In this context 4 main issues arose:

- Language
- Respect for difference
- Understanding the School System
- Resources

Language

First, and perhaps most importantly, migrant children arrive in the classroom with varying levels of competency in English. Some (not all) arrive with little or no English and therefore have to learn a new language, whilst also catching up on the curriculum and adjusting to a new environment. This has obvious implications in terms of teacher time and class resources.

Responses:

- Often children are taken out of the classroom for intensive language training, an important measure for entering and surviving school life. They are taught the language that they will need to get by in the classroom setting, such as language for socialising and key vocabulary. The next step is to acquire the confidence and vocabulary to be able to communicate as fluently and as quickly as possible.
- Further difficulties arise as the migrant children arrive throughout the school year and not all in September with the rest of the school. For this reason it crucial that teachers understand the children's abilities and teach from this level.
- Many of the schools in the Oxford area rely on a team of people to assist migrant children such as: the Ethnic Minorities Achievements service team and monolingual teaching assistants.
- Bilingual teaching assistants (often in Urdu and Bangla) and instructors are also used. Support for children in their mother tongue is important to explain concepts even though the long term aim is for the children to be fluent in English. Many teachers want to keep the children

in the class as much possible, and this is facilitated by bilingual teaching assistants sitting alongside the children during lessons.

- Pilot studies have tried teaching classes to children in their own language before the normal lesson is given with amazing success. This prepares the children for the lesson in English, equipping them with the key vocabulary and the tools that they will need e.g. classifying, sorting, arranging. This method is work intensive but effective.

Respect for difference and anti-racism

Schools are operating in a social climate that is often hostile to asylum seekers, to Islam and to migrants. Within this context they must both build the confidence of individual children and develop a strong and inclusive school community. Developing a school ethos that is caring and respectful benefits all pupils. It requires a whole school approach, supported by anti racist policies, materials and teaching.

Racial awareness and potential conflicts are important issues. Participants felt this was generally managed well by local schools, but required a lot of attention. All emphasised the importance of ensuring that a school is inclusive, in particular giving extra attention to those who are potentially vulnerable. By making sure that all children are supported and creating a supportive culture in which everyone feels looked after and none of the children feel singled out.

Asylum seeking and refugee families have particular needs and it was suggested that all education staff must appreciate that some may have left difficult situations.

Teachers highlighted the benefit of having someone in the classroom who can say 'I know what that is like'. Children may have first hand experience of a country or culture, or relatives at home so they are able to talk from a position of strength about the topic. Whether they can explain differences in daily life or customs in Pakistan or what monsoon rains are like in Bangladesh this can aid all children in their understanding, assist cohesiveness in the class and improve the self esteem of those able to recount their personal experiences.

Responses:

- Many schools work to avoid children becoming isolated by having playground staff that encourage group games. One school sends pairs of year-six children to play with the younger children and provide good role models for friendship.
- Teachers are using diversity in the classroom to add to the learning experience and prepare the children for living in a multicultural world.
- The curriculum needs to be flexible enough to allow incorporation anti-racism and cultural awareness education.
- Being in the classroom helps as migrant children can see that other children do not always get all of the problems right, but can then see that it does not matter.
- Education staff must deal sensitively with any issues that may manifest themselves as aggressive play or difficulties communicating. The support of those with expertise is appreciated both from within the state sector and outside agencies such as Asylum Welcome and AFCIC (Action for Children in Conflict).
- Teaching staff discussed how confidence can be best built within the classroom and that sometimes a child's difficulties may be a matter of self esteem. The migrant child needs to learn that if you know the answer it is fine to raise your hand to answer, and it is important not to worry if you get the answer wrong.
- Implementation and monitoring of anti-racist policy and practice was seen as vital.

Understanding the School System

Migrant children and parents are often very unfamiliar with the British school system and this can act as a barrier to rapid improvement. The informality of the British classroom can be a sharp contrast to

the stricter, less interactive classrooms found in other parts of the world. It may take time to adjust so that the children feel they can contribute to discussion and ask questions.

Responses:

- Schools have had success using workshops that aim to make the parents more comfortable with the school environment and help them to understand what the school is trying to do for their child. At these the parents have made educational aids such as story sacks and maths games which can be done at home with parents, involving them in their child's education even if their English is limited.
- Teachers have also been imaginative in thinking of ways in which they can incorporate migrant children and their families into the school and lessons. One local primary school, in conjunction with 'Full Circle' charity, brought together parents and children to create a bilingual story book to be used in lesson. They used a traditional story that some of the parents knew and transcribed, with the children helping with the art work and the typing up onto the computer.
- The discussion identified that the general parent population have a number concerns over resource issues. They worry that resources being used on migrant children take away resources from the whole school population. It was felt that a lot would be gained if it were explicit where the resources for extra services were coming from and how this was influencing the school's overall budget. Parents need to know that the additional needs of certain children won't have negative impacts on other children.

Resources

The general feeling is that there could always be more resources and more money available. There can also be difficulty in matching the costs of the resources needed for migrant children to the appropriate pool of money.

More generally schools themselves serve as an unacknowledged resource. For families isolated from other networks a school may be experienced as a space that is known, safe, yet 'official'. School staff may be a port of call with people seeking advice on housing, health immigration/asylum etc.

Responses:

- The primary requirement of migrant children especially when they first arrive is time. This is needed of the teaching and support staff who at first may be required for one-to-one and small group attention but also within the curriculum where there is not always the room for taking the child out of the classroom as it means they miss out on something else.
- To be taught effectively it is also felt that classroom sizes must be kept down, optimally to around 22 or 23.
- One of the areas greatest assets was perceived to be the teachers themselves. The area manages to attract skilled, good quality staff who understand the children and how they learn.
- Teaching staff noted that the number and quality of bilingual books and learning sources has improved over the last ten years. Some EMA staff go to specialist book fairs and have a number of publishers in which they can rely on to produce books that avoid Eurocentric views, show good examples of children integrating and avoid negative images of foreign countries.
- However whilst this is so, some of the resources are becoming out of date and at times their range can be limited so a number of teachers turn to more creative solutions. Most teachers use artefacts that they have sourced themselves in lessons to bring the topic to make the concepts more accessible to the migrant children, others make their own resources.
- Schools with large numbers of migrant children the use of professional translators may be essential but without a specific budget finding funding from other sources can be difficult.
- Outside agencies can provide other valuable sources of funds, providing services such as workshops or voluntary schemes where people may see children in their own homes. However applying for these can be time consuming.
- It was suggested that there should be multi-agency advice sessions within schools.

Across the board there was an appreciation for the research into the education and integration of migrant children. There is the feeling that there is much relevant work being done that can be practically fed back into improving the learning process whether it be work done by schools project here in Oxford regarding the mental health of children from asylum seeking and refugee families or work by national institutions on the appropriate use of ICT.

However, there is also a consensus that there is still much work to be done and that more longitudinal studies could help add depth. Gaps were identified in knowledge of how best to assess the Special Educational needs of migrant children and how children can get up to the speed of their peers in their national tests. The project also revealed that it would be useful to do work with the families of the migrant children into how to make the British school system understandable.

During the discussion itself a number of participants recognized the value of events of this type and their role in helping to change the negative views that people associate with migrant children. It was seen as a proactive way of sharing ideas, showing how things can work and a good chance to discover and consider ways of maximizing some of the advantages that migrant children offer.



Written by Rachel Williamson with support from the COMPAS team. We thank all those who gave up their time to contribute their experiences.