

Experiences of Asylum Seeker/ Refugee parents

PROFILE

Bemis Scotland conducted questionnaires with 164 parents from ethnic minorities exploring their knowledge and that experiences of schools in Scotland. The questionnaire did not ask if the parents had or were in the process of claiming asylum, however based on the country of origin and year of arrival, 16 respondents were identified as highly likely to have come from asylum seeker backgrounds. From this data, we have been able to identify some significant gaps in knowledge, particularly around secondary education and post-16 choices as well as gaining a picture of the experiences that parents have of school.

IDENTIFYING PARTICIPANTS

Participants were identified on the basis of nationality – this means that there may have been significantly more interviewees who were asylum seekers but were not identified. Five of the countries (Iran, Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Sudan) identified were in the top 10 nationalities of people who applied for asylum in 2005¹, the parent from Lebanon was included due to issues raised in her responses which indicated that she was also applying from asylum. While Pakistan produces the 4th most asylum applications in the UK we decided not to include this nationality in our sample as Scotland has a significant population from Pakistan and there were no clear indicators to suggest the participants had applied for asylum.

Two respondents identified as being Kurdish – this is not a formal nationality and Kurdistan covers areas of Turkey, Iran and Iraq. In all these countries, particularly Iraq, people identifying as Kurds have faced discrimination and persecution – it is therefore likely that they would be asylum seekers and we have included them in our sample.

¹ https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/assets/0002/7887/Asylum_Statistics_May_2013.pdf

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

The Curriculum for Excellence recognises the important role that parents play in supporting their children's education and their right to be involved. A substantial body of research shows the benefits of parental involvement to children's levels of attainment and behaviour.

Parental involvement in the form of "at home good parenting" has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation (Desforges 2003)²

This is particularly important for asylum seeker children who will have had traumatic experiences in both their home country and in the journey to the UK. Schools are often the first service that families access and can play a central role in supporting the integration of the whole family

It is no exaggeration to say that refugee children's well-being depends to a major degree on their school experiences, successes and failures. . . School policies are a powerful tool for helping a refugee child feel safe and normal again, and begin to learn. They can promote the child's confidence and integration, and prevent isolation and frustration. Failure in school can have a disastrous impact on children who are trying to reconstruct their lives and their self-esteem, and develop hope for the future. Educational progress and emotional well-being are mutually dependent. (Richman, 1998a)³

Building links between home and school help children to settle in and do well at school, seeing parents come into the school gives children a sense of belonging. Close relations between the school and parents also mean that the school is aware of any issues going on with the family and can provide appropriate support to the children. Parents in asylum seeker families will have to cope with the practicalities of building a new life in a new country and the pressures this places on them. A trusting relationship with school can help signpost the families to appropriate services and ensure that children do not have to help their parents in negotiating these processes⁴.

Under the UNCRC, children have the right to guidance and direction from their parents (Article 5). When families are new to a country, particularly in the case of asylum and refugee families who have not chosen to move, parents will not have the information to be able to support and guide their children in the new system. Where possible parents

² Desforges, C. (2003) The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievements and adjustment. A literature review. London: Department for Education and Skills. Research report RR433.

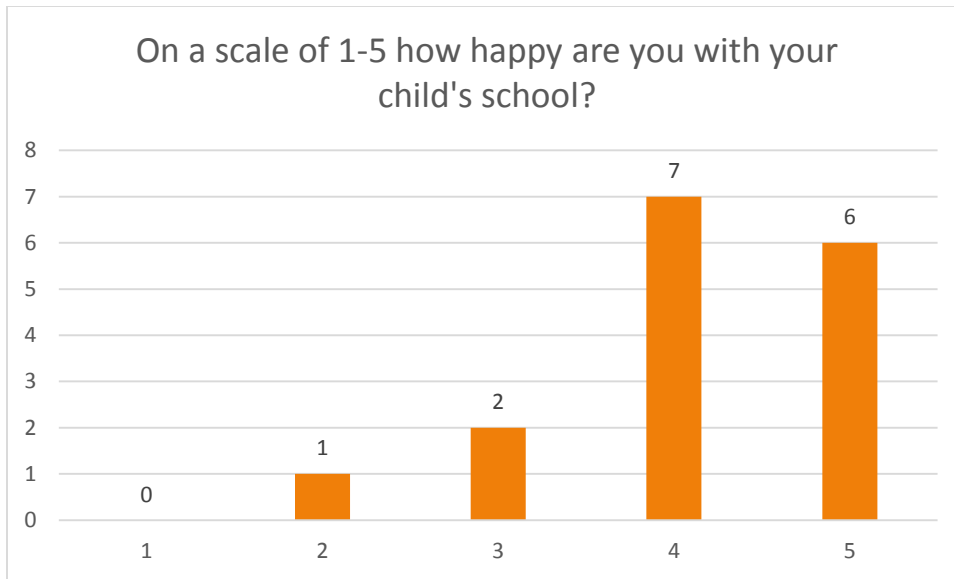
³ Richman, N (1998a) In the midst of the whirlwind. A manual for helping refugee children. Save the Children. London

⁴ Hek, R (2005) The Experiences and Needs of Refugee and Asylum Seeking Children in the UK: A Literature Review. National Evaluation of the Children's Fund University of Birmingham

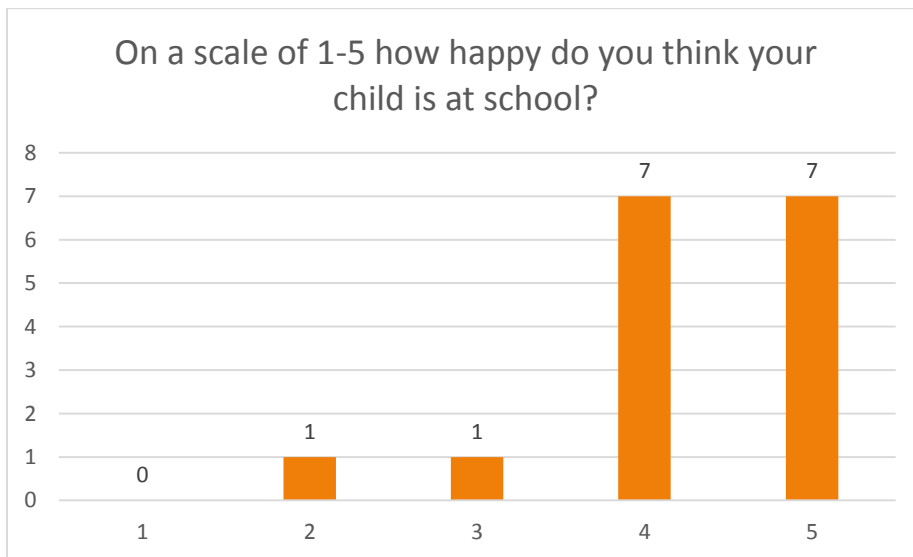
need to be supported to understand new systems and ensure that the burden of negotiating them does not fall on their children.

EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL

The first part of the questionnaire addressed the parents' experience of school – whether they felt it was a welcoming and supportive environment for their children. The overwhelming majority of the parents reported feeling happy and that their children were happy with the school.



Sample size 16



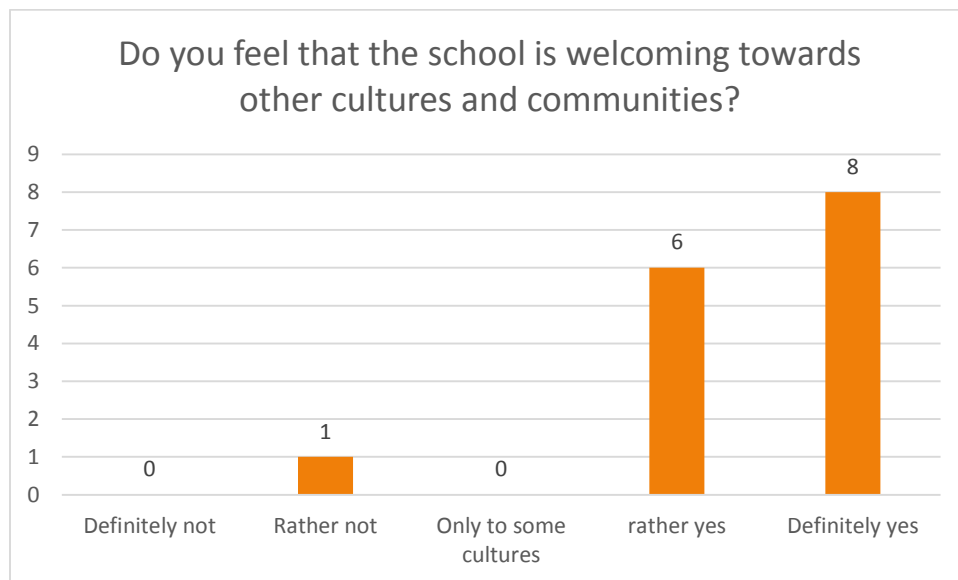
Sample size: 16

Most of the parents were also positive about the efforts the school had made to welcome other cultures and specifically mentioned positive actions that the school had taken to recognize the diversity in the school.

They celebrate all the cultural events, like Chinese New Year, Indian events, Muslim Eid and also local events, Christmas etc (Father, Eritrea)

The teachers try to speak Arabic to us, some words, at the school there is a lot of culture awareness, teachers and pupils are kind. My kids have never been bullied. It also provides Halal food. Flags of a lot of countries are put up on the walls of the school (Both parents, Syria)

Recognising cultural celebrations and community languages were the most frequently mentioned actions taken by the school. Several parents also mentioned the fact that Halal meals are provided in school and felt this showed respect for their religion.



Sample size: 15

When asked what the school does to show it is open to other cultures, several of the parents focused on respect as being central.

The school treat my kids well. . . my kids are accepted the way they are – able to wear Islamic clothing (Both parents, Syria)

The school respects my son and is very aware of the culture and educating children to respect too (Mother, Afghanistan)

Two of the parents, however reported that they did not feel the school was inclusive or made enough effort to address the barriers they faced.

They don't show they are open, as the school is not doing much with parents with language barrier (Mother, Syria)

I do not feel that the school is open to other cultures. I don't know, I don't feel it. I can't tell for sure – the school has 99% Scottish pupils (Mother, Lebanon)

Providing support around the language barrier is vital for parents. For meetings with school, such as parents' evenings, parents have the right to request an interpreter. In the case of two parents this did not happen

I can't talk to teacher, it is because of the language barrier as the school doesn't provide me with an interpreter (Mother, Syria)

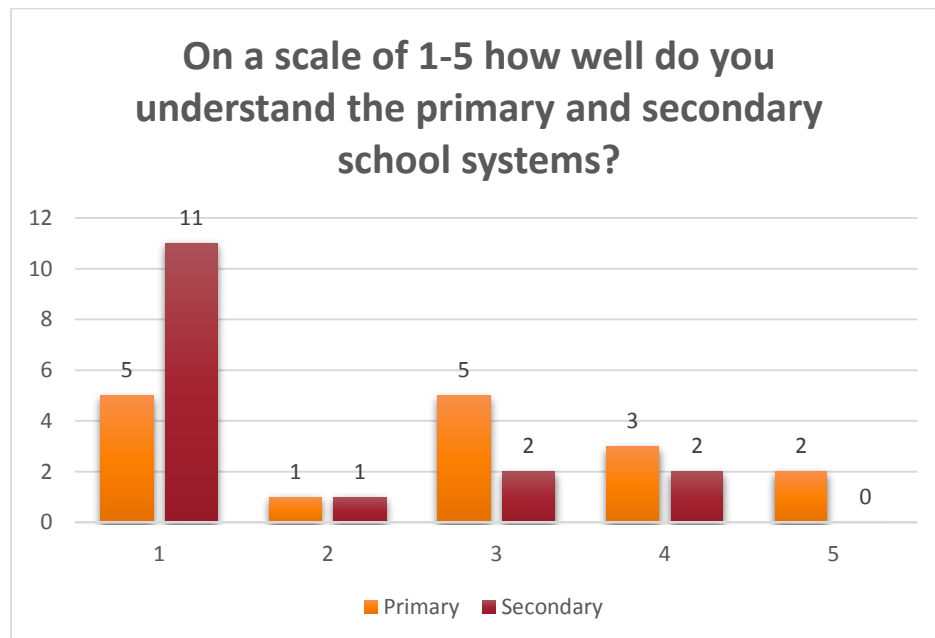
Q: Do you think parents' evenings are important?

A: yes, at least you get to speak about issues that your kids face, just have a say; but if you don't speak English how would you do this? (Both parents, Syria)

From the responses it would appear that recognizing the culture and language of these families is key to giving families a sense of welcome in the school and to helping parents feel that their culture is recognised and respected. Small acts – like teachers greeting parents in their native language – made a big difference to parents' sense of being welcomed by the school.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The participants displayed a low level of knowledge around the Scottish Education system, particularly around what happens in secondary school.

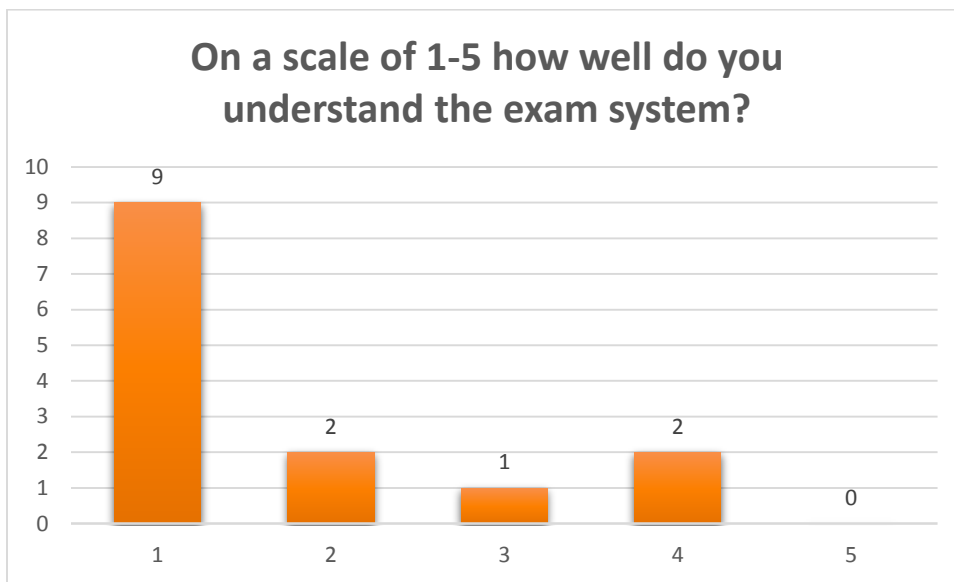


Sample size: 16

Out of the 16 respondents 10 felt that they did not understand the secondary schools system well and none felt they understood it very well. This compares with the general responses to the question where 40% of respondents felt that they understood the secondary school system between quite well and extremely well.

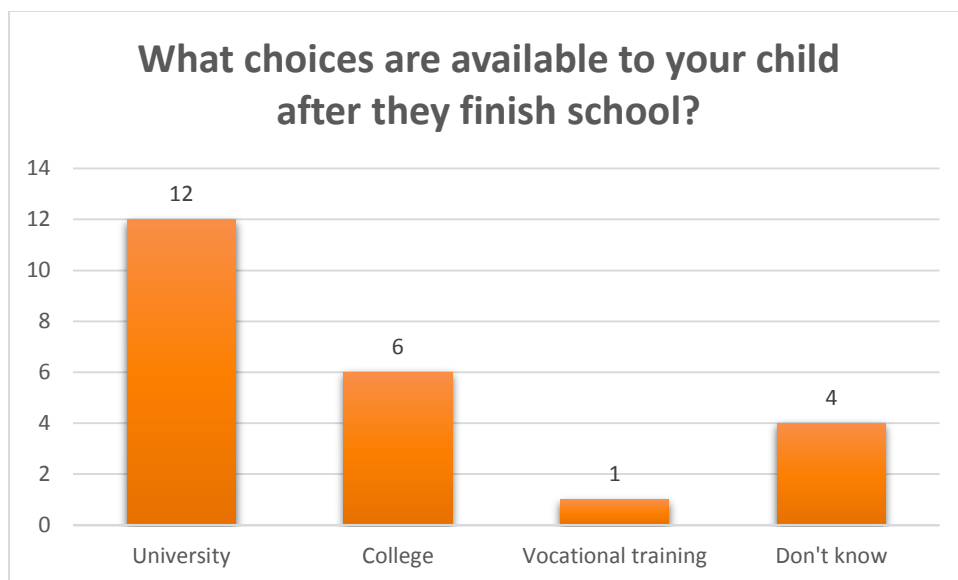
The parents also displayed a lack of confidence in understanding the exam system, with 9 respondents saying that they did not understand the examination system at all. On being asked what exams their children would sit, one parent replied

No idea – even my kids don't know as it confuses them. Not been provided with proper information (Mother, Syria)



(Sample size: 14, two respondents gave no answer)

This sense of not having enough information was also evident when parents were asked what educational options were open to their children after secondary school



It should be noted that of the 16 parents interviewed only six of them had children in secondary school, and that ten of the respondents did not have direct experience of secondary school, Scottish exams and post-school opportunities. However, even among the parents with children in secondary half the parents reported not understanding the secondary school education system at all.

When asked what kind of support or information would be helpful, several of the parents mentioned language support and emphasised that they needed to improve their English to better support their children

I need to study more and get into Scottish education myself to be able to understand more. I didn't have my education here (Mother, Afghanistan)

First I need to learn English, training on subject that my son is doing (Mother, Iran)

The parents were also eager to learn more about the Scottish education system

School maybe could provide support to parents eg. services to deliver information on how to help with difficult homework and where to go for support (Mother, Eritrea)

I would like to know more – how to help my son in his homework, but I don't know how (Mother, Iraq)

Several parents mentioned how much they felt they needed to learn

We need to learn from scratch, a lot of support is required for us and our children (Mother, Syria)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools are central to children from refugee backgrounds settling in and achieving their full potential; they are the first communities that many asylum seeker families will come into contact with and can play an important role in supporting families to integrate. On the basis of this small sample there is excellent work going on in schools in Scotland to make new families feel welcomed and the vast majority of the parents were very happy with their children's school.

From the experiences described in this report we would make the following recommendations to schools to enable them to support parental involvement among asylum seeker families.

LANGUAGE SUPPORT

Parents have a right to request an interpreter for meetings with the school, however, from speaking to parents we found that not all parents were aware of this. It is vital that parents know they can access an interpreter and are supported and encouraged to do so.

Language is frequently mentioned by ethnic minority parents as the biggest barrier to them becoming involved and schools need to think innovatively to address this. Bemis' Gathered Together project has collated a wide range of good practice that schools have used to overcome the language barrier including getting parent volunteers to help with translating material, producing podcasts in different languages and building links with community organisations to ensure that parents get the right information. Schools can also play a key role in sign-posting parents to other services, including community ESOL classes.

RECOGNISING DIFFERENT CULTURES

The parents who were most positive about their children's school spoke about the effort the school had made to recognize their culture – this included informing parents of the provision of Halal food, celebrating different cultures and having signs up in different languages. This helps to show families that they are welcomed and builds trust, as well as celebrating difference within the school, which can help tackle prejudiced based bullying.

PROVIDING PARENTS WITH INFORMATION ABOUT THE SCOTTISH SCHOOL SYSTEM

While parents were generally positive about their children's schools, the majority were not familiar with the education system – particularly in secondary school. In secondary children will be more independent and be expected to take more responsibility for their own learning. However they will also be making key decisions about subject choices and their future careers, where parents need to be able to give guidance and support.

From asking parents about options for their children after school it was clear that they have high expectations for their children with the majority of parents identifying university as their destination once leaving school. However when children arrive in the UK into secondary school and have limited English, they may not be able to achieve the grades required for university. Asylum seekers and refugee children can also face the additional barrier of being charged as international students by universities making it prohibitively expensive to attend. Parents and young people need to be supported to get the right information about the choices available to them and the different pathways to achieving their desired goals, including Modern Apprenticeships, college courses etc.

SUPPORTING PARENTS TO HELP THEIR CHILDREN

Parents can be unsure of how best to help their children's learning – with limited English the parents we spoke to reported feeling unable to help with homework both because of the language barrier and because of differences between teaching styles in their home country and Scotland. The first language provides the best foundation for children to learn new languages and ensuring that parents are able to help their children with learning and giving them support to become involved using their home language is key to children's attainment.

In Scotland, parents and schools are partners in their children's learning. It is vital that asylum seeker families are supported to build the capacity to support their children and become involved in both their children's learning and school communities so that they are able to be full and active partners in their children's learning.

For more information about the Gathered Together project, resources and up-coming training please visit our website <http://gatheredtogether.bemis.org.uk/>

