

Creating Inclusive Schools: Enhancing Educational Opportunities for Migrant and Refugee Children in Ireland

The article examines the integration of migrant and refugee children into Ireland's education system, focusing on the challenges they face and strategies to improve their academic and social inclusion. It emphasises the importance of cultural integration programmes and partnerships with mental health professionals to create an inclusive environment. It argues that addressing these challenges is essential for the success of migrant and refugee children and fostering a more inclusive and cohesive Irish society.

Introduction

With an increasing number of migrant and refugee children entering Ireland's education system, the challenges and opportunities presented by this demographic shift are becoming more apparent. These children, particularly those fleeing conflict, bring diverse cultural backgrounds and unique educational needs. This article examines their integration into Ireland's education system and proposes strategies to enhance their academic and social inclusion.

In the year to April 2024, 149,200 people immigrated to Ireland, marking a 17-year high (CSO, 2024). Approximately 26% of international protection newcomers are children (Government of Ireland, 2024). Ireland, historically a nation of net emigration, is now experiencing an unprecedented influx of migrants.

While initial solidarity was strong, especially for Ukrainian refugees, the ongoing housing crisis and strain on public services have sparked anti-immigration protests, with slogans like 'Get them out' and 'Ireland is full' highlighting local concerns over resources and perceived threats to



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safety (Carroll, 2023; McCallig, 2024). Even as data shows that most Irish citizens support migrants, protests suggest this support is being tested (Laurence et al., 2024). Migrant and refugee children now face greater challenges in feeling welcomed and integrated.

Key challenges

One of the most pressing issues for migrant and refugee children is language acquisition. Many arrive in Ireland with limited English, creating barriers to academic success and social integration. While English as an additional language (EAL) programmes have improved under the Migrant Integration Strategy, resource limitations hinder their effectiveness (Darmody et al., 2022). Expanding EAL services, especially in schools with many non-English-speaking students, is essential for inclusion and preventing academic underperformance (Government of Ireland, 2020). Many migrant and refugee children also face educational gaps due to interrupted schooling. Schools are doing their best but would benefit from further resources and professional development to address these needs.

Ireland's education system is founded on principles of equality and inclusion, which are crucial for integrating migrant and refugee children. Schools are increasingly incorporating intercultural education through cross-cultural projects and anti-racism workshops that foster empathy and understanding (Devine, 2017; Horgan et al., 2022). The National Action Plan Against Racism calls for schools to embed anti-racism and intercultural principles into everyday learning, supporting greater societal cohesion (Government of Ireland, 2023).

The wellbeing of migrant and refugee children is critical to their integration. Many have endured trauma from war, displacement, or family separation, affecting their mental health and ability to learn (Watters et al., 2022). Addressing these needs is vital for creating a supportive school environment. Trauma-informed care has gained attention, but schools often lack the resources and specialised staff to support children with complex emotional needs.

Migrant and refugee children consistently report lower levels of happiness than their Irish peers (Government of Ireland, 2019). Strengthening mental health services can directly enhance students' academic performance, as wellbeing and cognitive function are closely linked (Richter et al., 2022).

Key actions

To improve the inclusion of migrant and refugee children, several actions can be prioritised, as seen in successful models worldwide. Intensive language

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programmes can be introduced (Pashang et al., 2018). Teachers and staff can receive comprehensive training in trauma-informed care (Miller et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2019). Schools can collaborate with mental health professionals to offer regular workshops, as seen in Canada and the US (Barrett & Berger, 2021). Relationships with migrant families can be strengthened through cultural integration programmes, such as Norway's Introduction Programme and Germany's parental integration courses. Finally, partnerships with local mental health providers can relieve pressure on school staff and ensure students receive necessary support, as in the UK's Place2Be programme and Australia's Headspace initiative.

Conclusion

Ireland's education system has made meaningful strides in supporting migrant and refugee children, yet persistent challenges remain. Expanding EAL services, providing trauma-informed care, and strengthening mental health support are vital not just for supporting these children but also for fostering a more inclusive and cohesive society.

As migration continues to shape Ireland's future, prioritising the integration of migrant and refugee children is essential for building a nation enriched by its diversity and grounded in the values of equality, inclusion, and shared opportunity. The success of these children is not only their own but Ireland's as well.

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