Feels Like Home:
Exploring the experiences of newcomer pupils in primary schools in Northern Ireland

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Believe in children

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Introduction

Northern Ireland has undergone rapid demographic change as a result of migration in the past decade. In 2004, eight countries from central and eastern Europe, the 'A8[1]', joined the European Union (EU). As new European citizens, nationals from the A8 were free to travel and reside in any other EU member state. The arrival of large numbers of migrant workers as well as smaller numbers of refugees and asylum seekers has resulted in more diversity in culture, religion and language than Northern Ireland has experienced before. As a consequence, schools in NI have also seen a rise in admissions of children with little or no English language.

Although the black and minority ethnic (BME) population has been steadily growing, minimal research has been conducted in NI about the educational needs and policy implications for children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). This is also an area of particular interest for Barnardo's NI as we increasingly work with newcomer families and children across our service base and work in schools. In order to explore the issues faced by both school staff and newcomer pupils, Barnardo's NI has funded and conducted research into the experiences of school staff and newcomer pupils in primary schools to address this information gap.

This paper presents an overview of the policy and literature context, key research findings and recommendations for policy and practice.[2]

Policy context

Supporting Newcomer Pupils
The *Supporting Newcomer Pupils*[3] policy was developed in 2009 as part of the Department of Education's 'Every School a Good School' initiative. The purpose was to address the barriers to learning of pupils who did not share the same language of instruction as their teacher and enable newcomer pupils to fully participate in the curriculum and life of the school. This document outlined the provision by the Department of Education (DE) to fund a regional support service, the Inclusion and Diversity Service (IDS), with the intention of improving support to newcomer pupils by providing a consistent level of support and specialist advice to schools. In addition, DE committed to continue to directly fund schools through the Common Funding Formula (CFF) in which each school is entitled to £1,012.66 per year for each newcomer child (2012/13)[4].

Count, Read, Succeed
This overarching policy aims to ensure that every child fulfils her or his full potential at each stage of their development. This strategy identified five key areas by DE and underpins the commitment to newcomer pupils set out in the 'Supporting Newcomer Pupils' policy:

 a. raising standards for all;
 b. closing the performance gap, increasing access and equity;
 c. developing the education workforce;
 d. improving the learning environment; and
 e. transforming education management.

Extended Schools
The Extended Schools (ES) programme aims to improve levels of educational achievement and the longer term life chances of disadvantaged children and young people by providing the necessary additional support which can enable those children to reach their full potential. Through this programme, schools serving areas of the highest social deprivation can provide for a wide range of services or activities outside of the normal school day to help meet the needs of pupils, their families and local communities.

Together: Building a United Community
The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister published *Together: Building a United Community Strategy* in May 2013, based on the commitment of the NI Executive to improve community relations and continue to work towards a more united and shared society. This policy aims to ensure the educational inclusion and integration of children from an ethnic minority background and the inclusion of ethnic minority communities in community spaces. It also promotes cultural identity and access to the arts for ethnic minority communities.

Newcomer pupils in Northern Ireland

All children in NI have the right[5] to basic education regardless of their ethnic, religious or socio-economic background. In 2009, DE replaced the term 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) with 'newcomer'. DE defines a 'newcomer' as, *"a pupil who has*

1   'A8' countries: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia
2   For full report refer to Kernaghan, D. (2015) *Feels Like Home: Exploring the Experiences of Newcomer Pupils in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland.* Barnardo's NI, Belfast
3   Department of Education Supporting Newcomer Pupils http://www.deni.gov.uk/newcomer_policy_english.pdf
4   An Independent Review of the Common Funding Scheme (2013)
5   United Nations (1989) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 28

enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher. It does not refer to indigenous pupils who choose to attend an Irish medium school" (Supporting Newcomer Pupils, 2009).

Data provided by DE[6] has shown an exponential growth in newcomer pupils in NI at all stages of education:

- 10,698 newcomer pupils in 2014 were attending school in NI;
- newcomer pupils now account for 3.2% of the total school population;
- the majority of newcomer pupils attend primary school (69.4%) in comparison to post primary schools (23.4%).

While newcomer pupils in post-primary schools have more than doubled from 1,148 in 2006/07 to 2,501 in 2013/14, the largest growth area for newcomer pupils has been in primary schools. As shown in Figure 1, newcomer pupils in primary schools have

nearly trebled from 2,630 in 2006/07 to 7,424 in 2013/14.

Newcomer pupils have been seen by teachers as a positive addition to the classroom overall (Murtagh and Francis, 2012; Skinner, 2010; Ryan, D'Angelo, Sales and Rodrigues, 2010). NI teachers reported that newcomer pupils provided the opportunity to learn about other cultures, tolerance and social relationships (Purdy and Ferguson, 2012). However, studies have found that there are also particular challenges for both schools and newcomer parents and pupils:

Unfamiliar education system: Unfamiliarity with the education system may result in newcomer parents missing deadlines for paperwork, particularly regarding free part time pre-school places, and confusion around uniforms, transport assistance and free school meal entitlements (Kernaghan, 2014; Geraghty et al, 2010). For newcomer pupils and their parents born in other countries, the NI education system may be particularly difficult to understand and navigate as:

- NI has the lowest statutory school starting age in Europe at 4 years old;
- The school system has been historically segregated on religious lines (Catholic and Protestant) resulting in a number of different categories of schools; and
- Parents have the choice to enter their children into a series of unregulated tests to decide which post-primary school they can access.

In addition, newcomer pupils may need time to adjust to NI schools as it may differ from their previous school experiences in terms of workload, discipline and relationship with teachers (Geraghty et al, 2010). Particularly in the case of children of asylum seekers and refugees, pupils may have experienced trauma, loss and displacement before starting school and therefore have additional needs to settle into school (McGovern et al, 2011).

Language barrier: Research studies on ethnic minority groups in the UK have found that the lack of English may be a source of frustration for parents when communicating with school as they are often unable to talk directly to teachers and at times may feel that their concerns are not listened to (D'Angelo, Paniagua and Ozdemir, 2011; Sales et al, 2008). Teachers may also find communication problematic in terms of explaining to parents about a child's progress and emphasising the importance of helping children with homework (Irwin et al, 2014; NISMP, 2014; D'Angelo et al, 2011; McGovern et al, 2011; Biggart, O'Hare and Connolly, 2009). Within the classroom, pupils with little or no English may go through a "silent period" identified by Krashen (1982) during which they are building up language competence through actively listening and processing the language they hear.

Figure 1: Increase in newcomer pupils in NI primary schools
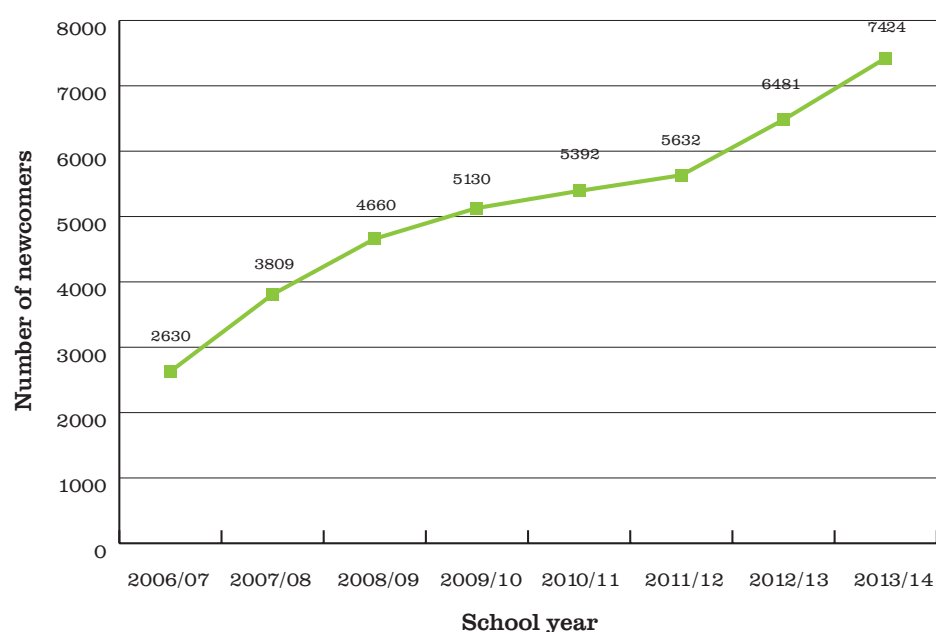
Source: NI School Census 2013/14

Differentiation: Teachers consider and plan to accommodate all pupils in the class by the differentiation of tasks and support. However, the length of time taken to develop academic language proficiency is dependent on an individual's age of arrival, previous educational background, level of literacy in their first language and opportunities to interact with native English speakers (Collier and Thomas, 1989; Demie, 2010). Teachers report that it may be problematic to deal with the breadth of differentiation needed to support learning for newcomer and other pupils.

Lack of training: English as an Additional Language is not a subject specialism in initial teacher education in the UK. Studies suggest teachers feel that pre-service teacher training and continuous professional development regarding newcomer pupils have not kept pace with the changing demographics in Northern Ireland (Purdy and Ferguson, 2012; Murtagh and Francis, 2012; Skinner, 2010; Bracken, Hagan, O'Toole, Quinn, and Ryan, 2009). Research suggests that the area of both pre-service and in-service teacher training on English as an Additional Language requires review in order to increase teacher confidence and meet the needs of newcomer pupils (Purdy and Ferguson, 2012; Bracken et al, 2009; DENI, 2006).

About the research

The research was qualitative in nature with all interviews and focus groups conducted between December 2013 and June 2014. Four primary schools with a high number of newcomer pupils were invited to participate in the study in each of the five Education and Library Boards (ELB) which resulted in a total of 13 schools participating in the study.[7] The research was conducted over three phases:

Phase 1: Interviews with principals

The principal or vice principal of each of the 13 selected schools was interviewed. The aim of this phase was to understand the effect of newcomer pupils from a whole schools' perspective. Principals were asked questions related to the process of admission for newcomer pupils, support available to schools, pastoral care and integration. Challenges and benefits of newcomer pupils and examples of good practice were also explored.

Phase 2: Interviews and focus groups with teachers

A total of 39 teachers drawn from across different stages of primary school participated in the study including Foundation Stage (n = 17), Key Stage 1 (n = 12) and Key Stage 2 (n = 10) teachers. In this phase, nine 1-to-1 interviews and nine focus groups with teachers were conducted. Teachers were asked about the ways they managed and integrated newcomer pupils in the classroom, pastoral care issues and relationships with newcomer pupils' parents. They were also asked about the resources, support and training available to teachers for newcomer pupils.

Phase 3: Focus groups with newcomer pupils

Ten focus groups and one 1-to-1 interview were conducted in 11 primary schools. This resulted in a total of 47 children from 14 different countries of origin participating in the research. An arts related method 'the jigsaw approach' was used in children's focus groups to enable them to share their lived experiences in a relevant and meaningful way whilst capturing their voice with authenticity (Stephenson, 2011). Children were asked to write one word on a jigsaw piece on topics such as how they felt when they started school and their likes and dislikes about school. The researcher then used the pupils' words as prompts to gain a deeper understanding about their experiences.

Key findings

School management of newcomer pupils

Schools in the study were dealing with a diverse range of nationalities, languages and cultures. Some participating schools reported that they had over 20 different nationalities, while some schools had 5 or 6 main nationalities and other schools had two main groups. Observation of any of the participating schools showed a range of multilingual signage and displays to welcome visitors and pupils. Principals explained this was part of how at a school level newcomer pupils were made welcome at the outset. On the whole, school management and teaching staff reported that newcomer pupils were beneficial to the school in terms of diversity and cultural issues. They also recognised that the school had a role in promoting integration and inclusion both within the school and to the wider community:

"It's a whole school policy to have inclusion and to respect their different cultures, to really celebrate that. And I think that's probably the best way to integrate them into the community as well as the school."
Principal, BELB

Principals were asked questions relating to the whole school level including pupils' admission, how schools support newcomer pupils and how schools are supported through funding and the Inclusion and Diversity Service. Key findings included:

- Most principals were generally satisfied with the admission system for newcomer pupils.

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7   Schools were drawn from every ELB apart from the Western ELB. The geographic distribution of participating schools across the four ELBs included: Belfast (4), Southern (4), South Eastern (3), North Eastern (2).

- Schools usually took a holistic approach with newcomer pupils and families. Support offered to newcomer families from schools in this study included:
  - Helping parents complete official paperwork;
  - Holding evening classes to support parents with English language learning;
  - Running parenting classes for parents;
  - Extended school hours through breakfast and afterschool clubs to facilitate shift work;
  - Providing information about purchasing uniforms at a lower cost.

- Concerns were raised by school management and teaching staff about poor attendance by some newcomer pupils. The two main areas of concern were: (i) attendance at Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 and; (ii) extended periods of time off during term time.

- Teachers found bullying amongst newcomer pupils with a mutual language or between two newcomer groups particularly problematic to identify as they were unable to understand name calling and nasty comments in different languages.

- School principals generally considered the amount of funding for newcomer pupils appropriate and the majority reported that this funding is used for additional teaching staff and classroom assistants.

- Concerns about the potential of newcomer funding to be ring-fenced centred on the reduction of flexibility for schools and the disproportionate impact ring-fencing may have on schools with small numbers of newcomer pupils.

- School staff expressed mixed views on the Inclusion and Diversity Service. They felt the service was most useful when providing schools with tools to introduce and settle newcomers initially but it was of limited support in terms of providing advice for classroom practice. This was particularly in relation to more complex issues of special educational needs and age appropriate resources.

Newcomer pupils in the classroom

A newcomer pupil's arrival to a NI primary school was often a transitional period in the child's life in which they may be adjusting to a new country, home and school. When the children were asked what they felt when they started primary school, the most common response was fear. Nearly two thirds of children reported that they felt sad, shy, worried and nervous and often cried when they began school. Primarily, concerns of newcomer pupils starting school centred on not knowing any other children and not being able to make friends or interact with others because of the language difference.

"I feel like when I am coming in a new country, you don't know anybody from here; the first time when are you coming here, you can't speak with anybody, like you don't have partners, you don't have friends."
Iranian male, 10 years old

"I was scared because, it's not that I cannot answer everyone, but I was only like three days in Northern Ireland and I started to go to school."
Polish female, 11 years old

While many newcomer pupils felt scared and confused when starting school, the majority reported that they enjoyed school now. Key to feeling included was friendships with peers and a good relationship with their teacher. Teachers reported that initially they expected children with little or no English to have a silent period in which a newcomer pupil is acquiring English language through absorbing interactions in the classroom and learning on their own. During this time, teachers build up vocabulary by focussing on survival language and high frequency words. This was reinforced in a number of ways including gesturing by the teacher, inclusive games with the peer group, labels and visual signs around the classroom and picture cards:

"I think their basic needs: toilets and feeling sick. If you think about their own language, the very first words they learn are toilet, line up, put [on] your coat. So it's basic classroom routine, just the survival language we would call it really. Water, milk, snack, language."
P1 teacher, BELB

"…they are maybe silent for the first wee while, maybe just to try and comprehend what are all these words, if they haven't heard English before. And then they will over time speak small, they might say "toilet please" and then it might progress to "can I go to the toilet?", and then you can see the big smile on their face. They know what they want to say but you just need to give them that time to do it."
P4 teacher, BELB

The focus groups and interviews with teachers highlighted a number of challenges they experienced in relation to newcomer pupils in the classroom:

- Low school readiness manifested itself in the classroom as children from other countries may not have had any previous experience of being away from their parents, school routines or understanding of appropriate behaviour in the classroom.

- Teachers felt that younger children with little or no English were easier to manage as the Foundation Stage curriculum allows more interaction and all children are learning new things at the same time compared with older children who had little English and had no experience of school.

Three main challenges for teachers in the classroom were identified as:

- **Language barrier:** This was problematic in terms of being able to communicate with newcomer pupils to understand their needs, assess their progress and ensuring that they could access the NI Curriculum.

- **Differentiation:** The breadth of home languages, different levels of school readiness and understanding of English, as well as the wide range of academic ability within the classroom was all highlighted as challenging for teachers in terms of preparation, classroom management and teaching at the appropriate level.

- **Special Educational Needs:** Teachers reported difficulty in being able to discern between the language barrier and a potential learning problem or special educational need for newcomer pupils.

Teachers identified that while many newcomer pupils were able to develop conversational English and recognise basic vocabulary quite quickly after an initial silent period, they were concerned about the depth of newcomer pupils' English language comprehension.

Some children felt frustrated at misunderstandings caused by the language barrier; teachers highlighted that the lack of age appropriate materials for older newcomer pupils in Key Stage 2 often adds to pupils' frustration.

School relationships with newcomer pupils' parents

As schools are often the first port of call for newcomer families, many schools have gained an in-depth understanding of how to support newcomer families needs when they first arrive. The most common ways schools communicate with parents of newcomer pupils include:

- through interpreters supplied by the Inclusion and Diversity Service;
- translated letters/school reports/weekly school newsletter;
- using bilingual staff to translate;
- communicating through a person nominated by the parent (such as friend, child or other family member);
- use of technology to translate including texting, email and school website;
- children used as translators for parents.

Results found that communication with newcomer parents was particularly problematic in regard to parents with a complete lack of English and low levels of literacy in their own language. Many of the children were bilingual and some pupils indicated that their parents wanted them to maintain their first language. Children reported this was encouraged by all conversation at home being conducted in their parents' first language in addition to watching television programmes and reading books in their first language.

Teachers identified that support from parents and access to learning materials in English at home were key factors in how well newcomer pupils developed their English language. However, they were concerned that many newcomer pupils had limited access to materials in English outside school and also identified that homework could be challenging as some parents are unable to provide support due to their own lack of English.

"And now the difficulty is because the parents do not speak English at home, there is very little support we find. We do send home school books, I think further down the school find that much more advantageous. A lot of the parents, the stuff that we are sending home and going over in class, they do find quite difficult."
P7 teacher, BELB

"There's no point of setting up homework which is not been done, which is often the case. We go through it at the interviews with the translators, but it's not kept up. There's definitely, I can't communicate with some of my parents at all this year. In previous years, you maybe had one good parent who's translated for a few. But this was a year where there isn't anybody you can ask to do that."
P1 teacher, BELB

Unsurprisingly, over half of the children reported that homework was the worst thing about school. Some reported that they found particular subjects difficult while others described homework as 'boring'. There was a mixed response from

participants when asked if a parent could help them with their homework. While nearly half reported that a parent could help, homework was also identified by pupils as being problematic:

"In some subjects it is hard because if I don't know what to do, say in English, no-one could explain it to me because none of my parents are English and they wouldn't know that and they wouldn't understand what it says there and that is quite hard."
Polish female, 10 years old

To counteract this, some schools set up an after school homework club to provide pupils with additional support. Some schools have also begun working with the parents of newcomer pupils to develop their own English language acquisition or adapted homework to make it easier for parents to understand.

Good practice

Over the course of the study a number of areas of good practice were identified at both a school and classroom level. School level good practice included:

- After school clubs for newcomer pupils;
- Celebrating different cultures e.g. multicultural events and workshops and English language classes for parents;
- Inclusive ethos;
- School reports translated;
- Sharing good practice with other schools;
- Weekly translated newsletters/notes;
- Growing use of technology to communicate with parents.

Good practice was also identified at a classroom level:

- Bilingual teaching assistants;
- Buddy System;
- Development of home-school journals;
- NI children learning a second language;
- Strategic seating plans to integrate newcomer pupils;
- Visual aids and displays in classroom in multiple languages.

Much innovative and dynamic practice is being led by primary schools in order to meet the needs of newcomer pupils. Evidence suggests that while good practice is ongoing this has been achieved on a school to school basis with little standardisation across the education sector.

To end the children's focus groups, pupils were asked about what advice they would give a newcomer who was just about to start school. Advice addressed the fear that the majority of newcomer pupils felt when starting school as discussed previously. Children sought to reassure others that while starting a new school may be difficult, that it would become easier as they learnt more English:

"I would say at the beginning it is going to be quite hard and you are going to struggle but then later on it gets easier because you make friends and you learn a wee bit of English every day".
Polish female, 10 years old

"Don't worry because there's always someone to support you and help you to get better at English. Just don't be intimidated if you don't speak English that well."
Filipino female, 11 years old

They wanted to convey to others that they should not be afraid to ask for help as support was available. Children themselves often offered to translate for any new pupils so they would be able to communicate with others.

Recommendations

Drawing on this research study, and to usefully inform newcomer policy and practice in primary schools, the following recommendations are suggested for consideration:

1. Data collected in the Annual School Census should record 'Country of Origin' and 'First Language' in addition to ethnicity to provide greater demographic detail of newcomer pupils and the range of language needs schools may face on a year to year basis.

2. In order to reflect the growth in newcomer pupils in NI schools, the Department of Education should commission the Education and Training Inspectorate to conduct an evaluation of the current provision available to support newcomer pupils in NI schools which would inform an updated version of the Department's Guidance on Supporting Newcomer Pupils.

3. The current formal training provision related to English as an Additional Language should be reviewed for: (i) pre-service teachers; (ii) in-service teachers; and (iii) classroom assistants to ensure the workforce are equipped with knowledge and specific strategies to support newcomer pupils' development and comprehension of the English language.

4. The Inclusion and Diversity Service should be reviewed to ensure it is appropriate to support the changing needs of the newcomer population in schools. Specific focus on reconfiguring elements of the service should aim to support schools who have established newcomer populations with consideration to:
   - providing teachers with model lessons;
   - providing updated and age appropriate resources;
   - working directly with

newcomer pupils;

- developing and coordinating formal links between schools to share their experiences and good practice relating to newcomer pupils.

5. Consideration should be given to the specific development and pilot of an intensive learning programme which addresses newcomer pupils specific learning needs to aid language development and comprehension and prepares newcomer pupils with little English language for entry into the classroom.

6. Support for newcomer pupils including teaching resources and the length of current funding should be reassessed to ensure newcomer pupils are receiving the support needed to acquire academic English proficiency.

7. Increasing schools' awareness of funding opportunities through OFMDFM, District Councils Good Relations Programme and Community Relations Council could support ethnic minority parents having greater parental involvement in schools, access to English classes and greater integration into the wider community.

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