

RITeS: a Project to Support Refugee Teachers into the Teaching Profession in Scotland

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Introduction

It is of great concern that across the UK – and through most of the ‘western world’, there are sections of society that are very severely underrepresented in the teaching workforce. Most notably there is a gross under-representation of men, especially among those working with younger children, but there is also a severe under-representation of teachers from Black and minority ethnic communities.

If these are matters of great concern for moral, educational and political reasons, there is an added concern at times of teacher shortages, such as that experienced during the 1990s in England and increasingly emerging in Scotland at the present time (see Hartshorn et al. 2005, for a full examination of these issues in the Scottish context). When major efforts are being made to boost recruitment into the teaching workforce it is essential that consideration is given to the demographic makeup of those entering and extra efforts made to ensure that historic and current imbalances are redressed.

The importance of ethnic and linguistic diversity in the teaching workforce

Where teachers share the home language of the children being taught, international research has indicated this will enhance the children’s chances of educational success. Discussing the experience of minority ethnic teaching students, Jones et al (1997) considered linguistic diversity in the school. One Hindi-speaking student teacher commenting that unknown pupils approached him in the corridor to speak Hindi with him as they were so pleased that he was there. A Sylheti speaking teacher found her linguistic skills advantageous in establishing a rapport with pupils. A Ghanaian teaching student was proud of his bilingualism but believed he needed to know more about the education system in the UK. The teaching population and the educational experience of pupils could be significantly

enhanced by employing teachers with the linguistic skills of the refugee population in Scotland.

More than twenty years ago the Rampton Report (Department of Education and Science 1981) expressed concern about the under representation of ethnic minorities in the teaching population of England and Wales. More than ten years ago, the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) urged the British government to take steps ‘to ensure that people from the ethnic minorities will be recruited for teacher training without unlawful discrimination’ (cited in Osler 1997, 47).

Where ethnic background data was provided in the most recent census (September 2003) of school staff in Scotland, only 0.7% of teachers were from minority ethnic groups. In promoted posts the proportion who were from minority ethnic groups was 0.4%. (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2) The ethnic composition of the Scottish teaching population does not reflect the ethnic composition of the population as a whole and certainly does not reflect the pupil population of Scottish schools. Where ethnic background data was provided in the most recent census (September 2003) of school pupils, 4.6% of pupils in Scottish schools were of an ethnic origin other than White UK.

When the dominant ethnicity of the teaching workforce is white, it is difficult for cultural difference to be truly recognised, represented and respected in school (Lynch and Lodge 2002) in relation to the practices and processes of curriculum provision, pedagogical approaches, peer culture and organisational norms and practices.

When we come to consider the question of recruiting from asylum seeking and refugee communities, these issues are heightened yet further for two reasons. Firstly, it is clear that there are a significant number of experienced teachers among these communities, many of whom are keen to adapt their skills to the new context in which they find themselves and yet, in spite of the shortages referred to above, it is far from

straightforward for them to enter the profession in the UK. Secondly, the specific education needs of children from these communities are very distinctive (see Menter et al. 2000). These are children who may have experienced considerable trauma through rapid relocation, often under physical threat, to a very different society, where their own language is not understood. Education authorities and schools usually make serious efforts to address these needs, but are not always successful in this. If there were teachers in the system from those same communities then schools and authorities would be much more likely to be in a position to be effective.

Refugee communities in the UK

As Rutter (2001) among others has shown Britain has a long history of receiving refugees from many different parts of the world. In recent years, there has been a coalescence of the politics of immigration and nationality on the one hand with the politics of asylum on the other hand. There is evidence of new forms of racism which focus on immigration status as much as or more than on skin colour. So it is that some of the most virulent and violent racist attacks have been aimed at asylum seekers and refugees.

In Scotland, where immigration, nationality and associated matters continue to be 'reserved' to Westminster, there have been particular problems in creating a distinctive approach which focuses on economic development through attracting key workers into the country, whilst the UK government is frequently perceived to be attempting to limit the inward flow of people at all costs. That is not to say that refugees and asylum seekers are any less exposed to attack in Scotland than in England, but it does mean that the Scottish authorities are much more committed to seeing the arrival of new people as an opportunity to recruit and/or develop more skilled workers.

Refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland

The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act resulted in the dispersal of the asylum seeking population in the UK around Britain. This has led to a significant number of refugees and asylum seekers settling in Scotland, particularly in Glasgow, which is the only local authority in Scotland which made contractual arrangements with NASS (The National Asylum Support Service) to provide housing and education for asylum seekers.

The Scottish Refugee Council estimates (September 2003) there are approximately 10,000 refugees and asylum seekers living in Scotland, with 6,000 asylum seekers currently living in NASS accommodation in Glasgow. Most of the asylum seekers in Scotland had no choice in coming here, but were dispersed here by the Home Office.

30 different nationalities are represented among asylum seekers in Glasgow, with the main countries of origin being Turkey, Somalia, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Scottish Executive and the Scottish Refugee Council undertook a skills audit of the refugee and asylum seeking population in Glasgow and found that almost 75% of respondents spoke more than one language and 10% spoke four languages. Over half those questioned were educated to college level and 10% possessed a postgraduate degree or doctorate. Over 30% of respondents possessed a qualification in areas where Scotland is currently experiencing a shortage, including teaching. (SRC 2004)

Refugee and asylum seeker children in Scottish schools

Children from refugee and asylum seeking families in Glasgow are educated in 26 mainstream schools across the city. These schools have recently created bases to enable the children to acquire English and be integrated into mainstream classes as quickly as possible through intensive support and team teaching. For many of the children this will be their first exposure to formal education, while many of them will have experienced very different forms of education in their countries of origin. Their mainstreaming will be supported if their teachers have a good understanding of their previous educational experiences.

After three weeks I started going to school and from then onwards I started my ordinary life like all the normal children. I must say that the school is wonderful, the teachers are OK but the only thing that worries me is the education. I must say that it is a bit difficult but I like to learn and to do what they do at school. (Somalian girl, aged 15, McCaskill and Petrie 2000, 11)

This pupil's response to the difficulties of education will not be unique and could be eased with the employment of teachers who had an understanding of these specific needs (see also Rutter and Jones 1998).

Refugee teachers in Scotland

A study carried out in England by Carrington et al. (1999) recommended that there be more flexibility in the consideration of teaching qualifications from outwith the European Union. In Glasgow alone, it is estimated that there are around 80 experienced teachers among the refugee population, yet very few of these are currently able to register to teach in Scotland, due to the lack of equivalence of their qualifications and/or to their limited proficiency in English. A symposium organised in September 2003 by a sub-group of REMIT (Recruitment of Ethnic Minorities Into Teaching), which considered the difficulties faced by this population in entering the teaching profession in Scotland, identified some of the concerns and problems faced by the group (REMIT 2003). These concerns and difficulties included the lack of networks providing information and contextual knowledge for refugee teachers, the differences between educational systems, pedagogies and curricula and the English language abilities of the refugee teachers. As the Chief Executive and Registrar of the General Teaching Council for Scotland emphasised, when addressing this symposium:

The methods of the last century do not meet the needs of this century and the teaching profession needs to be as diverse as the population of the country. Multicultural awareness and social inclusion are vitally important for a new Scotland and all sectors need to work together to achieve this. (REMIT 2004, 3)

The evolution of the RITeS project

The proposals for action arising from this symposium included the establishment of a project to provide expert advice, guidance and support to possible candidates (i.e. for entry of refugee and asylum seekers into teaching in Scotland). Consequently a cross-institutional collaborative team was established which, informed by reports and initiatives in both Scotland and England successfully bid for funding from the European Refugee Fund to appoint a full time co-ordinator for

the new Refugees Into Teaching in Scotland (RITeS) project. It was also agreed from the start of the project that we should involve refugee teachers in the project and three individuals were invited to join the management group.

Prior to our funding bid, a meeting was arranged by the project and attended by approximately 50 of the 80 known refugee teachers to discuss the issues which would help inform our priorities. The obstacles into entry into teaching in Scotland at that time included

- a. gaps in the existing national database of international degrees and teaching qualifications
- b. the feared cost of a doctor's report for the health certificate
- c. the amount of time and assistance required for the drawing up of a personal statement

and, for those securing accreditation with the General Teaching Council for Scotland,

- d. the lack of arrangements for fulfilling CPD conditions
- e. the lack of any induction course on Scottish education or the syllabus.

Further understanding of the issues involved was enabled through the 25 refugee teachers who were on observation experience courses in Glasgow schools through the Bridges Project, one of our partner organisations.

Purpose, aims and objectives of the RITeS project

We believed that if the talent and expertise among teachers in the refugee communities in Scotland are to be deployed in Scottish schools, the establishment of a funded project was essential. Our main aim therefore was to appoint an appropriately qualified advisory worker who would enable these refugees to become effectively integrated into the wider community to the benefit of the Scottish education system.

Original aims

The project aimed firstly to establish a detailed register/database of these refugee teachers, including data collected through an audit of their qualifications, skills and experience. Through close liaison with The General Teaching Council for Scotland, the requirements which each individual has in order to join the profession in Scotland would firstly be identified and secondly be provided, where possible, by the project. This would include the development and provision of an adaptation course on the Scottish education system, tailor made to be subject specific where necessary, the development of a mentoring scheme (drawing on the experience of the Bridges project) and support for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Review of aims

The establishment of a detailed database of refugee teachers has been a major focus of the work of the project in the first 7 months of the co-ordinator being in post.

The project was originally envisaged as needing to last for at least five years and the further original aims identified earlier have not yet been met. This has not concerned the project as these aims are based on very individual needs and dependent

on the establishment of a full database. It takes considerable time to establish the wide range of needs amongst the group.

However the development and provision of an adaptation course on the Scottish education system, the development of a mentoring scheme and support for ESOL are all ongoing work which will be continued as the project evolves.

Small numbers of the client group have been helped into work shadowing placements and financial support for English Language testing has been provided. In addition a Teacher Education sub-group has been established with membership from the six teacher education institutions involved in the project advisory group. This group will use evidence from the database to establish the more specific needs for adaptation courses.

As the project has developed and positive publicity has spread, more organisations have become involved in the wider advisory group, including additional teacher education institutions, local authorities and voluntary organisations. This has helped to ensure that project planning takes account of as wide a range of perspectives and information as possible.

The first year

The principal activities which the project has engaged in to date have included establishing procedures for the initial data collection phase of the project, establishing procedures for the research component of the project, locating, meeting and communicating with the client group and networking with other colleagues and stakeholders working towards refugee integration.

So what does this mean for refugee teachers in Scotland?

There are currently 78 client records on the Database. Of these, 32 clients are being seen by the project co-ordinator on a regular basis. On average, each active client has received 7 instances of support, with the total time spent on direct client activity approximately 224 hours. To date, 8 months into the life of the project, the co-ordinator has responded to approximately 200 telephone enquiries from clients and approximately 50 client emails. A core group of teachers whom we hope to fast track into teaching in Scotland has been established. Seven teachers have been supported in their applications for registration to the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Five teachers have been supported in applications for Pupil Support Assistant posts in local schools. Ten teachers have been supported in their applications for English Language Support. Four teachers have been supported in their applications for Post Graduate Teacher training courses. One registered refugee teacher is being supported in her teaching post.

Evaluating our strengths

The major strength of the RITeS project since its inception has been the effective collaborative partnerships involved in the project. This has resulted in a successful implementation of some of the key aims of the project. The input of the partner representatives has resulted in a particularly effective and efficient service delivery to date. All representatives have given of their time, energies and expertise to support the project and publicise its activities. The partnership and collaborative working has also meant that the project is able to access senior professional workers with ease

in organisations such as Glasgow City Council and seek advice support and outcomes for them. An example of this is when a client from the refugee community, registered with the GTCS, requested the opportunity to visit a Mathematics Department in a secondary school in Glasgow. This was arranged by the project's partner in Glasgow City Council and a placement in a school organised.

A key example of the way in which partnership and collaboration have worked to the benefit of the project as a whole is that originally the project had budgeted for fees for the assessment costs levied by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) but early in the life of the project, we managed to secure a waiver of these fees by the GTCS for first time applicants for registration from the refugee community. This has meant that the amount allocated for that purpose can be devoted to other activities. The relationship with the GTCS has resulted in close collaborative working to facilitate the entry of the client group to the profession.

Further, the hosting institution for the project, the University of Strathclyde, has made generous dedicated office space available, which has meant that the co-ordinator is able to meet the client group in privacy, an essential requirement, given the frequently traumatised and distressed condition of some of the refugees.

Additionally, the University of Strathclyde has hosted and maintains the website dedicated to the project. This initiative is currently being developed and will be a most useful source of information and support for the client group and associated stakeholders.

The rudimentary database generously provided by a local further education college, another partner, was the starting point for the data collection process and the identification of many of the refugee and asylum seeker teachers. The co-ordinator was then invited by another project partner to take part in training for a new database initiative designed specifically for the refugee and asylum seeker community. This database system is ideal for the project's purposes and Scottish Enterprise, the body co-ordinating the various groups involved in the database pilot, agreed to fund the installation of the database on the RITeS computer system and, of fundamental importance, train and support the co-ordinator in the use and development of this system.

The establishment of the Refugee and Asylum Seeker Database Implementation Group (RADISG) has meant that other organisations working with the refugee community are using tracking and data processing systems which are compatible and can share information where this is permitted by the client and the data protection act. This collaborative and co-ordinated approach has resulted in much more professional service delivery than was envisaged.

Next steps

The project will continue to develop and maintain its database of refugee teachers. It will extend its geographic reach to other parts of the UK and will work with its counterparts in England to share best practice. It will continue to build on links already made with partner organisations, for example The General Teaching Council for Scotland. The following key activities will be undertaken over the next period:

- The establishment of an English Language for Refugee Teachers Group in association with English Language for Refugee Doctors. This will involve university students as volunteers
- Establishment of a teacher mentor scheme in association with the teacher associations in Scotland, e.g. the trade

unions.

- Identification and provision, in association with the Teacher Education Institutions in Scotland, of refugee teacher induction and education courses
- Support for individual refugee teachers employed in schools
- Establishing close links with teacher employers
- Dissemination of information and in-service work with schools to promote awareness of refugee teacher issues
- Publication of research report in association with the universities of Strathclyde, Glasgow and Paisley.

We believe that the determination of all concerned to ensure the success of the project will surely result in major benefits to the client group and we hope RITeS can provide a model of good practice for similar projects.

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Visit the RiTeS website: www.strath.ac.uk/cps/rites

