




**Migrant and ethnic  
minority children  
and young people's  
views of education in  
Northern Ireland**



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Researchers from Queen's University Belfast recently completed a research project to learn what education is like for children and parents/carers from migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds in Northern Ireland (NI). This short report gives a summary of the research and what we found out.

## What did we want to know?

We were interested to learn about **three** things:

### **School admissions**

How children (and parents) decide which school to go to, what they think about the transfer test, and what it is like to move from primary school to post-primary school.

### **Day-to-day experiences of school**

Such as what children like about school, what could be better, relationships with teachers, and friendships.

### **The curriculum**

What children think about what is taught at school.

# How did we find out about children's thoughts and experiences of education in NI?



We interviewed **62** children and young people (ages 9-15). This included children who were born in NI and children who had moved to NI from other countries.

As well as asking children questions, we gave them craft materials so they could share their thoughts and experiences through drawings or other artwork.

# What did we find out

## ••• about choosing schools?

→ Children were often involved when making decisions about which post-primary school they would like to go to. However, parents had **more influence** in decisions to attend grammar schools than secondary schools.

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→ When making their decisions, children thought about different things like the reputation of the school and **how close** it was to their home. They also considered its **size**, the **facilities**, if their **friends** were planning to go there or if they already had an older brother or sister there.


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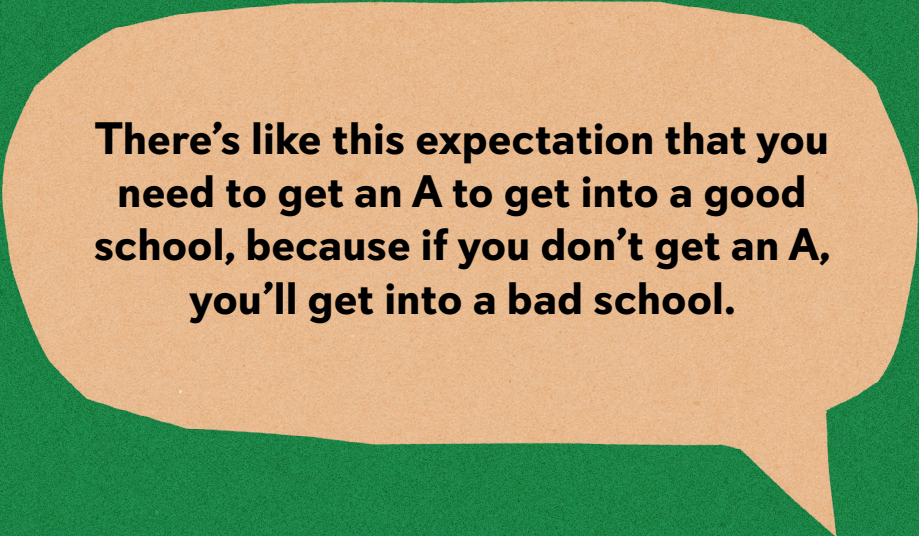
→ Refugee and asylum-seeking children, especially in Belfast, can face **extra challenges** when they are trying to find a school place. This means they often don't have a choice about where they go to school. Post-primary-aged children sometimes wait for several months before they can start school.

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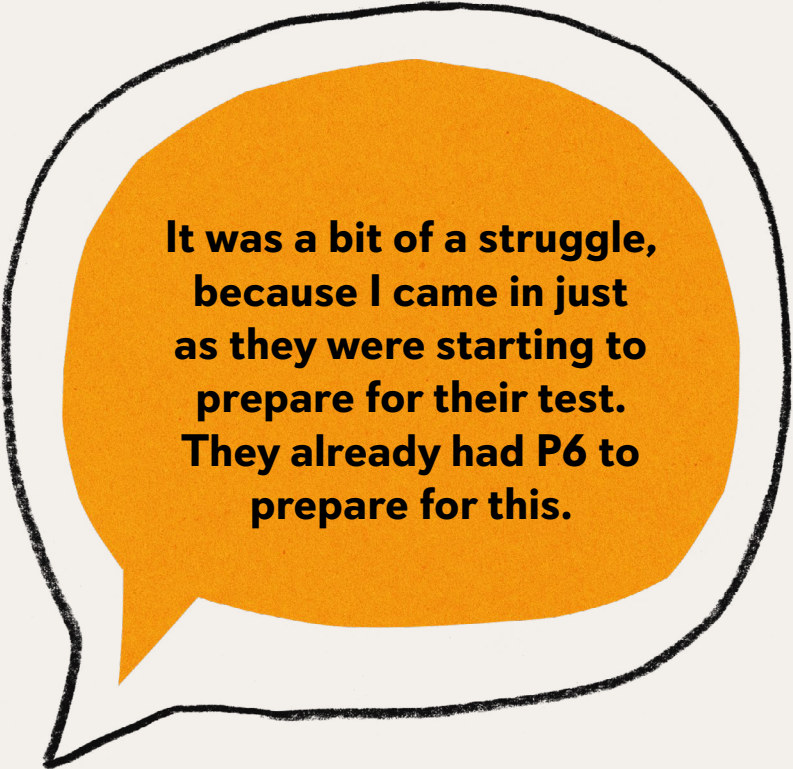
... and the

## transfer test process?

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- Children had different experiences of the transfer test process. Some described it as **'fun' but nerve-wracking**. Others found the time around the test **stressful** because there was lot of work or the practice papers were **difficult**.
  - Children felt that the test outcome would have a big influence on their lives and described the **pressure** they felt.



**There's like this expectation that you need to get an A to get into a good school, because if you don't get an A, you'll get into a bad school.**



**It was a bit of a struggle,  
because I came in just  
as they were starting to  
prepare for their test.  
They already had P6 to  
prepare for this.**

➔ The transfer test was especially **difficult** for children who had moved to NI in **P6 and P7** and had not had as long to prepare.

## ... about the


# curriculum?

- Many children thought that sharing and learning about different cultures and religions at school was **positive**. They said that it could help children feel proud of their traditions and prepare for travelling and working in other countries in the future.
- However, some children were **worried** that they might be teased by classmates for sharing information about their own culture.



- Some children reported that their countries, cultures and languages received **less attention** than others at school, especially if they were the only ones of their background or nationality in their class.
- Children from **Irish Traveller** backgrounds also reported that Traveller culture was not often talked about at school.






**You learn so much about  
different cultures but  
you don't learn about  
Traveller culture and  
that's so weird...**

**We never get talked  
about.**



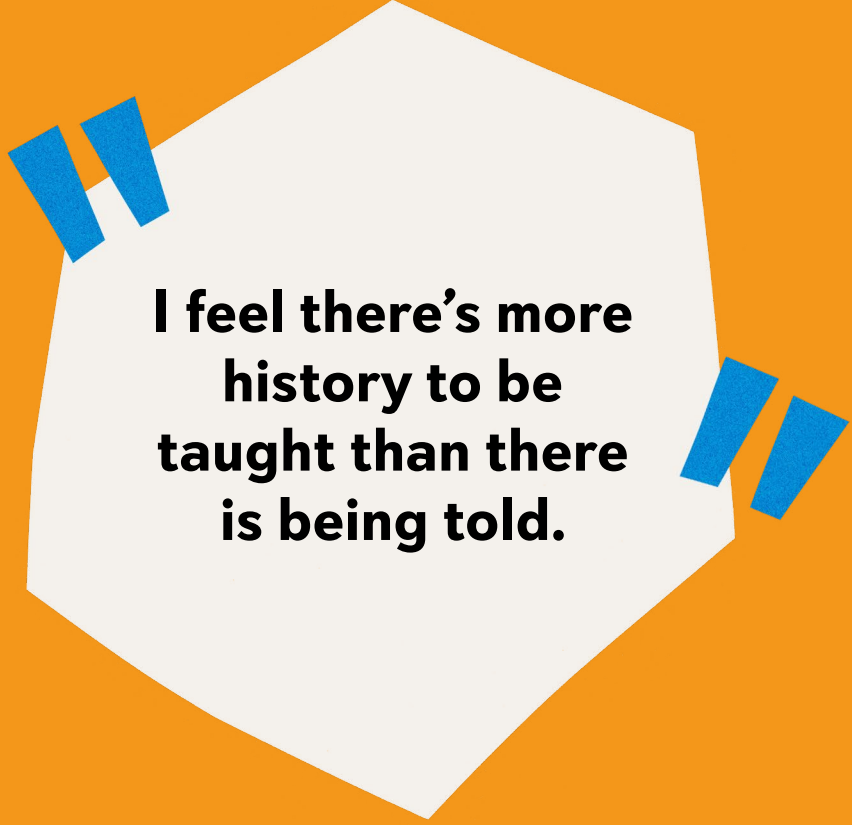
**No one talks about us.**

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- Some children compared how they learn at schools in NI with **other countries** they'd been to school in. They liked that schools in NI have **opportunities for play and practical activities**. They also liked that the teachers encouraged them even if they made mistakes.
  - However, some children and parents felt the curriculum at primary school was too focused on **literacy and numeracy**.
  - Several children whose families were planning to return to their home countries were also **worried** about settling back into schools in those countries, especially where the teaching style was different.



- Some children **questioned** what they had been taught, especially in history and RE.
- They were **not always happy** with the information they were given about some religions, countries and cultures because they felt that details were left out or were **inaccurate**.
- Several children also thought it would be better if their religious tradition were taught by someone of the **same religion**.





**I feel there's more  
history to be  
taught than there  
is being told.**

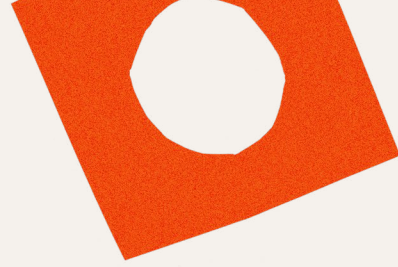
... and help

## learning English?

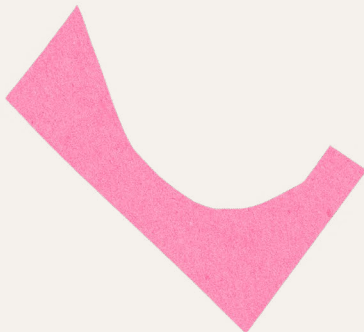
- Many children reported that they are **taken out** of their class to spend time learning English with classroom assistants or in extra lessons.
- While primary school-aged children often enjoyed learning English this way, some older children felt that being taken out of class could make them **stand out** as different from their classmates.



- Children who are learning English said that other pupils – such as a **'buddy'** – are important in helping them to communicate, make friends and settle into their new schools.



- Some children wanted to speak their **home language** at school if there were other children who spoke the same language that they could talk with.
- Others were **reluctant** to speak their home language because they would feel **embarrassed**.
- Some children thought they might **not be allowed** to speak languages other than English in class.



# ... about day-to-day

## school life?

- School was described as an important place for **making friends**. While children's friendship groups were often diverse, some said that they liked the **shared experience** of friendships with other children from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds.



- Children described a 'good school' as **diverse, inclusive, friendly and fair, with no bullying**.
- Some children also said it was important that the school served **good food**, had some quiet and **calm spaces**, and was **clean**.
- They viewed a 'good teacher' as one who was **not 'shouty'** and very strict but calm, supportive, and able to make the teaching **fun**.

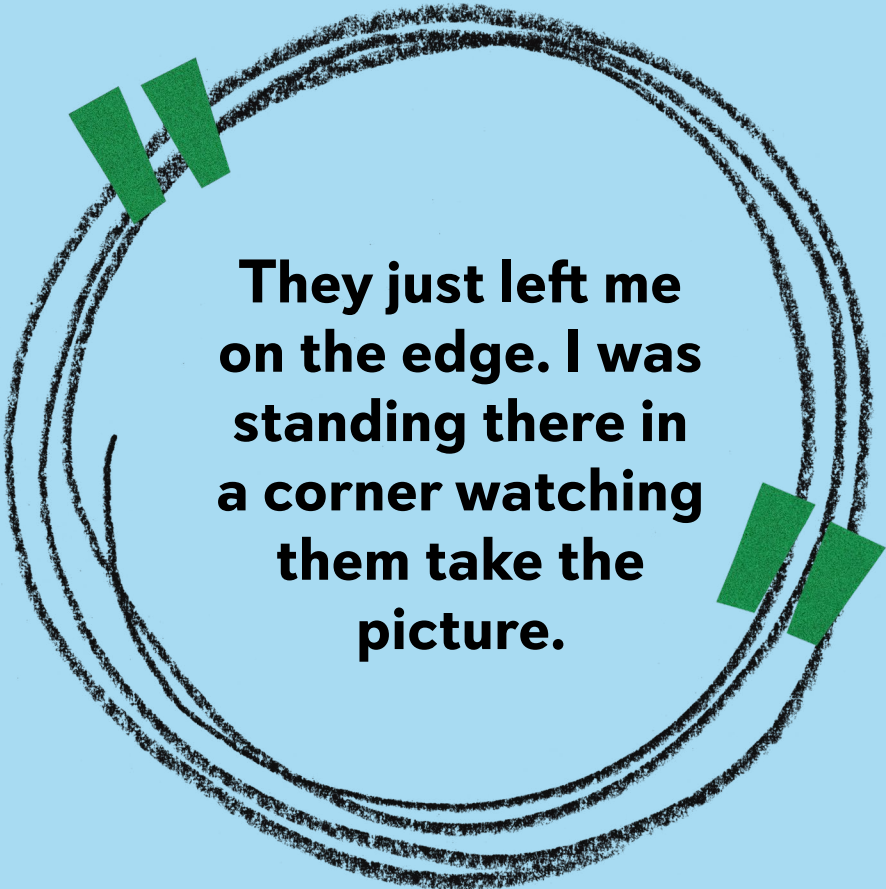
... and

## racism and exclusion

### at school

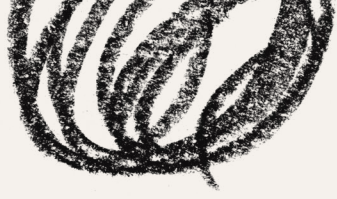
- Many children had experienced **racism** and racist **bullying** in school.
  - Children described having racist things said to them, being **pushed or hit**, or reported that other pupils had said unkind things about **their schoolwork or their English** (if they were learning English).
- 
- Some children also reported **feeling excluded** at school due to their background.
  - For example, they felt that they were **told off more often** than their classmates or reported that they had been left out of school activities.





**They just left me  
on the edge. I was  
standing there in  
a corner watching  
them take the  
picture.**





- Among families of children who had experienced racist bullying, some were **happy** with the school's response – for example, when teachers had moved children who had done the bullying to a different class or contacted their parents.
- However, children and their families often wished that **more action** had been taken when they reported the bullying.

**The teacher could have done a bit more than just tell them off.**



# What should happen next?

The researchers have written a report of what they have learned from the interviews and they have shared this with people who make decisions about education. This report includes recommendations for how education can be improved for children from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds. Some of the recommendations are:

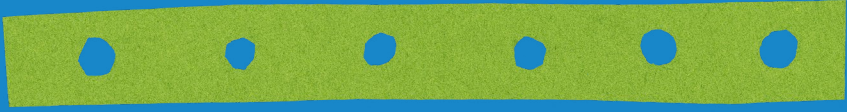
To look at how school admissions could be made easier and fairer for migrant families.

To improve the way that racist bullying is reported and dealt with in schools and provide extra training for teachers.

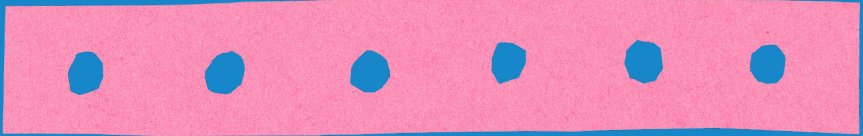
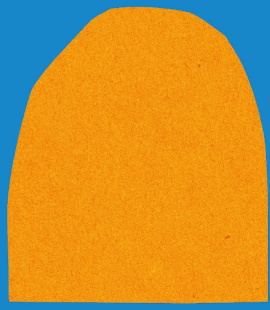
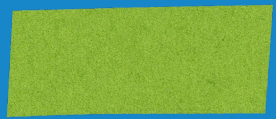
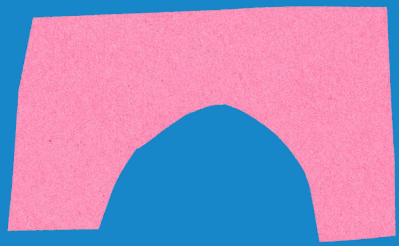
To make sure that English language learners receive high quality English teaching and that staff have the training they need to help pupils.

To review how world religions are taught at school.

To increase cultural and religious diversity in the curriculum.



If you or your parents/carers would like to know more about the research, please contact Rebecca Loader by email to [r.loader@qub.ac.uk](mailto:r.loader@qub.ac.uk)





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