Pandemic, Online Learning and Its Impact on Migrant Children in the UK

Policy Report

http://micreate.eu

The global Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has a profound impact on everyday life, including education. In March 2020, an estimated 1.3 billion children were taken out of the classroom following school closures around the world in March 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). The Prime Minister's announcement on 4th January 2021 placed England under another strict National lockdown, once again requiring a majority of pupils to rely on home learning (Cabinet Office, 2021). Although children are due to return to schools on 8th March, these lockdowns have had a profound impact on the education and long-term employment prospects of all young people, with certain groups of children being particularly at risk. This policy report is concerned with migrant children, as migrant communities faced stark social and educational inequalities in the UK even before the lockdown and it is anticipated that

the pandemic will have only exacerbated these. In this report, we use data collected from school staff in Manchester City Council Department for Education and staff participating in the MiCREATE project to bring to light challenges faced by migrant communities and children in accessing education during school closures and socially-distanced learning. We found that migrant families faced numerous challenges, many of which school staff struggled to address alone. Therefore, strong commitment from local, national and school leadership is needed to address these. Moreover, systematic and holistic inclusion policies are needed when schools re-open to reduce the ever-increasing inequalities this group faces. This policy brief is targeted at policymakers, educational professionals and teachers working in the British schools.

Key Points

- Limited English language skills mean that **some migrant parents are unable to support children with schoolwork**. Where possible, schools should translate communications to parents to common community languages. Any information provided should be presented in plain language. Additional government funding could allow schools to hold one-to-one and group sessions with parents on how to support their children with education;
- **Lack of adequate resources, such as digital devices**, makes it difficult to access work online. Increased funding from the government is needed to ensure all pupils have the resources needed for online learning. School's should also hold classes for parents on using digital devices for educational purposes and how they can support their children;
- **Newly arrived migrant children** experienced significant losses in their learning, particularly affecting their English language abilities. Social distancing can make organising **English as an Additional Language (EAL)** groups and classes impossible. Schools will need to provide alternative avenues for pupils to catch-up with the learning materials and develop their English language skills;
- Staff reported that **children felt lonely, isolated and bored at home during school closures**. Special attention should be paid to children's emotional well-being in this time, with consideration of particular issues affecting migrant pupils. Creative solutions such as online book clubs may help children to socialise and improve their reading and emotional wellbeing;
- Overall, **reopening of schools** should be used as an opportunity to establish a **systematic and holistic inclusion policy for migrant pupils**.

Background

In 2019, 6% of children under the age of 18 were born outside of the UK, whilst 8% were non-UK/non-Irish citizens (Fernández-Reino, 2020). Migrant children do not form a homogenous group and instead have diverse needs based on intersecting characteristics such as age, gender, socioeconomic background, migration generation and ethnic background. They also have various common characteristics which place them in a disadvantaged position when compared to children with native-born parents (Janta & Harte, 2016). For example, newly arrived migrant pupils are placed in a disadvantaged position as they are less familiar with the British educational system. Some experience multitudes of problems such as language barriers and lack of resources (Janta & Harte, 2016). Migrant children, therefore, form a particularly vulnerable group of pupils with many unmet needs. In times of normalcy, schools would play a large role in supporting the education and integration of these pupils and their families into British society. However, school lockdown has not afforded this opportunity and may have exacerbated these inequalities.

Staff feared that problems caused by school closures and measures taken to enforce social isolation can have a negative and lasting impact on migrant children's educational attainment. They noticed that upon return to school in September, migrant children had faced significant losses to their reading and maths abilities. This is problematic as even before the pandemic migrant children and children of foreign-born parents showed lower levels of educational attainment than children with native-born parents (OECD, 2019). Loss of learning caused due to online learning will deepen existing differences and gaps in attainment unless measures are taken to prevent this.

Challenges and Recommendations

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in their child's education Is thought to be crucial and routinely linked to better academic outcomes (Education Endownment Foundation, 2019). It is particularly relevant in home and online learning where parents are often required to take the role of a teacher. Whilst some parents and families may be able to spend extensive time with their children during this period and spend money on educational resources migrant parents will struggle due to language barriers and lack of knowledge to the English educational system. Migrant parents who speak little or no English have limited ability to become involved in their children's education; with the shift to online teaching, this issue was aggravated (OECD, 2020). Migrant families in Manchester were reported to struggle in providing support to their children due to barriers such as poor English language skills and lack of access to information in their native language. Some parents struggled to access the online learning. Where printed learning packs had been sent, migrant parents struggled to understand the work that was set for their children. Some schools were able to translate information for parents using resources already available within the school, ensuring parental involvement in children's education.

Literature indicates that programmes aimed at improving parents' knowledge of how children are taught can improve children's academic attainment. As an example, an evaluation of the Family Skills programme found that children whose parents attended sessions aimed at improving literacy and language skill of children learning English as an additional language made greater progress in literacy than children whose parents did not attend these sessions (Husain, et al., 2018). Therefore, it is imperative that schools facilitate parental involvement in education.

It is recommended that migrant pupils and parents, specifically those who might face linguistic barrier, should be supported through additional, online language courses and funds allocated to translation services should be increased. To facilitate children's learning, schools should provide parents with key information about the curriculum, teaching strategies and behaviour management. Information should be translated into the specific community languages and if this not possible, materials should be provided in plain English.

To be able to support online learning one needs to have sound understanding of online platforms of learning. This can be supported through provision of training on basic ICT skills; introduction to online platforms schools use for teaching and behaviour management within the home.

The Digital Divide

School staff reported concerns about children being unable to access online learning due to having inadequate access to digital devices. This is consistent with recent figures showing that 9% of households with children do not have access to a laptop, desktop PC, or tablet (Ofcom, 2020). The government has introduced a scheme to provide laptops but only to certain year groups and families that are seen by a social worker (Department for Education, 2020). This ultimately excludes certain groups of children such as many migrant children who may not fall in this category. This problem is exacerbated for larger families who have to share devices among several pupils.

Ensuring access to technology is necessary for participation in online learning as with schools closed many children from migrant families are likely to have minimal support from home and access to additional resources. Therefore, any resources provided by schools will be invaluable.

Schools, trusts and local authorities can now help disadvantaged pupils get free mobile data increases or 4G wireless routers from the Department of Education. However, to access both the laptop scheme and internet scheme parents will need to speak to their school (Department for Education, n.d.). Many parents may not be aware that these resources are in place, therefore, more should be done to advertise these opportunities both by schools and the local authorities. Moreover, schools that have devices such as laptops or tablets may loan them to families during the school closures.

Psychosocial Wellbeing

Not only educational attainment of migrant pupils is at risk, as challenges to socialisation and inclusion during the pandemic can have a profound impact on psychosocial well-being. School's act as more than just a place for learning, they also provide social and emotional support in addition to a structure to daily life, supportive peer relations and at times a respite from troubles at home (Skovdal & Campbell, 2015; Primdahl, et al., 2020). Given that students are not able to attend school, interact with other pupils and teachers, international new arrivals and other migrants are no longer able to access the essential support system the physical school environment provides. This has had a negative impact on migrant pupils' wellbeing with children feeling lonely, isolated and bored during school closures.

Online social events and clubs might help overcome feelings of loneliness, boredom and social isolation in children. It is recommended that charities run online book clubs targeting specifically the migrant community. This will enable children to form healthy social relations in a safe and secure manner under the guidance of adults. This will also help to boost pupils' engagement with school activities and with their peers.

Learning and Language Support

Concerns were raised that the effects of the pandemic on pupils' learning were more pronounced in international new arrivals. It was felt that these children had regressed in their English language skills during the lockdown and upon return to school they had to begin learning the language again. They also had more difficulty in engaging in online learning due to a lack of resources such as digital devices. Schools resorted to sending printed learning packs to these pupils, but these lack the interaction that online platforms provide. New arrivals, therefore, suffered significant losses to their learning.

When schools re-opened in September 2020, to ensure social distancing whole year groups were placed into 'bubbles' and pupils were not allowed to interact with pupils from other 'bubbles'. The support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) children often takes the form of additional classes or groups, where pupils from different year groups come together to receive extra language tuition that will support their participation in the mainstream curriculum. These groups are also where they are able to communicate with other peers, and sometimes staff, who speak their native tongue, thereby enabling them to form friendships and receive social and emotional support. The year group 'bubbles' make it impossible to organise these activities, meaning that English as an Additional Language (EAL) children miss out on this vital support.

Support for English as an Additional Language (EAL) students needs to be re-established and efforts need to be made in order to help children catch up with the learning materials. When schools re-open, alternative arrangement for language and social support of these students should to be made in respect of social distancing guidelines. Pre-teaching techniques, such as provision of key vocabulary and phrases ahead of the class, and use of subtitled curriculum relevant videos are some strategies that could benefit English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils (see Curran, 2020)

Conclusion

Whereas confusion, lack of clarity, and uncertainty were major highlights of the initial school closures in March 2020, lessons learned from it might allow for more confident measures and steps to take place when schools re-open and in the event of future school closures to minimize the negative impact on education. To achieve this, national, local and school policies must be sensitive to the barriers faced by migrant pupils and pupils from disadvantaged families. For this to be effective, the diversity of the migrant pupils and their specific learning needs have to be recognised.

The reopening of schools should be used as an opportunity to establish a systematic and holistic inclusion policy for migrant pupils. Moreover, a space for pupils needs to be established to reflect on their experiences during home-schooling in their different languages. Social workers, mediators and interpreters are needed to also focus on the children's emotional dimension, by taking into account their socio-economic, cultural and health situation, as well as the needs of migrant children. A holistic integration approach has to be child-centred, has to recognise children's needs, and make sure that their opinions are heard, recognised, and included in decision-making.

The MiCREATE project stimulates the inclusion of diverse groups of migrant children by adopting a child-centred approach to their integration at the educational and policy level. The project is led by the Institute of Social Studies at the Koper Science and Research Centre, Slovenia. The Policy Evaluation and Research Unit and Manchester Metropolitan University is part of a consortium of 15 partners across Europe including universities, public agencies and civil society organizations.

You can find more information about the project and the documents that were used as a source at http://micreate.eu. For further information contact the UK project leader Dr Shoba Arun (s.arun@mmu.ac.uk).

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