

Multilingual Minds: the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Newcomer Children and Young People in Northern Ireland and the Role of the Education Authority Youth Service.

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Research Objectives

1. To learn more about the mental health needs of newcomer children and young people in communities across Northern Ireland.
2. To explore ways in which the EA Youth Service can contribute to improving the health and wellbeing of newcomer children and young people and make recommendations for future development.

Research Methods

- January – April 2018
- Mixed methods approach but primarily qualitative research
- Questionnaire – 1462 Vol Sector Youth work practitioners, 39 RVYOs, statutory sector practitioners.
- Strengths and Difficulties (S&D) questionnaire issued to 39 Newcomer children and young people
- S&D q'aire completed by school staff in relation to the children who completed the same q'aire.
- Focus groups –
 - Newcomers – 4 primary & 4 post primary schools – urban/provincial
 - Youth Service personnel (Vol/Stat)
 - School Personnel
- Semi-structured interviews.
- Schools deemed best source of accessing newcomer children

Focus Groups Sought to Identify and Understand:

1. The nature of youth work engagement with newcomer children and young people (RQ1);
2. The issues newcomer children and young people face that affect their mental health (RQ3);
3. How youth workers might support the development of positive mental health and wellbeing amongst newcomer children and young people (RQ4);
4. The key opportunities for newcomer children and young people in relation to their mental health and the youth work programmes that are available (RQ3); and

5. The key challenges experienced in seeking to develop the mental health and wellbeing of newcomer children and young people (RQ2).

A further two questions sought to establish the recommendations youth workers would make to :

- Assist the development of the EA Youth Service in order to promote positive mental health and wellbeing in newcomer children and young people (RQ4), and
- Whether each organisation represented had a plan in place to help youth workers engage with newcomer children and young people more effectively (RQ4).

Key Findings

The Mental Health and Wellbeing of Newcomer Children and Young People in Northern Ireland

- Newcomer children and young people in Northern Ireland are a diverse group with different backgrounds, experiences and needs.
- Newcomer children and young people describe a number of opportunities associated with their experience of living in Northern Ireland. They enjoy school and value education, they appreciate the help of supportive teachers, they respond positively to learning new languages at school, and they sometimes feel safer and more secure in Northern Ireland than in their previous home regions.

In addition to the usual challenges of adolescence, this study suggests that some newcomer children and young people living in Northern Ireland experience particular adversity including:

- lack of control over change in circumstances (particularly among refugees and asylum seekers),
- disruption of relationship networks,
- loss of a sense of belonging,
- loneliness, anxiety and lack of awareness due to linguistic difference and language competence,
- cultural barriers,
- a fear of not being accepted,
- the stigma of being a newcomer,
- lack of confidence/self-esteem,
- pre-existing experiences of trauma (particularly but not exclusively among refugees),
- mental ill health of parents,
- family problems including substance abuse,
- parentification and loss of childhood,
- instability and anxiety around political developments including Brexit,
- community hostility and racism,
- pressures to succeed academically in tandem with family responsibility, and
- limited support at home with school work.

- The newcomer children and young people in this study reported experiences of stress, loneliness and isolation, and difficulties establishing lasting friendships beyond their ethnic and linguistic group.
- Both self-report and teacher report indicated that symptoms of emotional problems, conduct problems and prosocial behaviour were in the ***average range***.

- A number of the interviewees perceived mental health needs among newcomers to be largely similar to children and young people from NI. This may indicate *resilience* despite the difficult circumstances described above.
- Youth worker and school staff interviews highlighted specific concerns in relation to supporting the mental health needs of refugee and asylum seekers.

- Linguistic and cultural factors specific to the newcomer experience may have an impact on the seeking and sourcing of support for newcomer children and young people who do experience poor mental health, including counselling and bereavement services.
- Extended and enhanced translation services will be needed to address this.
- The newcomer children and young people in this study prefer activities that help them develop their ability to communicate in English and gain confidence.

- They recommend activities such as sport, drama and art that do not initially require a high degree of English competence.
- Older children enjoy social interaction in a less formal setting.

- The children and young people suggested the development of a marketing strategy to improve access to information including posters in different languages to advertise activities, as well as the use of social media.
- The children and young people were keen to build networks within communities with information meetings for new arrivals to raise awareness of opportunities provided by the EA Youth Service.

EA Youth Service Provision

- The newcomer children and young people attend extracurricular activities after school, but had limited engagement with EA Youth Service provision.
- Reasons for this include:
 - lack of awareness due to linguistic barriers and ineffective communication,
 - a lack of awareness of provision among key staff in schools and families, and reticence among families for children and young people to join.

- Current engagement with EA Youth Service provision among newcomer children and young people varies in nature and extent depending on the context.
- In some instances there is successful collaboration across sectors, and provision and expertise are being developed.
- Mostly this provision is targeted, but practitioners are questioning this and considering a more integrated approach in the longer term.

- Youth Service practitioners demonstrate an awareness of the mental health and wellbeing needs of newcomer children and young people but the majority do not feel adequately equipped to address these at present.
- Youth Service practitioners have a clear understanding of the opportunities that Youth Service provision can offer for newcomer children and young people such as offering a safe space and providing support, the possibility of friendships, a sense of belonging and access to other services.

- Youth Service practitioners encounter a range of challenges in relation to engaging with newcomer children and young people such as:
 - funding and resourcing concerns,
 - ineffective communication,
 - bureaucracy,
 - linguistic and cultural barriers,
 - distrust or lack of common understanding with newcomer families,
 - a skills deficit and
 - limited training opportunities.

Collaboration and Partnership

- Collaboration across sectors, harnessing expertise & experience and promoting mutual learning & development emerged as a positive factor in the development of effective, high quality, evidence-based and research informed provision for newcomer children and young people.
- The work of the EA Intercultural Education Service is valued by the key staff in schools participating in this study. Associated translation services will be required to be extended beyond schools to address the linguistic barriers experienced by Youth Service practitioners and to afford access to expert support for newcomer children and young people who need it in areas such bereavement services, counselling and behaviour management.

- Examples of partnership programmes between the EA Youth Service and schools, such as the Learning Together Programme, were viewed positively, and manage to achieve higher levels of attendance among newcomer pupils.
- Schools in areas with high percentages of newcomer enrolments have developed relationships with families and community groups over time and have gained the trust of parents. Parents and children view the school site in a positive light because of this and also because of the geographical convenience of the school location with respect to their homes. Activities held on the school site are thus more likely to gain higher attendance than those held in other locations, particularly outside the immediate vicinity of the local community.

Leadership, Learning and Development

- There is evidence of a desire among the Youth Service practitioners in this study to learn and develop together in order to improve provision. Specific funding, training and resource needs identified in this report will need to be addressed.
- Examples of good practice in Youth Service settings and in schools emerged in this study. In order to develop high quality provision it will be essential to share expertise, disseminate learning and develop leadership.

Recommendations

Strategic Direction

EA should consider:

- The commitment of sustainable funding for long term evidence-based and research-informed strategic development of high quality EA Youth Service provision, particularly in areas with significant immigrant populations, given the clear opportunities such provision offers for the flourishing of all young people in all of our communities in Northern Ireland.
- Given the challenges that Youth Service personnel encounter, develop and implement a strategy for staff care, development and support.

- The development and implementation of an effective communication strategy both internal and external. Internally this should aim to establish clarity regarding terminology and access to relevant information. Externally this should seek to address cultural and linguistic barriers, using effective marketing and translation services as necessary to ensure dissemination of key information, utilising social media and published documentation as appropriate.
- Utilise the school site as a local hub for engagement with all young people, including newcomer children, for the purpose of providing a safe and trusted space, fostering friendships between children and young people across linguistic and cultural divides, and for the collaborative delivery of effective informal education programmes

- The development of informal education programmes that incorporate support with the development of English language competence and with schoolwork, in collaboration with colleagues in schools and community groups, and delivered on the school site.
- Reaching out to parents: the utilisation of the school site as a focus for relationship building with families and parents in order to inform, build trust, equip, support and work together for the good of young people and communities
- The inclusion of bilingual volunteers recruited from the linguistic communities and the families to which newcomer children and young people belong, thus building trust and reflecting diversity within the workforce.

Collaboration, Learning and Development

- Building on existing examples of successful collaboration by harnessing the expertise of EA Youth Service practitioners, key staff in schools and experts across other sectors, to foster mutual learning and the enhancement of high quality provision for newcomer children and young people in Northern Ireland.
- The development of evidence based, research informed guidance in the form of an online resource toolkit to support Youth Service practitioners.

- Identify an online platform to support learning, the collation and sharing of age-appropriate resources, relevant information and guidance; an online portal to support the development of relevant expertise and support.
- Provision of opportunities for face to face collaborative learning and dissemination of good practice amongst EA Youth Service practitioners and between sectors including education and health, such as a networking forum and regional, national and international conferences.

- The development and delivery in collaboration with key educational providers of funded specialist training modules for Youth Service practitioners, possibly accessed online, in the following 3 areas:
 - Mental health and wellbeing: awareness, assessment and support for children and young people, with clear relevance for the Youth Service context
 - Understanding and supporting the needs of refugee and trauma experienced children and young people
 - An introduction to linguistic diversity to include potential for basic up skilling in key languages represented in the communities of newcomer children and young people

Further Research

- **To engage with parents** of newcomer children and young people in a range of representative linguistic groups and backgrounds to learn more about their views and experiences, to understand their hopes and concerns with respect to their children and how the EA Youth Service can support their families as they settle into life in Northern Ireland, thus promoting mental health and wellbeing.
- **To scope the views of a wider sample of young people** in ethnic communities across Northern Ireland to learn more about their experiences, wellbeing and needs and to ensure that efforts to develop Youth Service provision reflect their interests
- **To investigate the needs of children and young people in Northern Ireland who are refugees and asylum seekers** in comparison to their newcomer and non-newcomer peers, and the role of schools and EA Youth Service professionals in meeting these needs.