



This paper is taken from

*Citizenship Education in Society
Proceedings of the ninth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2007

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-1899764-90-7

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Foster, R., & Kovalcikova, I. (2007) Approaches to the Education of Asylum Seeker Children in Slovakia and the UK: A Cross-Cultural Comparison, in Ross, A. (ed) Citizenship Education in Society. London: CiCe, pp 535-542.

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The rector and the staff of the University of Montpellier III
- Andrew Craven, of the CiCe Administrative team, for editorial work on the book, and Lindsay Melling and Teresa Carbajo-Garcia, for the administration of the conference arrangements
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement

Approaches to the education of asylum seeker children in Slovakia and the UK: a cross-cultural comparison

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Abstract

This paper explores approaches to the education of asylum seekers in an established member of the European Union, the U.K., and a new member, Slovakia. The investigation looks first at policy frameworks in the two countries - official government documents, national and local guidance. The second section takes case study examples from the two contexts and explores the issues and challenges of educating asylum seeker children via the perspectives and experiences of children, parents and teachers. The findings reveal significant difficulties at both policy and local provision levels. However, the school case studies provide grounds for cautious optimism that the inclusion of asylum seeker pupils into the life of the school can be a positive experience for all concerned.

Introduction and National Contexts

Our task was to explore the approach to the education of asylum seekers in an established member of the European Union, the U.K., and a new member, Slovakia.

Our investigation looked first at policy frameworks in the two countries, for example, official government documents and guidance issued at national and local level. Then we took case study examples from the two contexts and explored the issues and challenges of educating asylum seeker children via the perspectives and experiences of the children themselves, their parents, carers and teachers.

From the perspective of asylum seekers, the Slovak Republic is considered primarily as a transitional country. Most asylum seekers envisage only a short stay in Slovakia and the main priority for many is to arrange for their onward journey to their country of destination (Divinsky, 2005; Porubanova, 2005)

The U.K., by contrast, is primarily a destination country for asylum seekers. Those applying for asylum are expected to lodge their appeal as soon as possible after their arrival and are then either placed in a base for asylum seekers or are transferred to a community in some part of the UK. The Home Office claims that more than 70% of applications are dealt with inside six months (Home Office, 2007). However, many cases can take several years to be concluded.

The distinction between being a transition country and a destination country has significant implications for asylum seekers' experiences of and attitudes towards the

This paper is part of *Citizenship Education in Society: Proceedings of the ninth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*, ed Ross A, published by CiCe (London) 2007. ISBN 978-1899764-90-7; ISSN 1470-6695

Funded with support from the European Commission SOCRATES Project of the Department of Education and Culture. This publication reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

services and processes with which they are involved as asylum seekers, including education.

Asylum seeker children ('minor aliens') in the Slovak Republic fall into two groups:

- Most are unaccompanied children, typically boys aged 13 – 18, found and apprehended in various parts of Slovakia when attempting to reach Western European countries;
- A minority are children accompanied by relatives or other adults. These so-called 'family groups' often have no proof of relationship.

Unaccompanied asylum seeker children, the most vulnerable group, are placed in a children's home for a period of months, to enable a long-term solution to be devised. This could be repatriation (returning to the country of origin) or the granting of asylum.

Children's Homes typically provide board, lodging and education. Education services will include psychological and social diagnostics and educational support focused on psychological, personal and social development (Migration Office, 2004).

Children with relatives or other adults are placed in accommodation centres run by the Slovak Republic Migration office. These centres offer a range of support services, including education from kindergarten onwards.

In the U.K., most asylum seeker children are with their family. They cover the complete age range for compulsory school attendance (5 – 16). There is a growing minority of unaccompanied asylum seeker children who, as in Slovakia, are mainly teenage boys.

Asylum seeker families are typically either:

- Placed in a reception centre for asylum seekers (usually somewhere such as a disused military base);
- Dispersed to communities around the UK where they are placed in social housing and children are allocated to local schools

The available housing is often of the poorest standard in the most disadvantaged parts of towns; schools in these areas are frequently those with the least resources and often the most difficult and disaffected children; access to social support (e.g. health care) is provided but usually at a basic level. A Home Office report in 2005 indicated:

Local authorities with a higher proportion of dispersed asylum seekers tended to have higher proportions of vacant housing stock and residents in social grade (SG) E (i.e. on state benefit, unemployed or in the lowest grade jobs). (Anie *et al*, 2005)

The Department for Education and Skills (DFES) encourages Local Authorities (LAs) to place asylum seeker children in schools within 20 days of their arrival. Standard schools'

admission criteria apply to the children of asylum seeker families. DFES guidelines for LAs are clear:

It is Government policy that asylum seeker and refugee children are given the same opportunities as all other children to benefit from school. LAs have a legal duty to ensure that education is available for all children of compulsory school age forming part of the population of their area (www.teachernet.gov.uk, 2002)

The Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) has a duty to monitor LA support for the education of asylum seeker children. Their reports suggest that provision for asylum seeker pupils is improving, although by no means of universally high standard:

Some schools are particularly adept at supporting pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL). In contrast, in some schools the needs of pupils with EAL are not given sufficient attention in curriculum planning; this limits their access to subject areas. (OfSTED, 2003)

Methodology

We employed qualitative research procedures based on case studies in order to explore and illuminate the practical outcomes of education policies towards asylum seeker children in Slovakia and the U.K., i.e. what is actually happening in terms of education provision and what are the perspectives of the children, their parents / carers and the teachers and other staff working with them.

In Slovakia, research was carried out in one children's home for unaccompanied asylum seeker children and one accommodation centre for family groups. The accommodation centre housed asylum seekers from a number of countries.

Data was obtained from:

- Unstructured, non-participatory observation of the physical, social and educational environment; the behaviour of children in kindergarten, lessons and other group activities;
- Semi-structured interviews with the accommodation centre and children's home management; teachers at the centre; the parents / carers of asylum seeker children; and the asylum seeker children themselves.

In the U.K., research was carried out in four schools (two primary i.e. children aged 5 – 11 and two secondary i.e. children aged 11 – 16).

The schools were in different parts of the U.K., all in towns to which significant numbers of asylum seekers have been dispersed.

Data was obtained from:

- Semi-structured interviews with 25 asylum seeker children, 15 of their parents, 8 of their teachers and 20 of the school's other pupils;
- Group discussions, based on the same set of questions, with groups of 6 – 10 asylum seeker children, 4 – 6 parents, 4 – 6 teachers and 6 – 10 of the school's other pupils in each of the four schools.

Analysis of the findings

Slovakia

In the children's home, there was a programme of education, offering various educational activities. Attempts were made to establish personalised learning programmes for each student, based on an assessment of their learning needs, following interviews with a psychologist and a social worker.

However, this interview process was frequently difficult. In many cases, interaction was severely limited by problems of language and most of the asylum seeker boys had no interest in learning the Slovak language since they were not seeking asylum in Slovakia and intended their stay to be as short as possible. Even where lack of language was less of a problem (for example, because there was an interpreter available), many boys appeared very reluctant to talk about their home, education or experiences since leaving. There was also a strong suspicion that some were not actually 'minors' at all but were in fact significantly older and were simply taking advantage of the shelter, food and other support provided by the residence, though the lack of any identity documentation made this impossible to establish.

In terms of language, most were interested only in learning English, which they perceived as being useful for their final destination. Their attitude towards education in general was poor; their priorities lay elsewhere.

For most, the priority was to make contact with people smugglers in order to be able to continue their journey to their preferred country of destination. Many ran away from the residence within a matter of days or weeks, presumably to resume their efforts to reach Western or Southern Europe.

The accommodation centre is a specialised facility of the Slovak Republic Migration Office. The centre provides facilities for cultural, social and sporting activities and to teach the basics of the Slovak language. Pre-school children may attend kindergarten in the accommodation centre; school age children attend school in the city and have support to learn the Slovak language from a teacher who visits the centre twice weekly. (*Prieceľ, Belo-Caban, 2005*).

For children aged 6-15 placed in the centre, school attendance is compulsory as it is for all children in the Slovak Republic. Many do not attend school regularly and co-

operation between their parents and the school is often poor. (This may be a consequence of their interim and temporary position as asylum seekers).

The kindergarten in the accommodation centre relies on standard methodology and materials for pre-school educational facilities in Slovakia; staff have no special training for work in a multicultural setting, or in how to teach Slovak as a foreign language.

For children of school age, the language teacher proposes the grade into which a child is enrolled, typically 2-3 grades behind his/her age. Kaul, aged 13, illustrated the problem that this can cause. He stated that he did not want to attend the school, because the children were too young. He had been placed into 4th grade (10 - 11 year olds). The teachers in the school where the asylum seeker children are placed face difficulties. They lack expertise in working with this target group and, they argue, there is little additional training because the Slovak Republic Migration Office is interested only in children's school attendance and not in the curriculum or in what progress children make in the classroom.

U.K.

The evidence from the U.K. schools suggests that, where schools and teachers approach the inclusion of asylum seeker children in a positive and proactive way and where the children and their parents are committed to education, a lot can be achieved despite the undoubted difficulties and challenges.

The issue of language learning is central. As a key government document indicates: 'Rapid English language acquisition is key to their successful integration into the U.K. education system and the local community' (DFES, 2004, p.9). Two of the schools had a policy of immersing asylum seeker pupils in the curriculum with support from additional English lessons. The other two took the view that asylum seeker pupils with little English would be helped to integrate more quickly and fully by an initial period in a bilingual base learning English. These different approaches, both reported on very favourably by teachers and pupils involved, seemed to have developed for pragmatic rather than principled reasons. However, they both worked, largely because almost all of the asylum seeker children (and their families) wanted to stay in the U.K. and were strongly motivated to learn the language.

Responses from the asylum seeker children were overwhelmingly positive. Most of them were happy and settled at school. They felt that the teachers and the support staff did their best to help them. Most were keen to develop friendships with U.K. pupils and the most outgoing of them found this not to be a problem. Incidents of bullying were mentioned but the asylum seeker pupils did not seem to be too concerned that this was evidence of racism, freely acknowledging that in some instances they were as much to blame as the other pupils. The asylum seeker pupils felt that the school dealt with such incidents and all the pupils involved fairly. A majority of the children said that school was the highlight of life in the U.K.

It was apparent that most asylum seeker pupils valued education, as did their parents. The schools encouraged parental contact, e.g. attendance at parents' evenings and contacting school if they felt that their child was under-performing at school. There

was a considerable challenge in establishing effective home-school links, given the difficulties such as language and limited integration of many asylum seeker families into the neighbourhoods where they live. However, progress was encouraging; both of the primary schools ran morning social groups for parents once or twice a week.

For the teaching staff, it was apparent that although some still had concerns about their own abilities to meet the academic needs of the asylum seeker pupils, enhanced understanding and skills have led to increased confidence in their capacity to include asylum seeker pupils in their lessons. It was now generally (although not universally) recognised that asylum seeker pupils should not routinely be placed in low ability groups just because they had only limited English.

The majority of the UK pupils generally felt positive towards the asylum seeker children. It is clear that the use of established pupils to act as 'buddies' to asylum seeker pupils is an important strategy in both integrating the newcomers and engaging established pupils with the process of providing support and induction. There appears to have been strong integration into the school communities, many positive comments being made, particularly about friendships, bringing new strengths to the school and learning from and about each other.

Reflections

Reflections on these findings are formulated around a number of key questions.

Are government education policies and practices suitable to meet the needs of asylum seeker children?

In both Slovakia and the U.K., policies had been put in place for the education of asylum seeker children; these policies generally asserted the rights of asylum seeker children to education on the same basis as resident children. In both, these policies appeared largely to have been assembled in haste in direct response to the challenges presented by unprecedented and unexpected numbers of people moving across Europe seeking asylum.

Teachers and administrators in Slovakia argued strongly that their government was really only interested in ensuring school attendance; they were not concerned about quality or appropriateness of educational experience of asylum seeker children. They also questioned the appropriateness of placing adults with children into bigger accommodation camps, where children are frequently confronted with violence and physical attacks among migrants.

What training and support is available to teachers in their initial and in-service training to enable them to meet the needs of asylum seeker children?

Teachers in both countries emphasised that little if anything in their initial training had prepared them for teaching asylum seeker children who did not speak the language.

In terms of continuing professional development, both Slovak and U.K. teachers felt that early provision of training in teaching their language as an additional language would

have been of benefit to them and their pupils. This concern about the lack of appropriate training echoes a theme that emerges repeatedly in the U.K. in both research (e.g. Cline *et al* 2002) and in official documents (OfSTED 2003, DFES 2004).

Slovak teachers indicated that there was little support available in terms of training opportunities for working with asylum seeker children. It was argued that many teachers did not really see the point of such training, since most asylum seeker children were passing through Slovakia and would not be there for long.

In the U.K., the picture seemed patchy; some teachers complained of limited training and support whilst others suggested that more professional development provision was now available. A further major development in the U.K. was that both government and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as the Refugee Council were now producing curriculum materials and other support materials for teachers of asylum seeker children.

Are asylum seeker children encouraged to achieve the best of which they are capable, e.g. by placing them in high ability groups where appropriate?

This issue perhaps showed the greatest contrast between the situations in Slovakia in the U.K.

In Slovakia, only a small number of asylum seekers showed commitment to education. As already indicated, most viewed Slovakia as a transition country and had little motivation towards language learning and education in general. This raised the question for many Slovaks: why should asylum seeker children have the right to educational provision in Slovakia when they rarely show any interest or motivation towards education? (Divinsky, 2005)

Although official Slovak policy was to ensure education provision for asylum seeker children, there was little evident commitment to the quality and appropriateness of this provision. For example, asylum seeker children were routinely placed in classes two or three years below their own age, even though this was rarely meeting their educational needs.

In the U.K., there was generally a much more positive picture. Most asylum seeker children, especially those in families, wanted to learn and their parents / carers had a high respect for education. Given that they were all hopeful of staying in the U.K., there was a strong commitment to learning English and, as their language developed, many asylum seeker children demonstrated good levels of ability and achievement across the curriculum. Most teachers recognised that routinely placing asylum seeker children in low ability groups on the basis of limited English was inappropriate and, in the case study schools at least, this no longer happened.

What was the impact of having asylum seeker children in the school on the other pupils in the school?

The experience of being with and supporting asylum seeker children has been valuable citizenship learning for many locally-born children whose opportunities to meet people from other countries and cultures were previously very limited.

Through ‘buddying’ and generally helping asylum seeker pupils in class, pupils had been given responsibilities to which they had overwhelmingly risen. In listening to the real life experiences of the asylum seeker pupils, they had gained insights rarely on offer from news media, especially the tabloid press, and had responded to the asylum seeker families as people rather than the scrounging alien invaders of tabloid headlines. Without the words ‘Citizenship Education’ ever being uttered, pupils had significantly enhanced their understanding of and skills in what it is to be a responsible citizen and good neighbour.

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