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Parental and professional perspectives on educational integration of migrant and refugee children in Ireland

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore qualitative research with Asylum-Seeking and Refugee Parents and Educational Professionals in Ireland and investigate the socio-educational integration of refugee and migrant children in their new schools. This work was undertaken as part of the larger ongoing EU Horizon2020 study 'Integration Mapping of Refugee and Migrant Children' (IMMERSE). This paper will focus on the findings from collaborative workshops and interviews with parents and educational professionals and will discuss many of the barriers migrant and refugee children face in Irish schools. The data from this research demonstrates some very positive findings in relation to socio-educational integration in schools in Ireland. It finds similarities between parents and professional perspectives on what supports positive integration in school for children including positive child-teacher relations and the importance of peer relationships. While the findings indicate that parents were positive about the general environment of schools in Ireland, and education supports such as extra classes, they also found it difficult to accessible additional educational supports for their children.

Introduction

Integration of migrants from around the globe is a relatively recent concern for Ireland, having traditionally been a country characterised by emigration rather than immigration. In the last three decades, however, increasing numbers of international migrants have sought new homes and beginnings in Ireland, bringing with them new challenges and opportunities. According to the 2016 national census, about 17% of Ireland's population was foreign born, with the largest groups coming from the UK (34%), EU East countries (29%, over half of which came from Poland, Romania, and Lithuania), and Asia (12%, the majority originating in South and Southeast Asian countries, such as India, the Philippines, and Pakistan) (Central Statistics Office, 2017). With the exception of those from the UK, Ireland's migrant population is young (most concentrated in the 15–24 year and 25–44 year ranges) and relatively recently arrived, with most having been in the country for ten years or fewer (McGinnity, Fahey, Quinn, Arnold, Maitre, and O'Connell, 2018, pp. 18–19). Schools are chief among the social institutions impacted by this movement, as key sites of integration and support for the migrant children. The aim of this paper is to explore qualitative research with Asylum-Seeking and Refugee Parents and Educational Professionals in Ireland and investigate the socio-educational integration of refugee and migrant children in their new

schools. This work was undertaken as part of the larger ongoing EU Horizon2020 study 'Integration Mapping of Refugee and Migrant Children' (IMMERSE). This paper will focus on the findings from collaborative workshops and interviews with parents and professionals and will discuss many of the barriers migrant and refugee children face in Irish schools.

Migration to Ireland and integration in the Irish education system

Ireland has experienced a dramatic shift in migration patterns over the past 30 years. Historically a migrant-sending rather than a migrant-receiving country, economic growth in the first half of the 1990s triggered a significant change to in-flows and out-flows of people. In the latter half of the decade and particularly after 2004 following the enlargement of the EU, immigration numbers began to surpass emigration numbers, peaking in 2006/7. The recession of 2008 brought widespread economic uncertainty and prompted a dramatic, though temporary, reversal of this trend. Immigration numbers began to climb slowly again in 2010 and began to re-outstrip emigration in 2014/15 (McGinnity et al., 2018, p. 10). Ireland has received a much smaller number of asylum applications than many other EU countries, and asylum seekers made up less than 1% of the country's migrant population in 2018. Asylum applications were almost non-existent until the mid-1980s and remained relatively infrequent until an explosion in the late 1990s and early 2000s, peaking at almost 12,000 in 2002. During that brief surge, the most common countries of origin for applicants were Nigeria (over a third), Eastern European countries, and Zimbabwe (Arnold, Ryan, and Quinn, 2018). This was followed by a rapid decline over the next decade to less than 1,000 applications per year in 2012 and 2013 (ORAC 2012, 2013).

The refugee crisis that shook the EU in 2015/16 caused applications in Ireland to rise again, though the effect was nothing like what other countries, such as Germany, Italy, Greece, and France, saw as a result, due in part to Ireland's geographic isolation on the periphery of the continent. The greater impact of the refugee crisis for Ireland was an overhaul of Irish policy and law regarding international protection, resulting in the introduction of the International Protection Act 2015, which brought 'Irish procedure into line with European practice' (Arnold, Ryan, and Quinn., 2018, p. 20). Applications have continued to increase, however,[i] and one of the chief criticisms of the Irish asylum system is the amount of time applicants spend in process, with average wait times for first interviews at 19 months (UNHCR, 2018). Other major concerns include a myriad of problems with state provided accommodation centres, known as Direct Provision (DP),[ii] the number of people in emergency accommodation due to capacity issues in DP, restrictions on the right of asylum seekers to access the labour market, and lack of access to tertiary education (Irish Refugee Council, 2019).

Policy development on integration in Ireland is likewise relatively recent. General integration policy initiatives have been guided by national and international obligations and are embedded within a more general equality agenda, with the Employment Equality Acts 1998–2015 (2015) and the Equal Status Acts (2000–2015) as the key pieces of legislation. The more recent Migrant Integration Strategy (Department of Justice and Equality, 2018) set out a

more focused programme for migrant integration. In addressing integration in education specifically, the Departments of Education and Skills and the Office of the Minister for Integration developed the Intercultural Education Strategy 2010–2015 (2010, p. 56) that laid out goals around intercultural learning, capacity building for schools and teachers, language support, parent and community engagement, and gathering data for monitoring purposes. Despite these goals and the accompanying evaluative mechanisms, it is unclear whether the proposed monitoring ever took place, and evidence from this research project suggests the onus for achieving the outcomes was left to the initiative of individual schools and teachers. The Migration Integration Strategy again stressed the importance of and action around similar key issues, such as language support, enrolment policies, teacher training, addressing racism, promoting intercultural attitudes, curriculum reform, and encouraging parent participation. Apart from the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act (2018), most of these initiatives have not yet been rolled out.

Education in Ireland is compulsory for children aged 6–16 years, and attendance is essentially universal. Between 99 and 100% of children aged 6–16 were in full-time formal education in 2015 (CSO, 2017). In fact, most children are enrolled in full-time formal school by age 5 and remain in school until they have completed the post-primary cycle, usually age 18. Primary school is an eight-year cycle, normally finished when children are about 12 years old, after which they move into post-primary (more commonly known as secondary) school for a further 5–6 years. After completing secondary education, students can continue their education through Further Education and Training institutions (also known as adult or community education, after secondary level, but not part of the third-level system) and/or Higher Education institutions (third level – universities, institutes of technology, and colleges of education). According to Irish law, asylum-seeking and refugee children have the same right to access education as children who are Irish citizens, irrespective of their application status.[iii] Concerns about access have been raised with respect to children living in emergency accommodation due to an overextended DP system (Hennigan, 2019) and children who arrive late in the school year (Ni Raghallaigh, Smith, and Scholtz, 2019), but these groups appear to be quite small. A lack of available data makes it difficult to be certain, but it appears that the majority of asylum-seeking children in Ireland are able to access primary and secondary education.

Educational integration of migrant children and youth

Education has been identified as having a complex intersection with migrant integration (Mohamed and Thomas, 2017). It has the potential to be a positive force, offering routes to achievement and confidence building for migrant children and youth whose communities often place a high value on education (Kinzie, Sack, Angell, Manson, and Rath, 1986; Kohli and Mather, 2003; Ager and Strang, 2008). It also acts as a route to access to a range of social and services. However, these factors cannot be simply read as positive and intersect complexly with migratory experiences and its often fluid nature (Hart, 2009). Positive factors are limited by teachers' poor knowledge of migrant community contexts (O'Riordan, Horgan, Martin, and Blaney, 2013) and time taken to adjust to host country norms and practices (Smyth, McCoy, and Darmody, 2004). It is also hampered, for instance, by limited information available to migrants about educational systems (Ager and Strang, 2008), bullying and exclusion (Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett, 2010), school norms and

practices (Smyth et al., 2004), and contradictory surveillance roles schools play in monitoring migrants (Martin, Horgan, O'Riordan, and Christie, 2018).

Individual factors pertaining to migrant youth's integration include their own individual characteristics, age, disposition, levels of ability, and the level of control they can have of their environments (Bermen, 2001; Lustig, Kia-Keating, Knight, Geltman, Ellis, and Kinzie, 2004; Mohamed and Thomas, 2017). Having hope and belief in education are also important considerations, as are coping strategies and ways of expressing, and interpreting messages communicated (Yohani and Larsen, 2009; Carlson, Cacciator, and Klimek, 2012). Competency in host country languages, levels of belonging to the different contexts and communities they inhabit, and opportunities to develop positive and supportive relationships tend to be important supportive factors (Lustig, Kia-Keating, Knight, Geltman, Ellis, and Kinzie, 2004; Mohamed and Thomas, 2017). Having hope and belief in education are also important considerations, as are coping strategies and ways of expressing, and interpreting messages communicated (Yohani and Larsen, 2009; Carlson, Cacciator, and Klimek, 2012). Competency in host country languages, levels of belonging to the different contexts and communities they inhabit, and opportunities to develop positive and supportive relationships tend to be important supportive factors.

Analysis of longitudinal data from the Growing up in Ireland Study on Wellbeing and School Experiences among 9- and 13-year-olds in Ireland has suggest that the wellbeing scores of children from immigrant backgrounds are lower than those of Irish children across a wide range of indicators (Smyth, 2015, p.66). However, in relation to education achievement and potential, they found that immigrant children are slightly more positive at age 9 about their perceived academic ability than non-immigrant peers, again drawing our attention to the important role education can have for this cohort of children. Positive achievement at school, acceptance by peers and staff all contribute to feelings of belonging and wellbeing at school. The degree to which migrant children feel they belong in school intersects with their relations with staff, other students, and the overall school environment (Hart, 2009; Correa-Velez et al., 2010). Robust and flexible welcome programmes for migrant children enhance feelings of belonging, as does a focus on language acquisition, enabling the child/young person to participate and achieve academically and integrate socially. Proactively ensuring visibility and welcome for diverse cultures also includes attending to staff competency in understanding country of origin practices of their students and having some language fluency (Ager and Strang, 2008; Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Mohamed and Thomas, 2017). Support for host language acquisition of migrant students is important in facilitating participation and achievement, as are the expectations and assumptions teachers have about them. Proactive welcome also includes understanding that it can also take some time for migrant and refugee children to re-adjust and incorporating this into schedules (Darmody, Byrne, and McGinnity, 2012). Recognising pre- and post-migratory experiences is considered important in supporting their participation and achievement in education (Yohani and Larsen, 2009).

However, there is a tendency for teachers to have lower expectations of migrant students (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2008), connected to often inaccurate perceptions of their potential and existing educational experiences/achievements. Inflexible school schedules also tend to feed into these factors. Furthermore, several studies have identified bullying and racism towards migrant students as a problem across European countries (Manyena and Brady 2006; Correa-Velez et al., 2010; Mohamed and Thomas, 2017). Moreover, it has been found that

adolescents tend to make friendships with those who are like them (Motti-Stefanidi et al., 2008), a tendency that can contribute towards excluding migrant youth.

The overall wellbeing of their parents/family members (Lustig et al., 2004) and parents' role in advocating for their children (Yohani and Larsen, 2009; Ziaian, de Astiss, Antoniou, Baghurst, and Sawyer, 2013) are thought to support their integration, providing educational, community, and social support. Resettlement for refugee youth is underpinned by opportunities to participate and to belong to their family, their ethnic community as well as to the broader host community (Correa-Velez et al., 2010). Engagement in extra-curricular activities, the degree of acceptance and welcome within community in which migrant children are living, as well as the resources available to them, their families, and communities are all identified as supporting their integration.

Methodology

IMMERSE is a four-year Horizon2020 European Research Project that aims to measure the socio-educational integration of migrant and refugee children in Europe. As part of the research project, researchers carried out qualitative data collection involving collaborative workshops and interviews with different levels of stakeholders (micro, meso, and macro) to form the basis for recommendations of indicators to the final dashboard. At the micro level, workshops were held with migrant and refugee children, aged 6 to 18 years, enrolled in formal and non-formal education in Ireland and with parents of refugee and migrant children. At the meso level, we conducted workshops with professionals working in the education and migration sectors, and at the macro level, we conducted individual interviews with policy-makers and experts in these same fields. All of the fieldwork was conducted between May and August 2019. Ethical approval was obtained from the Social Research Ethics Committee at University College Cork. This paper will focus on the findings from the adult interviews in Ireland in this phase of the project.

The parent workshop took place at a migrant services centre and was comprised of 25 parents, all mothers who were either currently in the asylum system in Ireland or had recently received international protection status in Ireland. While this is a large number for this type of research activity, it drew on an existing group of migrant parents who meet weekly and was facilitated by four experienced interviewers. The participants' familiarity with each other and the centre where the workshop took place made for open and lively discussion. The parent workshop followed Krueger's (2002) method: welcoming participants, offering an overview, setting ground rules, and discussion. The workshop was open and participant-led and enabled probing by the facilitators on any particular issues that arose. Discussions focused on the parents' experiences of their children's integration into school and education, with attention to barriers, supports, and practices/supports they recommend, but with space for any further suggestions they had on integration of their children into school and education. The workshops were conducted in English and were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. In addition, written material was also collected from the workshop participants, which had formed part of the World Café method. Analysis of the data from the workshops and interviews was undertaken looking at what the data say and identifying patterns within the data using a systematic thematic method.

Two meso-level workshops were held with education and migrant organisation professionals, such as school principals and staff from migrant centres, in Cork and Limerick, each lasting approximately two hours. These workshops took the form of a world café (Brown and Isaacs, 2005), whereby participants, while following discussion guidelines and direction, generate key identifiers during the course of discussions. There were nine participants in the first workshop and five participants in the second workshop. Discussions focused on the views and experiences of these professionals in supporting migrant children in their integration into education and school. It elicited (i) the issues they identify in this process; (ii) challenges they face; (iii) the supports available to them in meeting these challenges; (iv) examples of successful interventions/initiatives; and (v) any further suggestions they had. At macro level, nine individual interviews were conducted with key education policy professionals and NGO representatives. These interviews lasted from 40 to 90 minutes and followed a semi-structured format using a general interview guide that had elements tailored to the area of expertise of each interviewee.

Research findings

School system in Ireland/positive school environment

Parents discussed the positive school environment they experienced in their children's schools. Examples of this include their view that their children were accepted at school and there was a respect for religious identity. They felt that these schools were 'very helpful' and 'understanding'. One parent noted that her children's school had a 'helpful receptionist' who supported her child's experience of integration. The provision of 'Balanced healthy food at school' was also seen as positive. Parents also felt that the teachers listened to them if there were issues they were unhappy with and that the teachers were 'nice'.

Parents spoke about the general environment of schools in Ireland and noted that there is 'Not too much pressure on children' and there was 'Less work load' compared to their country of origin schools. They also said that there was 'peace and safety'. Many of them expressed satisfaction with the school and system and comments that their children were 'Shown new things everyday'. They also were positive about education supports such as extra classes, homework clubs, and supports for reading and writing provided by the schools. While some parents wanted more play in primary school, a number of parents also felt there should be more study 'Don't want child to play too much – more study'.

On the other hand, parents described difficulties they had in interacting with the Irish education system. The cost of schooling in Ireland was mentioned as problematic, and they commented on the demands made of them by schools. Accessing additional supports for their children, particularly speech and language therapists, was noted as a barrier. Comments indicated the lack of a transparent and accessible route to educational support information as there was no key person to guide them through the system.

Child's positive relationship with teachers

Parents identified a positive relationship with teachers as one of the most important indicators of integration in school for their children. They said that their children had a 'Good relationship with teachers' and 'Teachers are motivated and give support'. A number of parents commented on the teacher recognising their children's strengths and getting to know their child.

> The teachers knows your children better than you. I see my child making a mess but when I speak to the teacher she will say this is his talent. That is a good thing that they know your child better than you cause the next time I see the mess, I say ok this is my child's talent. It makes parents happy as well. Mother 1

This parent's comments also highlight the role of the teacher in communicating aspects of the child-centred curriculum to parents which may be different to the parents' own experience of education.

> There is a very special bond with their teachers. Parents can't make that friendship. The child is drawing at the walls and I say to his teachers that I have taken them away and the teachers says 'No no no just give him a book. Let me draw'. Mother 2.

The parents view the teacher as a caring adult who has a special bond with their children and that the teachers understood the children's needs. A supportive school environment can have a positive integration effort.

Child-centred experiences and children's rights

Parents discussed the school environment in Ireland and identified an emphasis on children's rights within the curriculum and children's relationship with teachers. For example, they note that children are expected to ask questions in school and be heard and they are 'Taught in school to ask questions if they don't understand' (Mother). While the positive impacts of children experiencing a child-centred environment were acknowledged, this also raised tensions for some parents in negotiating new cultural norms on child discipline, parental authority, and children's rights in Ireland. For example, one parent said:

> If you look at African children and you look at Irish children, there is a very big difference, you know. In Ireland, the mother hits the child and the child is taken away. It comes to the stage where a parent is not able to control her child. Mother 3

This quote demonstrates the cultural tensions that can arise when legal and normative frameworks regarding child protection and children's rights are different in countries of origin and host migrant countries. It also demonstrates the fear parents may have of being under surveillance by social services and possibly having their children taken away. Another parents also discussed the different parenting styles and attitudes to the use of physical chastisement which she had encountered in Ireland.

> My kids they come home and they say today we learned that we have rights and my ears go oh no because in Nigeria a child doesn't know about child's right and a child's rights are not enforced and so to come here and to know that they have rights can make or boost their confidence and I think in school they can express and say how they feel and it is not like that in our country…it has been very positive and now if they do something wrong cause I have boys and they are very hard as they are very adventurous cause back home I would just use the cane and now I will sit down say why do you do that and I will get their side. It makes them more confident and more respectful. It is changing my relationship with them. Mother 4

This mother has found the differing cultural, legal, and normative parenting frameworks which she experienced in Ireland to be positive for her parenting and interactions with her children and positive for her children's confidence.

Friendships, racism, and bullying

Parents identified positive and negative factors related to peer interaction that impacted integration. Having friends was critical for integration, and participants commented that their children 'mixed with other children very fast'. However, they also commented that their children were often isolated from peers or lonely and that other children did not want to play with them. They pointed to the leadership role of the school in facilitating and promoting the development of friendships and challenging exclusion, with ongoing monitoring of the challenges children face. For example, one parent wanted the school to do more to support peer friendships and challenge exclusion and in particular to be proactive in supporting the children to make friends as part of the induction to the school environment.

Parents frequently mentioned peer discrimination, racism, and bullying as negatively impacting their children's integration. Incidents of race-based bullying were mentioned, such as children being 'bullied because of skin colour and language' or 'making fun of them by comparing lifestyles'. One mother felt that children were copying their parents who were modelling anti-migrant discrimination and racism at home, highlighting the need to address racism and acceptance of migrants and diversity more generally.

Language barriers

A number of parents mentioned language barriers and felt that more English as an Additional Language (EAL) supports and Irish language supports are needed to integrate their children into the education system. They commented that some of the children experienced peer exclusion because their English was poor. For example, one mother described other children not wanting to play with her child 'because she can't talk well'. Some of the parents also felt their children generally lacked confidence and were uncertain while they were in school. As their children's English improved, parents commented that so did their academic achievements and integration highlighting the value that parents place on their children's English language acquisition for successful integration.

Meso and macro level – Professional perspectives on socio-educational integration

Meso- and macro-level participants from both the governmental, policy-making side and the practitioners and NGO/community partners side agreed that integration is a relatively new issue in Ireland. However, participants were somewhat divided between the policy-makers who were optimistic about the work currently being done in the field of integration and the practitioners and NGO/community partners who were critical of the scope of these efforts and the slow pace of change.

Friendships, bullying, and racism

Meso-level participants cited children's peer interactions as of critical importance, within and outside of school for integration. Participants advocated for effective school classroom set-up and management, involving active learning and group work as particularly good ways to help new students integrate. Participants also agreed on the importance of extra-curricular activities for developing relationships with peers, particularly a wider variety of peers, so that 'integration doesn't end with the school day'. However, there were a number of barriers cited to participation in extra-curricular activities, such as fees, isolated living situations (a problem for children in direct provision housing), and lack of support networks. Migrant children's involvement in extra-curriculars often depends on individual kindnesses and exceptions, rather than consistent systemic support and this promotes a charity model of provision for the most vulnerable child migrants. Participants felt that school management and teachers were responsible for setting the tone and vigilantly monitoring situations that could end up in isolation, segregation, or racism and being proactive to avoid them. Unfortunately, instances of racism were still present, and the participants noted that children experience racism from their peers and also occasionally from teachers and the parents of Irish-born children. Macro participants noted that policies to address racism and cultural discrimination are local level and often tied to general anti-bullying policies. The NGO and community partners, however, felt that these policies were inadequate to the lived experiences of migrants.

Teacher relationships with students and parents

All professional participants acknowledged the importance of good relationships with teachers to the integration of migrant children. The participants agreed that teachers are becoming more open and inclusive generally, and that good student/teacher relationships are more valued. Such relationships mean that children are happier, more comfortable in school, and more trusting of their teachers. This is especially important when instances of racism and bullying occur, because students are less likely to report such instances if they think they will not be believed.

Trusting relationships with migrant parents are also important for teachers, and these relationships can be even more challenging than relationships with the children. Professionals felt that parents are often worried about their children's ability to cope, and schools and teachers have to help manage these worries, a task which is very often made more difficult by language barriers and uncertainty about the availability of support and resources. Teachers rely on parents for information about their children, which can be sensitive if the family has left their home country under duress, and parents need to trust teachers to do what is best for their child's education. There were some concerns raised by participants about the Irish teaching population being majority white, middle-class, Irish-born, and predominately female. There have been some recent initiatives in order to address this homogeneity, but it is too early to gauge the magnitude of their effects.

Cultural differences, religion, and diversity

Meso participants sometimes noted different expectations of education from migrant families. Some migrant children, particularly refugee children, had little to no experience of education before arriving in Ireland and had to learn what happens in school and how to behave. Some families took education very seriously, expected their children to be in school for long hours, and frequently checked in with teachers, while others took children out of school for months at a time. In addition, some professionals felt that not all parents embraced the ideals of child rights, child voice, or child-centred education leading to a cultural dissonance in some cases between the values of migrant parents and teachers.

The majority of Irish schools have a Catholic ethos and are managed by voluntary boards of management under Catholic patronage, and meso participants felt that, though Ireland is becoming an increasingly secular society, the education system still often reflects its largely Catholic heritage. Children who do not do communion or confirmation can be/feel isolated, because it is such a prominent rite of passage for their Irish peers. Participants emphasised that respect was the most crucial element for teaching about topics that may be sensitive because of religious or cultural differences – teachers being respectful of other religions and cultures and teaching the students to be respectful, as well. Having a concentration of migrant students could make it easier to secure supports and resources and could prompt the school to develop good integration practices. It could also help migrant children to fit in more easily, especially if there was already a group of other children with a similar background at the same school. It created an environment where diversity was the norm, a direction in which participants felt Irish society was moving. However, concentrations of migrant children could inhibit language progression (as students tend to speak their home language more rather than practising English) and encourage segregation.

Education policy: Language and curriculum

Meso participants noted that language barriers prevent effective communication with parents of migrant children as they often do not speak English fluently, preventing back-and-forth

flows of information regarding the child's background and education. There were no funds for professional translation services, so school staff had to improvise translation, often resorting to google translate or an intermediary like the child, a friend, or another parent.

According to the DES representative, the general approach to migrant children in Irish education is one of integration from the beginning, rather than separate integration classrooms or schools and the emphasis is on proficiency in the host language. At both primary and post-primary levels, additional language support is provided for students who do not speak English as their first language. English as an Acquired Language (EAL) funding is allocated based on the number of children in a school who are classified as EAL using an assessment toolkit developed by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to test levels of English language proficiency, a process much criticised in the meso-level focus groups. According to the interviewee from DES, the 'priority is to prioritise the host language to ensure there can be maximum participation in the education system and boarder life of Ireland'. Schools undergo extensive annual testing procedures to prove that EAL supports are needed, a time and resource intensive process.

Another language-related challenge that meso participants faced was striking a balance between encouraging English fluency as quickly as possible, allowing migrant students to succeed academically and integrate with their peers, and ensuring they do not lose their original languages, which are an important part of their identity. They spoke about the importance of academic success, but always in combination with at least one other wellbeing outcome, noting that lack of success in school can contribute to mental health problems, distress, low self-confidence, and poor self-image. Conversely, succeeding at school can help boost confidence and promote belonging. As such, participants were eager for teachers and schools to shift away from a deficit approach to language, where speaking a different language is a disadvantage, almost like a Special Educational Need (SEN), and work instead from the premise that having multiple languages is an advantage and something to be celebrated. All children are assessed individually for additional supports, and migrant children are not specifically targeted for additional supports (except EAL). It was noted that many migrant children are attending DEIS[iv] schools that already have additional supports for children and families. Some participants also pointed to the new Education Admissions Bill and Student and Parent Charter Bill as steps in the right direction to redress past discrimination and encourage greater involvement of migrant parents in Irish schools, though not all participants were equally optimistic about these measures.

The impact of migration and housing policies on education

The DP system which provides accommodation for asylum seekers was heavily criticised, particularly the length of time people spend in the system while waiting for a decision on their application for Refugee Status. DP centres are often remote and/or isolated from other neighbourhoods, making it difficult for refugee children to interact with their peers outside of school and participate in extra-curricular activities. Recent strains on the system have forced authorities to forego normal induction procedures and place refugee families in emergency centres where even access to school is not guaranteed. In addition, migrant families (not in the asylum system) have sometimes been forced to locate to areas not prepared for additional

families. Out-of-date census data has led to capacity issues while new schools are being built, a problem that particularly affects migrants due to admissions policies that favour longer-established local children.

Discussion

Parents and professional participants identified the importance of positive child-teacher relations for integration. Parents were generally positive about their relationships and interactions with their children's teachers. Parents appreciated teachers' emotional as well as intellectual investment in their children, commenting on the caring and supportive attitudes they had observed. Motti-Stefanidi et al. (2008) and others stressed the vital role of teachers and school climate in helping migrant and refugee children to integrate and succeed academically, a prominent theme from the children's and parents' workshops. Overall parents were generally positive about the school climate in their children's schools. Some of the meso and the macro participants were critical of the inflexible curriculum, the Catholic orientation of most Irish schools, and the tedious bureaucratic procedures that stood in the way of securing adequate supports for their migrant students. Policy-makers, on the other hand, were optimistic about the shift in direction for policy and curriculum in Ireland towards a more flexible design, but acknowledged that there are no supports directed specifically at migrant students, except for EAL resources. Interestingly, parents were uncritical of the Catholic ethos of the majority of schools their children attended and felt their child's religious identity was respected in school regardless of their faith. Language and support for language learning is a central concern in integration research, and was unsurprisingly a significant concern among research participants in this study. Key barriers in relation to language include poor access to translation services and supports and recognition for mother tongue languages.

Parents and professionals reported incidents of bullying and racism and the multiple negative impacts of such incidents as has been documented in other numerous studies (Priest et al., 2014; Manyena and Brady, 2006; Mohamed and Thomas, 2017). Parents and some of the professional participants noted racist attitudes coming from the parents of Irish-born children, which influenced how these children interacted with their migrant peers. Some of the professional participants, mainly the Community and NGO participants, were critical of anti-racism policies, viewing them as inadequate, partly because they were usually subsumed under an anti-bullying policy and therefore focused on individual identities rather than structural inequalities. These findings reinforce Hart's (2009) caution that schools can be supportive, stabilising, integrating environments for migrant children, but they can also be sites of isolation, silencing, and discrimination. Parents and some professionals expressed concerns about access to additional educational supports and services to support their children, particularly children with Special Educational Needs. This reflects findings from international research that parents are negatively impacted by limited information available to migrants about educational systems (Ager and Strang, 2008).

A theme which was not mentioned in the parent interview but was in the professional interviews was the impact of current housing policy on integration in education. The DP system in Ireland for those in the asylum process was heavily criticised for being detrimental to children, with poor housing conditions that are often isolated and far from schools and peers. The DP has been heavily criticised for overcrowding, substandard conditions, isolated locations, and other problems documented in the McMahon Report (2015) and various reports and publications since it was established 20 years ago (Martin et al., 2018; Irish Refugee Council, 2019). Overcrowded housing and housing problems are identified in the literature as negatively impacting children's wellbeing (Bradshaw and Richardson, 2009) and access to personal and private rooms are identified as positively impacting child wellbeing (Semerci et al., 2014). Another important issue related to housing was the lack of up-to-date data on where families were moving to which impacted capacity issues in schools, with migrant children left disadvantaged by admissions policies that favour longer-established families. International evidence has suggested there is a link between access to schools and school segregation and housing segregation experienced by migrants (Darmody et al., 2012, p. 7).

Conclusion

The degree to which migrant children feel they belong in school intersects with their relations with staff, other students, and the overall school environment (Hart, 2009; Correa-Velez et al., 2010). The data from this research demonstrates some very positive findings in relation to socio-educational integration in schools in Ireland. It finds similarities between parents and professional perspectives on what supports positive integration in school for children including positive child-teacher relations and the importance of peer relationships. Support for language acquisition of migrant students was important for all participants in facilitating participation and achievement, as were the expectations and assumptions teachers have about migrant students. Parents placed a very high value on English language acquisitions for their child's successful integration including for social and academic integration and success. This is also reflected in current policy in Irish schools which prioritises proficiency in the host language. There are however some areas of tension which should be addressed to improve opportunities for positive integration. While the positive impacts of children experiencing a child-centred environment were acknowledged by parents and professionals, it also raised tensions for some parents in negotiating new cultural norms on child discipline, parental authority, and children's rights in Ireland. Another key area is improved access to additional supports for refugee and asylum-seeking families to support integration and such supports need to include access to additional educational supports, extra-curricular activities, and appropriate housing.

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[i] At the end of 2018, the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service (INIS) reported that there were approximately 5,700 cases for international protection awaiting a decision from the International Protection Office (3,673 of which had been received that year), and about 6,200 people living in DP. The top countries of origin for asylum seekers in 2018 were Albania, Georgia, Syria, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria (INIS, 2019).

[ii] DP has been heavily criticised for overcrowding, substandard conditions, isolated locations, and other problems documented in the McMahon Report (2015). A number of organisations in Ireland have called for its abolition.

[iii] This right is derived from a combination of provisions from key legal acts in Ireland: the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 that makes education compulsory for all children aged 6–16 years; the Equal Status Acts that prohibit discrimination on the grounds of race, colour, nationality, or ethnic or national origins; and the Refugee Act 1996 that grants refugees the right to access education, 'in like manner and to the like extent in all respects as an Irish citizen' (Section 3, subsection (2)(a)(i)). Though this provision covers those who have been granted refugee status, there is no distinction in practice between refugee children and children still in the application process in Ireland, in accordance with Article 14 of Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament, known as the Reception Conditions Directive (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32013L0033&from=EN).

[iv] DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) is a national programme established by the Department of Education and Skills in 2005 aimed at addressing the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Schools who have concentrations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are designated as DEIS and receive extra supports.