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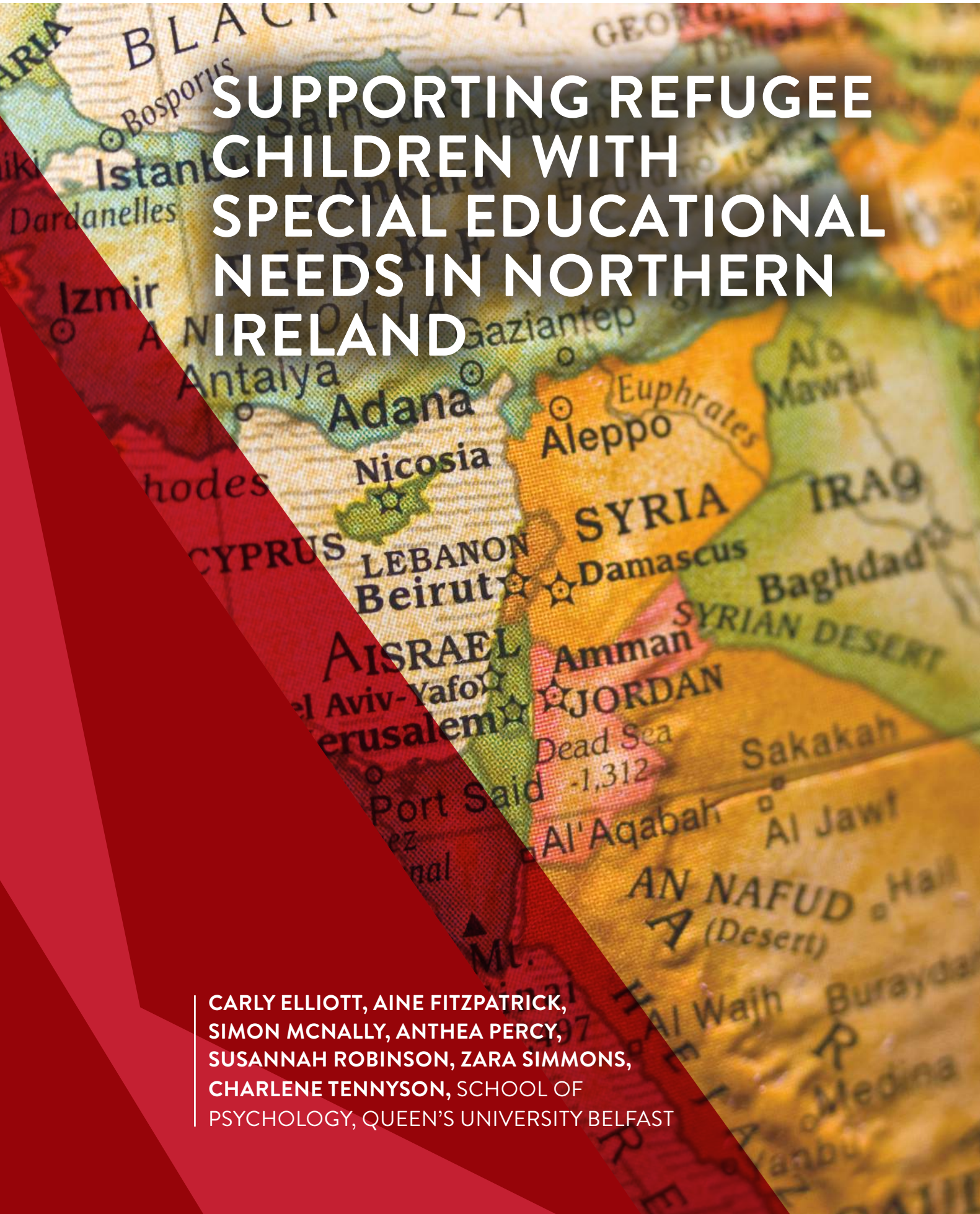

SUPPORTING REFUGEE CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Foreword

This study was completed by a group of six Year 2 Trainee Educational Psychologists, in part fulfilment of the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology course at Queens University Belfast. The study falls within a module on Equality and Diversity which aims to explore and enhance understanding of marginalised groups within the local Northern Ireland society.

Data was collected in January 2019.

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Supporting Refugee Children with Special Educational Needs in Northern Ireland

Background: As of February 2020, Northern Ireland (NI) has welcomed 1,815 Syrian refugees, almost half of whom are under the age of 18 (NI Department for Communities, 2020), and many of whom have special educational needs. This study aims to explore the reasonable adjustments made by educational communities thus far, to minimise the impact of potential barriers to learning for this distinct group within our society and promote integration. **Methods**: Six participants were recruited from an organisation in NI that works directly with refugee families. A semi-structured interview format was employed to explore the participants' views and experiences, and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. **Results:** Five main themes were identified. These include: 'No typical day', with key workers working flexibly according to the needs of individual families with the aim of empowering them and promoting autonomy; 'Challenges faced by parents' in terms of their relationships with schools and statutory educational services; 'The individual needs of children' encompassing SEN, trauma, language barriers, and inconsistent educational experience; 'Understanding culture', and finally, current and potential areas of 'Good practice'. **Conclusions:** Whilst key workers were able to cite many examples of good practice in NI schools, it was clear that educational agencies need to further develop their capacity and their preparedness in relation to this growing population of children, and think creatively about how best to meet their needs in the context of financial constraints. Recommendations are outlined and Educational Psychologists are identified as key agents for change.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, many people have fled Syria to avoid the conflict and the human rights violations imposed by the government regime. As of January 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2020) estimated that there are 5.57 million registered Syrian refugees living in camps or urban populations within the neighbouring countries of Syria, e.g. Turkey, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. Figure 1 shows a map indicating the areas where Syrian refugees have registered in camps. The situation in Syria has been described thus*: "the biggest humanitarian emergency of our era, yet the world is failing to meet the needs of refugees and the countries hosting them"* (António Guterres, Middle East Star, 2014, p. 1).

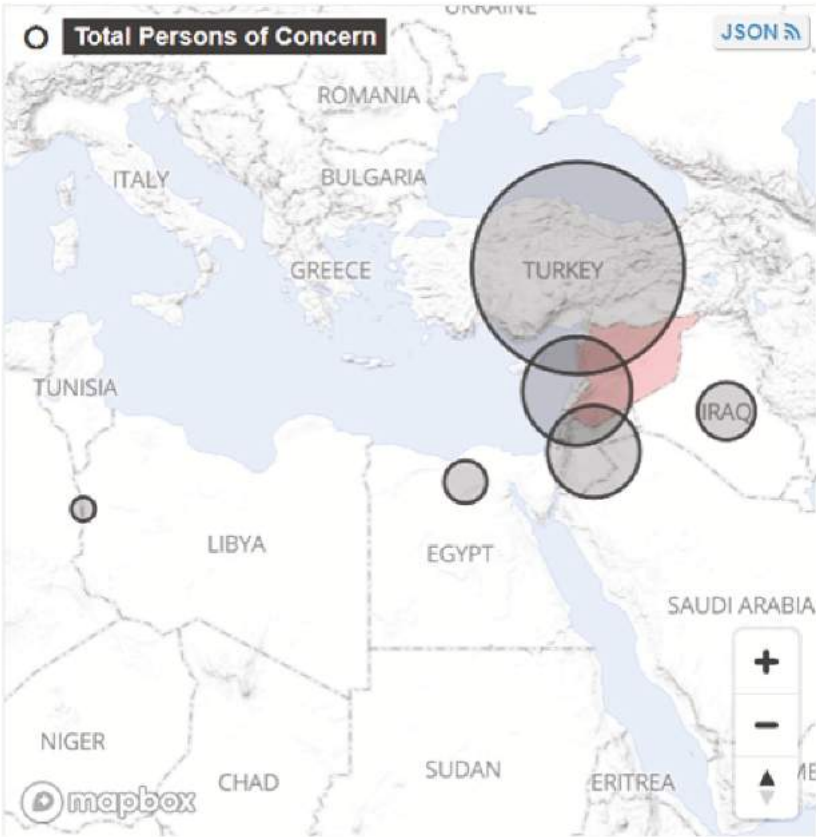

Figure 1. *Map showing placement of Syrian refugee camps with circle size representing number of refugees (UNHCR, 2020).*

In response, the UK government changed its policy in 2014 from focusing on sending humanitarian aid to Syria's neighbouring countries, to establishing the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (VPRP); this provided a route for selected Syrians to come to the UK (McGuinness, 2017), with an aim of accepting 20,000 Syrian refugees by

the year 2020. As of November 2019, the UK had received approximately 18,190 Syrian refugees (Walsh, 2019). As of February 2020 NI has received 1,815 refugees. Almost half (46%) of those resettled in NI are under the age of 18 (NI Department for Communities, 2020). Support for Syrian refugees entering the UK has been devolved to local governments and therefore within NI the responsibility lies with the Department for Communities (DfC).

The DfC established a 'Reception and Integration Group', and in addition, there exists a 'consortium' of the voluntary stakeholders, involved in meeting the needs of these incomer families. Included are:

- Department for Communities
- Home Office
- Department for the Environment
- The Executive Office
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive
- Northern Ireland Social Security Agency
- Education Authority
- Health and Social Care Trusts
- Police Service of Northern Ireland
- Refugee and Asylum Forum
- British Red Cross
- Barnardo's
- Extern
- Bryson Intercultural
- South Belfast Round Table
- Law Centre

As the Education Authority (EA) is one of the organisations listed, educational agencies, including the Educational Psychology Service (EPS), have a responsibility to address the educational needs of Syrian refugees to ensure appropriate provisions are in place to support their access to education, and support their integration into the Northern Irish community. This study aims to learn from the experience of refugee key workers in order to consider how reasonable adjustments to educational practices might better serve the needs of Syrian refugee children and young people.

Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS)

The VPRS was the UK strategy to resettle Syrian refugees and was developed in 2014/2015 (DfC, 2018). The VPRS only takes applications from people who have escaped into the neighbouring countries of Syria, and therefore excludes Syrians who have travelled into other European nations. It initially prioritised the elderly, the disabled and victims of sexual violence and torture (McGuinness, 2017). However in 2017 it was expanded to accept those with medical needs, women and girls at risk, children and adolescents in a vulnerable situation, people in need of legal or physical protection, and people who do not have integration prospects in their current host country (DfC, 2018).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) assesses individuals in refugee camps in light of the VPRS criteria set by the UK government. The Home Office receives the application, and if accepted, the person is granted full refugee status for five years. Full refugee status provides the individual with several rights, including (DfC, 2018):

- Access to public funds (e.g. benefits)
- Entitlement to work
- Right to claim housing, be admitted to schools and receive healthcare
- Family reunion
- Right to move around and resettle freely in the UK

Prior to 2017, successful applicants had been given humanitarian protection status which had similar rights to full refugee status except they could not access public funds. These individuals were not automatically given full refugee status during the 2017 policy change but could apply for a change of status from the Home Office (DfC, 2018). After five years Syrian refugees who cannot return to Syria can apply for resettlement to the UK.

Considering the aim of this study is to investigate the adjustments made within the schooling system in NI, it is worth considering that due to the nature of the VPRS, Syrian refugees in NI are likely to have considerable additional difficulties compared to other newcomers and the general population.

Difficulties Faced by Refugees

Within NI schools a newcomer is defined as *'a child or young person who has enrolled in a school but who does not have satisfactory language skills to participate fully in the school curriculum and does not have a language in common with the teacher'* (Northern Ireland Strategic Migration Partnership, 2014, p. 7).

Newcomer children could be considered to loosely fit within the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) category. There have been several reports and studies that document the

difficulties experienced by newcomers and BME groups and we can assume that the experiences of Syrian refugee young people will be similar. However, caution must be stressed at this point that newcomers, people from BME groups and refugees are not a homogeneous group. There will be differing experiences between economic migrants and refugees, as refugees will have the additional complications that qualified them for the VPRS detailed above.

Each individual refugee will not have precisely the same experience as another refugee, even one coming from the same country. Nonetheless there is still much to learn from the experiences of newcomers and BME groups that can be used to help and support refugee groups. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust published a cultural toolkit which detailed the difficulties faced by BME groups when accessing mental health services (HSCB, 2014). The barriers to accessing services faced by BME groups in NI included poor understanding of NI services; language; lack of information; services seen as culturally inappropriate or inaccessible; misunderstanding leading to misdiagnosis; stigma and fear of mental health.

HSCB (2014) describe several factors that aggravate the difficulties faced by BME groups, including isolation and lack of family support within NI (this is particularly difficult if their culture has a tradition of seeking support from within families); stigma of having difficulties from within and outside the family; poor economic conditions such as housing and employment, and fear of ramifications.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and poverty are noted as particular aggravating factors for BME groups who are also refugees (HSCB, 2014). Being BME, a refugee and having a disability means the individual is likely to experience multiple compounding discriminations. Murphy and Vieten (2017) conducted a study into the everyday life experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in NI. In their report they discuss a range of challenges faced by refugee groups including difficulties with housing, poor information regarding rights of refugees within public services, fear of complaining about public officials due to repercussions in terms of their refugee status, and lack of support for mental health and victims of traumatic experiences. Significant challenges were reported regarding the quality of education for refugees, including: language and communication issues; prejudice and racism; social exclusion; interrupted schooling and educational lag; literacy issues; limited or no resources to deal with or awareness of the specific challenges refugees face; trauma, significantly affecting the learning process.

The authors found that parents of refugee pupils spoke with general satisfaction regarding how their children were engaging with the NI educational setting, however they noted several difficulties as follows:

- Multiple house moves leading to children having to walk through politically segregated areas wearing a uniform that draws unwanted attention

- Parents feeling nervous about communicating with teachers and therefore do not fully understand what is going on with their children's education
- A lack of understanding of refugee experiences
- Segregation of children can have a negative impact i.e. differentiated support can be perceived as "slow learners" and reduces self-esteem
- Discrimination and racism are mostly experienced outside of school, however some schools were described as poor to react to children reporting incidents of racism.

Chapter 2: Overview of the Literature

Article 39 of the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that professionals have a duty to provide:

> *"Appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child."* (United Nations, 1989, p. 11)

In order to provide appropriate support, it is necessary for those aiding refugee children and their families to have a better understanding of their experiences and their presentations across multiple settings. To that end, an overview of the literature is provided hereafter. The literature review will begin by considering refugee children's experience of trauma, the impact on their mental health and the challenges faced by social care services in addressing these. We then go on to consider the barriers to accessing education faced by these children including language, educational experiences, special educational needs, teacher expectation and resourcing and discrimination. We end by setting the scene for the current study.

Refugee children's experience of trauma

McBrien (2005) argues that being a refugee child is a traumatic experience in itself due to the many disruptions that their lives are subject to. It is important to consider that they have not left their homes by choice but often due to the outbreak of war (McBrien, 2005). Refugee children will have diverse experiences due to their migration histories (Mace, Mulheron, Jones & Cherian, 2014) and many will have previously lived in refugee camps where food, shelter and medical care are scarce and education is virtually non-existent (McBrien, 2005).

Trauma and Mental Health

A review by Reed, Fazel, Jones, Panter-Brick & Stein (2012) suggests that pre-migration exposure to violence can be a strong predictor of future mental health difficulties. While not all war affected refugee children will develop mental health problems, due to their exposure to trauma and the adversities they face adapting to their new life, they are at risk of experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties (McMullen, O'Callaghan, Richards, Eakin and Rafferty, 2012). Almost half (45%) of Syrian refugee children experience symptoms of PTSD, 44% experience depression and 25% report psychosomatic pains in limbs (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

A study by Fazel and colleagues also explored the various risk and protective factors impacting the onset of psychological imbalances. It is interesting to note that the study alludes to family as being both a protective and a risk factor. The research highlights that parental support and family cohesion can act as a preventative against future mental health issues, while being raised by a single parent or by parent(s) with mental health difficulties had the opposite effect (Fazel et al., 2012). Although many children receive emotional support in the home environment, this is often not available for refugee children due to the intense trauma that their families have likely experienced (McBrien, 2005). The Fazel et al. (2011) review illustrated that financial strain, post-migration housing changes, and discrimination were all strong predictors of future mental health difficulties. One may assume that these cumulative difficulties may put strain on any family unit, potentially jeopardising the cohesion of that family and impacting the support for refugee young people.

Accessing Social Care Services

While refugee children and young people are likely to be presenting with similar difficulties to any child who has experienced trauma, separation, or emotional turmoil, they in some way present with "a fresh version of old challenges" to those working in social care systems (Kohli, 2002, p. 31). The literature reflects the difficulties that refugees experience in accessing social care which encompass, in part: intrusive assessment procedures, poor awareness of refugee needs, and cultural and language barriers (Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). This would suggest that some professionals struggle to adequately support the unique needs of this client group. Newbigging & Thomas's (2011) study provides some justification for this, as professionals have stated that funding constraints have significantly impeded the provision of good social care.

Barriers to accessing educational opportunities

Language

A recurring theme throughout the literature is the language barrier and the difficulties this can create for refugees when entering a country that does not speak their home language. This can be a particular challenge for children when it comes to accessing the curriculum in their new school provisions. Refugee children have English as an additional language (EAL) and school may be the only environment they are exposed to English. This presents a difficulty for education professionals in distinguishing between those children who have SEN and those who simply have not yet acquired an adequate level of English to complete academic work (Kernaghan, 2015). The British Psychological Society (BPS; 2018) advocate for the dichotomous view of EAL to not be considered a SEN in terms of grouping refugee children who present with learning difficulties.

Once resettled, refugee children tend to acquire conversational ability in the language of their new country faster than their parents (Zhou, 2001, as cited in McBrien, 2005). As a

result, they often translate at school meetings, doctor appointments, and service organisations for their parents. Competency with the English language was also reported to result in parents feeling unable to support their child with homework. Moreover, the language barrier also makes it difficult for parents to relay their concerns about their child, it can be a source of frustration or makes them feel they are not being listened to by professionals (D'Angelo, Paniagua & Ozdemir, 2011). Szente et al. (2006) conclude that interpreters are of vital importance to closing the communication gap between school and parents and when this is not possible, translated written communication should be provided.

Although it is important for refugee children to adapt to their new surroundings, Matthews (2008) notes that this is not a linear process; schools, teachers and existing students must adapt to the refugee child to assist with their integration. Although teachers may not be familiar with a child's native language, they must utilise languages which are universal to all, such as, arts, music and play. This is in order to communicate adequately and enable a child to share their experiences (Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006). A classroom wide use of basic sign language and visual strategies can also be used to communicate effectively.

Having a language barrier has not only proven to be difficult from an academic point of view but also with regards to social situations. Social connections are a key contributing factor to feelings of belonging for a refugee, which lead to better emotional wellbeing (Beirens, Hughes, Hek & Spicer, 2007). Szente et al. (2006) noted that introducing the class to the refugee pupil's culture and learning basic words such as 'thank you' or 'good' in the child's native language, can make the child feel safer and more included in their new school environment.

Despite clear difficulties with accessing the curriculum due to suspected language barriers, Segal and Mayadas (2005) note that it is important not to generalise and that some refugees from higher education levels may already be fluent or have significant experience with the English language. In addition, Segal & Mayadas (2005) advise that teachers are aware that some refugee children may be illiterate in their own language and it is important to consider this when supporting them to access the curriculum.

Inconsistent educational experiences

Refugee children must navigate numerous new systems in their host country, not least because they tend to learn the language of this country more quickly and must often speak for adult family members as well (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007). One of the first, and arguably the most influential, systems they encounter after resettlement is their school. Unfortunately, it is not unusual to find that refugee children have difficulty integrating into the classrooms of their host country; in part, this can be due to large gaps in their education because of the context of growing up in a war torn country (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007).

The United Nations estimated that half of Syrian refugee children living in neighbouring regions of Syria, were not enrolled in school during the 2014-15 academic year (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Of those who did attend school, they often had poor attainments due to gaps in their learning and having experienced discrimination and bullying (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015). Teachers report that newcomer children are often not 'school ready' due to the lack of exposure to the school setting, language barriers, and specifically, in the case of refugee children, trauma from the war (McGovern et al., 2011).

Significant gaps in education, or absenteeism, can have a major impact on children and young people. Kearney (2008) describes school absenteeism as a 'serious public health issue' which can lead to a number of behavioural difficulties and mental health difficulties in childhood that persist into adulthood. Sankey, Hill, Brown, Quinn & Fletcher (2006) note that absenteeism can have a serious impact on the education and career plans of children and young people. Attendance at school leads to a sense of belonging however absence from school can lead to exclusion from peer groups and the loss of friendships and social opportunities (MacDonald & Marsh, 2004).

The impact of trauma on education

As discussed, refugee children are likely to have experienced some form of trauma and loss, which can manifest itself in different ways when they begin education within their host country. A study on the impact of trauma on this population indicated that adverse life experiences had emerged in the classroom as poor academic performance, gross motor problems, and social interaction difficulties (Driver & Beltran, 1998). Furthermore, trauma predisposes a child to experience anxiety, concentration difficulties and memory problems which can contribute to poor educational attainments (Dyregrov, 2004). Poor self-regulation and disruptive behaviours are also associated with trauma and poor educational outcomes (Dyregrov, 2004).

Teachers have reported feeling overwhelmed when supporting refugee children because they are unaware of their background and any traumas that they may have experienced (Szente, Hoot & Taylor, 2006). Compounding this fact is a lack of trust towards teachers. McBrien (2005) notes that experiences in refugee camps could lead to a fear of authority, therefore making it difficult for refugee children to trust teachers in their new schools.

While it has been well documented that trauma has a negative impact on children's educational functioning and experience of school (Hart, 2009) there is some evidence contrary to this fact. For instance, research in Australia suggested that refugee children display high levels of resiliency with only a small minority of children requiring intervention in their educational setting (Mace et al., 2014). However, it is likely that refugee children will require additional support to settle in to school due to the trauma and loss that they have experienced (McGovern, Meas & Webb, 2011), with some schools suggesting counselling with a focus on trauma should be made available for these pupils (Kernaghan, 2015).

Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Prior to the conflict in Syria, information regarding disability prevalence was limited as a result of research deficits and stigma (Said Foundation, 2009). However, correlations between specific types of disability and risk factors in Syria have been identified. Cerebral Palsy and Intellectual Disabilities were both reported to be associated with intermarriage and pre and peri-natal complications. Cerebral Palsy was also noted to be the most common disability amongst Syrians and also within the Arab nations (Said Foundation, 2009).

Mace et al. (2014) found cognitive and developmental problems were not reported to be of concern to parents on initial contact with education services, however, delayed language development in their native language was a major concern. Yet, it is unclear whether parents had no concerns regarding cognitive development or their concerns over language development were simply more significant.

Due to cultural beliefs, some families may not want their children to be assessed or have the label of SEN (Ryan et al., 2010). There is a sense that parents fear that their child will be singled out, stigmatised and not accepted if their child is 'labelled' as having a special need (Taylor & Sidhu, 2011).

Teacher expectations and resources

Teachers' expectations of refugee children's academic ability can lead to frustrations for the child and their parents. Limited understanding of refugee children, their experiences and difficulties with assessment can lead to school staff having lower expectations of their ability and a tendency to 'label' the pupils (Murphy & Vieten, 2017), affecting their self-esteem, motivation and ambition (Nakeyar et al, 2018). Schools must consider the impact of missed learning opportunities experienced by refugee children before classifying a difficulty as within child. Rousseau et al. (1996) caution teachers against acting as if in crisis to refugees of different migrating into their classrooms. Rather, they urge teachers to consider whether the perceived behaviours or difficulties of refugee children are in fact difficulties, or could they be attributed to contrasting cultural differences (Rousseau et al., 1996).

A common theme throughout the literature is the fact that some teachers feel unequipped to support the needs of refugees. Given the diverse range of traumas these children have experienced it is likely that teachers in the host countries may feel under resourced to support their SEN (Strekalova & Hoot, 2008).

Teachers reported that they often use the speed of English acquisition as an indicator of SEN. However, without proficient training in EAL many teachers feel they have a limited understanding of how to support English acquisition in newcomer pupils and how to assess SEN with children with limited English language skills (Purdy & Ferguson, 2012).

It is important that school staff receive training on how trauma, frustration due to lack of English language skills, peer victimisation and poverty can manifest in the classroom before 'labelling' a child with a particular SEN. It is also important that teachers view the child's presenting behaviours in relation to the context and consider the impact on the child's wellbeing (German & Ehntholt, 2007). Szente et al. (2006) suggested that when multi-disciplinary professionals worked closely together, the transition to a new school system was made easier for refugee children. This is supported by findings from Mace et al. (2014) which noted that school liaison and support were cited as protective factors for refugee children, contributing to positive educational and social outcomes.

Discrimination

The language barrier causes obvious difficulties for these children such as being unable to communicate needs and access the curriculum (Kernaghan, 2015). However, it also has a significant impact on their ability to form friendships (McGovern et al., 2011). Newcomer children may feel socially isolated, lack a sense of belonging and desire to participate in school activities (Geraghty, McStravick & Mitchell, 2010). Newcomer children are also more likely to be socially excluded, bullied and be discriminated against than local children (Biggart, O'Hare & Connolly, 2009).

Refugee children report that one of the main reasons they wish to acquire the English language is to develop friendships (Geraghty, McStravick & Mitchell, 2010). Many will have lost friends through conflict and resettlement and developing new friendships is an important but challenging issue. However, cultural clashes, discrimination, racism and instances of bullying all present as barriers to refugee children developing friendships with their new peers (Nakeyar, Esses & Reid, 2018). Bullying was suggested to mainly occur outside school during transit to school (Murphy & Vieten, 2017). Young people reported that whilst the majority of individuals were welcoming, specific individuals had targeted them.

Good Educational Practice

The literature suggests that should young people feel a sense of belonging in school then this can have a positive impact on their mental health, academic attainment, and social inclusion (Anderman, 2002); however, the inverse is also true. Refugees can experience language difficulties, cultural differences, and discrimination when integrating within the resettled school (Coll & Magnuson, 1997), which can adversely impact their sense of belonging. To counter this, some schools have established programmes which focus on promoting cultural identity, increasing teacher training, and using art to promote mental health (Rousseau & Guzder, 2008).

One programme of note is the Pharos prevention programme, originating from the Netherlands. The Pharos initiative works under the premise that school serves as a significant link to a new future within the host society (Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). The

programme explores themes of identity, safety, and relationships with the children and young people (CYP), as well as providing training to staff on trauma, preventative strategies, and the background of refugees (Ingleby & Watters, 2002). It reports largely positive feedback from participants and evaluations have suggested that it has a desirable impact on CYP's sense of belonging (Ingleby & Watters, 2002).

Making friends can create a sense of belonging (Geraghty et al, 2010) which in turn helps integration. An inclusive whole school attitude whereby different cultures are celebrated is key and it can lead to greater acceptance by peers and teachers (Kernaghan, 2015). School strategies such as mentor or buddy systems are useful in making refugee children feel welcome and reduce their isolation. A whole school approach to understanding refugee culture and experiences can aid understanding of their needs which in turn can create a sense of belonging (Hek, 2005).

Examples of good practice to tackle challenges refugee children face in settling into a new school include: using interpreters, translated paperwork and provision of English language classes. There are a number of agencies in Northern Ireland playing a vital role in supporting refugee families with children with SEN through educating them on the education system, providing support through the SEN process and discussing the different cultural attitudes to SEN.

Mace et al. (2014) concluded that despite the multitude of traumatic experiences, refugee children demonstrated resilience and significant educational SEN were only identified in a small minority of children. However, this may be as a result of the lack of longitudinal research in this area as studies have mainly focused on the period of resettlement, which is when the children tend to receive most support. Given these findings and the diverse background experiences of refugee children it should not be assumed that every refugee child will require specialist trauma intervention.

For all refugee children regardless of the traumatic experiences, prompt access to schooling has been noted to support integration into their new community and improve their quality of life (BPS, 2018). Where there is a high intake of refugee children it is recommended schools should receive specialist training in order to prepare for promoting successful integration and positive educational experiences (Murphy & Vieten, 2017). Additionally, the provision of school liaison and school support was found to result in empowering families and facilitating refugee children to experience academic and social success (Mace et al., 2014).

Rationale for the study

The difficulties that refugee children face to 'fully enjoy their right to education' has been a concern highlighted by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY, 2008) over the last decade. It is apparent that despite the literature presented above regarding potential barriers to accessing educational opportunities, as

well as examples of good practice, there is a paucity in research on the reasonable adjustments made by educational services, including schools in Northern Ireland, in relation to meeting the distinct needs of Syrian refugee children in the educational community. Whilst it would have been the preference of the research time to explore the experience of refugee families and children directly, this was beyond the financial scope of the study. As a result it was determined that the research group should explore these experiences more indirectly by accessing the voice of key workers who work most closely and directly with the families during the resettlement process.

Research Question

What knowledge and experiences do key workers have to share in arising from their day-to-day practice liaising with education on behalf of refugee children and their families in Northern Ireland?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Design

A qualitative case study design was used as it offers a means of gaining a rich picture and an in-depth analysis of an individual's experience of working with refugee families and the educational systems around them. One-to-one semi-structured interviews were used to gain the views and experiences of key workers from a refugee service in the UK. Specifically, their views and experiences of working with Syrian refugee children with special educational needs were sought. The interview also explored the challenges they may have faced in supporting the families in meeting the needs of their children and their views on how educational practice in relation to refugee families could be improved.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to facilitate capturing the participants' experience and knowledge about supporting the needs of refugee children with SEN, in a focused yet flexible manner. Different types of questioning facilitated the exploration of the participants' explicit and implicit assumptions (Flick, 2018). The interview schedule can be found in Appendix C.

Recruitment of Participants

The refugee service was contacted by the research team to gain their interest in the study and consent was given to recruit participants from their staff. The manager of the service provided gatekeeper consent and shared the study information leaflet (Appendix B) with staff. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were self-selecting, they volunteered to be interviewed about their experiences of working with refugee families.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Key workers were offered the opportunity to participate if they had experience of working with Syrian families for at least a year. It was deemed important that they should have experience of liaising with educational agencies throughout the academic year.

Participant Information

Six key workers volunteered to take part in the study. On the day of the interview, one participant was unable to attend due to unforeseeable circumstances. Therefore, five key workers were interviewed. All key workers had worked with Syrian families for at least a year.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the School of Psychology's Ethics Committee at Queen's University Belfast. Every effort was and has been made to ensure the anonymity of key

workers and the Syrian families throughout the research by using pseudonyms and omitting any identifiable information.

Materials

- Organisation Information Sheet (Appendix A)
- Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B)
- Participant Consent Form
- Interview Schedule (Appendix C)
- Dictaphone or Smart Phone

Procedure

1. Once ethical approval had been obtained, participant information sheets were passed to the refugee services' manager to share with key workers to recruit potential participants.

2. The date and preferred location for the interviews to take place was determined. All participants chose to be interviewed at the refugee services' office on the same date and time for their convenience.

3. On the day of the interview, it was ensured that the key workers had read and understood the participant information sheet (Appendix B). Written consent was also gained.

4. Once the recording had begun, the participants were asked to reaffirm their consent to take part, they were also reminded that their participation was voluntary and had the right to withdraw at any time.

5. Five key workers were each interviewed by a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). The interviews were recorded on a Dictaphone or on a Smart Phone, each interview followed the same interview schedule and they lasted between 17 and 60 minutes.

6. The audio transcription of each interview was transferred onto an encrypted file on a laptop within 24 hours and the audio recording was deleted from the Dictaphone or Smart Phone.

7. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and all identifying information was made anonymous.

8. Once analysed a backup copy of each recording was sent to the research supervisor who will ensure it is stored on the QUB network drive for 5 years in accordance with QUB procedures.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary method of analysis as it captures and interprets personal experiences into a patterned response of themes that relate to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexible nature and suitability for a small sample size. However, it should be noted that other approaches may have been suitable for use in this study. For instance, discourse analysis may have been appropriate for in-depth exploration into the use of language throughout the interview; some researchers feel that claims cannot be made about the effects of language by using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis leant itself to this study as it allowed for quick and efficient analysis of the data which suited the proposed time frame for data analysis. Thematic analysis also requires little or no prior experience of the researchers which was beneficial for TEPs who had limited experience of qualitative research, and provides results that can be understood by a wide variety of audiences.

One of the major criticisms of thematic analysis is that it can be difficult to repeat the method of analysis conducted due to subjective interpretations (Antaki, Billig, Edwards & Potter, 2002). To counteract this criticism this study has followed the methods detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to help ensure the study remains methodologically sound.

The thematic analysis was conducted in five phases:

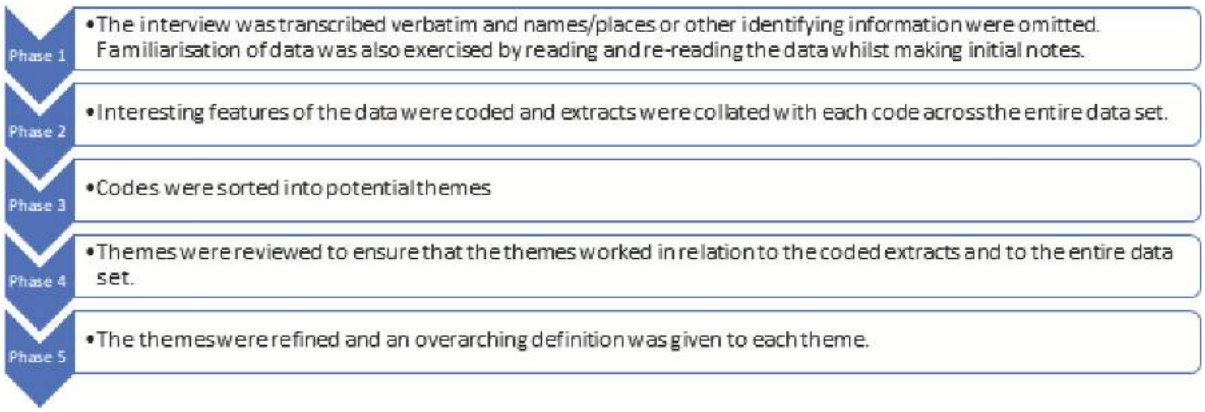

Figure 2. *Phases of Thematic Analysis, adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006).*

Chapter 4: Findings

As a result of direct and specific questions asked during semi-structured interview, the findings of this report allow for an insight into the knowledge and experiences key workers have as a result of their day-to-day role in liaising with education on behalf of refugee children and their families in Northern Ireland. This report does not claim to be representative of the experiences of all key workers within Northern Ireland.

A number of themes arose from the interviews with key workers concerning their experiences in their current role. While a degree of overlap may be evident between themes, each theme has a unique focus which highlights the knowledge and experiences of the key workers. The evident themes and sub-themes are presented in a thematic map below:

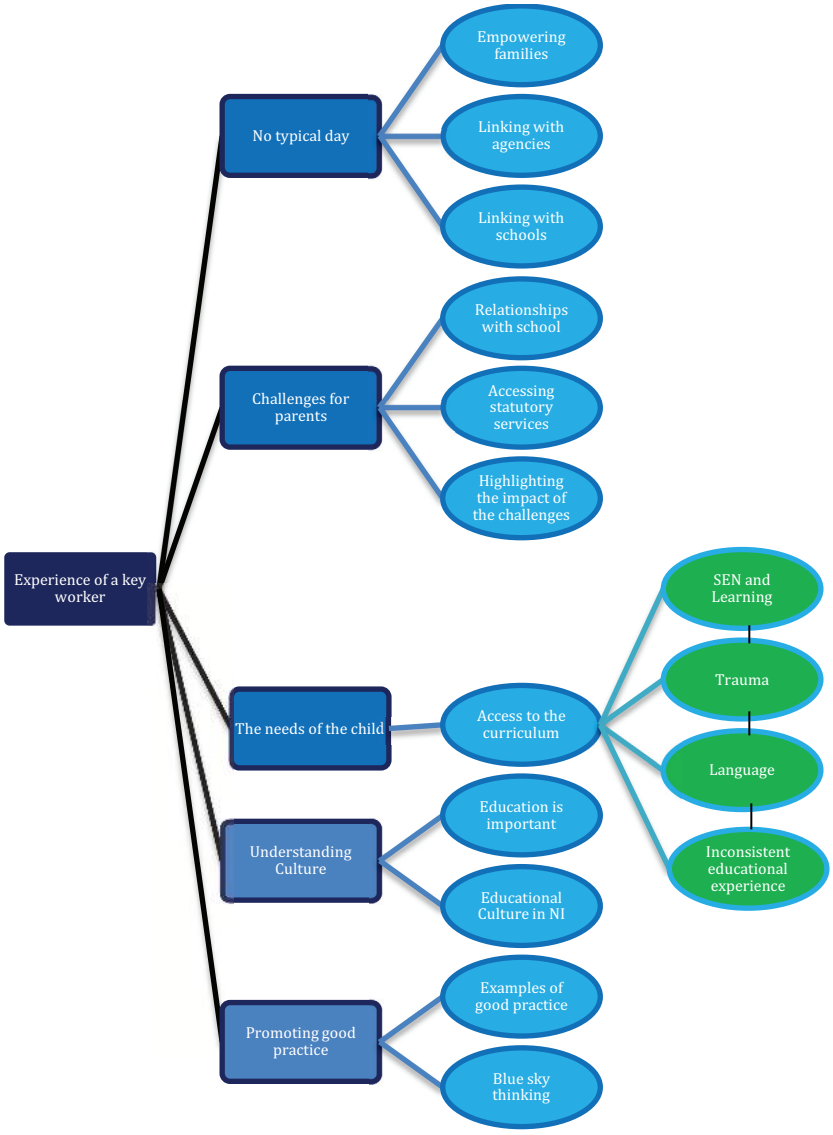

Figure 3. *Overall Thematic Map of Findings*

Theme 1: No Typical Day

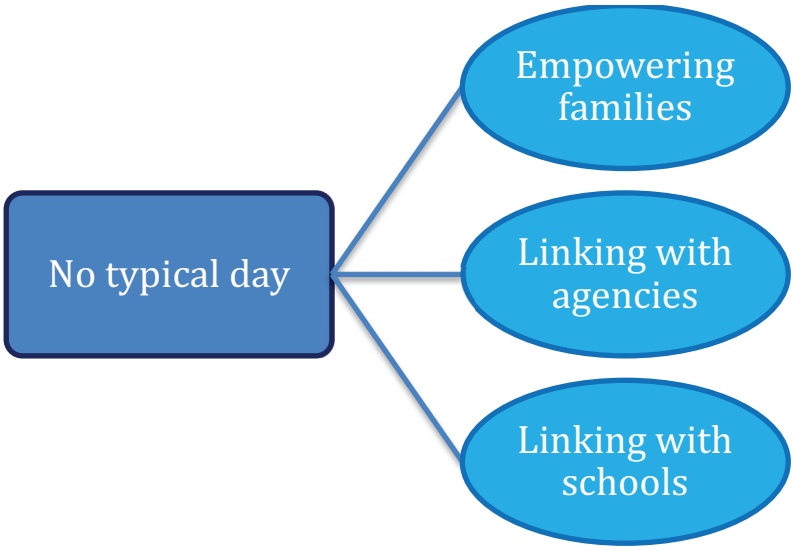

Figure 4. *Theme 1: No Typical Day*

During interview, key workers attempted to explain their role in supporting refugee families. It became clear that there was no 'typical' work day for a key worker, *"so, typical work day well there is…...it is very varied".*

> *"There's not a typical day…a lot of the time we would go in with our own agendas and we have to, it's part of the programme. But that could change depending on the family's agenda*"

> *"…just really anything that comes up…it's a real massive mix and then every so often there's something that you just don't expect that comes up that you end up dealing with too…"*

Furthermore one key worker spoke at length about how the role of the key worker changes and evolves throughout their period of involvement with a family. For example: *"at the start of our support it's quite intense……the first couple of weeks is a lot of 'em showing them around the area……..gradually that would peeder out as they become more independent"*

> *"One of the things for me is to get stability as quick as possible within the house,"*

> *"showing them around the area, making sure they get registered with schools, GPs, Dentist, em that they know local shops, know how to use public transport, get benefits, em signed up for benefits"*

Although the role of the key worker was described as variable, one participant was able to identify a key or salient part of her role:

> *"I suppose a lot of our job is being a, like a bridge between services and families, so like making sure that there's good links set up between, between them."*

Unsurprisingly therefore a number of sub-themes emerged under the theme of 'No typical day'. These include empowering families, linking with agencies and linking with schools.

Empowering Families

> *"…we're supposed to try and … build up their skills on how to know all different agencies that are involved in their child's care and how to manage that."*

Many key workers reflected on the need to empower the families they support so that they may feel more confident and independent in various aspects of their new lives. In doing so, the key worker may need to advocate for the refugee families to have a voice and encourage them to have more of an input into decisions that will ultimately impact their lives:

> *"A lot of the time they're like 'Listen, we don't need to read it all' …Whereas, we would try and encourage them that, 'Actually, it's really important that you do read it all' … because there could be things, especially, if … the outcome affects the placement of the child"*

In order to do so, the key worker may spend time building up the skills of the families in areas such as communication, language and practical life skills, so that they are better placed to live independently, reducing their reliance on their key worker:

> *"…we try using like an enabling approach with the family, so explaining that this logo means it's X, this logo means you know, 'emm, jobs and benefits, so they understand when that letter comes in future where the letter is actually coming from and then what is just required of the letter…"*

> *"…integration into the community so that might be identifying, training and employment opportunities, volunteering… giving them an idea of how to use buses to get in and around the city they live in"*

This skill-building is done with the intention to promote the autonomy of refugee families, so that they are able to function independently of the key worker as that support begins to withdraw:

"…the support levels will decrease. … Everything that we do is trying to build up families' independence and how to manage all these aspects of their own lives themselves."

Linking with Agencies

"Yeh' so housing, health, dentists, opticians, colleges for adults and well like yeh' adults for learnin' English, schools, banks to get bank accounts set up, job centre and social security, benefits, 'em churches and community groups 'em like youth clubs 'emmm [laughs]"

There are numerous agencies and professionals involved with refugee families as part of the resettlement process. It is apparent that the key worker plays a central role in establishing and maintaining links between these professionals and the family:

"In terms of our role, we're here to help the families resettle, so to link them in with all the different agencies going forward"

"At the beginning they don't really know what word…or what's happening, so we'll help them with that and get them to the agency that…deals with that".

Some key workers reflected that this could be to their own detriment, as agencies can become dependent on the key worker.

"The Social Workers all do ring us. The children's nurse will ring us, the physiotherapist will ring us, and then the school will ring us."

As a result, the key worker where possible, would encourage the professionals to contact the families directly, rather than through them. Additionally, a key worker reflected that at times the support required might be considered outside of their role, however it was deemed necessary to support the refugee families:

"…you end up doing things, isn't necessarily part of your role purely because it needs somebody to take like a co-ordination role… Like ok let's pull this together have one central person which is what I ended up being for one of the families, so, so that all and sundry has my name and number!"

Linking with Schools

"I went in and explained what had happened to them, what they had been through, and that obviously he needs extra attention in terms of what he has been, I mean you know children…don't just get down on the floor and start hiding…if he's not scared but if you didn't know that you'd think what's happening with these kids".

Arguably, some of the most important agencies with whom refugee families must liaise with involve education. It was clear that the key worker could be crucial in setting up meetings and initially establishing the lines of communication between home and school. Some key workers had had positive experiences:

> *"…so far all my experiences have been good in getting them into school. (INT: ah that's great) and schools have been very welcoming and have been trying to do, every school has surprised me more and more in terms of what they can accommodate for these kids, you know and get them settled in as quick as possible which is good…"*

Key workers noted that their bridge between families and schools was ongoing:

> *"Key workers would check in for a few weeks with the school saying 'How's she getting on? Is there anything needed passed onto parents' or if parents have concerns that's passed back to school."*

Unfortunately, it appears that there can be an overreliance on the key worker as a go-between for school and home. There seems to be a reluctance or uncertainty from school about contacting the parents directly and so as is the case with other agencies, the key worker is contacted out of convenience.

> *"Rather than go to the parents directly, they go to us, they think we're like the vehicle of how to get to the parents without trying to get to the parents directly"*

As such, there seems to be a need for balance between establishing a relationship between schools and refugee families and stepping back to allow both parties to maintain that relationship:

> *"So, one thing that I would always do in school meetings is I would address […] the Principal, that you'd say 'Okay -' just before the meeting starts 'So, if such and such leaves here and they've got questions and if they've got concerns about their children, what will they do?'"*

> *"You're maybe putting it out to the Principal that you're not going to be here forever, so therefore they need to learn to communicate directly themselves."*

Theme 2: Challenges for parents

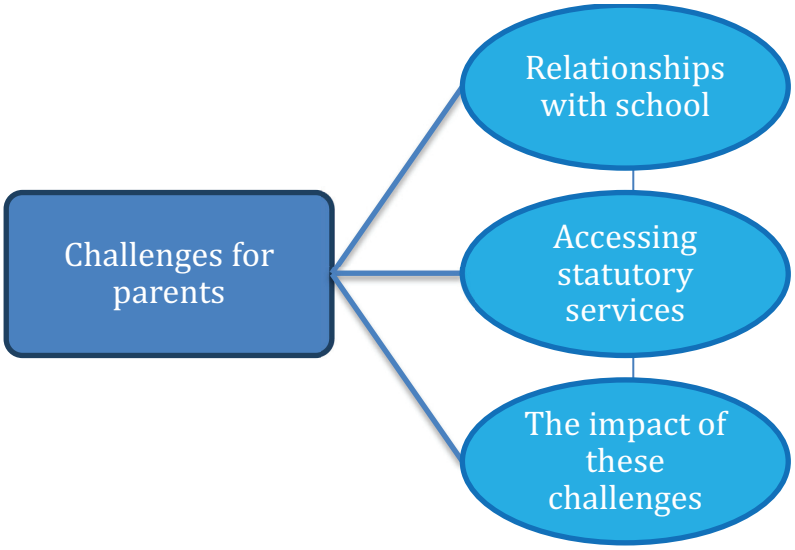

Figure 5. *Theme 2: Challenges for parents*

A range of challenges facing refugee families arriving in another country were discussed through the perspective of the key workers. A number of sub-themes emerged in terms of managing relationships with schools, accessing statutory services in education and the impact of these challenges.

Relationships with schools

Findings suggest that many schools in NI have been very accommodating for refugee families. However a number of challenges arise in relation to the relationships with school.

A significant challenge arises as a result of language barriers. In particular, frustration was expressed concerning the impact of the language barrier on supporting homework:

> *"Parents generally can't help their children with homework because they can't understand what it says or what they are doing so there is very little home support for school"*

> *"The kids are going to school and they're coming home and they've homework to do and unless the teacher has shown them, and they understand what's happening, if they don't, there's, they haven't got support at home for that. So there's big gaps there."*

As well as the language barriers associated with the homework process, parents of refugee children have also experienced having been excluded from parent teacher meetings due to the, "*big hassle getting interpreters"*. Consequently, parents are often missing out on updates of their child's education or school issues and the language barrier

that exists between families and schools can disempower parents as it can make the children the main communicators within the family*, "their children will learn English quicker so then the parent feels that they are behind".*

> *"So interpretation is a big problem… lots of letters, calendars, posters, things that get sent home from school all in English and don't get me wrong and have asked and have went forward and said we need this translated and have got a small budget for it but for the most part the money just isn't there for it, it's expensive you know to be able to translate into a different language"*

Findings suggest that NI schools have an annual allocation of two interpretation slots per refugee child "*that's all they can claim for financially",* however some schools think creatively:

> *"…each school is totally different… all schools will have access to the same thing money wise… But schools who want to go above and beyond… some will put…, a basic amount of support in and some will put huge amounts of support in and that's really down to each individual school"..*

Should the need arise to contact parents more than twice a year, which may be the case in children with SEN, schools pay for interpreters from their own budget, however in some cases it would appear that they are reluctant to do so:

> *"…a lot of the time, to be honest, schools and other agencies, not just schools, pick up the phone to ring [the service] 'But can you tell the parents this'. You know, because it's easier for them to tell us something to ask us to pass on, than for them to go to the effort of trying to get a message interpreted."*

On the other hand, problems may arise because of discrepancies in translation that may impact the validity of what the professional or the family have actually said.

> *"So, while a family can always be confident themselves with what they've said, once it's out of their mouth, they don't know how it's interpreted."*

This may be more evident if several translators are used throughout the assessment process or in other applicable situations:

> *"So, we always try to say to families that that information is in the assessment it's really important that we read through and check because you could've, it could've been done over a few different sessions with different interpreters".*

It was also reported that families have missed crucial appointments with services due to interpreters not showing up for meetings. This has led to feelings of frustration, with the families feeling that it reflects badly upon them.

It was also expressed by key workers that schools often do not have any awareness or guidance on the background or the needs of Syrian children when they come to Northern Ireland.

> *"…I feel schools should have kind'a little bit more insight before Syrian kids come to school…"*

They found that schools are not aware of cultural differences, gaps in schooling and the impact of trauma on education. There is an interesting juxtaposition between the schools who are resistant to refugees joining and those who hold the misperception of themselves as 'experts' when working with refugee CYP.

> *"And sometimes schools, like, certain schools who've had a few Syrian children then think that they are the experts in settling these children … and those then schools, maybe still aren't maybe necessarily what they should be doing."*

> *"There is one school that just, I think they're quite proud of the fact that they have no Syrian children."*

Expectations regarding school uniform present a challenge for refugee families. While some schools are flexible and do not expect the children to have a uniform straight away, *"There's other schools will say 'Well you have to get the uniform'"*. The key worker described that she often has to explain to schools that the family does not currently have the money to purchase the uniform, but on occasion the schools uphold their expectation that all pupils wear a uniform from the beginning. This has led to feelings of frustration for families and the key worker:

> *"Y' know there's, you're nearly hittin', you're finding it frustrated never-mind the family. And you don't want a child to feel any different going into the school without the uniform. But that has, that has happened*"

Challenges related to Statutory Services

Many examples were given of how families have been impacted negatively while working with statutory services to access school placements.

> *"…it's one of the first things they are asking about from when they arrive… What about school for my children… then just applying to places if they come in at a certain time of year are they going to get a place? Pre-school places are at a premium"*

Thus ease of securing provision may be dependent on the date of arrival in NI, with a high demand for pre-school placements and deadlines that cannot be adjusted for refugees. The location of the refugee family appears to present another difficulty in accessing placements, as in certain areas "*both mainstream and special educational schools are saturated".* Special school placements were highlighted to present a further challenge with children requiring a statutory assessment before placement allocation "*it took over a year to get that child to a special school"*.

> *"…they struggle in terms of getting places in schools so it will take them months and months and months even with the help of our EWO and stuff, 'emm, etc. not an easy process…"*

This was specifically evident in relation to the time taken to organise a statutory assessment and subsequently receive a school provision:

> "*It takes a long time to get a statutory assessment 'em, like different appointments that they had to go to, to try and get into school".*

The negative impact of challenges with statutory services was discussed at length through specific examples of families who had been directly impacted by this process:

> *"they had a teenage boy who really wanted to go to school but because he hadn't had the statutory assessment completed, he couldn't, wasn't given a place, so every time I visited that family it was a huge issue…. he was out of school for a year……..it was so difficult for family and he, his condition like deteriorated.."*

> *"He was so bored and ... so he would sleep during the day and like in the morning and then be awake all night….his family as well like just didn't know how to help him really."*

A major problem to emerge is related to how refugee children were being left 'waiting' and 'in limbo' until they were given an educational placement, with two children waiting five months before starting school, despite their wish to start school:

> "S*he is not in P1 yet so she's still….. But it's a big thing for that family as well, 'em, when are they going to get to go to school? How does this work? And is, this is a lot of conversations I suppose explaining the system"*

> *"…when I think about particular challenges in the whole special educational needs I would say the main challenge is just the time that it takes."*

> *"…this family arrived in August. They have been waiting on an educational place for their two children."*

"…whereas now there seems to be more so that there's a delay, they're at home while the assessment takes place and then only following the assessment, if they're statemented or whatever, then they're given a placement"

A key difficulty which was discussed at length was the issue of transport to and from school. This appears to have a big impact on the lives of refugee families. Many parents have experienced traumas and physical injuries as a result of the war and many do not have independent means of transport:

"The parents have either a disability or an injury from the war and can't walk their children to school, but the children can't walk to school on their own obviously because they are all primary school age or else the school's too far."

Indeed, the issue of transport has the potential to delay young people from commencing school placement:

"All the decision making around transport and getting a wheelchair held him… kept him out of school for probably 2 months."

This demonstrates a challenge for families as having their child's needs appropriately identified by statutory services requires submitting sufficient supporting information which families can struggle to do due to the language barrier and lack of awareness of statutory processes. Contributing to this issue is the lack of information available about the child's early development, previous school history, even their chronological age. This highlights the importance of the key worker in advocating for the child and family.

Overall there is a feeling that statutory services, could do more to help settle refugee pupils into education;

"I think there could be more done…as in they could be as well prepared as well as we are in terms of getting them in and settled and into the right education environment"

One key worker explained how some professionals working in the education sector are not visible or accessible to key workers and therefore also the refugee pupils and families. In the following example the participant is referring to Educational Psychologists;

"We don't really have a connection with…you know we don't see them, they are not visible"

The challenge of contacting and receiving responses from statutory services was highlighted by the key worker throughout the interview:

> *"I find it difficult to move to get in touch with education and welfare officers who are responsible for SEN and without their involvement it makes it hard to move the whole process forward…"*

Conversely, the key worker noted that mainstream EWOs *"have made life really easy"* and appeared to indicate the difficulty accessing statutory offices was unique to special education.

The impact of these challenges

As one might expect the key workers identified numerous ways in which these challenges impact on refugee children and their families.

Children and young people experiencing a slow assessment process and a lengthy wait for their placement, may be at home with very few social opportunities. This may lead to them feeling socially isolated.

> *"Well, I think for the families that children are awaiting assessments, or assessments are ongoing and they're not in an educational placement, I think that affects children due to the lack of social interaction that they have"*

It was apparent that not only can the child with additional needs be impacted by this process, but so can their siblings. While the key worker and other professionals are trying to get the child with special educational needs support, the other children in the family may not have access to extra social activities in the interim.

> *"I suppose, um, the families really need then that assessment process to start as quick as possible to try and get the best educational placement for the child, and then it's difficult then in the interim because you want to try and [pause] you know, get all the children in the family linked into different, like, social activities and various different things."*

In addition, the parents may not have the same access to social opportunities in the community while they await placement of their child.

> *"…obviously two parents can't go out to English classes then if the child is not in school placement as well."*

Ironically, the wait involved as part of the placement process is reported to have an adverse impact on the educational attainment of the young person.

> *"…their educational attainment is obviously affected too the longer they're out of school"*

However, even when they are given a place in school there are circumstances relating to teacher interactions that can continue to have an impact on their learning.

> *"Whereas, sometimes when children go into classrooms that, you know, the teacher's not really taking any particular attention to the child, then they get kind of lost in amongst everybody else, do you know?"*

It was established by key workers that some schools are more welcoming towards refugees than others. In schools that were less welcoming, refugee children are reported to feel more anxious in the classrooms.

> *"…they would've been going to that school thinking 'we're not really welcome here'. Um, um, so I was glad. I think if children do, they do pick up on that then that makes it they're maybe going into their, um, school classes very apprehensive or worried, do you know?"*

An uncompromising approach can be damaging to the child-teacher relationship and to the confidence of the young person:

> *"You know, some schools there's no compromising, no thinking about the individual, then you do find that those children take a wee bit longer to... they wouldn't maybe be as confident to maybe raise their hand, or ask questions, or they'll come home not maybe knowing about what they're supposed to do their homework, because they didn't want to ask"*

The impact of such an approach is evident on the overall wellbeing of the young person and their happiness in school.

> *"…the children definitely aren't as happy. They'd say they're not as happy"*

Noted delays in receiving a uniform grant and variation in how this sum of money is received also has a significant impact. Families may find themselves in a position of having to use their allocated money to buy the necessary items for their children.

> *"The grant form will take a wee while. So, the families are given, from Bryson, a fund of money when they first arrive and therefore families have to use that for their uniform purchases"*

When the families receive the grant, they may need to supplement what is given in order to purchase all the uniform items that schools require their pupils to have. Refugee families may face more strain should their young person attend a post-primary school.

> *"It's very expensive. […] primary school not so maybe much of a financial burden but secondary school definitely. Like a blazer, blazers for secondary*

schools are 70 pounds, just for one piece, and while the uniform grant is more for secondary school it doesn't cover if you had to buy everything"

Theme 3: The needs of the child

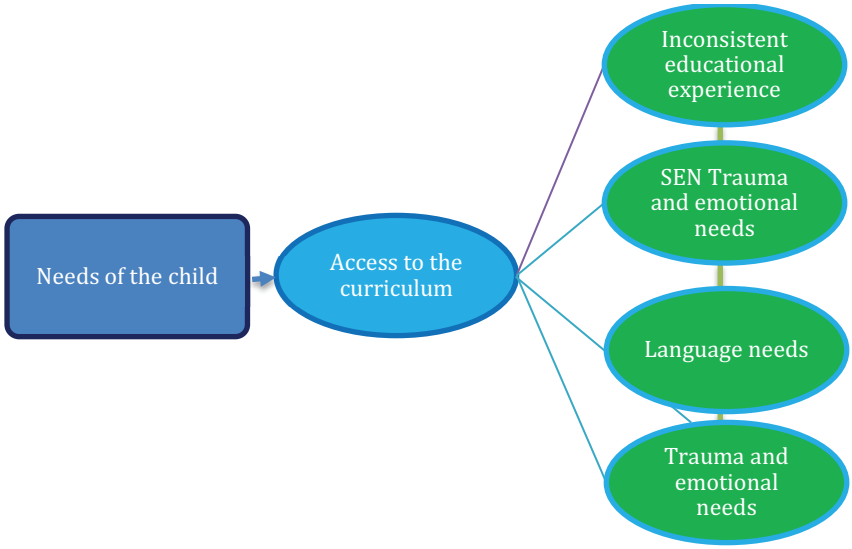

Figure 6. *Theme 3: the needs of the child*

It was clear that the key worker participants had encountered a range of needs amongst their client group. These have been grouped into a number of sub-themes including: needs arising from inconsistent or patchy educational experiences, SEN/Learning needs, language needs and trauma and other emotional needs.

Inconsistent experience of education

> *"Children just not being used to being in a school environment."*

Key worker participants noted that a number of children have had their school life interrupted by the war in their home country and during their time in refugee camps. Some have had very limited or no school experience. Key workers spoke of how school attendance may not have been a priority in their previous life contexts.

> *"Even moving from one place to another you're not in a place where you can learn or retain information."*

This limited school experience can lead to some children having limited experience of boundaries:

> *"…he then had to learn boundaries. There was no boundaries in place and we would find at times other children, there would not be boundaries"*

Consequently, key workers indicated that attending school and being introduced to rules and boundaries can be a new experience for a refugee child and should be taken into consideration when responding to their needs.

Key workers indicated that while some children may have had long experiences of absenteeism, some children may have had no prior experience of a structured school environment before arriving in Northern Ireland. As such, settling into a new setting can come with its own unique challenges. One such challenge is that of finding themselves in a highly structured, routine driven situation. Difficulties with concentration or sitting in one room for a prolonged period of time in the course of the school day were acknowledged. As such, their behaviour may seem problematic:

> *"…but certainly then, what you do notice then is that children that do have an additional special need, that settling in process too and placement, um, is very, very difficult in terms of routine, you know, settling in to routine"*

The key worker noted that Syrian children were often retained in a school year below their chronological age. This was suggested to be a result of difficulties associated with English as an additional language (EAL) and consequently attainment in school, and also lack of previous educational experience:

> *"…if they do come to us and they've had education, purely because of the language alone sometimes they have to be bounced back a year… they're being held back, and they are in a class with kids that aren't their age and what not and they're older so that can cause problems… Because a 10/11 year old child doesn't want to be in with 9 year olds…"*

> *"Well 'yeh they are quite behind I suppose and a lot of children when they first come here, so if they are normally so if they should be in P6 they'll go into P5."*

Consequently this may result in feelings of isolation in the children who have been removed from their peer group and distress for parents who were noted to comment *"this isn't suitable… He's in the wrong class he needs to move up…"*

SEN

It appeared that key worker participants had encountered a broad range of special educational needs in the children of their refugee client group. Special needs arising from medical difficulties including cerebral palsy were commonly reported: *"Cerebral palsy seems to be a big one."*

> *"There's ADHD, 'em autism, there's eh with like physical disabilities……. spina bifida as well."*

> *"This is what I noticed, they're all like, medically. So, it's a child with cerebral palsy, it's a child with learning - or Down syndrome, it's a child with things that are very […] medical or genetic things"*

Key workers were also aware that needs ranged in severity and in terms of impact on the child's access to the curriculum:

> *"For me mine have been severe enough that mainstream couldn't be a consideration… apart from that one who started in mainstream but who really shouldn't have been there…" "In every intake that we have there will be kids with special educational needs"*

One key worker expressed a range of defined needs in her caseload. However, she was keen to point out that while a number of children on her caseload didn't have a defined or diagnosed need, their learning was impacted by virtue of their refugee status:

> *"….so these kids coming in, all of them for me should be categorised as special educational needs in terms of because they are coming into a different language, some of them had schooling like I say, some of them didn't, some of them start schooling a bit later on"*

They clearly felt that refugee status constituted a special educational need in its own right, given the impact on learning. The key worker also emphasised that the impact of refugee status can be more difficult for certain age ranges:

> *"I think for teenagers it's very difficult cause then they are coming to do GCSEs."*

In other instances, these CYP may not have had a diagnosis or assessment of need in their country of origin and it is not until they are in school in Northern Ireland that that need becomes evident.

> *"Starting school is certainly difficult and we have a lot of children that maybe don't have, that wouldn't be flagged up on their UN referral form that there has been any particular learning need, or anything identified."*

> *"It's more so, we probably have [pause] a high proportion that, once they're here, and maybe for the ones that are kind of middle of the road, they might try mainstream school and issues are identified in school"*

Language

> *"What's the point in our child just sitting in the class and not understanding anything?"*

Key workers emphasised that language is a key difficulty for refugee children, however there was a perception that the language barrier was not recognised by statutory services as a special need and therefore a barrier to learning:

> *"Language barrier, 'em which isn't considered, it's not a special need in special needs school kind of thing but it is."*

They also emphasised the importance of understanding language through different mediums. While children might quickly pick up spoken English language this does not necessarily translate into other mediums:

> *"It's a lot of oral so their speaking and listening can be quite good but reading and writing is really behind."*

Concerns for the academic attainment of refugee children were expressed during interviews, *"they can't read or write and so like they're academically quite further behind."* Key workers described the specific areas of learning which are impacted, *"reading and writing is really behind".* As the ability to read and write in the English language is a key part of schooling in NI this can have a detrimental effect on the children's learning outcomes.

While the potential impact of a language barrier on a child's learning has been explored, one key worker also emphasised the potential emotional difficulties associated with a language barrier.

> *"Children probably feel that as well that there's quite a lot of pressure for them to learn English quickly you know it's hard."*

This may also contribute to poor emotional wellbeing as even when children may feel overwhelmed by the pressure of a new school environment, they cannot express this to their new teaching staff:

> *"I think it's just all made worse by the language barrier just that they can't really express you know how they are feeling, or, that it's all very new"*

The need for specific support in response to the difficulty of having a language barrier was emphasised during interview, "*they need specific language support."* It was suggested that *"some schools have done that and it's been beneficial."* Even when a translator is put in place the key worker suggested that in order for children to benefit from translated documents *"they have to understand what's going on in the classroom."*

EAL presents additional difficulties for children attempting to access the curriculum. The key worker mentioned that the educational outcomes predicted for children may not be achieved *"they can't do it 'cause they haven't got the language to do it."* In one case the key worker recounted parents sourced a tutor *"to help his English move on"* in order to maintain their child's progress academically.

Trauma/Emotional Difficulties

> *"With our work trauma is a big, big part of it."*

The impact of the trauma to which refugee children have likely been exposed during the war in their home country was discussed at length during key worker interviews. One noted how the impact of trauma is a need which she observes in the majority of children with whom she works:

> *"So this project in particular, a lot of children would obviously been impacted just from the moving from where they come from to NI……. or trauma issues"*

Participants were keen to emphasise that the impact of being a Syrian refugee should be viewed as a trauma in itself, irrespective of whether the child has directly witnessed traumatic instances their refugee status should be taken into consideration by the educational professionals who work with them.

> *"But I'd say all of the children are affected by just being Syrian even, even if they haven't seen like traumatic events so I think schools could really improve by just that additional support for refugee children"*

Differing levels of need congruent with differing levels of resiliency were acknowledged:

> *"Not every person coming in through our doors is going to be obviously affected…by what has happened…because they have different resiliency"*

However, when considering SEN, trauma appears to present and related strongly to whatever difficulties the young person is experiencing;

> *"Special needs, I'm going to also add the kids who are traumatised in terms of…the evidence that you can see that…within the children."*
>
> *Int: "…what special education needs do those children have?"*
>
> *Pt: "…both of them are related to trauma"*

Indicators of trauma were described as subtle/hidden and it was acknowledged that school staff often struggled to recognise the signs;

> *"The school it's very, very difficult for them…to pick up things like that especially when they're not seeing them in their normal environment"*

Key workers suggested that the impact of lack of awareness of how trauma can manifest in refugee children has in some cases led to detrimental effects for some children and their families;

"…The family took it really, really bad in terms of the boy being 'emm, reducing his timetable hours … the family felt as if though the kid was being punished for his behaviour…"

Indicators of trauma were described, as were traumatic experiences from Syrian refugee children's backgrounds e.g. witnessing torture, parents being murdered, witnessing parental abduction and loss of extended family. Many children were described as having multiple traumatic experiences:

"That wee boy was kind of traumatised and re-traumatised"

"…Dad has been abducted from their family home and emm, and beaten in front of them before taken away and never returned and now pronounced dead. So, to them that was a huge kinda', 'emm, trauma and…. they came here on their own, so as one family, so for me that wee boy was kinda' traumatised and re-traumatised…"

These experiences reportedly led to behaviours from children that were likely related to their traumatic experiences. However without knowing their backgrounds schools failed to pick this up;

"With like any sudden movements he would hide…something that school didn't pick that up…that is trauma related"

While schools lack understanding of trauma it appears that specific statutory services for trauma within the community support are beneficial;

"We got them referred to the family trauma centre…which has been fantastic"

One key worker reported that often families too did not always understand their child's behavioural presentation and did not always relate it to the trauma the child had experienced. Families can be in denial or fearful *"…I don't, want, 'emm, I don't want my kids to be reminded of the past…."* One key worker noted that it:

"..was frustrating to understand what was happening and they (the family) kept phoning me 'please explain to them (school) that he will be really good', 'we have spoken to him', but I am trying to tell the family that he didn't do anything bad, he's reacting to his…and again for them to understand the trauma and the child has been affected by the trauma…"

Families can be initially reluctant to accept help and one key worker acknowledged that this should be viewed through a cultural lens:

"It is quite a taboo thing, mental health in their home country"

> *“I think a lot of parents that come they don't really talk to their children about trauma or what they’ve been through because they see it as something that’s happened in the past.”*

As a result, children may not be receiving direct support in regards to their mental health and wellbeing within the community, or from other agencies outside education in relation to the possible traumas they have experienced. This emphasises the need for an understanding of the effects of trauma in the school environment as well as the need for direct therapeutic support for refugee children in school.

Theme 4: Understanding Culture

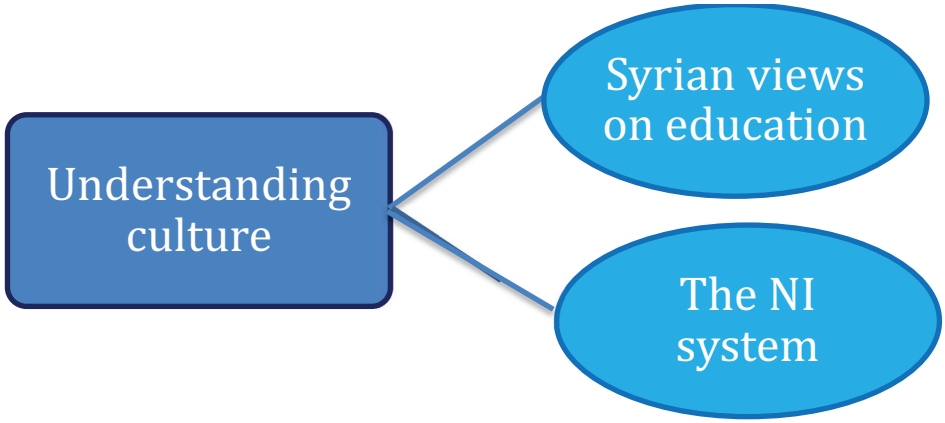

Figure 7. *Theme 4: Understanding Culture*

Key workers perceived a barrier or challenge for refugee families and young people when integrating into NI in terms of the 'fit' between their own beliefs and culture and the educational culture in NI. This is discussed in terms of two main themes: Syrian views on education and the NI educational system.

Syrian views on education

Key worker participants expressed clearly during interview that a main priority for refugee families is the success of their children:

> *"Education is really important for Syrians… it's one of the first things they are asking about from when they arrive… What about school for my children?"*

Key workers highlighted that parents often show that they have a desire to move on from the past events of their life in their home country, *"we're here starting fresh let's move on",* as such their children are often a source of hope for refugee families and a child's success educationally is often a way in which families can feel like they are moving on from the past. In one key worker's experience, many refugee parents would view the success of their children as the most important thing for their lives and their future:

> *"I'd say most of the parents that come they say you know our lives are over, we're here for the sake of our children, so education is a huge priority for them and they are all very much we need to get our kids in school they need to do well and, which is quite weird when it's like a 30 year old person saying their life's over they're here for their child but it's a huge priority for them school"*

"I think the first thing parents would say to me when they come is, we are here because of our children, we want our children to be educated, we want the best for them"

Key workers perceived that education and a child's success in school was a priority for families above all else, *"it's so important for them, education is so important."* One key worker told a story of a young boy who had been out of school for a long time. They spoke of the difficulty of having him out of school as this was limiting their opportunities and in turn their success. When the child was eventually given a school placement, they spoke of how important this was for the family unit as they were now perceived to be doing well and succeeding, *"in a school environment he thrives like he is so good."*

The NI Educational System

Key workers reported that many Syrian families are surprised to learn that children with SEN in NI can attend school, as in Syria there appears to be a belief that children with SEN cannot attend school as they are not able to learn.

"…first of all they are surprised that these kids can get education…"

"…because he had like physical disabilities emm, they weren't used to the fact that he could go to school… so that was a big challenge for them… for even to just let him go and allow that process to happen and they kept kinda saying, but 'how's he going to learn' but 'he doesn't have the mental capability', 'he can't understand',…"

Participants noted that Syrian families are used to caring for children with SEN at home and the process of allowing their children to attend school for the first time has been challenging. A further key worker explained how in Syria, special schools were a privilege and how Syrian families are surprised at what education is available in NI for children with SEN:

"…this is completely new to them, because even back in Syria, back there, schools out there, these were really special schools that you had to pay for and only just a few people were able to use that…"

Unsurprisingly therefore, key workers reported that the SEN process is unfamiliar to Syrian families. Syrian families are unaware where to ask for help for their child with SEN or do not know how to push for extra help like local families would do.

"…a lot of times a lot of parents, local, would fight for their child with special educational needs in terms of what they want for them and what they hope for them to achieve and for that statement to be done and everything, and they are pushing and pushing but these families are coming with again and

no awareness, no understanding and they kinda don't understand to push to get the best for their child as well. But again that is lack of awareness…"

Syrian parents are described as being just happy that their children can get schooling. While this seems positive it is placed in a context where parents may be complacent and accept sub-par standards rather than challenge schools to do better;

"Improvement within the children, sometimes it's very slow…if I was a parent it would be very frustrating but some of these parents are just grateful that they are here and they have schooling."

Theme 5: Promoting Good Practice

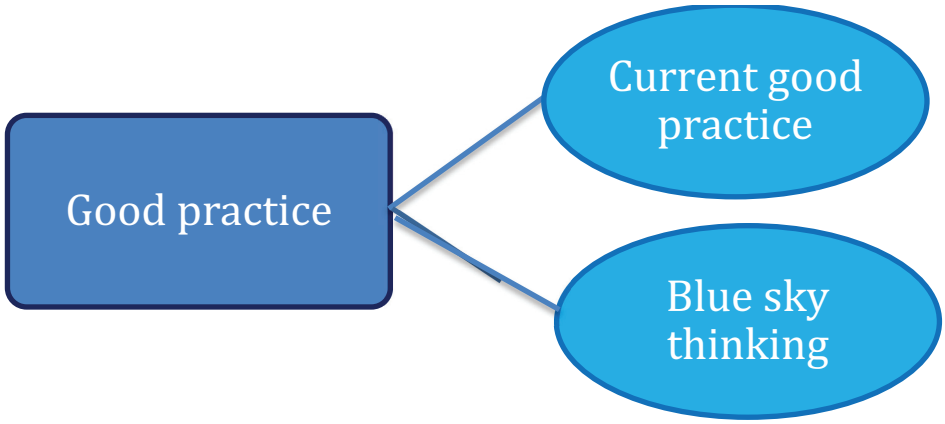

Figure 8. *Theme 5: Good practice*

A key theme in the conversations held during interview with participant key workers was the positive experiences which families have had with available services in NI. This strand of conversation was vital as it highlighted the practice which is beneficial at the moment as well as recommendations for future practice. This will be discussed in terms of two sub-themes: current good practice and blue sky thinking.

Current Good Practice

Key workers highlighted positive adjustments and flexible approaches made by schools to accommodate and assimilate refugee children. These included reduced class sizes, a *"buddy system"* pairing a child with an older child *"who speaks Arabic but English as well",* providing pictures to prevent communication breakdown and supporting language learning:

> *"they put him in a wee small class with just a few people to suit his needs better rather than a big class, they adapt to each child it's not just about suiting the school… even the way the school is laid out, the teachers, the other staff… it's just really impressed me, so it did and the way they manage things"*

> *"And schools have been very welcoming and have been trying to do, every school has surprised me more and more…in terms of what they can accommodate for these, for these kids…"*

A further example of adjustments that schools can make in order to make refugee children feel welcome and to ease the resettlement process is in their cultural adaption:

"… so if we have children that go to the Catholic maintained school they would have, um, prayers throughout the day […] and the families may be of the Muslim faith and they […] wouldn't maybe want to go off to mass. So, schools have been very good in respecting all those things."

Schools were reported to be self-motivated *"doing this off their own back"* to make the adjustments and assist the children to acclimatise. One key worker spoke highly of specific schools and the support they offered to both refugee children and families. This included the management of parental expectations, provision of Arabic speaker *"to help them feel more settled in the classroom",* and applying for funding to ensure the best support is available for the children. Schools were even noted to encourage families to learn English:

"the school were fabulous… in how they dealt with him, managed the parents, managed the expectations, dealt with like the language barrier… there's just such a system of support in for that child and those parents now and the school have been largely responsible for that…"

"…the majority of the schools that we have had have been very patient with maybe making an altered timetable if required and discussing with parents how best to settle in the children"

"I had a family who had their children settled in a school and it was a lovely, lovely school, and the teachers were so great. One of the teachers even went and did Arabic lessons at night"

Other techniques were reported as useful to aid the experience of refugee families. For instance, schools have used communication books between home and school to inform either party of how that child is in either setting on a daily basis.

"…they were very creative with how they did that with, they created a wee communication system between them all"

"…it had photographs for who the child's teacher was going to be, who, photographs of the school, photographs of the principal, who the child's teacher was going to be emm…photograph of you're going into P4…"

Examples of further good practice in schools include employing Arabic speaking classroom assistants that could reduce the impact of the language barriers. Furthermore, a flexible approach to school uniforms was a welcomed approach by some schools, with some covering the cost of the child's uniform. The emotional needs of the children and young people (CYP) have also been supported through school counselling.

Specific officers in the EA were commended for their communication skills and approach with the refugee families:

"…there's particular education officers that just when they're willing to work with you or they get back to you, they listen to you and to the families, it's that empathy and warmth in their approach with the families, whenever that exists it makes everybody more comfortable as you can imagine…"

The key worker also reflected on the role of an Education Welfare Officer Representative from the EA whose job it was to liaise with refugee support services. The introduction of this role was described as beneficial in many ways including: providing a point of contact for key workers to the EA, help with legal terminology regarding applying for statutory support and improving awareness of services available;

"Now with this new person in along the way things should be explained better…"

This highlights the positive outcomes for families when all relevant agencies are willing to engage and support them. Further positive experiences included children being allocated a special educational placement before an official assessment of their needs:

"What they did was put the children into special educational schools to meet the needs of the children before they were assessed. Now that was good cus the kids were straight in."

This example of good practice was facilitated by effective multi-disciplinary working whereby the children's SENs were identified early and information was effectively communicated. There are further examples of positive multi-disciplinary working, for example, health professionals combining appointments so only one appointment and interpreter is required. Effective communication between health, community and education also led to a young person receiving emotional support.

Blue Sky thinking

One key worker proposed that a faster, more efficient assessment of SEN was deemed necessary to improve outcomes for refugee children. The challenges in co-ordinating the various professionals to achieve this were also acknowledged:

"Special educational needs [assessment] needs to be made faster but it's not just one person looks after that there's so many people involved and getting reports and doing this and doing that or at least allowing kids to be in school while that's completed"

It was also suggested that in an ideal world assessment of need should be undertaken while the child is in a placement. One key worker suggested that during periods of delay especially when it was *"obvious a statement was going to be produced then let the child start school"*, access to school placements, specifically in special schools, pending the outcome of statutory assessment, would improve their quality of life:

"I think having children in placements while assessments are ongoing, if possible."

"I think for children who are not in placement, um, I think the sooner they're in, especially children who've never been in any, um... If you think of the like, severe learning disability, if they've never been in any environment that is stimulating, sensory, or anything, then the quicker that, that, um, happens the better."

Further, it was suggested that schools should focus their efforts and resources at helping Syrian pupils progress academically;

"…within money that the schools are getting…they need to really invest in not failing these kids and that's what I worry about that these kids are not going to progress academically"

Improving awareness and understanding of professionals was seen as important in improving the wellbeing of children with SEN;

"I think just somebody for them to understand and understand them…to be able to work with the cultural gap as well…because that's huge as well, em in terms of special education needs, in terms of disability within children because that's a taboo as well."

"…not every person coming through our doors is going to be obviously going to be affected by what's happened because they have different resiliency levels but I do think it's a very sensitive subject, and I think it's a subject where we need to be aware of and we need to be observant and we need to then treat it very quickly…"

Educational Psychologists were considered by key workers to be professionals who could provide guidance to key workers and help schools understand the difficulties faced by Syrian refugee pupils:

"…they are a part of that professionalism, that understands…and that can bridge that gap, you know? Whereas a lot, you know, maybe they're limited to certain things but I really think they could be hands on."

This highlights the importance that an Educational Psychologist could have in supporting Syrian children as they have the skill base to support SEN and trauma. Also, it was suggested that Educational Psychologists and other professionals within the EA could provide training on how to support newcomer children and how to best address possible language barriers.

> *“Refreshing them on practical aspects that they need to do, do you know, for newcomer children. Especially those with, like, where English isn't their first language, would be good as well”*

Refugee families themselves could also benefit from receiving education on the NI school system, the legislation on school attendance and the importance of school stability. It was felt that *“if parents are communicated to…emm… y’know then they’ll understand.”*

The high standard of care that was, by and large, commonly afforded to refugee families was acknowledged, however key workers remained mindful of the challenges they faced and the potential areas which could afford to improve.

Discussion

The present study explored the views and experiences of key workers from a refugee service in the UK in relation to their work with families of Syrian refugee children with special educational needs (SEN). The challenges they faced in supporting the families and the barriers faced by individual children were also explored, as were their views on aspects of educational practice that were working well and how educational practice in relation to refugee families could be improved. Findings indicate that refugee children face tremendous challenges in their education and home life following their resettlement, and while there is evidence of good practice amongst different services, future improvements are required to better support the needs of these children.

The importance of key worker support for refugee families was a prominent finding. It was clear that the role is highly variable, with day-to-day tasks changing in response to the individual needs of the family they are supporting. What was clear was that the role and the nature of support provided evolves over time. A consistent feature of their work is empowering the refugee families, building skills and knowledge, increasing independence and autonomy and promoting integration into NI society. Furthermore, the key workers play a crucial 'bridging' role, helping families register and navigate what are essentially alien health, social, legal, political and education services. The importance of this aspect of the key worker role is supported by Szente et al. (2006) and Mace et al. (2014), who found that professionals working together and close school liaison aided the transition to a new school system for refugee children and acted as significant protective factors, contributing to positive educational and social outcomes. What is clear in the current research is that while key workers can establish the initial bridges or relationships between home and agencies and schools, it is important that all parties work to maintain these links, and do not seek to over rely on key workers.

Undoubtedly, one of the most wide-reaching themes was the focus on challenges faced by refugee families living in NI. These challenges appear to be wide-reaching, systemic and inter-linked. Establishing and maintaining a relationship with school in order to support children's learning appears to present a particular challenge for many parents. Unsurprisingly, the language barrier between the refugee families and school was found to be a major challenge. As many of the parents have a lack of English language themselves, many refugee children are not receiving support with their homework. Furthermore, their parents are often not kept up-to-date with their school life due to a reluctance of some schools to use the interpretation and translation services. This has furthermore consequences for parental involvement in school life, a child's access to the curriculum and feelings of frustration for the families. D'Angelo et al. (2011) also found the language barrier could be a source of frustration for parents as it makes it difficult to relay their concerns about their child.

Key workers discussed the apparent reluctance of schools to use the service of interpreters. Concerns regarding the accuracy of translations, inconsistent use of

individual interpreters, and delays in accessing services due to interpreters not being present are all challenges stemming from the language barrier. The limited funding for accessing interpreters has led to some schools paying for interpretation and translation services from their own budget. Szente et al. (2006) emphasised the importance of such interpretation and translation services for closing the communication gap between families and services.

Lack of flexibility around school uniform and the financial implications of this also appear to be a source of stress. There also appears to be inconsistency in cultural awareness and openness in welcoming refugee children into schools. Coll & Magnuson (1997) noted that cultural differences and discrimination could be expected when CYP resettled into the host school.

The challenges when working with statutory agencies were well documented in the findings. Experiences of slow assessments, long waits to gain school placements and delays in responses unfortunately appear to be quite common. Issues in arranging transport of children with SEN to school arose quite commonly during discussion. These findings are consistent with the literature which acknowledges a poor awareness of needs and intrusive assessments (Newbigging & Thomas, 2011). As the parents have limited understanding about what is involved in the SEN process in the UK (Kernaghan, 2015), the importance of key worker support in advocating for them through the SEN process is paramount. While statutory services have standard protocols and timeframes they must follow, it is important to recognise that refugee children and their families have a unique set of needs and as such should be treated in accordance with these. The literature suggests that statutory services have been directly tasked with supporting these individuals under the VPR scheme (DfC, 2018), and as such could potentially look at altering standard practice in order to meet these needs effectively and in a timelier manner, given the repercussions for refugee children and their families.

Indeed, given the multitude of challenges faced by these families, it is little wonder that they are impacted in different ways. In many instances key workers reported that children and young people were socially isolated because of the slow assessment process and long wait times. This can have a knock-on effect on other family members who sacrifice social and economic opportunities to stay home with the child. School attitudes towards refugees appeared to play a significant part in the emotional wellbeing of refugee families. Exclusionary, inflexible and uncompromising attitudes seemed to adversely impact the confidence and happiness of these children and young people and increase their anxiety in school. As a result, it would appear that parents are worried about stigma, about the treatment of their children and how the family will be regarded in the community. The impact that these challenges have on refugee families is consistent with the literature from Anderman (2002), which states that sense of belonging impacts mental health, social inclusion, and attainment.

The wide ranging special educational needs of refugee children was a key finding across the data. Some children were reported to have specific/diagnosed SENs diagnosed pre-resettlement, and others had difficulties diagnosed once they had enrolled in schools in NI. Medical needs such as cerebral palsy were noted to be common (Said Foundation, 2009).

The participant key workers cautioned however that poor attainment might be associated with inconsistent or patchy access to education as well as exposure to trauma in their home country or in transit which might present as SEN on enrolment in the highly structured and formal school system in NI.

Furthermore, key workers noted that educational professionals need to be cautious in distinguishing between those children who have a SEN related specifically to language difficulties or literacy and those who simply have not yet acquired an adequate level of English to complete academic work (Kernaghan, 2015). Educational Psychology has a key role to play here. Additionally, the very essence of a language barrier has behavioural and social implications for children and young people, with developing friendships being reported as a main reason why CYP wish to learn the English language (Geraghty et al., 2010).

The impact of trauma on refugee children and their families was evident in the findings. Due to the war in Syria, the children may have experienced recurring traumatic events. Key workers highlighted the importance of awareness raising in schools and with other educational professionals as well as the provision of appropriate trauma-informed support within schools. Previous research has acknowledged the impact of trauma on war-affected children, specifically on their mental health (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015) and educational attainments (Dyregrov, 2004). Refugee status in itself was discussed within the topic of trauma. This is echoed by McBrien (2005) who concludes that the very fact of being a refugee is, in itself, traumatic due to the various life disruptions they have endured. This is reflected in the literature, Kernaghan (2015) noted the importance of allowing children sufficient adjustment time and acknowledging that school and boundaries may be a new experience for many refugee children.

Certain cultural beliefs emerged from the data. Education was described as of value with parents wishing for success for their children. There was a sense that success in education would help the families ‘move on’ from their previous experiences and that the educational opportunities for their children might in some way compensate for the trials of relocation and resettlement. This is an interesting finding, little research appears to have explored the value placed on education by Syrian refugee parents. However, Murphy & Vieten (2017) found that parents have expressed their frustration at language barriers and lack of interpreters to support their involvement in their child’s education, possibly indicating that this is of high value to them.

Cultural differences emerged from the findings, particularly in relation to the education of children with SEN. Key workers noted that families were often surprised that their child, who had a SEN, would be able to attend school. While this was a positive outcome for the families, it also presented challenges as it was not an experience that they were accustomed to. The unfamiliarity of the UK education system has previously been cited as a challenge for newcomer families (Ryan et al., 2010). Therefore going through a rigorous assessment process, gaining a SEN placement and separating from their child for the first time are significant challenges for these families. The stress of this process may be enhanced by perceived poor access to statutory services noted above. Further, this highlights the critical role that key workers have in helping families to navigate the SEN process to ensure each child receives the support they need.

The final theme identified has particular relevance for educationalists working with refugee families. Examples of current good practice are discussed. Included are a positive attitude to newcomers, creative use of funding, reduced class sizes, buddy systems with older children and supporting language learning. This is similar to the finding of Kernaghan and colleagues (2015) who noted that buddy systems and visuals for language and communication support have been positively implemented in schools elsewhere. Some schools were noted to provide exceptional support to children and families, providing additional language classes for families and positive management of parental expectations. There were examples of appropriate consideration of cultural differences, such as adapting assemblies or menus accordingly. Good practice schools had very accommodating, positive attitudes and were creative in their strategies. There is evidence of communities and schools joining together to help refugee families resettle in their areas through English language classes and homework support groups. Other examples include a few notable examples of children being given access to a specialist educational placement while awaiting their assessment.

While these examples of good practice are encouraging, findings indicate that there is room for improvement in future professional practice in supporting refugee families and their children. Participant key workers were invited to engage in some blue sky thinking, to identify what educational professionals could do better in their support of this vulnerable population.

Key workers were clear that in their view it would be highly impactful if assessment processes were delivered at a much faster rate and waiting times for a school placement were shorter. This has clear resource implications for the education system in NI. They also suggested that greater collaboration and transparency between professionals would help aid assessments, and streamline the process, leading to quicker identification of SEN and allocation of provision. As aforementioned, there have been good practice examples whereby children have been placed in a school whilst the statutory assessment process was ongoing. It would be advantageous for all if this more flexible approach were common practice.

Given that the challenges faced by refugee families are wide and systemic, key workers expressed their hope that newcomer parents receive education on the UK school and legal system and the importance of school stability. Furthermore, community and school collaboration whereby newcomer parents are welcomed and taught the English language might see positive outcomes for school involvement, socialisation, and emotional wellbeing and employment prospects. Such initiatives may foster a greater sense of belonging which will help their resettlement and integration into the UK (Hek, 2005).

It was felt that professional development for teachers in relation to meeting the needs of newcomer children, their needs and their culture was becoming increasingly important. The literature is congruent with these findings, with comments made on poor awareness of needs, assessment procedures, and teachers feeling overwhelmed in knowing how to support refugee children (Newbigging & Thomas, 2011; Szente et al., 2006). There was a sense that schools need to reflect on their expectations of newcomer children and continue to push them academically. This is echoed by Murphy and Vieten (2017) who note that limited understanding of the needs of refugee children can lead to school staff having lower expectations of their ability, which can subsequently affect their motivation and self-esteem. Educational Psychologists were viewed as key professionals, well placed to provide this training for school staff. With the right training, professionals could be in a better position to improve the outcomes for refugee families in Northern Ireland.

Limitations and future research

It is recognised that there are a number of limitations to this research. A significant limitation arises as a result of the sampling strategy employed. The sample size was small, key workers were recruited from one agency and participants volunteered to participate. Recruitment information about the study was shared with key workers by the management of the refugee service. It is therefore possible that participation was not as voluntary as was hoped, as key workers may have felt obliged to participate in the research. This may also have had an impact on findings as the participants may have been cautious of their responses due to their employed status. All researchers reiterated that participation was voluntary before interviews began in an attempt to overcome this limitation. However future research could endeavour to share study information directly with a wide range of key workers from a range of different agencies, without service management being involved. More significantly, future research should capture the voices of refugee families themselves, rather than indirectly through key workers. This would ensure their experiences were explored directly and not ‘filtered’ through the biases and perceptions of another individual. This study reflects the experience and views of five key workers in their role supporting refugee families. Finally, it is not assumed that the findings are representative of all key workers, instead findings are attributed to subjective experience.

Recommendations

Despite limitations outlined above there are a number of findings from this study that warrant consideration. These include recommendations aimed at improving professional practice and outcomes for Syrian refugee families living in Northern Ireland. Firstly, successful practice that has been identified within schools is highlighted. Next, general recommendations are made for educational professions, including the need for collaborative working, training, and advice for statutory services. The role of the Educational Psychologist is considered in light of the DECAP professional competencies.

Recommendations for schools

Practice in some schools was noted by participant key workers to be excellent. Findings indicate that the following represents good practice in meeting the needs of refugee young people and their families:

- Refugee children may require **additional support to access school curricula** and fully engage with school life. Schools that were highlighted as having good practice appeared to be those using their resources in a creative manner.

- Schools should seek to create a **safe school environment** that encourages belonging and friendships. During the initial 'settling-in' phase at school, a buddy system of newly arrived Syrian children with older Arabic speaking children, has been shown to have a positive effect on integrating refugee children (Kernaghan, 2015).

- Schools should aim to educate their pupils on the **cultural practices of Syrian people** in order to make young Syrian children feel included in their environment and build a school climate of tolerance and acceptance.

- **Reasonable adjustments** such as visual aids, adapting lunch menus, consideration of school assembly content and flexibility during the initial settling-in period for children new to separation from their parents appeared to make a significant difference to the quality of life of the children.

- **Reduced class sizes** or smaller groups when possible were found to be beneficial.

- Schools need to become more aware of the context and cultural beliefs of these children and their families, they need to be **trauma informed** and know how to manage this in classrooms.

- **Expectations of newcomer children** - training in relation to the needs of and challenges faced by refugee children should also encourage schools to raise their expectations of the children academically.

- Access to **additional English classes** where appropriate would be beneficial for refugee children arriving in NI. Indeed, the provision of English classes for the whole

family in an easily accessible location such as school would benefit the whole family and aid their integration into life in NI.

- **Visual communication aids** should be used with refugee children upon arrival to the school environment to aid inclusivity and help the voice of the child to be heard while they learn the English language.

- NI schools could aid the inclusivity of refugee children by **learning key words and phrases** in the home language of the newcomer child and encourage these to be used in the classroom.

- Use of **communication books** with photographs of teachers and other staff for the child starting school and also for establishing communication between school and home is recommended.

- **Transparency with parents**. Schools should communicate their support strategies for Syrian pupils to the pupils and their families in an accessible manner.

- **Emotional wellbeing**. The emotional wellbeing of refugee children needs to be carefully considered given the traumatic experiences prior to arrival in NI, but also from the experiences of being a newcomer child learning a new language, experiencing potential isolation and exclusion from peer groups due to cultural and language barriers.

- **Therapeutic support**. Schools where possible should aim to offer therapeutic support to refugee children in their care, this may be through collaborative working with a range of professionals such as play therapists, school counselling services or Educational Psychologists.

- **Fostering links with communities**. This involves joining together to help refugee families resettle in their areas through English language classes and homework support groups. Links between community groups and schools could help address the challenges refugee families face.

- **Collaboration with other agencies and support organisations**. Multi-agency working is essential to provide the best outcomes for refugee children with SEN. Collaboration between both statutory and voluntary sector organisations who work with refugees can provide awareness and specialist support for both professionals and families.

- **Training for schools**. Training has been highlighted as a specific need for professionals involved with refugee children. Researchers have advocated that schools with a high intake of refugee children should receive specialist training (Murphy & Vieten, 2017). In accordance with BPS guidelines, intercultural and diversity training for the whole school is important (BPS, 2018). Training could take many different forms and focus on a variety of aspects which will promote the best

outcome for Syrian refugee children. It is proposed that schools would benefit from training in relation to:

Trauma - schools should be trauma informed in their practice and increase their awareness of the many ways in which trauma can manifest in children and young people and recognise the need for emotional support for these young people.

Cultural difference - schools should be aware of cultural beliefs and differences in relation to expectations of educational provision for children with SEN, religious requirements in relation to prayer times or dietary restrictions, and social etiquette. Schools may benefit from whole school awareness sessions to create a greater sense of acceptance and diversity amongst pupils and staff. One such initiative is the 'Pharos' programme which would provide staff with appropriate training related to newcomer children, as well as, promoting a sense of belonging to the CYP.

Range of needs - in addition to the more obvious language and possible SEN, schools should be aware refugee children may have no previous experience of schooling or separation from their parents. Schools should be made aware that children may require a period of adjustment.

Ongoing daily challenges for refugee families - refugee families face a multitude of challenges in relation to their social, psychological and physical wellbeing upon arrival in NI. The sourcing of school uniforms, transportation, and the language barrier may all impact the ability of families to engage and support their child's educational experience. In addition the issues of discrimination, bullying and in some cases social exclusion are real daily issues for this population in society (Nakeyar et al., 2018).

English as an additional language - schools should be advised of strategies that would be effective with children where English is not their first language. Training on how to differentiate SEN from the language barrier and ensure the language barrier does not prevent academic progression or access to services, is also essential.

Available resources - schools should be provided with awareness raising sessions or consideration given to a more effective way to disseminate information about available resources, entitlements for refugee children and how to access the support of interpreters.

Recommendations for Statutory Services

Findings indicate that educational professionals in NI could be more proactive in their support of these children. Consideration could be given to the following:

- Given the planning undertaken by VPRS, a mechanism could be established whereby information regarding children who will potentially require psychology input or specialist educational provision should be provided to the EA in advance of their arrival. The EA could then plan appropriate provision and allocate time for assessments in order to prevent the significant delays reported.

- Representatives from the Education Authority initially meet the families in the welcome centres to explain the education system. However it appears that the SEN assessment process and provisions are not explained in an accessible manner. Given the increasing numbers of children with SEN arriving in NI, there may be a need to provide extra information on the SEN process and to support families through this process.

- Statutory services should aim to understand and appreciate the unique difficulties that refugee individuals face and offer support to these families accordingly. Statutory assessment processes, whilst legal processes, require a degree of flexibility for refugee children particularly in relation to accessing special schools prior to issue of a statement of SEN, when applicable. Statutory services should create a mechanism in which refugee children requiring specialist provision can be placed in school before an official assessment of their needs is completed.

- Improved communication between the EA, especially and those involved in SEN assessment and provision would be beneficial to minimise delays in assessment. A key contact within the EA would be beneficial to provide a coordinating role for all agencies involved with the child. A representative from the EA recently appointed to fulfil a similar role has been found to be very beneficial thus far.

- Given the reported inconsistencies of provision for children under the VPRS it may be wise for the EA to implement a system of monitoring and earmarking resources, where the allocated funding for each child is being spent.

- A list of recommended provisions could be compiled and provided to each school with a new refugee child.

- The study highlights the importance of funding for and access to interpreters and translated documents. It suggests that the allocated annual funding of two interpretation slots per year is insufficient to allow parents to feel involved in their child's education and more funding for this provision should be made available.

- The BPS (2018) also recommends that schools provide a translated information pack for parents on how to support their child to learn at home. This could also be provided by the EA.

- Transport - the provision of transport for disabled parents or for those placed in areas without a school within walking distance should be considered.

Recommendations for Educational Psychologists

Educational Psychologists are well placed to provide support to refugee families and education professionals due to knowledge in SEN and trauma. Therefore, recommendations for Educational Psychologists arising from this research will be considered in the context of the DECAP competencies developed from Farrell et al. (2006).

Research and evaluation

Educational Psychologists could be involved in future research with refugee children and their families in NI. It would be valuable to capture the voices of refugee children themselves about their experiences of school in NI. Creative and child-friendly methods, familiar to all Educational Psychologists such as drawings, could be used as a way of capturing their feelings and experiences. Additionally as frontline practitioners who visit families directly in their homes, Educational Psychologists are ideally placed to gather information from families and parents which can serve to ensure that the educational system in Northern Ireland is better prepared for newcomer families and children with SEN.

Prevention

Educational Psychologists are well placed to deliver training to school staff on the needs of refugee children. In-house training could be delivered by an Educational Psychologist on refugee experiences, cultural differences, range of needs presented by refugee children and how best to support this vulnerable group. It is important that Educational Psychologists are aware of the challenges faced by refugee families in their advocacy role for children. As Educational Psychologists work closely with parents and schools, they are in a position to help all parties work together to get the best outcome for a child.

Consultation and problem solving

Educational Psychologists should contribute to consultations and formulations being mindful of the likely complex trauma. They should share their knowledge with the school staff and statutory agencies in which they work and advise them on best practices.

Joint working

Educational Psychologists should take a more multidisciplinary approach with a range of professionals such as interpreters and key workers within voluntary organisations, when working with refugee children and families.

Psychological therapy and methods of intervention

Educational Psychologists could also provide therapeutic interventions for trauma and emotional and behavioural difficulties. Increased knowledge of the emotional impact of life as a refugee has the potential to guide Educational Psychologists in their therapeutic work and recognise the need for emotional support for these young people.

Psychological assessment and advice

Educational Psychologists must consider carefully how a child's needs can be appropriately assessed. An interpreter will be required whilst gaining information from parents and also while explaining assessment findings to parents. Furthermore, Educational Psychologists must consider the appropriateness of using standardised assessments with refugee children. Confounding variables including trauma, language barriers, lack of previous schooling and the effects of their resettlement should be taken into consideration. It is possible a dynamic assessment approach may be more suitable for these children but only after sufficient settling in time has passed.

Assessment of refugee children will require additional planning and information gathering given trauma experiences, cultural differences and language barriers. The pro forma for information gathering with refugee families should be taken into consideration.

Systemic and organisational change and development

The barriers to accessing education that exist for this vulnerable but growing group of citizens within society are many. These findings suggest that Educational Psychologists should take a fresh perspective, and advocate for the refugee families, so that the parents might play a fuller role in their children's education, advocate for funding for language supports, advocate for trauma awareness in our schools and advocate with policy makers and service providers to better meet the needs of refugee children with SEN in our society.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Organisation Information Sheet

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheet

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Appendix A: Organisation Information

Organisation Information Sheet and Consent Form

Title: Supporting refugee children with special educational needs in Northern Ireland.

Thank you for considering this research project. Before you agree to participate, it is important you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

In their day-to day practice key workers within your service have been working with vulnerable families and children with special educational needs and with schools and educational agencies. This study aims to explore the knowledge and experiences of these key workers in their day-to day practice liaising with educational agencies on behalf of their client group.

This knowledge will be used to build on an evidence base from which educational professionals in the EA might evolve and develop their practice and better serve the needs of this diverse population. We believe that you can provide us with information from your day-to-day practice which form an evidence base in the context of which we can review our day-to-day practice.

What will the study involve?

You will be asked to identify 6 key workers who would be willing to talk to a member of the research team for up to 1 hour. Participant information leaflets will be provided in order to further clarify the purpose of the study and their potential role within it. Potential participants will have an opportunity to meet with the Research Supervisor if they have any questions regarding the nature and purpose of the research. They will be invited to formally consent into the study. The interview would take place a few weeks post-consent within the Centre or if preferred within the research supervisor's office in QUB. The interview will be tape recorded and later analysed to identify common themes.

The content of the interview would be as follows:

- Their day-to-day role and function with regard to families of children with SEN.
- Perceptions of educational need and unmet need amongst this population.
- The challenges faced in their day to day work with regard to engaging with educational agencies to meet children's needs.
- The impact of these challenges on child and family outcomes.
- What needs to change within educational services to improve the experiences of refugee families and to improve outcomes?

There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. We simply want to know what your staff think.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause disadvantage or discomfort. We are asking your staff to talk about their day-to-day working life, so the potential psychological harm or distress should be the same as any experienced in everyday life. We ask that your staff take care not to identify any of your clients, their schools or the named educational agencies with whom they work. We do not wish your staff or anyone else to be identifiable.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that this work will have a beneficial impact on how refugee families and their children are supported by educational agencies. Results will be shared with your service in order to inform your professional work and with educational agencies, and in particular Educational Psychology to inform our work with this client group.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any complaints about the project in the first instance you can contact any member of the research team. If you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the Programme Director on the DECAP course in Queens University Belfast or Head of School in Psychology, Queens University Belfast. Contact details are below.

Who is organising the research?

The project is being carried out in partnership with your organisation and Anthea Percy who is an Educational Psychologist and Year 2 Course Tutor on the DECAP course in Queens University. This course trains Educational Psychology students. The interviewers will be Year 2 trainees from the programme.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences Ethics Review Procedures.

Contacts for further information

Anthea Percy, Course Tutor, Doctorate in Educational Child and Adolescent Psychology. RM 03:530, School of Psychology, David Keir Building, Queens University Belfast. anthea.percy@qub.ac.uk.

Patricia Davison, Programme Director, Doctorate in Educational Child and Adolescent Psychology. School of Psychology, David Keir Building, Malone Road, Queens University Belfast. p.davison@qub.ac.uk.

Dr Teresa McCormack, Head of School, School of Psychology, David Keir Building, Malone Road, Queens University Belfast. t.mccormack@qub.ac.uk

Thank you for considering allowing your organisation to participate in this research.

Title of Project: Supporting refugee children with special educational needs in Northern Ireland.

Name of Researchers: Anthea Percy, Carly Elliott, Simon McNally, Zara Phair, Susannah Robinson, Aine Fitzpatrick, Charlene Tennyson

Please tick to confirm your understanding of the study and that you are happy for your organisation to take part and your facilities to be used to host parts of the project.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. ☐
2. I understand that participation of our organisation and its members in the research is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and that this will not affect legal rights or their relationship with QUB. ☐
3. I understand that any personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential. ☐
4. I agree for our organisation and members to take part in the above study. ☐
5. I agree to conform to the Data Protection Act (2018) ☐

Name of Gatekeeper: Date: Signature:

Name of Researcher: Date: Signature:

Name of Person taking consent: Date: Signature:

(if different from researcher)

Appendix B: Participant information

Participant Information Sheet

Title: Supporting refugee children with special educational needs in Northern Ireland.

You are being invited to take part in this research project. Before you decide to do so, it is important you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. You will have an opportunity to meet with the research supervisor at your convenience if you wish to ask any questions. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

In your day-to-day practice you, as an experienced key worker within your refugee service, you have been working with vulnerable families and children with special educational needs and with schools and educational agencies in order to ensure their needs are met. This study aims to learn from your experience in order to consider how we as education professionals might better serve the needs of this diverse population.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because of your skills, experiences and expertise working with some of the most vulnerable citizens in our society. We believe that you can provide us with information from your day-to-day practice which form an evidence base in the context of which we can review our day-to-day practice.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You are under no obligation to do so. If you do decide to take part you will be able to keep a copy of this information sheet. You will be invited to consent formally into the study which will take place in January 2019. Your managers are in agreement with the study and have agreed that you can have the time to sit down and talk with a member of our research team. However, you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason and should you decide to withdraw your withdrawal will not impact your relationship with the research team, with Your or with QUB. If you change your mind following interview you can withdraw consent for your data to be included in the study up until 1.4.19.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will have an opportunity to meet with the research supervisor and ask any questions you might have. At this stage you will be invited to formally consent.

We will then ask you to sit down with a member of our research team either within a private room in the Refugee centre or within a private office in the School of Psychology (if you prefer) and talk generally about your experiences. This conversation will be recorded. We will ask you about your role in supporting refugee families with children with special needs, challenges you have encountered in your practice and areas of perceived unmet need. We will also ask you views as to how we as educational professionals can better address the needs of these children. There are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. We simply want to know what you think.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Participating in the research is not anticipated to cause you any disadvantage or discomfort.

We are asking you to talk about your day-to-day working life, so the potential psychological harm or distress should be the same as any experienced in everyday life. We only ask that you take care not to identify any of your clients, their schools or the named educational agencies with whom you work. We do not wish you or anyone else to be identifiable.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will have a beneficial impact on how refugee families and their children are supported by educational agencies. Results will be shared with your service in order to inform your professional work and with educational agencies, an in particular Educational Psychology to inform our work with this client group.

What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

Should the research stop earlier than planned and you are affected in any way we will tell you and explain why.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any complaints about the project in the first instance you can contact any member of the research team. If you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction you can contact the Programme Director on the DECAP course in Queens University Belfast or Head of School in Psychology, Queens University Belfast. Contact details are below.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified or identifiable in any reports or publications. Any data collected about you will be encrypted and protected by passwords and other relevant security processes and technologies. These have all been approved by QUB Ethics panel.

Data collected may be shared in an anonymised form to allow reuse by the research team. Once again the anonymised data will not allow any individuals or their institutions to be identified or identifiable.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

You will recorded on a phone during your interview. This information will be transferred to an encrypted password protected laptop within 24 hours of your interview and the data stored on the phone will be deleted. Once the information has been transferred to written format the audio recording on the laptop will be destroyed.

What will happen to the results of the research project?

Results of the research will be published. You will not be identified in any report or publication and your organisation will receive a copy of the report. We will provide you with an advance copy of the report to ensure that you are happy with the content and the level of anonymity. The report will also be viewed by educational professionals.

Who is organising the research?

The project is being carried out in partnership with your organisation and Anthea Percy who is an Educational Psychologist and Year 2 Course Tutor on the DECAP course in Queens University. This course trains Educational Psychology students. The interviewers will be Year 2 trainees from the programme.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved by the Faculty of Engineering and Physical Sciences Ethics Review Procedures.

Contacts for further information

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Thank you for considering this research.

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

Supporting refugee children with special educational needs in Northern Ireland?

Research Question

What knowledge and experiences do key workers have to share in arising from their day-to-day practice liaising with education on behalf of refugee children and their families in Northern Ireland?

Theme 1: Their day-to-day role and function with regard to families of children with SEN.

Theme 2: Perceptions of need and unmet need amongst this population.

Theme 3: The challenges faced in their day-to-day with regard to engaging with educational agencies to meet children's needs.

Theme 4: Impact of challenges on child and family outcomes.

Theme 5: What needs to change to improve the experiences of these families and to improve their outcomes.

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