

## The impact of new arrival displaced child refugees on primary schools

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Refugees are essentially those people who are forced to leave their homes and countries for a range of reasons to ensure their safety. Unfortunately, many of these refugees include large numbers of females, children and babies. The current situation in Ukraine and other countries around the world has resulted in refugees being displaced to many different countries. For some people this has resulted in leaving their places of work and study and returning to their home country. However, the majority of people from key areas have had to leave with little or nothing beyond some family members. This bulletin begins to explore the impact of new arrival displaced refugee children on English primary schools in terms of staffing and support provided.

### Literature

The number of displaced people around the world is the highest it's ever been. According to the World Economic Forum, "by the end of 2019, one in 97 people had been displaced and forced to flee their home" (2022). This figure is much



higher now as a result of global conflict in countries around the world including Syria, Myanmar, Afghanistan and more recently, Ukraine. The impact of this situation is not only on the displaced refugees themselves, but also on the hosting country and their populations. The 1951 Geneva Convention is the main protocol of refugee law. According to the UN Agency (2022)

this convention clearly spells out who is a refugee and the rights that they have which has been updated by the 1967 Protocol and now includes displaced refugees. However, regardless of these rights, people in the United Kingdom have opened up their hearts and homes to displaced refugee children and their families to help give them a place of safety. From an educational perspective,

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the National Curriculum in England clearly indicates that all children regardless of their background or ability have the right to have access to learning (DfE, 2022) and this includes displaced refugees. Furthermore, developmental theories illustrate the trajectory of what children should achieve by given milestones (Piaget, 1936). However, this may not be possible for children who are displaced refugees as they are likely to go through emotional and cultural disorientation first before they feel comfortable enough in a classroom with strangers to be open to learning. Here, perhaps Vygotsky's (1978) socio cultural theory would be more prevalent in terms of ensuring children have the opportunity to observe and engage in learning in a social way. This is particularly important if displaced refugee children also have English as an Additional Language (EAL) or no even no English at all (Mistry and Sood, 2020). One reason for this is so that children can see the expectations of learning if they see other children modelling it first.

### Impact on primary schools

During many school visits to observe Early Years and primary teacher training students over the last three months, a number of informal conversations have taken place with mentors and senior leaders in relation to either preparations taking place to host some displaced refugee children, or the support needed to help meet the needs of these children that have already arrived to relatives and families. Permission was given to share these brief comments. From observations in schools, generally the children are very welcoming



towards all visitors and new arrivals in their class. Although all staff are equally as welcoming and friendly, some staff especially teachers seem a little apprehensive in terms of the support needed to meet the needs of their displaced refugee children. This is only because all teachers want the best for their children, but with underlying issues of fear, anxiety, trauma, and may be a lack of English language understanding in their displaced refugees, they worry that they do not have enough time, adult support or resources to help them the way they would like to. One class teacher said "we have a buddy system so that any new arrival is paired up with a more confident, kind and compassionate child to help them settle in our school". Furthermore, this discussion showed how welcoming and accepting children can be in including new children into their class community. However, another mentor commented "I'm worried that we do not have enough support staff to work 1:1 with my displaced refugee child, therefore sometimes they do not get enough of my time". A third mentor commented "my main

concern is that I need to help my displaced refugee acquire English, which is challenging as the rest of my class are fluent speakers". From these brief conversations, it was evident to see that the key impact on primary schools is a lack of teaching assistants to help teachers in meeting the learning needs of these children. In addition, there is also a greater emphasis on learning mentors in schools to do even more nurturing activities to help these children deal with the trauma they have just been through.

### How are primary schools meeting the needs of their displaced children

The priority of any primary school is to ensure that displaced refugee children settle in as quickly as possible so that they feel happy and safe as though they belong to the setting and class community. One school mentor said "one of the things we have done for all families with financial difficulties is that we have asked parents to donate good quality school uniforms which are no longer required to our school bank, then we give this out to anyone in need and



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parents can give a donation towards this if they would like to”. This is one way to ensure that parents do not feel under pressure to buy brand new uniform and for their child (ren) to feel part of their school. One headteacher said “we are trying to hire some more part time temporary teaching assistants to support teachers with group work for our displaced refugees as we have two in our school”, but there is a budget restriction on this which implies schools need to find alternative means of funding this whether it is through fundraising or de-prioritizing another resource. Another senior leader said that they “are trying to make sure that there is provision of free school meals for these children”, which also includes access to breakfast club. Another mentor said “we do daily phonics across the whole school so we need to do a lot of sound work with our refugee child which is reinforced through songs, rhymes, games and anything with repeated text”. Furthermore, they also went on to say, like with any new arrival, all adults need to have the confidence and patience to use gestures and picture cues to aid understanding (Mistry and Sood, 2020).

Another head teacher said that their biggest worry as a school is “all the bad things these displaced refugees have seen and experienced whilst in Ukraine and the journey they have had to go through to get here”, and this is because the psychological impact of this could really hamper a child’s ability to learn as illustrated by the following case study from a Y2 teacher who had an interesting experience in the early stages of her career with a displaced refugee child:

### Case study

A displaced male refugee from the old Yugoslavia came via Turkey into my Y2 class. He had no English language knowledge but was fluent in Turkish, so we were working on getting some translation support for a few hours a day to help him. From day one, the children were very helpful and showed him where things were kept, what he had to do, and where he had to go – which he began to pick up very quickly. One day a metal bin slipped out of my hands as it was being carried and it made a loud noise. The children in the class did not react other than look up briefly to see what the noise was and then carried on with their learning and conversations. However, my displaced refugee child dived under the tables with his head in his hands rocking backwards and forwards – with a look of fear in his eyes.

The children and support staff in the class were all confused as to why this child was under the table. After a lot of coaxing from myself and the children in the class, the child eventually came out from under the tables – he was visibly shaking. It transpired that in his old school in Yugoslavia they were trained that if they heard a loud noise they all need to get under the tables very quickly and put their hands over their heads to protect themselves from falling debris and shelling before being evacuated to another location. So this was his natural reaction. Over a period of time this child settled in well, but the staff team had to do a lot of work in terms of nurture activities, mindfulness tasks, and building confidence activities as well as getting some advice from a play therapist.





Situations like this is what schools need to be aware of especially if they have never had a displaced refugee child. So many schools already have a range of activities associated with Personal Social and Emotional Development (PSED), as well as citizenship and mindfulness to help children make sense of a traumatic world through collaboration tasks and play based learning. In addition, many schools are doing mindfulness-based learning to help children regulate their emotions – which is perhaps the biggest challenge for these children.

### What do primary schools need to help them?

It is interesting that in the current situation, the support being considered is beyond help needed to acquire the English language. Schools need extra funding to employ teaching assistants (if they speak the same language as displaced refugee children then this is an advantage) to work on a one to one basis initially with the child so that they begin to feel secure. Schools also do not

need the pressure of ensuring that these children have to reach certain targets in English and Mathematics in line with their peers. In addition, school staff also have to think about support in relation to trauma and emotional disorientation, and the associated specialists that could help with this. Schools are already aware that there maybe issues associated with behaviour for these displaced refugees due to a lack of understanding from the children in terms of knowing what is expected from them, which could lead to frustration from the child. Therefore, there will also need to be an adjustment in terms of enforcing behaviour management strategies.

### Conclusion

Although the situation with displaced refugee children is heartbreaking, many of them would like to return to their home and be reunited with their family and friends. Until then, schools in England are places of safety where these children can engage in learning opportunities and experiences whilst making new friends in a new context. As school staff we all have

a responsibility to ensure that these children are as happy as they can be through fully integrating and including them in our classes and school communities because some of these children could easily stay with us throughout their education. Further research is required to investigate how the needs of displaced refugee children have changed after they have been in the school system for six months.

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## Pen Portrait

Malini Mistry is a Senior Lecturer in Primary Education at the University of Bedfordshire. She works across a range of different course including Primary PGCE, Primary BA (QTS), EYTS and also leads the BA Applied Early Years Top Up course. Her research interest includes children with English as an Additional Language.

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