Introduction

The Supporting and Mentoring in Learning and Education (SMILE) project was a three-year project set up by the Refugee Council in 2008. The project was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) (formerly Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF)) and operated across three regions: Greater London, the West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside. It supported asylum seeking and refugee children (both separated and in families) to improve their life chances by helping them to enjoy and achieve in education, and by raising awareness of their specific needs. SMILE aimed to reduce the isolation and address the absence of education and social activities experienced by so many refugee children and young people. The project worked to promote inclusive education by challenging prejudices relating to asylum and raise awareness of the needs of refugee children. A key part of SMILE was to provide one to one support to the children and young people through assigning them a mentor or befriender to provide individual, tailored support.

SMILE sought to assist refugee children access the education to which they were entitled through assigning a mentor to young people in need of an educational placement. Befrienders worked to a wider remit of enabling young people to develop confidence and skills to improve their life chances in the UK and reduce the isolation so many refugee children face.

In addition, the SMILE project also aimed to raise awareness around the needs of refugee children through conducting school talks and interactive work in schools, as well as training for teachers and staff promoting the needs of this client group.

Finally, action research was embedded in the project in order to monitor and evaluate the project, provide a continuous feedback mechanism between researcher and project workers to ensure best practice, and to identify wider barriers and solutions to enable refugee and asylum seeking children to enjoy and achieve in their education.
Context

Data on numbers of refugee and asylum seeking children in the UK is somewhat limited. However, according to Home Office annual statistics, in 2009 an estimated 3,175 separated children applied for asylum in the UK. The main countries of origin for separated children are currently Afghanistan, Iran, China, Iraq and Eritrea, with the overwhelming majority being from Afghanistan. The annual statistics also include figures relating to the number of children in families seeking asylum. In 2009, there were a total of 4,391 asylum applicant dependants aged eighteen and under. In addition, a further 1,130 age disputed separated children applied for asylum in the same year.

By law, separated children in England have the same rights and entitlements as citizen children in relation to education and support from local authorities; however, access to care and support is often determined by a child’s immigration status. The rights of refugee and asylum seeking children to education are enshrined in international and national legislative frameworks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), under article 3(1) states: “In all actions concerning children (…), the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” The same convention also states that children have a right to education. Education is also a human right, upheld in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Refugee young people’s experiences of education will vary widely, depending on their socio-economic status, religion, gender and pre-flight experiences. Some will have obtained high levels of quality education in their home country, whilst others may have little or no experience due to their home environment, disruption of services from war and conflict or long journeys to a place of refuge. Whatever their experiences, research has found that refugee children have strong desire to enter education and that education can play a significant role in mitigating the negative effects of their traumatic experiences and support them to overcome isolation and build resilience.

The research

Evidence was drawn from qualitative interviews conducted in the three project regions (London, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and Humberside) with volunteers and young people as well as the three volunteer coordinators. A total of 39 interviews were conducted with 17 volunteers (nine befrienders and eight mentors), 19 young people (ten befriendees and nine mentees) and the volunteer coordinators in each of the three regions. Interviews with volunteers and young people were conducted upon completion of the mentoring relationship and both half-way and at the end of the befriending relationship so as to gather a comprehensive picture of the dynamics in the longer term relationships. Data was also collected from the project team’s own record keeping and questionnaires completed upon school talks as well as a selection of the social activities set up for young people.

Key findings

- SMILE was a highly successful project that met the needs and aspirations of the young people it set out to assist. Relationships were found overall to be of reciprocal benefit to both young people and volunteers, all of whom felt they had benefitted from the project.

- Volunteers had a significant positive impact on young people, both in terms of assisting them to access an educational placement but also in relation to social skills, improving English language, increasing confidence, knowledge of life in the UK, as well as enabling them to achieve their potential in the school environment.

“the best thing is I think about the education. Yes. I am happy about that. And the second time I am happy [my mentor] is like coming my friend. She speak, she spend her time with me…”

Boy mentee, Greater London

- Unfortunately, findings show that refugee and asylum seeking young people are still facing considerable barriers to accessing education in the UK, including waiting times to access further educational colleges, confusion over their entitlements to financial assistance, difficulties in navigating the English education system, and discriminatory or inconsistent admissions policies. The lack of statutory policy for assisting refugee young people leaves their inclusion to the discretion of schools and there are many inconsistencies in local authority practice. Evidence of the discriminatory admissions procedures still in place came to light in the case of two separated young boys from Afghanistan, who were forced to take a local authority to court in order to ensure they were able to access the mainstream education they were entitled to.

- Volunteers played a pivotal role in enabling young people to access an educational placement. Without the assistance of SMILE volunteers, these young
people would have struggled to find a place. Findings suggest there is a real need for specialist projects such as SMILE to ensure that refugee children can access the education they are entitled to.

- The issue of age dispute arose spontaneously during the interviews with young people, highlighting the significant and very distressing impact this has on a young person's life. The subjectivity and inconsistency of the process is found to increase young people's sense of isolation and confusion, and can lead to them being out of education for significant periods of time, impacting negatively on their self development and ability to rebuild their lives.

- SMILE social activities were found to have had a positive impact on young people's wellbeing in a number of ways and enabled young people to develop skills in an informal learning environment. Perhaps more importantly, such activities allowed young people to have fun and remember they are children first and foremost.

- Findings from school talks data would suggest that negative perceptions surrounding asylum seekers are fairly common within the minds of schoolchildren in the UK. Results following the school talks indicate that once pupils were informed of the facts, and particularly where they heard real life stories, their opinions changed and they showed greater empathy and understanding towards the plight of refugees and asylum seekers.

- Findings from interviews show that many young people are unwilling to disclose their personal experiences with their peers, feeling that they were too different or would not be understood. Awareness raising talks can serve to normalise these issues and provide greater understanding in all young people, enabling refuge and asylum seeking children to better integrate.

"I am not feel alone now, because if I have something [my befriender] helping me with that ... If I feel something, I share it with her. Like friend, I feel, like that. I feel like friend with [my befriender]."

Girl befriendee, Greater London

### Recommendations

- Voluntary sector organisations should take learning from the SMILE project forward and develop specialist mentoring and befriending services for refugees and asylum seekers to better enable them to access education and achieve more in their education. This could be done through joint projects with local authorities.

**Department for Education should:**

- Develop statutory guidance on the education of refugee and asylum seeking young people in relation to admissions procedures and support in the classroom.

- Ensure that, following proposed alterations to the education system, the definitive suite of guidance to be produced for schools includes guidance on the education of refugee and asylum seeking young people. Such guidance should be widely disseminated and promoted so that schools are aware of it.

- Provide learner support funds to all children and young people in further education between the ages of 16 and 19, regardless of immigration status. This is particularly important in light of the fact that the school leaving age will be raised to 17 by 2013 and to 18 by 2015.

- Ensure that any anti-bullying strategies contain provisions for bullying experienced by refugee and asylum seeking children.

- Ensure that the Revised Admissions Code contains provisions for asylum seekers and refugees.

- Develop statutory guidance on conducting age assessments.

**Local authorities should:**

- Ensure all policies and guidance to support looked after children in schools are implemented appropriately.

- Provide advice and guidance to young people and their parents/carers when they first arrive in the UK on how to access education.

- Develop a more consistent approach to admissions procedures and develop better lines of communication so as to promote good practice.

- Understand that the use of pupil referral units as alternative source of education for refugees and
asylum seekers is never appropriate, such pupils should have access to mainstream schooling where possible and appropriate alternative provision where not. The decision should always be based on individual child’s needs.

- Alternative educational provision for refugee and asylum seeking children outside the mainstream should be time limited with clear objectives, in line with guidance in this area.\(^5\)

- Monitor the support provided by social workers and keyworkers, ensure it is adequate and that young people have appropriate mechanisms to complain when it is not.

- Monitor support of refugee children in schools in a systematic way.

- Consider a more holistic approach to age assessment, with evidence taken from wide range of individuals involved in the child’s care.

**Schools should:**
- Ensure teachers receive training on initial teacher training programmes and also as part of continuing professional development on the needs and experience of refugees and asylum seekers.

- Hold more awareness raising sessions, such as the SMILE school talks programmes, within school settings to increase knowledge of asylum seekers and refugees amongst all staff and pupils and reduce misperceptions and prejudice.

**UKBA should:**
- Ensure the protection needs of children in the asylum system are upheld and that immigration controls are not prioritised over the welfare of this group of children.

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1 For the purposes of this summary, the term ‘refugee children’ will be used to refer to both those with status and those still in the asylum process, save where necessary to differentiate.


3 These figures relate to applicants whose age was disputed at the time of application. The data is therefore provisional, as it does not show the outcome of any challenge made by the applicant to the age dispute.

4 For further information, see Refugee Council (2005) *Daring to dream: Raising the achievement of 14 to 16 old asylum-seeking and refugee children and young people*; and Brownlees and Finch (2010) *Levelling the playing field*. A UNICEF UK report into provision of services to unaccompanied or separated migrant children in three local authority areas in England, UNICEF www.unicef.org.uk/publications/pdf/levelling-playing-field.pdf


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The full SMILE Project report is published by the Refugee Council and is available as a free download from www.refugeecouncil.org.uk. More information about the work of the SMILE Project can also be found here.