Experiences of Education Among Minority Ethnic Groups in Northern Ireland
Research briefing

Background

While Northern Ireland (NI) has long been home to minority ethnic communities, the past two decades have witnessed considerable inward migration to the region. At school level, pupils from minority ethnic and newcomer backgrounds now represent 6.1% and 5.5% of the pupil population respectively (DENI, 2023), the latter increasing from 2.8% in 2012/13.

While a more diverse pupil population represents a considerable change in a society and education system historically shaped by community divisions, the educational experiences of minority ethnic, migrant and newcomer groups (hereafter minority ethnic groups) in NI have received limited research attention over the past 20 years. This study aimed to address the gap in the current evidence base, adopting four objectives:

1) To explore how minority ethnic families select schools for their children and the circumstances that inform these decisions.
2) To examine children's and parents' experiences of school life and school engagement.
3) To investigate children's and parents' views of the NI curriculum and its delivery, including support for English and heritage languages.
4) To provide evidence and recommendations for policy and practice to improve the educational experience of minority ethnic groups.

Methodology

The research comprised a review of literature, government- and school-level policy and data concerning education among minority ethnic groups in NI; qualitative interviews with 62 children aged 9-15 (30 female and 32 male) and 53 parents (41 female and 12 male) from diverse minority ethnic backgrounds across the region; and interviews and focus groups with 43 stakeholders, including educators, policymakers and representatives of statutory and voluntary agencies. Interpreters were provided where requested. All primary data were collected between April 2022 and March 2023.

Key findings

School admissions

- Navigating the complex Northern Ireland education system is challenging for migrant parents, especially those with lower levels of English language fluency. Applications processes can also be difficult for those with lower literacy levels and less confidence with online technologies.

- The proximity of the school to home and the diversity of intake are important factors in parents' school choice. While a school's denomination is not a priority for many families, some parents from minority faith traditions are concerned about how to support their child at a school with a Christian ethos.

- Newcomer pupils, and particularly children from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds, often experience a protracted wait for school places. While most schools are accommodating, there were reports of schools declining to admit newcomer pupils even though places were available.

- The transfer test for grammar school admissions presents a particular challenge for migrant families, particularly those arriving in NI the upper years of primary school. Some migrant parents report that grammar school admissions processes placed them at a disadvantage.

Experiences of school and the curriculum

- Experiences of verbal and physical racist bullying, as well as direct and indirect discrimination, are widely reported by families. While racist bullying negatively impacts children's mental health, wellbeing and school attitudes, racist incidents are often inadequately addressed by schools.

- Children and parents largely have positive views on learning and sharing information about cultural and religious diversity at school, but some identify a need for increased representation of minority cultures, religions and languages, diverse histories, and the local contributions of minority ethnic communities.

- The quality of language support for newcomer children is variable and is perceived to be dominated by an 'emergency response'. Classroom assistants, both bilingual and others, often become the principal English language teachers for newcomer pupils. Multilingual parents lack support from schools or other statutory bodies in making decisions about home language use.

Home-school communication and special educational needs

- Most parents feel comfortable contacting their child's school with concerns or questions, However, some experience barriers including a lack of confidence about communicating in English, anxieties about seeming 'difficult' or working patterns. Practices that schools had successfully adopted to overcome barriers to parents' engagement included conducting home visits and employing family support staff.

- School communications could be challenging for parents with English as an additional language, lower literacy levels or a lack of technological proficiency. Schools' knowledge of available interpreting services and the funding that is provided for this purpose appears variable.

- Some parents spoke about the risk of special educational needs being missed among children with English as an additional language or the difficulty of having concerns or diagnoses recognised by the school. There were indications that minority ethnic families could experience additional challenges in accessing support for SEN.

Recommendations

School admissions

- Review 1) standard school admissions procedures, including school transfer and the applications process, and 2) 'in-year' admissions processes to address inequalities for minority ethnic and migrant families.
- Extend publicity of the Intercultural Education Service's multilingual resources on school admissions.
- Consider existing school placements as a priority when rehousing asylum-seeking and refugee families to minimise disruption to children's education.

Experiences of school and the curriculum

- Introduce anti-racism and anti-bias training as a core element of teacher education and development.
- Strengthen arrangements for monitoring, reporting and responding to racist bullying in schools, and support implementation of preventative practices such as anti-racist education.
- Review and enhance representation of cultural and religious diversity in the curriculum.
- Constitute an advisory group of minority faith representatives to review the teaching of world religions.
- Standardise and quality assure English language provision, creating clear progression pathways and funding comprehensive training in English language teaching and second language development.
- Provide support for parents to make informed choices about raising bilingual children.

Home-school relationships and special educational needs

- Prioritise investment in initiatives that support parental engagement in schools with large migrant and newcomer populations, including the provision of family support services.
- Distribute a Departmental circular reminding schools of the interpreting service and allocated funding.
- Disseminate multilingual guidance on using school apps and websites and prioritise the use of plain English in school communications.
- Ensure that the review of special educational needs provision prioritises equity in relation to identifying and supporting children with SEN from minority ethnic and migrant backgrounds.