

# **Supporting Refugee Students Transition to and Progress in Post-primary School**

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## **Summary**

Newly-arrived refugee students come from various education backgrounds with different profiles and different cultural expectations of schooling. Upon arrival they must quickly adapt to a new school system and education culture which may challenge their expectations. They require specific guidance in order to help them settle in to post-primary school, and furthermore advice on school programmes and subject choices, and progression opportunities available to them. This article explores the various issues which affect Separated Children when they move into an Irish post-primary school and the strategies that schools can employ to help students overcome these barriers. Among them school induction, a buddy system and promotion of first language to assist in the learning process.

## **Key Words**

School transition; refugee students; school induction; minority language students; separated children; asylum seekers.

*Making the jump from one school to another is usually a daunting experience. It is especially daunting when that school is in a foreign country, when the lessons are in a foreign language, and when that step is being taken without the support of family. It is significantly more challenging for those young people who are in the process of seeking asylum and trying to navigate their new life as a Separated Child (Curriculum Development Unit, 2012:5).*

## Introduction

This article is based on the experience of City of Dublin VEC Separated Children's Service. Interview data included is from current research being undertaken. The article highlights some of the learning from our Service as we look at the education experiences of refugee students and explore the issues which affect them when they move into post-primary school.

The article starts by giving an outline of who Separated Children and refugee students are before briefly explaining the Service. The text boxes present some typical student profiles. School interventions which aim to support social and emotional development are as important as those that support linguistic competence, and this is the key focus of the article. The article continues by discussing measures schools, and in particular Guidance Counsellors can employ to help students overcome initial barriers as well as detailing ongoing supports schools can provide to assist student progress.

While the focus of this article is on young people of refugee backgrounds, due to the similarity of issues encountered, it is also relevant to the wider school population.

### Definitions

**A refugee** is a person who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the country ...' as set out in the Refugee Convention 1951.

**An asylum seeker** is a person who has applied to the government of a country other than their own for protection or refuge ('asylum') because they are unable or unwilling to seek the protection of their own government. Asylum seekers are regionally resettled to a location generally outside Dublin in full-board accommodation following a short stay in a reception centre in Dublin. Under direct provision they receive €19.10 a week per adult. An asylum seeker who is refused protection, i.e. not granted refugee status, is at risk of deportation.

A young person may also be in Ireland as a result of the family reunification process. In these circumstances they will have been reunified with a family member (usually a parent/sibling) who has been granted refugee status.

**Separated Children Seeking Asylum** also known as **unaccompanied minors** are "children under 18 who are outside of their country of origin and separated from parents or previous legal/customary caregiver...They may be seeking asylum because of fear of persecution or the lack of protection due to human rights violations, armed conflict and disturbances in their own country" (Separated Children in Europe Programme).

Separated Children are young people who arrive into Ireland without their family or customary care providers to look after them. Once they are identified, they are usually brought into the care of the State. Generally, they are older adolescents who are only recently arrived. Often they won't have any links to Ireland or any contacts with people here. An allocated social worker will oversee the development of the child's care plan which includes a lot of discussion regarding the best placement options available for the child. Foster care or supported lodgings with a family and both short-term and long-term residential units are all considered options. The HSE has custodianship of the child and acts in *loco parentis*.

Throughout the article the term refugee student is the common term used, referring to Separated Children, young refugees and young asylum seekers as the school issues discussed are common to all three groups.

The legal status of a person has implications for them and can affect people in many different ways, including their right to free further/third level education and the right to work. Generally speaking refugees have access to both, while asylum seekers do not.

Family separations are a normal part of the migratory process for all of the above groups. Refugee students may:

- come from very disrupted education backgrounds
- have little to no experience, or no recent experience, of schooling
- have had limited or no English language education
- have the added challenges of literacy difficulties in their first language
- have little or no understanding of the Irish education system as a result of limited social support networks and of not having grown up in Ireland
- have left their country of origin for a variety of political, economic, cultural, social and personal factors

It is worth noting here, that the mere fact of a young person attending school in their country of origin does not in itself say anything about the actual quantity or quality of teaching or learning. There are numerous factors in developing countries that affect children's meaningful access to education. Notwithstanding that, in our experience young refugees have a high regard for education (see also Trinity Immigration Initiative, 2010). ESRI (2009) research has found that generally ethnic minority students were highly motivated in terms of their education.

While we may make reasonable assumptions about students who have gone through the Irish education system, as the profiles show, we cannot make any assumptions about refugee students. As previously mentioned, all refugee students will have experienced some degree of separation and/or loss. This, coupled with the fact that they rarely have close relations in Ireland, have not yet established friendships or a social network, can result in the young person feeling very isolated. All of them will be going through a process of cultural, linguistic and social adaptation.

Guidance Counsellors play a vital role in working with these students. Many of the points raised in this article and the actions suggested belong within the domain of a whole school response and are not exclusively the responsibility of the Guidance Counsellor. Guidance Counsellors can link in with the HSE Team for Separated Children, HSE social worker, foster parent and the CDVEC Separated Children's Service. Many NGOs and Community and Voluntary Organisations also work with this particular target group and can provide information, training and support to schools.

## CDVEC Separated Children's Service

The CDVEC Separated Children's Service has been in operation for more than a decade and offers a range of supports that aim to address the wide range and complexity of issues and challenges that young asylum seekers and refugees face.

The Refugee Access Programme (RAP) is one of the supports within the service. The RAP is an intensive transition programme which aims to equip newly-arrived Separated Children and other young people from refugee backgrounds with the skills and tools necessary to engage with the Post-primary curriculum. A student referred to the service can start on the RAP at any time during the year. They normally participate in the programme for 12-16 weeks, in accordance with their care plan, before being placed in foster care/supported lodgings and transitioning into a secondary school, usually outside of Dublin city centre.

In addition to classes in English, Maths and Life Skills the RAP provides:

- programme induction (incl. visit to RAP and assessment prior to enrolment)
- buddy system
- space for religious practices
- information on Post-primary school life
- a focus on learning to learn
- opportunity for first language use

The issues for students who transition into our RAP programme are mirrored when they transition from RAP to a Post-primary school. Many of the issues around transitioning (teacher-student relationships; social interaction; self-confidence; self-image; unfamiliar subjects; new and larger school environment; a longer day; having numerous teachers; participating in extra-curricular activities; bullying) are similar for all incoming students however for ethnic minority students the process of settling in is more challenging and takes longer (ESRI, 2004).

### Profiles

The following three profiles give a snapshot of student backgrounds and indicate some, but not all, of the issues which affect Refugee students.

**Mohammed**, from Afghanistan is 17 years old, from a very traditional rural family background and has been in Ireland for 7 weeks. Prior to coming to Ireland he had not been outside of his home province. He is having to get used to many different things: the Irish weather; the food; the behaviour of people; a public transport system; realising the importance of time, etc. In addition, all the people he comes into contact with on a daily basis are strangers, the majority of whom are adult professionals. He has no support from his family or friends.

We have very little detailed information on Mohammed's education background but to our knowledge he had practically no experience of schooling except for a few classes over the years in the Madrasa (school linked to the local Mosque). He is not literate in the Roman script and had no English language skills upon arrival in Ireland. Mohammed has literacy difficulties in Pashto, his first language. He also speaks Dari. He has studied on the CDVEC Refugee Access Programme for 17 weeks.

As well as adapting to the many new aspects of his life in Ireland, he has to get used to the school system and all the structures that go with it – sitting in class for long periods; a strict timetable; numerous teachers and classrooms; school rules. Everything about school is new to him, despite his age. This is a big challenge on many levels. In addition Mohammed has limited opportunities to express his own culture and would love to find a group to play cricket with.

*The Guidance Counsellor plays a very important role during this initial vulnerable period. They can provide particular support to this young person when starting in school by scheduling time to provide individual guidance to the student about the school ethos, school culture, school rules, school activities and clubs etc. They can work in conjunction with the Year Head and HSCLO to ensure that the young person becomes gradually acquainted with the school environment. The Guidance Counsellor can advocate for English Language Support for this student and can review progress with the student by referring back to their education reports from the Refugee Access Programme. They can encourage them to partake in extra-curricular activities.*

**Mariam** is from the Congo and arrived here with her younger brother. They were initially identified as Separated Children and have just been reunited with their aunt in Ireland. Mariam has fled a country where extreme violence, daily fighting and insecurity are the norm. For the past number of years, her schooling has been severely interrupted. Growing up she did not have any routine literacy activities. She speaks Kikongo, Swahili and French and has A1 (Beginner) level English.

*Mariam is keen to progress in her education but is anxious about moving on to school because her English language level may hinder her capacity to engage with school subjects. She has studied European history in school in the Congo, but Irish history and subjects like PE and Home Economics are new to her. She finds the teaching style in Ireland very different to what she was used to, however she finds the teachers very approachable. She is surprised at the apparent lack of respect some of her classmates show the teachers.*

*Her aunt is involved with other Congolese in Ireland and Mariam has the chance to meet other young people like herself. Prior to arriving in Ireland she had never experienced racism and she finds this very difficult to deal with.*

*The Guidance Counsellor can brief the student on school subjects and the importance of subject choice. They can also outline the general approach teachers take in Ireland and the different teaching methodologies. The school can outline their policy on anti-racism, how to report it and who the student can turn to for support. It is important not to make light of the experience and to indicate that steps will be taken to combat racism. School staff can reassure students that racism will not be tolerated in the school.*

**Dina** is from Nigeria and is 16 years old. She has been in Ireland for four months in the care of the HSE. Although she was schooled in Nigeria, she was in an overcrowded class, teachers were often absent and at times Dina had to stay at home to care for her younger siblings.

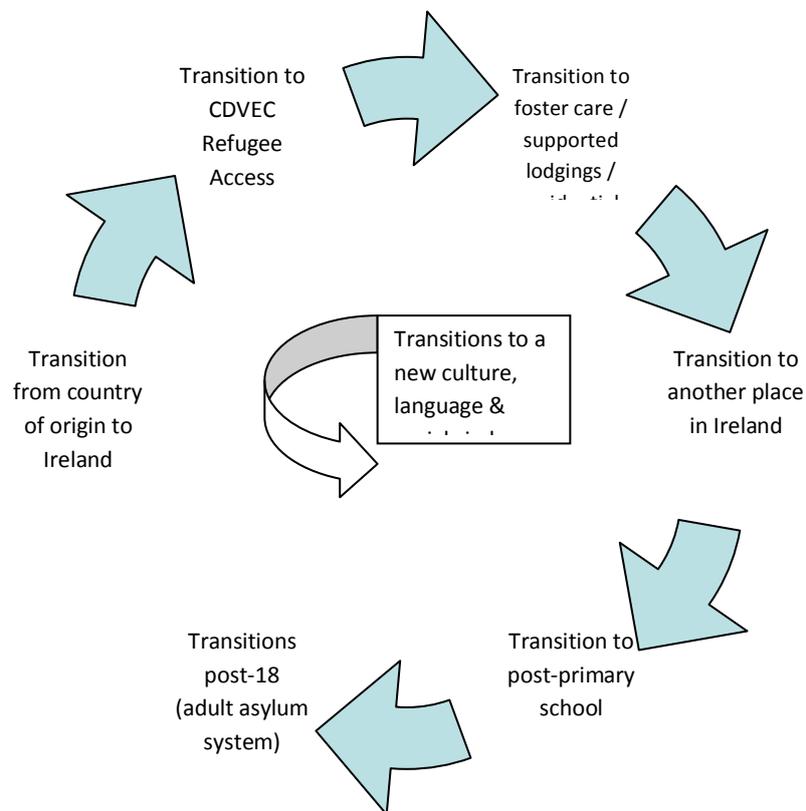
*While her English oral and aural skills are well developed (it is her second language and the language she was schooled in), she has difficulties with reading and writing. She does not receive English as an Additional Language support as the school has no allocation for it. Dina has recently moved in to a foster care placement and is adapting to the many changes in her life. Her recent fostering also means that she has moved into a local Post-primary school in Cavan midway through the Spring term. There are no other African children in her class and the school has no prior experience of working with Separated Children.*

*She has many lapses in concentration, possibly because of anxieties. She has difficulty engaging with her future plans as her case for asylum is currently under review. She must engage with a large number of professionals and wishes she had more peer and social support.*

*The Guidance Counsellor can liaise with the foster parent(s) and HSE social worker in relation to particular anxieties or concerns that arise with the young person and in conjunction with them identify additional supports which they may benefit from. Students can be linked in with local youth services.*

The extent to which the above factors affect a young person’s process of adaptation, integration and ability to learn may vary greatly. In order for schools to develop support strategies for young refugees, school staff should be aware of the full complexity and range of potential problematic issues that may affect the young person.

Each school should decide on a need-to-know basis whether and to which extent to inform staff of the exact circumstances of the young person from an asylum/refugee background. It is important for the Guidance Counsellor to be aware of the students’ background and they should meet with refugee children on an individual basis. However, it is rarely necessary for school staff to know details on their asylum case and it is important to respect the young person’s privacy.



## Transitions experienced by Separated Children

### Adolescence and Adaptation

According to Giddens (1997) the concept of ‘teenager’ is relatively recent, and can be defined differently in different cultures. In traditional societies where children are already working alongside adults, the process of ‘unlearning’ is much less severe compared to their counterparts in modern societies i.e. there is not as marked a difference between adolescence and adulthood as there is in Ireland for example. Refugee students may have matured at a quicker pace than their Irish peers and may have different concerns e.g. having a profession and earning money, immigration status. Risk behaviours can also differ for ethnic minority

students e.g. they may not be familiar with drug abuse in society or teen socialising.

The challenges of adolescence are greatly compounded by the stresses of settling into a new country according to Omidvar and Richmond (2003). Immigrant and refugee youth felt pulled in opposite directions between what seemed to be irreconcilable values and cultures and a desire to adapt and fit into their new home.

Refugee youth adjust and settle into their new lives at different paces and on different levels, however all try to establish social networks. This adaptation occurs at both psychological and sociocultural levels. Changes can occur in food, clothing, language, relationships, customs, beliefs, behaviours, self-esteem etc. and these changes can be significant, particularly if occurring over a short period of time. This can lead to acculturation stress, leading to increased levels of anxiety, depression, feelings of alienation and identity confusion (Berry 1997)



Confluence of adolescence and adulthood, immigration and ethnicity

## School supports

### Introduction

“Enrolling in an Irish school requires adaptation not only to schoolwork but to a new social setting” (ESRI, 2009: XVI) and schools may need to take specific measures to help refugee students adapt to and integrate into Post-primary. Starting secondary school requires a transition period for all students, however it can be particularly challenging if the student is a young refugee and if they join mid-term and mid way through the Junior or Senior Cycle.

*I can say it took my three weeks or one month to know exactly the school. (Fayrouz, student)*

Schools expect adolescents to understand the school environment, its routines, rights and responsibilities, and social customs. Guidance Counsellors and teachers can help students understand the ethos and culture of the school and can create opportunities within schools for students to participate, helping them access support services within and outside of the school.

For students who have not been encultured in any education system this process of familiarisation can take longer. The following paragraphs outline some of the strategies and specific supports which schools can consider putting in place for young refugee students. By adopting these, the young person is more likely to settle in more quickly and easily to their new school environment.

### Practicalities

School staff can make a particular effort in learning how to pronounce a student's name. This is one thing the young refugee has not lost. Taking the time and learning how to correctly pronounce a student's name makes a big difference. This seemingly small gesture has repeatedly been cited to us as something young people appreciate.

A student who is a Separated Child is likely to have attended the CDVEC Refugee Access Programme and you can seek an education report from the young person's social worker or directly from the Service.

### School Induction

Schools have an induction day for incoming first year students, however students who join mid-cycle or mid-term will not have benefitted from this. Past RAP students speak very positively about the welcome they receive at their new schools.

*He was saying that he's really found the school a good place to be, very welcoming, very welcoming from the staff and from other students (Karen, teacher)*

They report the helpfulness of teachers, the friendliness of school staff and peer support as assisting them in adjusting to their new school environment. The ESRI (2004) reported that two-thirds of students saw school personnel as playing a key role in their transition.



### Visiting the School

School induction may include facilitating a visit to the school prior to starting on the first day. Young asylum seekers will often have missed the school open day and RAP has found that students benefit significantly from visiting the school prior to incorporation in class.

*If someone can go first, visit the school you know to have a chat maybe with the Principal or someone in the school to tell them about the school, the rules of the school that would also help them cause me I just go there on (first day)(Naseem, student)*

The Guidance Counsellor could ensure that the newly-arrived students are shown around the school premises and help them to become familiar with the environment (classrooms, how they are labelled on the timetable, school canteen, use of the school journal).

An alternative to this is a virtual school tour. On a 3-D video school tour the newly-arrived student can view the school facilities and become familiar with the surroundings. School personnel can encourage the foster parent/guardian/parent to help the new student access the school website to get an idea of school facilities, school subjects, teachers, after-school activities etc.

For many incoming students they will initially feel very disorientated and isolated when starting Post-primary school. However for young asylum seekers, particularly if they join the school mid-term when the bonds of friendships and school teams have already been established, these feelings are further heightened.

*My first day was horrible. My first day I was really confused, first when it start the first class it was French so I feel comfortable in that. Then the second class was Biology or...I was confused especially when I went to History class and the Sir was speaking really fast. The first day I didn't catch anything yeah because I was nervous because it's my first day in school. (Philip, student)*

On the Refugee Access Programme we show students the film from the *Stepping Stones: Starting Second-Level School in Ireland* resource. The film is based on refugee students' real experiences of starting secondary school. Students who move into secondary school realise that they are not alone in going through this process of transitioning and this can reassure them.

### **Information on the School**

During their first days at school students have so much new information to process and new situations to get used to. They can easily forget what they have been told because of the sheer volume of information they must process within a relatively short period of time. On the RAP we reinforce important information to new students and provide written explanations in simple language where appropriate. The young person can process this in their home environment with their foster parent/carer.

### **School Pack**

Past RAP students reported that the sheer volume of text contained in the school journal makes it difficult to identify what is initially important. For this reason a school pack can be provided with essential and seemingly-obvious information. Among other things this could include:

- a timetable
- an outline in simple language of the rules
- a list of after-school activities
- information on the lunch times, locker rooms and general information on the running of school

- a map of the school with classroom names/numbers outlined
- a list of school staff, including year head & form tutor

A specific support is the provision of information translated into the first language of the learner.

The Guidance Counsellor could ensure that the student introductory pack takes into account the particular needs of refugee students. This introductory pack can be used with all incoming students. A clear explanation of the school timetable and the layout of classrooms in the school building is very important for all new students. Past RAP students report that one of the most daunting experiences is when the bell rings, everyone gets up and scatters to new rooms. Panic can set in and they may not have the language ability to ask where to go next or may be too shy or embarrassed:

*That was so very frustrating like you'll be standing and you don't know which room to go to and all the students will be rushing to the class because no one is standing to talk to you, no they have to rush to class. (Abdi, student)*

*But because I have to hold my journal all the time and check the class, the room I have to go in and all the week I keep getting late stamp in my journal because I'll be looking for the room I have to go to and I'll be late 5 minutes and the teacher would put a late stamp ... It was so confusing at first but now its ok. (Fayrouz, student)*

## **Buddy**

An effective buddy system in a school can have a significant beneficial impact for a young refugee. On the RAP itself students have enjoyed participating in the buddy system - welcoming new students, showing them the ropes and acting as a peer who can be approached at any time.

Former RAP students value peer support in secondary school to help them settle in and adjust to the new learning environment. It can also help with socialisation and making friends. Frequently refugee students will be starting school among a sea of unknown faces. Some students were pleased to have been helped by their classmates during their first day at school:

*So thanks God I had one student beside me who was also from Africa, from Angola yeah so he was just trying to keep me talking and now we are good friends now. Yeah he was just helping me to know the class, when we have next class he was telling me this and this class, he was showing me the school. (Abdi, student)*

In this instance, the fact that the classmate coincidentally spoke the same language and stuck with Abdi for the first couple of days was hugely beneficial.

Having a well-planned and structured buddy system in place can give the new student time to figure out how things work. The Year Head or Guidance Counsellor can implement the following steps in relation to a Buddy system:

- Identify a class member/prefect to act as buddy (they could be from a similar language background)
- Support the buddy with basic guidance on what to help the newly-arrived student
- Ensure that the buddy and new student are introduced before the first class of the first day

- *When I went to the admission the principal said the first day I came they send somebody to show me the school and all that. But when I start nobody shows me (Tina)*
- Follow up on any issues with the buddy after the initial week

Buddies should know what is expected of them and the support should be available throughout the year for newly-arrived students. While matching along linguistic/ethnic lines can work, it may not always be the best option and should be approached with caution. Half of Irish school report having a peer mentor system in place (ESRI, 2004) and this could be an existing support schools can extend to a mid-term student arrival.

### Religious Practices

Religion can be an extremely important issue for young refugees (Ni Raghallaigh, 2011). The relationship with God is the one relationship that has remained constant in their lives. The RAP programme quickly identified that providing a quiet space where students can go to pray was very important. Schools can initiate a conversation with the newly-arrived student around any particular requests they may have in relation to practising their religion. Some schools make an effort to celebrate or facilitate special events in the calendar of minority ethnic and religious groups (ESRI, 2009). This encourages students to explore the diversity of cultures and religions in the school environment.

### Programme Choice

Young refugees need significant help navigating the education system. The Guidance Counsellor has a particularly important role in guiding refugee students who need particular help navigating through an education system that is very unfamiliar. On the RAP we explain the post-primary system to students: the Junior and Senior Cycle; the range of programme and subject choices and the importance of this; the Further/Higher Education system. Information on the post-primary system is available in several languages from our Service. As with other students, school programme choice needs to be explained in detail.

### Subject Choice

Many subjects are new to asylum seeking students as they may never have encountered them in their country of origin. Students often come from backgrounds where traditional gender roles dictate education pathways and career choices. As a result the student may never have considered certain subjects or options - such as nursing if male or engineering if female. Subject choices need to be outlined by the Guidance Counsellor to the newly-arrived student in a clear and concise manner as they will not have had the same opportunity to sample subjects as first years. They may need to be explained in more detail. Subject factsheets are available on the NCCA website and provide a clear picture of what content subjects entail.

*But the other day she (the guidance counsellor) was talking to me, she said 'you know what you're going to do?' I said 'yeah' (Nursing) but she said 'you're not doing biology' (Tina, student)*

Options may be restricted around school subject choice but it is important to have a conversation with the student about what is available because they may not have been present in the school when this was being explored by all students. Students may know at an early stage which career path they wish to follow, but will not necessarily be aware of which subjects they require for that profession/course.



## **Other School Supports**

### **Learning to Learn**

On the RAP we help students to reestablish the routine of attending school: recording and doing homework, keeping copies of their worksheets, reviewing/revising work and organising their learning. In addition we consciously foster the development of higher order thinking skills - analysis, synthesis, evaluating understanding. In addition we timetable a study skills class. The RAP programme has found the need to implement and further develop differentiated teaching and learning methods. These strategies help to ensure better school readiness for students.

While a reasonable assumption may be made that students who have gone to school in Ireland have to some extent developed key skills such as taking notes, identifying key information, skimming and scanning, structuring an essay etc., the same assumption cannot be made for refugee students. In her book Rutter (2001) explains that refugee students are often not used to the style of teaching in their new country including doing group work, practicals or research. Refugee students may come from education backgrounds where critical analysis and expression of personal opinion are not fostered as part of the school curriculum. For most refugee students and particularly students who have had limited or disrupted education, learning to learn requires extra support and adapting to the style of teaching in Ireland can be difficult.

### **Language & Educational Assessment**

During their initial weeks in school, it is normal that refugee students may be withdrawn and not participate fully in class. Apart from having to adapt to their new environment they are also learning in a new language. Their engagement and production may not be a true reflection of their actual understanding and ability. However, if progress is not being achieved after a reasonable period of time, it may not be due to difficulty with English language but may reflect a learning difficulty. This is especially the case if students are not fully literate in their own language. It can be difficult for teachers to distinguish between a language or a learning difficulty and this may have a consequence on accessing appropriate supports in a timely manner. Guidance Counsellors can liaise with the HSE and the student's social worker if they think the student may have a learning difficulty and wish to seek an assessment.

In addition, lack of initial competence in English may be a misrepresentation of the effects of a refugee's personal experience (Candappa, 2007:31) and specific measures may need to be taken to enhance the student's academic English skills and access to the whole school curriculum. EAL supports, although reduced are still available. EAL support can only be claimed at the beginning of the school year and as many refugee students arrive mid-term they can often miss out on this support.

### First Language Use

Maintenance of mother tongue is a critical factor in the retention of identity. On RAP we actively encourage students to maintain their first language and to view it as a resource for learning. Extensive research by Jim Cummins highlights the positive implications of maintaining and developing a first language and indeed DES policy is to promote this: *Pupils should also be encouraged and facilitated to maintain a connection with their own culture and language through curricular activities and display* (2009 DES Circular). However, McDaid (2011) reports evidence of actual repression of language minority children's first language (L1) in Irish schools. One successful project, a Trilingual Literacy Camp, focusing on minority language children and promotion of their first language engaged pupils in writing/audio recording dual-language story books. Using L1 in the class environment recognises the value of all languages and their importance in linguistic, social and cognitive terms. When Post-primary students are studying a specific topic they can access their prior knowledge most readily through their L1. Guidance Counsellors and other school staff can encourage students to use their first language for learning and plan for this in the delivery of their lessons.

### Racism

Racism can have a corrosive effect on an individual and Candappa (2007) reports that it can impact negatively on their educational experiences. For young refugees this might be the first time in their life that they have encountered racist abuse. In addition, young refugees may be anxious or reluctant to report racism as they wrongly fear it may negatively impact on their claim for asylum (ICI, 2011: 27). On the RAP we include discussion of racism and dealing with racism in our Life Skills classes and we take racism very seriously. Although many young refugees experience racism inside and outside of school, they may not disclose this for a variety of reasons; one of these being that they already feel so different and do not want to attract even more negative attention.

*Yeah it (racism) happens but have to brush it off*

*Interviewer: And would you talk about it with some of your friends?*

*No I just leave it. (Philip, student)*

Schools should not underestimate racism and the effect it may have on a young person. As with other types of victimisation, incidents of racism should be reported and dealt with effectively. Promoting intercultural awareness among staff and students alike is also an important measure schools can take to support young asylum seekers.

The supports outlined above may be referenced in school policies on enrolment, induction, interculturalism, equality, anti-bullying and anti-racism and the Guidance Counsellor can help to develop these.

### Completion of Schooling

When Separated Children turn 18 they are no longer afforded the same care or rights as a minor. They will generally complete their final school exams, but depending on their

immigration status they may not have access to free Further or Third level education<sup>1</sup>. Everyone has the right to seek further or higher education, however students may be required to pay EU or International Fees at the institutions concerned. This in itself can create particular anxieties for the young asylum seeker.

School staff need to take into account the very unstable circumstances that may apply to a refugee student who is approaching 18 years of age. Their home and living arrangements may change. If they are seeking asylum they must cope with moving to the adult asylum system (direct provision) and they may even be at risk of deportation if their claim for asylum has failed. Committing to a further or higher education course for three or four years can be very difficult for a young person who lives from day-to-day in a direct provision centre and whose future in Ireland is uncertain. In addition the young person may be anxious about third-level fees and, while they may wish to continue studying this may not seem feasible. These circumstances must be taken into account at the time of year when many students are completing CAO forms.

## Conclusion

School transition can be complex and difficult for all students however, Separated Children must also cope with multiple transitions. They frequently come from situations of chaos and insecurity. They have been uprooted and transplanted into an alien environment and have left behind loved ones, their familiar lives, surroundings and routines.

When Separated Children transition into second-level school in Ireland they have the added disadvantage of not having established family support, social networks, fluency in English or local knowledge. While so many other aspects of their lives are in flux, with the right supports, schools can afford them stability and help them successfully navigate their educational paths.

This article has discussed school induction (visiting the school, a buddy system, school and programme choice, and religious practices); promotion of first language; responding to racism; and supporting students with learning to learn skills as key to assisting newly-arrived young refugees in settling into and progressing through the Irish education system. The article has hopefully highlighted that school interventions which aim to support social and emotional development are just as important as those that support linguistic and cognitive competence and the vital role of the Guidance Counsellor in this.

The establishment of these inclusive practices will not only benefit young refugees but also all students who transition into Post-primary outside of the normal times.

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<sup>1</sup> Asylum seekers generally do not have access to the free fees initiative or to higher education grants. Young people granted refugee status can normally access the free fees initiative and higher education grants. Guidance Counsellors can check with individual university access/fees offices in relation to other funded supports. However, this is a complex issue and further information may need to be sought on an individual basis.



## Checklist

- Accompanied visit of the school
- Peer buddy assigned and guided to assist new students
- School Introductory Pack
- Translated information, including Factsheet: Post-primary school in Ireland available on [www.separatedchildrenservice.ie](http://www.separatedchildrenservice.ie)
- Space for religious practises
- Information on programme choice (TY, LCA, LCVP)
- Subject choice information
- Learning-to-Learn skills development
- English language supports
- Promotion of first language use
- Policy on anti-racism

N.B. Checklist is a guide only, and not an exhaustive list.

## Biography

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More information on the CDVEC Separated Children's Service can be found online at [www.separatedchildrenservice.ie](http://www.separatedchildrenservice.ie) or from the CDVEC Curriculum Development Unit.

## Further Information

Information on school systems where refugee groups come from can be found in Part Three of Jill Rutter's book *Supporting Refugee Children in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain*.

For an example of a virtual school tour see <http://www.portlaoisecollege.ie> created as part of a TY project

A copy of *Stepping Stones: Starting Second-Level School in Ireland* can be found at <http://www.separatedchildrenservice.ie> or may be requested from CDVEC Separated Children's Service. Useful websites in relation to school programmes are listed at the back of the *Stepping Stones* resources (Page 58).

For information on a comprehensive school pack see *Pathways to Parental Leadership Toolkit, Immigrant Council of Ireland*, 2011(Pg. 12) available at <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie>

LCA explanatory video on <http://lca.slss.ie/>

The JMB have published *Guidelines for the Inclusion of Students of Other Faiths in Catholic Secondary Schools* which could be a useful reference point on religious practices. These can be downloaded at <http://www.jmb.ie/publications>

Teachers can find out about the particularities of students' first language and English language learning difficulties particular pupils may have as a result of their first language from <https://netfiles.uiuc.edu/rsadler/shared/445%20Readings/Swan-learnerenglish.pdf>

NCCA Guidelines *Intercultural Education in the Post-primary School (2006)* explores ideas on developing an intercultural classroom in particular the chapter on Classroom Planning.

*Intercultural Education Strategy 2010-2015* published jointly by the Department of Education and Skills and the Office of the Minister for Integration is a useful consultation document for all stakeholders in the field of education.

Irish Refugee Council offers advice, information and assistance to refugees and individuals and families seeking asylum in Ireland <http://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie>

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