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Migrant education in the United Kingdom

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It came as something of a surprise that MIPEX declared that:

Schools in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland are some of best prepared for newcomer pupils, among leading European countries of immigration. [Those schools have the] strongest commitment to implement intercultural education.

This positive picture, however, may be explained by reference to several key developments. The current form of the National Curriculum has a cross curricular dimension of identity and diversity. This was achieved following the Ajegbo Report (2007) which provided a higher profile for diversity in relation to citizenship. This focus on inclusion has led to a widening of the concept of citizenship (Kiwani 2008). Citizenship education itself which includes this strand of 'identity and diversity: living in the UK' is now achieving positive results. Government inspectors (Ofsted) have reported in 2010 that there are more confident schools and teachers and these findings are supported by a longitudinal study being undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Keating et al 2009).

Schools have had a duty for some time to accommodate different cultural, racial and religious needs (e.g. Race Relations Amendment Act 2000, Northern Ireland Act 1998). Half of the 1.2 million pupils that attend schools in London are from minority ethnic groups (British Council). More recently, there has been a requirement on schools to promote community cohesion. Alan Johnson in his role as Secretary of State for Education explained:

Johnson explained that:

by community cohesion, we mean working towards a society in which there is a common vision and sense of belonging by all communities; a society in which the diversity of people's backgrounds and circumstances is appreciated and valued; a society in which similar life opportunities are available to all; and a society in which strong and positive relationships exist and continue to be developed in the workplace, in schools and in the wider community.

There has been some considerable interaction between government department for education and the Home Office (responsible for immigration) with clear efforts made to avoid an exclusive sense of Britishness but instead to work as Tony McNulty the immigration minister said on 'preparedness to become citizens'. This interaction between different government sectors can also be seen in the policy Every Child Matters which seeks to ensure effective liaison between schools and other agencies that deal with individuals and families. The report notes that: 'Generally across England, Wales,

Scotland and Northern Ireland, newcomers benefit from slightly favourable targeted measures’.

Finally, in this brief outline of the positive features associated with migration it is good to note that there are some references to multiculturalism, diversity and inclusion in standards for initial and continuing professional development.

The above perhaps goes some way towards explaining why the MIPEX report concludes that: ‘Migrant pupils receive better support in schools across Britain than they do on the continent, while all pupils receive the best education on how to live together in a diverse society’.

However, there is some failure in the education report to recognise the different policies and practices in the four nations of the UK and I accept that in this commentary I have focused on England. Citizenship education is not a National Curriculum subject, for example, in Scotland. The report does, rightly, recognise that there are weaknesses in understanding relevant issues and in provision across the UK. Much of what happens in relation to migrant students ‘depends on whether schools and municipalities apply for available extra funding, support and training’. And the report emphasises that ‘migrants have hardly any entitlements; for example, to introduction or high quality English programmes’. The UK is encouraged to learn from others, especially ‘North American and Nordic countries on targeting new needs and opportunities that immigrants bring to schools’. There is also the possibility of some slippage or at least a lack of explicitness in distinguishing between immigrants as a whole group, particular categories of migrants such as refugees and asylum seekers and ethnic diversity involving long established British citizens.

The main cause of the surprise about the positive tone of the MIPEX report is related to the amount of negative characterisations of immigration, refugees and asylum seekers that is so obviously apparent within the UK. There is a very obvious negative media commentary (see, for example, Pinson, Arnot and Candappa 2010) and surveys tend to show a fear of alteration to existing communities (e.g. ‘Britons are the most anxious about immigrants, an international survey of eight European and North American countries has suggested’, BBC, 4 February 2011). It should be noted that other elements of the MIPEX reports reflect some of the challenging issues faced within the UK. It is interesting that the Long Term Residence measure (where the UK falls from being best in Europe in 2007 to worst in 2010) and the Access to Nationality measure also falls, if rather less calamitously.

There is also some concern that the situation in the UK is changing. This may mean that future MIPEX reports may be less positive. A review of the National Curriculum is taking place. The current Secretary of State for Education has declared that it is important for history education to be strengthened in which ‘our island story’ is taught and for ‘pseudo-subjects’ to be removed. It is possible that he has citizenship education in mind. There is an emphasis on what is referred to as the ‘big society’ which may emerge from a neo-liberal inspired cost cutting measure in which the state will not support communities but instead expect individuals to be ‘enterprising’. Many of the structures (such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the Training and

Development Agency for Schools) that have supported the development of relatively benign policies are either being reduced or abolished.

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