



# Raising Cultural Awareness in Children and Young People

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**Abstract:** This briefing aims to outline how cultural awareness initiatives can reduce discrimination experienced by immigrant children and young people in Scotland.

**Keywords:** Discrimination, Cultural awareness, Children and young people, Learning initiatives

## Key Points:

- Migration in Scotland is of growing importance, and Edinburgh in particular has one of the largest communities of migrant and non-native children in the country.
- Evidence indicates racism and discrimination towards migrants is a prominent issue in local classrooms, with potential consequences for students' health and wellbeing such as depression, poor educational outcomes and aggressive behaviour.
- Cultural exchanges and awareness initiatives can discourage discriminatory attitudes and behaviour towards migrant children and youths, can equip students with practical skills and can benefit both non-native and native-born children psychologically and academically.
- Recommendations for global learning initiatives include participation in global online communities and cultural education in the classroom.

## Background

Scottish society is rich in cultural and racial diversity, with a highly mobile and dynamic social environment. Whilst high levels of immigration allow for a rich cultural landscape, such patterns can have negative consequences for immigrants' health, wellbeing and education, revealing the need for interventions to encourage cultural

awareness and sensitivity.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last few years, international migration has continued to rise.<sup>2</sup> Migration patterns can be attributed in part to circumstances in migrants' countries of origin, including discrimination, conflict and a lack of employment opportunities.<sup>3</sup> In the past decade Scotland has experienced record levels of migration and population growth.<sup>4</sup>

Scotland's non-UK born population increased by 84% between 2004 and 2012, at a rate higher than those recorded in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.<sup>5</sup> In recent years, immigrants between ages 0 and 24 have constituted the largest age groups entering Scotland from the rest of the UK and from overseas.<sup>6</sup>

Edinburgh in particular hosts one of the largest populations of migrants in Scotland,<sup>7</sup> with a growing number of children who have either migrated to Edinburgh or have been born to migrant parents.

The Scottish Government has committed to the Race Equality Framework to tackle discrimination and racism over the next 15 years, with potential for policy interventions in the areas of education and health.<sup>8</sup>

Whilst Edinburgh can be a very welcoming city, evidence indicates an increasing number of migrants including children are experiencing prejudice, bullying and discrimination.<sup>9</sup> It should be noted in recent years, additional mechanisms have

been introduced for students to report bullying and discrimination in schools – it is plausible this shift accounts for the rise in incidents reported.<sup>10</sup>

## Findings

This briefing examines literature related to how cultural awareness initiatives could reduce discrimination towards immigrant children and young people living in Edinburgh.

Discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or nationality can adversely affect a range of outcomes for non-native children. Research in a variety of contexts has found that for young immigrants, cultural stress and discrimination can have adverse health consequences, causing problems such as anxiety, depression, aggressive behaviour, poor sense of belonging, poor academic outcomes and substance use.<sup>11</sup>

There has been little research in Scotland concerning the impact of migration on children's education and social care, although we do know the demand for schools to provide English language assistance has increased.<sup>12</sup>

As early as age 3, children show internalisation of societal messages relating to their cultural and racial identity.<sup>13</sup> Researchers have witnessed racist behaviour and insults in children as young as 3-5 in America and 5-6 in England.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, by years 7-9 children are able to think critically about dynamics of oppression and stereotyping, and they are often willing to engage in efforts to challenge identity issues.<sup>15</sup>

It has been found that after age 9, racial attitudes – including negative stereotypes of identities – tend to stay constant unless a child experiences a life-changing event.<sup>16</sup> Unless students receive strong diversity and equality education before adolescence, it is likely they will grow up with negative racial attitudes firmly in place.<sup>17</sup>

In this age of globalisation, migrants' identity formation in their new home is not based on assimilation; rather, young immigrants negotiate multiple identities, including but not limited to those of their origin and destination cultures.<sup>18</sup>

In order to encourage anti-racist views and positive identities, educators must embrace cultural diversity in their curriculum and classroom for children as young as 3.<sup>19</sup> Ethnic identity exploration can provide a pathway to counteract the negative effects of discrimination on students' development and academic adjustment.<sup>20</sup> A culturally responsive classroom environment is necessary wherein students can contribute learning material and they have a platform to research, share and celebrate their diverse ethnic/cultural backgrounds.<sup>21</sup>

The following are some connected learning initiatives that have helped students to develop an awareness of and desire to learn more about people from around the world:<sup>22</sup>

1. Kidblog: A platform for students to share writing with people in other cultures around the world, with a safe and kid-friendly interface.
2. The Flat Connections Project: A global collaborative project that joins together students from primary and secondary schools in online classrooms. Their aim is to "design innovative programs to ensure success in global competence, intercultural awareness and digital fluency."
3. Around the World with 80 Schools: Started in January 2009, this is an ongoing project aiming to connect students from 80 schools from around the world via Skype.
4. My Wonderful World: National Geographic led this campaign previously to expand geographic learning in school, at home and in communities. They still provide many resources to encourage geographic and cultural learning in classrooms.
5. The Global Read Aloud Project: This project, in its sixth year of operation, connects students in reading and discussing literature together via Skype and through international collaborative spaces such as Edmodo and WriteAbout.
6. Skype in the Classroom: This Microsoft resource allows educators to connect with other teachers and classrooms worldwide and

locate guidance for using Skype in the classroom. Students can connect with students around the globe, with guest speakers and with lessons or field trips that explore foreign concepts and places.

7. ePals Global Community: The largest global online education community provides a safe social learning experience for students in over 200 countries. They create digital content and spaces designed for collaboration as well as for self-paced, self-directed learning.

Thus when children and young people are engaged in learning with/about various cultures this can raise children's cultural awareness, provide them with various skills (including digital literacy and geographical understanding) and improve their notions of group and self identity.<sup>23</sup> Such opportunities can grant students knowledge of and appreciation for differences among students in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, religion and socioeconomic differences.<sup>24</sup>

It is also important to create a safe classroom environment, so that students who feel discriminated against have the resources to report, overcome and combat racism or discrimination.<sup>25</sup>

### Limitations

This briefing was limited to English language research papers, government statistics and journalistic sources from the last 10 years. It is likely that relevant articles are missing from this review that were published in other languages, or indexed in databases besides those utilised.

As mentioned, there is a need for more research into the experiences of education and social care for migrant children and young people, particularly in the context of Scottish communities

and classrooms. There is also a need for research examining the causality between educational initiatives and students' experiences of self-esteem, health outcomes and discrimination.

In addition, this review was designed to answer a specific question about cultural awareness and discrimination. Recommendations are limited to those identified in the articles retrieved.

### Conclusion

By engaging with cultural awareness initiatives, children and young people can learn about similarities and differences between cultures, growing to appreciate the identities of themselves, their educators and their peers. Increased global awareness and cultural consciousness can create a safe, accepting and successful learning environment for all. Cultural exchanges in the classroom can benefit native-born and immigrant children emotionally as well as educationally.<sup>26</sup>

### Recommendations

Produce more research into instances of bullying and discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, migrant status or race in Edinburgh schools.

Run a consultation process with schools to identify ethnic or cultural issues present in school or community environments. Consider the possibility of carrying out learning initiatives similar to those outlined above, connecting children with their own culture and heritage, those of their peers and perhaps those of students around the world.

Create workshops with children and young people to promote cultural awareness through exposure to different languages, practices, foods and histories. Encourage children to contribute learning material.

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