

# Rethinking the role of EAL teachers: Lessons learned on supporting migrant pupils in Scotland

## Background

Schools catalyse social mobility and foster a sense of belonging within the local community. Teachers play a pivotal role in creating avenues for learning and engagement. Nonetheless, they may unintentionally perpetuate barriers embedded within institutional structures.

The TEAMS project is centred on examining teachers' roles within institutional frameworks and their interactions with various professional and social groups, such as students, families, colleagues, and specialists. The project addresses the pressing need to comprehend and assist teachers in supporting the integration of migrant students, facilitating their academic success and cross-cultural socialisation, and fostering a sense of belonging within the school community. The study on Scotland's policy and actions of teachers in support of migrant students was informed by an inclusive pedagogy approach that views diversity as the norm rather than a problem: the underlying principle is that an inclusive educational provision relies on creating inclusive school environments that support everyone, including groups that may face barriers, such as migrant students.

Central to this approach is the principle of collaboration among teachers and other stakeholders, as well as teachers' actions to support migrant students. Teachers often go beyond their job description to solve problems and address challenges even when policy does not provide specific guidelines, accessing tacit knowledge and making the best use of the resources available, in order to provide better pastoral care to both migrant and non-migrant students.

## Methodology

The TEAMS project examined collaboration among teachers and specialists in three state-funded high schools in a major city in Scotland: one in a very diverse and deprived area, one in a diverse mixed area, and one that receives migrant students within a relatively affluent neighbourhood. The study aimed to answer two main questions: 1) How do the forms of teachers' collaboration reflect the policy arrangements and their school culture? and 2) How are the teachers' practices and school cultures reflected in students' perceptions? The research team employed a mixed-method approach involving social network analysis and policy analysis to address these questions. Data collection methods included surveys and interviews with students and teachers, self-reflection logs, ethnographic observations in the schools, and analysis of policies at national, municipal, and school levels.

## Key findings

***Collaboration and knowledge exchange are vital.*** Teachers in all three schools demonstrated a great deal of flexibility and creative problem-solving. They leveraged knowledge from various sources inside and outside the school to support migrant students among others. The study highlighted interesting differences in how teachers collaborated across the three schools. While the same specialist support for English as Additional Language (EAL) was available to



## Summary

The study examines the role of teachers in fostering inclusivity and supporting migrant students in Scotland. Analyzing daily practices and policy documents in three state funded high schools, the study has focused on collaborations among teachers and support staff by specialist figures, especially the role of EAL teachers. Findings have shown the need to reassess the current framework of support for migrant students, particularly by fostering more systematic collaboration among teachers and reviewing EAL support.

all three schools, each school worked with this support differently. For example, one school has relied more on in-house support and accessed EAL teachers less frequently and more for knowledge exchange with teachers, while the other two sought the EAL teacher to directly support students. The project has shown that collaboration and communication among staff and between staff and specialists is a crucial tool in supporting all students, not just migrants. How staff use available support is critical for the pedagogical choices that include migrants in what is available to all, for example working together under the guidance of EAL teachers without leaving the responsibility solely to them.

**The changing role of EAL teachers** implies the need for new ways of working given the limited budgets and resources. While specialists can help integrate migrant students academically and emotionally, overreliance on the EAL teacher who, in many cases, was sought to provide direct support to students, is not sufficient for addressing pupils' needs effectively. While the one-on-one approach for EAL teachers could benefit the pupil, the current structure of EAL support does not allow for this, as one EAL teacher serves multiple school. Instead, the new role of EAL teachers as support for teachers themselves needs to be made clearer and followed with opportunities for training of both teachers and support staff. Critically, development opportunities need to involve ample opportunities for collaboration as well as discussion of relevant matters for students and staff as they arise. Our data showed a wealth of examples of so called *tacit* knowledge in the school communities but the opportunities to use and exchange this knowledge are often serendipitous and largely reliant on staff with relevant knowledge, experience and migrant background.

## Recommendations/ policy implications

Based on the requests and comments made by the school staff and the study's findings, there is a clear need to revise the current support for migrant pupils, who in Scotland are mostly defined as EAL learners, including a significant shift in the role of EAL teachers. In particular, research underlined the need to:

### 1. Reassess Specialist Support:

- Review and make clear the role of specialists such as EAL teachers: consider a shift towards supporting teacher development rather than direct pupil assistance.
- Consider how to recruit and train specialists, especially by creating opportunities to attract support among teachers with migrant background.
- Explore reframing specialists as trainers or consultants to enhance the confidence and capacity of classroom teachers.
- Recognise the expertise of migrant teachers and use their experiences to identify and address students' needs, and consider measures to diversify teaching workforce.

### 2. Encourage Collaboration Among Teachers:

- Incentivise collaboration among teachers through structured initiatives.
- Foster a culture of teamwork to bolster support for migrants and other students within educational settings, including home language recognition and encouragement.

### 3. Focus on Teacher Training Programs:

- Prioritise training programs to enhance teachers' confidence in their practices and activate their existing resources.
- Avoid overwhelming teachers with toolkits and policies; focus on practical strategies to empower them through opportunities to exchange knowledge and seek solutions.

## Contact

Dr Nataša Pantić

Email: [natasa.pantic@ed.ac.uk](mailto:natasa.pantic@ed.ac.uk)

