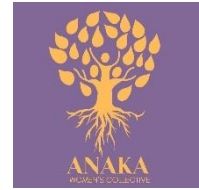


EDUCATION PROJECT EVALUATION

November 2021



Introduction

Anaka Women's Collective's was established to facilitate refugee and asylum-seeking women to address their needs, claim their rights and support each other. A key priority for members was their children's education and to address various challenges in access and attainment. These challenges have been thrown into starker relief by the Coronavirus crisis and the closure of schools in 2020 and 2021.

In spring 2021, Anaka piloted a project providing intensive support to improve engagement, confidence and outcomes in education. The approach was to work with mothers and children together, recognising the value of parental engagement and support with learning. The project was also an opportunity to learn more about the challenges families faced in accessing education.

What did we learn? A summary

Feedback from participating mothers, teenagers and teachers pointed to lack of support to learn English, leading to isolation, barriers to integration, loss of confidence and disengagement from learning. Children's wellbeing and mental health are being compromised, as well as their academic potential.

After the project, participants reported improved English, greater confidence and progress in learning, so that more children had caught up or kept up with peers despite the challenges of home-learning. Mothers reported they were more engaged with their children's learning, better able to help them and understood the education system in Northern Ireland better.

This report highlights the lack of appropriate and sufficient support for newcomer children in the education system in Northern Ireland and why this matters. It shows how even short-term and small-scale interventions can result in tangible progress – but clearly recommends that it should not be left to the voluntary efforts of a group of committed mothers and volunteer teachers to plug the gap in suitable provision.

The project was selected as an example of resilience and best practice by the UK Refugee Council. Interviews with participants can be heard here:

<https://www.ragp.org.uk/resilience/mothers-champion-refugee-childrens-education-during-lockdown>

For further information

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Evaluation carried out on behalf of the Voice of Migrant Women, VSB Foundation by Chris McCartney

Why is it harder for newcomer children?

Mothers, teenage participants and volunteer teachers shared a number of challenges in accessing education through surveys and focus groups as part of the project.

The language barrier

Mothers, children and teachers agreed that lack of English was a key barrier to succeeding in education, but that insufficient support is given to newly arrived children to learn the new language. Several teachers mentioned extra support should be more targeted and delivered one-to-one.

Some mums reported that currently their children had an extra hour of English per week, often combined with all foreign language pupils in a school.

The delay in learning English made life more difficult in several ways. In the classroom, accessing the full primary and secondary curriculum relies on reading and writing. Even where children become competent with conversational English, they can still struggle with technical language to unlock the full range of subjects.

Some mums said their children were told to ignore some work or were directed towards certain subjects perceived as easier. Lack of confidence with English also left many children feeling isolated from peers, lacking confidence to ask questions or for support, all of which further slowed their learning and transition.

Isolation and mental health

Language barriers undermine children's ability to make friends, settle and integrate into the school community. Feeling isolated and struggling to form friendships further hampers progress with English in a vicious circle.

Before taking part in the project, mums reported:

- Just 13% of children were confident about school and learning.
- 23% said their children were anxious, stressed or sad about school.
- Under a third said their kids liked to see friends at school

Many newcomer children already carry the experience of trauma and upheaval, which impacts their mental health and wellbeing and challenges with English also made it harder to address these needs.

"Children need to learn the language and targeted support is needed for that. It can't be left to what they pick up in the playground. Parents, especially mothers, need to learn the language also so they can help children with their schoolwork." Volunteer teacher.

"Studying English here and what is expected of them is very different than learning it as a second/additional language. They are bright children but are being asked to do very technical things in a language that is not their mother tongue. Many of them have missed primary education here and so have not had as much chance to practice these skills. This project gives them the time to ask and practice and grow in confidence." Volunteer teacher

"It was very difficult here, the first year. It was horrible because I didn't have any English, not me, not my kids. Everything was difficult, the work, the homework with the kids, the communication with the school. I don't know even if there is a homework, because I can't read and write. The principal of the school was a very nice man and he would try to do it through Google because he doesn't know Arabic also... Before the programme [when schools moved to home-learning], I used to spend from 10am in the morning until 6 or 7pm in the evening trying to translate the homework and the messages from school, then my children have to go and look for the answers." Mum of three

"Due to the language barrier teachers often have very little idea of what pupils have experienced before arriving here and are therefore unable to meet their emotional needs." Volunteer teacher

"I think especially for the older students, they find it hard to fit in, which leads to a perceived lack of interest in school work, but when given the proper support they are very keen learners" Volunteer teacher

Home/school partnership

Many parents arrived with limited English and despite an intense commitment to their children's education, struggled to read messages from school or follow homework. Before the project:

- More than half of mums interacted with the school once a month or less.
- Three quarters of mums understood the education system in NI only a little or not at all.
- Just three of 40 respondents felt able to help their children with their school work – most felt they could help only a little or not at all.
- 90% of children depended on someone other than their parent to help with homework, mostly teachers, assistants and after school initiatives.
- Only 10% of children could do their homework independently.

Mums reported mixed experiences with schools. Many said individual teaching staff and principals bent over backwards to help new families and to communicate with parents – but were under-resourced and equipped to do so. Some relied on Google Translate to communicate with parents.

The view of teachers

Participating teachers were unanimous that there was currently not enough support to allow children arriving here to realise their right to an education as well as appropriate emotional support. Several mentioned that additional input would best be delivered one-to-one. Two mentioned the importance of closer contact between parents and schools, and more help for parents with language so they can more actively engage and support their children's learning.

Several highlighted that schools/teachers lacked the resources and funding to appropriately meet the needs of these pupils. None felt the necessary support, information and training is in place for teaching staff to be able to support refugee and asylum-seeking children in their class and respondents were unanimous that the Education Authority had the lead responsibility on supporting newcomer families. Many felt this should be in partnership with individual schools, charities and other services.

There was recognition that schools and teachers are overstretched and more resources and staffing would be needed to do this properly.

Case study: Fareid

12-year-old Fareid* arrived in Northern Ireland in September 2020, and was allocated a school place in February 2021.

"When there was online lessons in the lockdown, that was easy. I had a dictionary, I had my mum to help me, but when I get to school face-to-face, it was hard. I was alone in the class and everybody work but I'm just watching them and nobody explain it or helped me. When I say 'can you explain that to me?' they just don't care and don't explain that.

"I feel like I was alone, no one helped me and I have no friends to even explain that to me. In [my home country] if you don't get the lessons any one of your friend can help you, but no one was wanting to talk to me."

Fareid's mother said her son was a smart boy, achieving top grades at home. "I sent emails to the school, I explained that English is a second language and he is feeling isolated because he can't contact the other students and teachers, but unfortunately he hasn't got any support. Also unfortunately, most of the teachers are unhelpful... Even in class if he ask for something, ask for clarification or more information, the teacher was saying 'that's not my responsibility.' It led him to hate the school, he refused to go to school, he said there was no point in him going.

*"His lack of knowledge of English is really affecting him as a teenager, he is not socialising with the other kids, he is always isolated, he doesn't want to mix because he is worried about the language and if he says something wrong. I'm really worried about him even mentally and emotionally." *Name changed for anonymity.*

"It's the kids who are suffering inside themselves, they feel like they can't ask for help from their mums because she doesn't know English, and at school, I can't ask because no one will help me, so they are keeping it inside themselves." Project organiser, Hiba Hussian

The Anaka Education Project

The challenges for newcomer children were thrown into even starker relief by the pandemic and school closures in 2020. In response, Anaka planned a pilot education support project, which was quickly scaled up when schools again switched to home-learning in January 2021.

In a mammoth effort, three volunteers co-ordinated some 30 volunteer teachers, working with 80 children from 35 families over the first 6 months of 2021. A waiting list was formed of other interested families. The project included:

- Zoom meetings for mothers, outlining the project, an overview of the education system and tips to support children's learning.
- Weekly Zoom sessions on English and Maths for 2-4 children with a volunteer teacher.
- Some volunteers offered one-to-one support to children or mothers eg extra English.

- Three student teachers worked intensively with a small number of children/families who were particularly struggling.
- Participating mothers could join Anaka's other programmes, eg English lessons, book club, social, creative and health related workshops.
- Crowdfunding paid for resource packs for families and equipment for teachers. A few families received tablets, but more were needed.

There was a clear expectation that mothers would join in sessions with their children. This was designed to help the mothers with English, knowledge of the school system and increase their engagement with the children's learning. It also allowed parents to reinforce the content covered with their children after sessions.

Impact of the Project

Progress in learning - For some, this programme resulted in clear progress. 40% of mums said their children's performance had improved.

There was a fall of 15% in kids reported to be really struggling in school, down from 37.5% at the start. Given the short-term, pilot nature of the intervention, in the context of home-learning, school closures and the challenges already identified for newcomer pupils. This is a great result, but highlights the need for sustained support.

English language - The chance to practice English in a friendly, small group setting was particularly valued when schools were closed. Several teachers highlighted progress in English, while more than half of mums said their children's English had improved over the short period of the project.

Confidence - Two thirds of children were happier about school, according to mums. 38% were more confident about school and learning. Most teachers found their children grew in confidence and became more engaged over the course of the programme. They reported participants became more willing to try harder material, more willing to speak up, answer questions and ask for help and therefore get the help they needed.

"For my daughter, fortunately the school support her. They set her a special programme, especially in English and Maths. It is very beneficial to her and for me also because during the lockdown I helped her to do all the homeworks. She attended the lessons of Anaka... she improves and she loves her teacher... Now she continues to improve in vocabulary. [When she went back to school] she found it easier and she starts to learn with her colleagues and not in a special programme... she is doing well, she is happier at school now." Mum of P7 pupil

"It helped him a lot, thank you very much for Anaka. I see his progress. To start, he doesn't know how he put a sentence... If you give him a story now he can read it. When we go out if I show him something, he can spell it for me and he can read it. When I say put this word in the sentence, he can make it. She gave him some confidence... so when she finish with him, days after, I try to use the same ways and language with him." Mum of P1

"I found it really good, because it helped me a lot.... At the start, I didn't want to join but as I went I wanted to go every single day" - teenage participant who said school was easier on her return after lockdown due to the programme.

Wellbeing and tackling isolation - Through greater confidence and language ability, 70% of mums reported their children were looking forward to seeing their friends at school, more than twice number before the project.

Outcomes for mothers

Many mothers commented on what a support the project had been during the home-schooling period but also beyond.

- 90% of mothers said they understood the education system better.
- 45% said they knew more about what their children were learning after taking part.
- 78% of mothers felt they now got more information from teachers and schools than before.
- Just over half of mums felt better about helping with school work, though 20% still felt they could hardly help.
- 37.5% felt their own English had improved as a result of the project.
- Many asked for the programme to continue.

The participation and engagement of parents was seen as generally positive – they were able to help keep the children focused, help with translation if there was a language challenge, and keep in touch with teachers on WhatsApp about how work was going. Some mothers were learning along with their children, and many were able to reinforce the learning throughout the week between the lessons.

A few teachers found mothers were too quick to speak for their children, making it more difficult for the children to fully participate. Some guidance to mums on how to support their children in the lessons could be helpful for the future.

The teachers' experience

Volunteers teachers reported a range of positive experiences – professionally and personally. Many felt it helped them gain confidence and stretched them professionally. Many found they had a new insight into the challenges and needs of newcomer children and most found it very rewarding to work with the children, see their progress and to receive positive feedback from families taking part.

Most teachers said participating in the project had changed their views on how children are supported. Some felt they were already aware of the challenges, for others it became clearer that support in schools is not adequate and the needs of newcomer children are not being addressed.

"Before the project, my son was struggling a lot in school. He knows only the alphabet and a few words in English, but after the project, [the volunteer teacher] started with him the alphabet from A-Z, she gave him a word or more to work on them, on a daily basis I was revising them with him... In Maths, she is helping him a lot and doing the homeworks. [Now he has gone back to school] it is going better in reading and his teacher wrote this on Seesaw, he noticed that. Still now, he refused to talk. I encourage him to try to talk because he is very shy, only in school, because maybe he is feeling he doesn't speak English, but at home there is no problem, he can talk and talk!" Mum of a P1 pupil

After just four weeks of classes, the project organiser saw a change in the mothers' approach: "That very sad tone in their voices has gone, they are engaged... Mums are saying 'Before I know nothing about what's in the school bag.' Now they are asking 'what should my child know at the end of P1, P2...' Before it wasn't like this, it was just 'go do your homework.'" Hiba Hussain

"Education is very important process for our kids. It's not affecting only the kids, it's affecting the kids and the whole family. If the mums are relieved from that pressure of spending 10 or 11 hours just translating the homeworks, she could do better things with her kids, she could use it for other things, just to develop herself, go to the college, doing things for herself, even taking some time off for herself! As a Mum, we all understand this is a major need." Mum of two

"I have gained first-hand experience for what it's like for newcomer children and for me that has made this experience one of the most valuable in my life. I think every student teacher should be encouraged to take part as part of their training." Volunteer teacher

Recommendations for education providers

Based on feedback of parents, teachers and children, it is clear newly-arrived families are not receiving effective or sufficient support to help pupils make a strong start to their school days in NI. The following recommendations to address the challenges are made to teachers, schools, the Education Authority and Department for Education NI, based on the learning from this small-scale pilot programme.

1. More resources are needed for schools, in terms of training, guidance and funding to resources extra staffing.
2. Early intervention will help children transition smoothly and more quickly, resulting in better outcomes and less support needed later on.
3. One size cannot fit all. Instead, education services must take a child-centred approach based on the needs and age of the individual child, level of English, family circumstances and experience prior to coming in NI.
4. Provision needs to consider the whole child, not simply their language or academic progress. Our project demonstrated where children feel isolated and sad, they will struggle to learn, but schools can help children to settle and integrate faster with their peers.
5. Planning and support needs to include the whole family – where parents are supported to learn English and invited to be part of their children’s education, their children will settle better and faster.
6. Interventions by volunteers and charities such as Anaka demonstrate what a small-scale targeted initiative can achieve. However this cannot and should not be a substitute for adequate and appropriate support within school provided by statutory agencies. While voluntary groups can make a difference, as clearly seen in this project, any voluntary sector support should be in partnership and supported financially by the Education Authority.
7. Sustained support is needed for the long term, because the type of support a child needs will change at they get older. Particularly secondary school children found they still valued extra support with technical language to fully access the curriculum even some years after arriving.
8. All children have the right to an education, and refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant children should not be denied the opportunity to study certain subjects or activities their peers are able to enjoy.

“I think people need a transition time... My English wasn’t fluent but I could understand some English, but also there is an accent problem, because even that I understand some English, the accent here is difficult for me. So the schools need to give students some time, like not with everyone but separate time to get used to the English and the accent. And focus on help with speaking, because it’s the most difficult part.” Teenage participant on what support is needed for newly arrived pupils

“Help to integrate and make friends, because once you have friends, the faster you pick up English and the better you feel about going to schools. Teachers could organise some group activities at first.” Teenage participant

“I wish that my children can contribute in their society, in Belfast, and can maybe not be isolated, can get different kind of friends, not only Sudanese friends, I wish they can move on and can maybe enjoy their life with British and Irish friends.” Nada – mum of 3 children who took part in the project.

Notes

Anaka Women’s Collective (Formerly Sawa/Homeplus women’s group) was formed to facilitate refugee and asylum-seeking women around Belfast to address their needs, claim their rights and support each other. The project was evaluated by Chris McCartney on behalf of the Voice of Migrant Women programme of VSB Foundation, collecting feedback from mothers using an Arabic survey at the beginning and end of the sessions, a survey of teachers and focus groups with mothers and teenage participants.