

Migration, migrants and child poverty

The impact of poverty on the educational experiences of migrant children

Although migrants are a diverse group in terms of their employment and earnings, their children are disproportionately represented among those living in poverty in the UK. Poverty impacts on migrant children's educational outcomes, but also on their social experiences at school. Child poverty also limits the chances of inter-generational mobility among migrants and, in some communities, poor labour market outcomes are becoming entrenched.

Educational outcomes

Education departments in all parts of the UK do not collect country-of-birth data, so it is very difficult to analyse how well migrant children are doing at school. In England, data on school achievement is analysed using broad ethnicity categories, although local authorities can collect more nuanced data by using extended ethnicity codes. This system allows broad ethnicity categories – eg, White UK (WTUK), Black African (BAFR) – to be refined using extended categories. BNIG and BSOM are extended ethnicity codes for Nigerians and Somalis, respectively.

Some local authorities have used extended ethnicity codes to look at the achievement of specific groups of migrants. The table presents data on GCSE performance by ethnic group in 2003, for the local authorities that collected this data. It should be noted that the Department for Education is extremely reticent to carry out a national analysis of educational outcomes by extended ethnicity code, and spending cuts mean that fewer local authorities are undertaking such work.

The data in the table highlights the different levels of achievement among children from migrant and minority ethnic communities in the UK, with some children enjoying a measure of success, but also significant under-achievement in some groups, including Somalis and Portuguese. Although this data was collected in 2003 and there have been improvements since then, this achievement gap remains. Educational under-achievement will impact on the future labour market participation and earnings potential

of today's children, and increase the chances that their own children will grow up in poverty.

There is an extensive body of research on the educational under-achievement of children from migrant and minority ethnic communities. This literature highlights causes of educational under-achievement that are common to all ethnic groups, of which growing up in poverty and maternal education have the biggest impact. There are also causes of under-achievement that are specific to migrant communities. Among Somalis, an interrupted or non-existent education prior to migrating to the UK is a significant cause of under-achievement. (The school system in southern Somali has been destroyed and some refugee children spend years out of school in their lengthy journeys to the UK.) The very high levels of worklessness among Somalis living in the UK also has a major impact on their children's educational outcomes.

Among the Portuguese, negative parental educational experience and a culture of early school leaving impact on children's educational outcomes. Most newly arrived Portuguese migrants in the UK are employed as low-paid workers in agriculture, food processing or the hospitality sector. Research on this community



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GCSE performance by ethnic group, 2003

Ethnic group	Mean % difference in proportion of children achieving five A*-C grades at GCSE relative to mean for England, 2003
Chinese	+11.0
Sri Lankan	+8.0
Indian	+7.0
Iranian	+5.0
Irish	+4.5
Filipino	+4.5
French	+3.0
Nigerian	+1.5
White British	+1.0
Ghanaian	-0.8
Italian	-1.0
Cypriot	-5.5
Bangladeshi	-9.3
Pakistani	-11.3
Jamaican	-15.3
Somali	-22.8
Turkish	-23.6
Portuguese	-32.3

Source: Department for Education and Institute for Public Policy Research calculations¹

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shows that low pay and parental absences from home because of shift work are significant causes of under-achievement. Parents cannot afford enrichment activities, such as music lessons, and their absence from the home in the evenings means that homework may not be completed. In the east of England many Portuguese migrant workers live in poor-quality or overcrowded housing, often of a temporary nature. This also makes homework difficult. Children who move home and school frequently are a group at risk of educational under-achievement. A lack of English language support in schools is a further factor contributing to the educational under-achievement among Portuguese children.²

While household poverty is one of the most significant factors associated with children's under-achievement, it appears to have a less significant effect on some migrant children's educational achievement (eg, Sri Lankan Tamils) than on White British children or some other migrant groups. We do not know the reason for this – the causes may relate to pre-migratory factors, or specific localities in the UK.

Wider school experiences

Poverty also impacts on children's social worlds. Qualitative research with migrant children highlights how isolating poverty can be for them, compounding language barriers and the generalised hostility to migrants endemic in some areas. Migrant children may also face isolation because they enter school after friendship groups have been formed. These groups are also cemented out of school, through birthday parties and leisure activities, such as trips to the cinema. But most out-of-school experiences require money, something that is in short supply in many migrant households. Children who live in substandard and overcrowded accommodation are also reluctant to invite friends home.³

Many migrant children also tell of teachers' insensitivity to their home circumstances. There are continued demands for money for trips, or children are set homework that requires a computer.

Migrant children in some areas face long delays in securing school places. Sometimes a school is full, but there is also substantial evidence to show that migrant children are turned away from schools that have surplus places.⁵ The perception that migrant children will affect league table standing is one reason for this illegal practice. Migrant families are often less able to challenge the failure to provide a school



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place by a local authority, or may not understand that 'being on a waiting list' is not a guarantee of a place.

Interventions to support migrant children

Central and local government, as well as schools, have acknowledged the need for interventions to improve the educational outcomes of migrant and minority ethnic children. Ensuring a greater uptake of free early years' provision for three- and four-year-olds is a policy priority, because high-quality nursery education means that children from migrant communities can start school speaking English. Local authorities have used 'parent champions' drawn from migrant communities to disseminate information about free nursery provision and encourage uptake.

In England and Wales, there is some targeted funding for children who have English language learning needs. At the time of writing, the ethnic minority achievement grant funds English as an additional language (EAL) support in schools in England as well as interventions to support some under-achieving minority ethnic groups. Many schools have introduced programmes that help migrant children to make better educational progress. The quality and amount of EAL teaching is crucial, as is the skill of mainstream teachers to teach children with limited English language fluency. Induction programmes targeted at children with little or no prior education appear successful. However, the size of the grant (£203.8 million in 2010/11) has not kept pace with numbers. In April 2011, the ethnic minority achievement grant is being abolished, with its monies incorporated into general school funding. Critics of this change believe that migrant children will get even less support learning English than today.

Welfare-to-work interventions also have the potential to impact on the educational achievement of some migrant groups, particularly refugees. However, many of these programmes

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have had limited success, often because they do not address the specific needs of migrants or give them ongoing support.⁶

Long-term prospects

Improvements in educational outcomes mean that some migrant and minority ethnic children will secure better economic outcomes than their parents. We are already seeing this trend emerge in the Bangladeshi community, although many young Bangladeshis face greater hurdles entering the labour market than do their White British peers.

The long-term educational and employment outcomes of groups such as the Somalis, Yemenis and Portuguese are much more concerning. There are, of course, many from these communities who are successful. But there is little evidence that the poor economic and employment outcomes of today's Somali adults will improve over a generation. Rather, social exclusion is becoming entrenched in this group.

Present educational interventions are largely not narrowing the achievement gap between these groups and the overall school population, and we are not challenging child poverty.

Policy recommendations

The poor long-term labour market and educational outcomes of some migrant communities require sustained action by the government. At the turn of the century, the Home Office and later Communities and Local Government put greater emphasis on cross-departmental programmes to encourage greater migrant integration. This is no longer seen as a policy priority. We need to change this situation.

Within education, there needs to be a debate about the real costs of providing EAL support for children and the impact of not doing this. Funding for EAL support in schools must match demand. The government must also sustain the funding for induction projects for older and more vulnerable new migrants, such as children who arrive in the UK late in their educational careers with little or no prior education.

There needs to be sustained outreach to migrant communities that do not use formal early childhood education to get them to take up the offer of free places. We also need to monitor the numbers of migrant children who face long delays in finding school places and use equalities legislation and the courts to ensure basic access to schooling.

We must also work to ensure our schools are aware of the impact of poverty on children's lives. Teachers need to be more sensitive to the needs of children living in poverty – greater understanding of this issue needs to be promoted on teacher education courses. Schools could become much more powerful local actors in local programmes to eradicate child poverty. We need to harness these local voices. ■

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- 1 Table cited in J Rutter and M Latorre, 'Migration, Migrants and Inequality' in J Hills, T Sefton, and K Stewart (eds), *Towards a More Equal Society*, The Policy Press, 2009
- 2 G de Abreu, T Cline and H Lambert (eds), *The Education of Portuguese Children in Britain : insights from research and practice in England and the Channel Islands*, Oxford Brookes University, 2003
- 3 J Rutter, *Refugee Children in the UK*, Open University Press, 2006
- 4 See note 3
- 5 See note 3
- 6 For an analysis of welfare-to-work interventions, see J Rutter, N Newman and R Pillai, *Moving up Together: promoting equality among the UK's diverse communities*, Institute for Public Policy Research, 2008