

Schools key to successful integration of child refugees, says study

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Schools can provide the ideal environment to improve integration and reduce the difficulties faced by refugee children in Western asylum countries, according to a new study from psychologists at City, University of London.

The research, which involved speaking to refugees who had arrived in England and Denmark as children, highlights that schools can provide safe and stable setting where refugee children can develop meaningful and constructive connections to peers, teachers and other professionals, as well as being a place in which discrimination, racism and stigmatisation can be actively countered.

The findings also highlight the importance of providing appropriate training for teachers when dealing with refugee children. This includes supporting children in the educational setting, specific skills related to working with refugee families, as well as having sufficient collaboration strategies and referral systems in place when clinical or therapeutic interventions are needed. The research is published in *Children and Youth Services Review*.

There is an urgent need to facilitate the integration of refugee children in Western asylum-countries as the number of individuals who have been forced to flee their homes and country of origin has increased rapidly in recent years. As a result, the need to understand how best to support such individuals, especially the youngest of them, has become pressing.

To further understand the needs and experiences of refugee children as they adjust and integrate into the asylum-country, the researchers looked at experiences of seven refugee adults, who had all arrived in Denmark or England as children accompanied by family members and were therefore born outside of the asylum-country.

The researchers found that:

- In both England and Denmark there was the emphasis on social and educational support, encouragement and guidance from teachers and mentors, as well as more general support provided by friends, peers and [family members](#). Offering refugee children, youth and adults the opportunity to create meaningful and close social relationships seems to be of central importance for positive integration and well-being, including working with families or within schools, or by strengthening connections between children, families and staff in schools
- Interventions seeking to encourage refugee youths' positive involvement in the asylum-country, and providing them with an opportunity to challenge harmful and harsh political ideologies are important
- One of the challenges that differed for the two groups was that participants in England felt stigmatised by stereotypical and racist comments, which may also have led to this groups' strong focus on succeeding academically
- Challenges in regards to integrating two different cultures into a whole were only found in the extracts from participants in Denmark. Participants in Denmark spoke about issues relating to their identity, and expressed that they felt part foreign (from their parents' country of origin) and part Danish
- Restoring stability and meaning, by facilitating ethnic pride, might be one way in which to support refugee children in educational contexts

Participants expressed a number of initial challenges, for instance in relation to what they had been through:

"You can try day and night, you'll never understand it - and it cannot be explained with words - never. Not even in pictures... it's.... it just cannot be explained. That feeling..."

In terms of the difference that a teacher had made to their life, one participant spoke about how extra one-to-one support at lunch time had made a big difference.

"That showed me, I was like, don't give up: If you want something, work hard, then one day you will achieve something," they said.

Another participant also spoke warmly about a former teacher:

"Yes, my teacher in the integration / reception class. She helped me a lot, not just with school but with everything; even things that had nothing to do with school. I would speak with her all the time. She was really helpful to me. Even now I still talk to her sometimes, we are still in touch. (...) she really made a big difference. She is the kind of person who helps people from other countries or foreign children".

As for what refugee children need, one participant said:

"I think that it would be a massive help for these children, if the adults and professionals know about their background and their situation that they're in, that they realize these are not just typical kindergarten or preschool children, but that they have actually experienced things like war and that these children are used to a completely different society. I think that is the most important thing. It could be a huge help for these children."

Speaking about the study, lead author Sara Thommessen, said:

"Our study highlights the importance of schools and teachers when considering prevention and intervention strategies in broad and inclusive terms.

"Speaking to refugees who settled in England and Denmark as children, we found that it's important to consider connections between the child, family, school and wider community, as these elements can have a huge impact on how refugee [children](#) integrate into Western asylum-countries.

"With large numbers of [refugee](#) individuals seeking safety - it is vital that we put initiatives in place to ensure that they receive the social and education support, encouragement and guidance they need."

Provided by City University London

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