



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

# SUPPORTING MIGRANT CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

*What information do schools need and how  
can it be collected?*

**PROJECT REPORT**  
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The views and opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the British Academy or the University of Birmingham.

# CONTENTS

Executive summary	p. 2
Introduction	p. 5
Literature review	p. 5
Comparative policy review	p. 7
Focus group interviews	p. 10
Discussion	p. 14
Recommendations	p. 15
References	p. 17

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Migrant children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are an overlooked group in research, practice and policy. Little is known about school approaches towards supporting this group of children; even less about the experiences of the children themselves. Lack of information or understanding of children's experiences of migration may result in non/mis-identification of SEN and children missing out on important support. Lack of data may also make it difficult to identify any potential patterns of over/under- representation or bias within SEN provision. However, the sensitive nature of migration complicates the collection of data on migrant children with SEN. Children and families may be reluctant to share information with both researchers and schools. Those working with the children may also be unsure about what type of information they need and how to collect it.

In this report, we present findings from a research project exploring the information needs of British schools in relation to migrant children with SEN, and the best ways of collecting this information. The project was carried out in 2019-2020 and consisted of a review of current academic literature on migration and SEN in Europe, a policy review of terminology and practice in six European countries, and qualitative focus group interviews with stakeholders in the UK.

The report has been developed primarily for those who work with migrant children in schools or other educational capacities. The report may also be of interest to others, for example researchers, students, organisations, or policy makers working in this area. We hope it will encourage more conversation and research and through this help place migrant children with SEN more firmly on the educational agenda.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review was to obtain an overview of **existing academic work on migration and SEN in Europe** and through this, identify potentially **common themes** and provide a **comparative background** for our study.

The review found very little work carried out in this area and consequently, the themes identified were based on a relatively small amount of studies. Nevertheless, some important commonalities were identified:

First, the review illustrated the dynamic nature of both the experiences of migrant families of children with SEN and the practices of schools. As families move between different countries, they also move between **different languages** and, potentially, **different ways of understanding SEN**. Schools similarly have **different experiences of diversity and multiculturalism**, due to the different extent and timing of migration into their respective countries. Their systems for supporting migrant students thus vary, and so does their approach to migrant children with SEN.

Second, when migrating, many families leave important support networks behind. This makes **schools important 'hubs' or 'first port of call' for families** accessing the complex system of

services available for their disabled children. The importance of **trust and relationships** between families and schools was identified as a key theme across studies.

Third, the papers identified significant **uncertainties in how to identify special educational needs in migrant children**. Teachers and others working with the children expressed concern that potential needs were going unrecognized. However, over-representation of migrant students in SEN provision was also described as a problem in some countries.

Fourth, **a lack of training** in how to work with migrant children, including those with suspected SEN, was identified as a key area of concern across several papers.

## COMPARATIVE POLICY REVIEW

The purpose of the policy review was to understand how the terminology used by other European countries for collecting data on migrant children and SEN compared to the UK, what provision was in place for migrant children and children with SEN, and how/if educational policies and practices addressed the needs of migrant children with SEN.

Our review revealed a complex picture of definitions and practices for migrant children and children with SEN in the six countries reviewed: England, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Spain and Italy. For **migrant status**, definitions were **predominantly based on country of birth and residence**, except for in England, where the school census classifies children based on **ethnicity**. In addition, **language categories** (for example 'English as an additional Language' or 'Bilingual students') were sometimes used as a distinguishing factor in education and as a basis for intervention. For **SEN status**, definitions were mostly focused on **the extent to which children needed additional support** to be able to access education with their peers.

Definitions of SEN in two countries - Italy and Spain - included characteristics that potentially overlapped with migration. Italy considered 'socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage' and Spain 'late entrants into the system' as part of their definitions of SEN. This is an important difference from the English SEN code of practice, which specifically states that 'difficulties related solely to learning English as an additional language are not SEN' (DfE/DoH 2015, p. 85).

We were not able to find any recent references to policies or practices which considered migrant children who also had SEN. However, as we only reviewed literature in English, we cannot be certain that nothing of the kind exists in the native language of the six countries reviewed.

## QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

The purpose of the qualitative interviews was to understand the information needs of different stakeholders working with migrant children with SEN in England. We also wanted to get their ideas about how such information could best be collected.

Three qualitative focus group interviews were carried out with a total of 12 stakeholders (special needs coordinators (SENCOs), caseworkers at a migrant organisation, and special needs support teachers). The findings from the qualitative interviews echoed many of the

common themes identified in the literature review, and illustrated well the complexities of working in the intersection between migration and SEN.

Our interviewees clearly emphasised the importance of **language, culture and communication** in the work with migrant children and their families. Language was often described as the key barrier to communication, but the interviewees also identified other elements of importance to communication, including:

- knowledge of different cultural understandings of education and special educational needs (**cross-cultural literacy skills**)
- awareness amongst professionals of the impact of the family's cultural background and their own cultural assumptions (**cultural sensitivity**)

Addressing our questions about information needs, the interviewees generally felt it was important to know more about individual migrant children. For example, they mentioned the need for information about the children's **medical history, language level in their first language, their family situation, and any past interventions**.

Considering the best ways of obtaining knowledge, they acknowledged that this kind of information was often not 'neutral' and that much therefore would depend on the person collecting it. By emphasising **trust and relationships as a key element in information gathering**, they seemed to support a personalised approach to data collection.

Finally, and similar to the reviewed papers, our interviewees also mentioned the **need for training**: for schools, parents and organisations working with migrants.

## FINAL COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of our study, 15 key recommendations for further collection of data, practice, training and policy in this area have been developed. We recognize that our findings in the report and these recommendations are based on a relatively small knowledge base, given the lack of research in this area and the small scale of our own study. We also acknowledge with regret that the voices of migrant parents and class teachers are missing from our report. This was not intentional, but due to difficulties of recruitment in the context of Covid-19. Our recommendations should therefore be seen as tentative and a point from which further work in this area can build.

Our main recommendation from the project concerns the **value of further research being conducted in this area**. Future research should address the **complexities around locality, different types of migrant and SEN groups**, and include the **perspectives of children, parents and class teachers**. All 15 recommendations are outlined on page 15-17.

## INTRODUCTION

Migrant children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are an overlooked group in research, practice and policy. Little is known about school approaches towards this group of children; even less about the experiences of the children themselves. Migrant children in England are a diverse group, who may come from a range of countries and have left their country of origin due to a range of circumstances. They may belong to different ethnic and religious communities, have varying levels of English proficiency and have different experiences from their home countries, the migration journey and the reception in the local community.

Lack of information or understanding of children's experiences of migration may result in non/mis-identification of SEN and children missing out on important support. Lack of data may furthermore make it difficult to identify any potential patterns of over/under-representation or bias within SEN provision. However, in the UK, formal monitoring of children's migration status is controversial (Busby 2016; Gayle 2018; Pells 2016) and the term 'migrant' is often used as a negative and oversimplified label within public discourse (Taylor 2014). This complicates the collection of data on migrant children with SEN. Children and families may be reluctant to share information with both researchers and schools. Those working with the children may also be unsure about what type of information they need and how to collect it.

This is the background upon which this report has been written. The purpose of the report is to describe the main findings of a research project carried out in 2019-2020 with funding from the British Academy. The project consisted of a review of current academic literature on migration and SEN in Europe, a policy review of terminology and practice in six European countries, and qualitative focus group interviews with stakeholders in the UK. Three main questions guided the research:

1. What information do British schools need in order to respond to the needs of migrant children with SEN?
2. What are the challenges of collecting data on migrant children with SEN in British schools?
3. What would be the best methodological approach to collect better data and facilitating better understanding of migrant children with SEN in British schools?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review was to obtain an overview of existing academic work on migration and SEN in Europe and through this, identify potentially common themes and provide a comparative background for our study. The full review is published in Jørgensen, Dobson and Perry (2020). The following provides a brief summary of the methods and main findings of the review.

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### REVIEW METHODS

Relevant databases were searched by applying all combinations of i) migrant, immigrant and refugee, ii) SEN, SEND and disability and iii) 'child.' Peer reviewed papers published after 2000,

based on research conducted (at least partially) in Europe was included, if they specifically described school-aged children, and at least to some extent educational issues or approaches. Only 13 papers which met the inclusion criteria were identified, clearly illustrating the lack of research and the need for more knowledge in this area.

The papers came from five countries, England, Spain, Italy, Germany and Finland, and some were written by the same authors using material from one specific project. The papers were mostly qualitative, and usually focused on a specific school, area and/or migrant group. Only eight of the papers were specifically about migrants and SEN. The remainder described the education of migrants more generally with a sub-section or some consideration of migrant children with SEN, or discussed migrant children potentially misplaced in SEN provision.

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## REVIEW FINDINGS

The review showed that the educational experiences of migrant families of children with SEN and the practices of schools are highly diverse and dynamic. As families moved between different countries, they also moved between different languages and, potentially, different ways of understanding SEN and inclusion (Caldin and Cinotti 2018; Hamilton 2013). By leaving their country of origin, families also often left important support networks behind. Schools functioned as important ‘hubs’ or ‘first port of call’ for families accessing the complex system of services available for their disabled children (Caldin 2014; Oliver and Singal 2017). However, communication between the schools and the families were also an area susceptible to misunderstandings, at least in the in the early stages after migration (Oliver and Singal 2017). Disrupted schooling due to migration and the lack of information accompanying the children was mentioned in several of the papers as complicating the assessment of the children (Oliver and Singal 2017). However, some of the papers also identified a deficit view amongst some school professionals, disregarding the children’s previous schooling and describing migrant parents as less involved (Caldin 2014; Paniagua 2015; Migliarini 2018).

Lack of proficiency in the school language was mentioned in almost all of the reviewed articles as a factor, which complicated communication between migrant parents and schools. It also made it difficult for parents to navigate the educational system. Families did not always understand the teachers, or the training and interventions suggested for their children (Paniagua 2017; Caldin 2014). The importance of trust and relationships between families and schools was identified as a key theme.

The schools described in the reviewed literature had different experiences of diversity and multiculturalism, due to the different extent and timing of migration in their respective countries. Their systems for supporting migrant students varied, and so did their approach to migrant children with SEN. Due to lack of policy guidance, different schools sometimes used different frameworks. Consequently, referral processes often ended up being highly personal and subjective (Paniagua 2015; 2017). The complexities of assessing and correctly placing children who lacked familiarity with the local language were emphasised in several papers (Madziva and Thondhlana 2017; Oliver and Singal 2017; Paniagua 2015). In situations where the children had experienced significant trauma, it was acknowledged that assessment could be further complicated (McIntyre and Hall 2018).

Some of the papers discussed the problem of migrant children being overrepresented in SEN provision (Migliarini 2018; Migliarini et al. 2018). This, they argued, was due to migrant students being positioned by teachers as less 'able,' due to their differences from a 'pre-determined, standardised 'norm.' However, given the significant doubt about how to identify special educational needs in migrant children, there was also concern that potential needs were going unrecognised.

Lack of funding and frequent turn-over of staff was identified as an issue in several papers (Caldin 2014; Caldin and Cinotti 2018; McIntyre and Hall 2018), along with widespread lack of training in working with migrant children, including those with suspected SEN (Hamilton 2013; Paniagua 2017). The lack of flexibility within schools due to rigid curricula, accountability technologies and standardization was furthermore described as having an impact on approaches to migrant children both with and without SEN.

## COMPARATIVE POLICY REVIEW

The aim of the comparative review was to examine three questions of relevance to our overall project questions: 1) how are migrant children defined within the different systems and what is the educational provision in place for them? 2) how is SEN defined within the different systems and what does the education of children with SEN look like? and 3) Do national policies and practices consider the intersection between migration and SEN and if so, how?

It was hoped that by exploring these three questions we would be able to provide some context for the main study questions and a comparative background for policies and practices in England.

Educational policy and legislation from six European countries was examined (Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Italy, Spain). Basic information on legislation and policy from these six countries was collected and summarized from three sources: the OECD education policy outlook,<sup>1</sup> Eurydice,<sup>2</sup> and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (EASNIE).<sup>3</sup>

In the process of doing the review it quickly became clear, that our questions were very extensive and that any answers to them would be immensely complex. Particularly the last question was very difficult to approach, as it queried not only what was *there*, but also what was *not there* in the identified policies. A firm answer would thus require familiarity with all possible related policies. Given that an in-depth and native language exploration of policies and practices in every single of the six selected countries was beyond the scope of the project, the following is thus limited to a brief summary of some of the main points derived from international reports.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/policy-outlook/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/home\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/home_en)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.european-agency.org/>

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## MIGRANT TERMINOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL PROVISION FOR MIGRANTS

Terminology around migration is complex and varies between countries. In a comparative report of European countries, the most common way to identify children and young people from a migrant background was found to be by *country of birth*, followed by *residence/immigration status* (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, p. 52). The English school census is different from these approaches as it does not classify children according to migration status or country of birth, but according to ethnicity, using 20 main categories (DfE 2019).

Within the reviewed educational contexts, language categories are also sometimes used to describe children of migrant origin and potentially provide a basis for interventions. In Denmark, for example ‘bilingual pupils’ (tosprogede elever) may be offered ‘Danish as a second language’ instruction (Undervisningsministeriet 2017). Similarly, the category ‘English as Additional Language’ is used in English schools to describe children, who have another first language than English and who may be referred to additional instruction.

About half of the countries included in the comparative European report identify newly arrived children as a special category in their educational systems, including Denmark, England and Italy. Others, such as Germany, Finland and Spain do not identify newly arrived children as a specific target group at the national level (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019, p. 54), but local governments and schools may still adopt various degrees of immersion or separation of newly arrived children (see for example Terhart and von Dewitz 2018 for a discussion of Germany). Based on the above, it seemed that the terminology in education in relation to migration predominantly focuses on language. Several countries provide additional, transitional language provision for children, who do not speak the native language, although in some there are no top-down regulations or recommendations for this practice (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019).

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## SEN TERMINOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

SEN terminology in the six countries also varied, but most definitions were based on situations where children need special or additional support to be able to participate, develop and learn within the classroom.

**In England**, the Children and Families Act of 2014 states that a child or young person has a special educational need (SEN) ‘if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her’. This includes when a child or young person: a) has significantly greater difficulty in learning than most others of the same age; b) has a disability which either prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions, or c) is under the age of five and is likely to fall within either of the above paragraphs when over that age (or would be if special educational provision were not made for them) (EASNIE 2018b). If an assessment suggests that a child or young person requires special help that cannot reasonably be provided within school or college, an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan must be developed and outline the provision required.

In **Denmark**, children with SEN are broadly defined as ‘children whose development requires special consideration or support’ and who are not able to develop satisfactorily within the framework of differentiated teaching. If the need for support is considered less than 9 teaching lessons per week, it must be provided within the normal class and teaching. Decisions about a child’s need for supplementary education are made by the school together with parents, following assessment from a pedagogical-psychological team (Eurydice 2019b).

**Finland** has no specific definition of SEN, but gives all learners the right to receive support regardless of whether they are ‘caused by difficulty with reading and writing, mathematics or attention, an illness, a disability or a life situation’ (EASNIE 2020a). There are three categories of support: general support, intensified support and special support. Whereas everyone is entitled to the first category, the second and third are based on assessment and more long-term planning by the educational provider (Eurydice 2019a).

In **Germany**, ‘children or young people are presumed to have special educational needs (SEN) if their opportunities for education, development and learning are limited to such an extent that they cannot be sufficiently promoted within the scope of instruction at mainstream schools without receiving additional special educational assistance.’ (EASNIE 2020b). Diagnosis of SEN involves a precise definition of individual special needs and an assessment, which includes information about development of learning, behavioural strategies, perception, social relationships, communication and interaction, individual and educational circumstances in life and the school environment and possibilities for change. This guides the decision about the process of education and the place of support (ibid.).

The **Italian** definition of SEN includes both pupils with ‘physical, intellectual or sensory impairments, whether stable or progressive, causing learning and working difficulties that can produce social detriment and alienation’ and pupils with ‘specific developmental disorders or with socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantages’ (EASNIE 2018a). Assessments for SEN are carried out by local health authorities upon request from parents. However, in the case of children with socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage, identification is done by teachers, who subsequently invite families to contact social services or make the referral themselves (ibid.). Italian education is characterised by inclusivity and 99.6% of learners with disabilities are in mainstream education (EASIE 2018, p. 133).

**The Spanish education act** of 2013 considers five types of specific educational support needs: 1) Learners with special educational needs, associated physical, intellectual or sensory disability, or serious behavioural disorder, 2) high-ability learners, 3) late entries into the Spanish education system, 4) specific learning difficulties and 5) ADHD (EASNIE 2020c). The identification and assessment of SEN is carried out by a multi-disciplinary team, who develops individual performance plans for the pupils based on their educational needs. Pupils are educated in mainstream classrooms and follow the mainstream curriculum wherever possible (ibid.)

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## THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN MIGRATION AND SEN IN POLICY

The reviewed policies of the six countries included in our policy analysis did not always make it clear whether any potential educational disadvantages associated with migration, e.g. in relation to language, could be considered as an element of SEN.

Some countries, such as Finland, Denmark and Germany, had a relatively broad overall definition of SEN focusing on needs requiring 'special consideration or support' which could potentially be interpreted as including language needs. However, Danish policy further specified that 'special educational support exists for pupils with intellectual disabilities, dyslexia, visual disabilities, hearing impairment and physical disabilities' (Eurydice 2019b) thus precluding language difficulties.

In Finland being a migrant was also not seen as having SEN, although the approach to special support seemed open to a variety of needs. Learners who experience particular challenges, either as a result of being a migrant or not, have support available to them to enable them to access the curriculum at the level that is appropriate to them. The German policy also seemed more open, as it set out a more specific set of eight support priorities, including sight, learning, emotional and social, development, speech, mental development, hearing, physical and motor development, instruction for sick pupils (Eurydice, 2020).

Definitions of SEN in two countries, Italy and Spain, specifically included characteristics in their definitions of SEN that potentially overlapped with migration. Italy considered socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage and Spain 'late entrants into the system' as part of their definitions of SEN. Contrary to this, the English SEN code of practice specifically stated that 'difficulties related solely to learning English as an additional language are not SEN' (DfE/DoH 2015, p. 85).

These differences constitute important policy distinctions, which, as we will discuss further below, may feed into teacher practices and school approaches towards migrant children with (or with suspected) SEN.

## FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Three qualitative focus group interviews were carried out with a total of 12 participants in the period Dec 2019 - Feb 2020. The participants were special needs coordinators (SENCOs), caseworkers at a migrant organisation, and specialist teachers. We had planned for two additional focus groups, one with parents of migrant children with SEN and one with a group of class teachers, but unfortunately, the onset of Covid-19 forced us to abandon this plan<sup>4</sup>. We thus acknowledge with great regret that the perspectives of parents and class teachers are missing from our analysis.

The three groups interviewed for the project had three very different roles in relation to migrant children with SEN. Only one group, the SENCOs, were specifically involved in the assessment of the children and the task of distinguishing SEN from EAL. The case workers were more likely to be involved in the application for funds when a need was identified, and

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<sup>4</sup> In England, Covid-19 forced schools to close in exactly the period when recruitment for our interviews with parents and teachers were to take place and our attempts to recruit on-line were unfortunately unsuccessful.

the specialist teachers were normally referred to after children had been given a diagnosis. Nevertheless, there were a number of overarching themes emphasised and discussed by all three groups: 1) language, culture and communication 2) information needs and ways of gathering it and 3) skills and training, which we discuss in turn below.

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## LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

Language was a reoccurring theme in all three focus group interviews. SENCOs emphasised the difficulty of assessing students for SEN, when they also spoke English as an additional language (EAL). In the specialist teacher team, it was mentioned that EAL could ‘mask’ SEN and that teachers could be reluctant to refer for SEN, if they thought that it might be a language issue. However, they also described an opposite situation, where teachers might think an issue was due to a hearing impairment rather than EAL. This clearly illustrates the importance of considering EAL and SEN separately, but also the possible overlaps between them, and the need for a holistic assessment.

While language was evidently an important element in its own right, the participants also emphasised the link between language, cultural references and belonging. All three groups recognized that the cultural background of families had an impact on how they understood their children’s condition and the support on offer for them. They mentioned that parents might find it difficult to accept a SEN diagnosis, and that some might come from a place where disability is taboo and something to be ashamed of. This could make it difficult for them to speak out and understand how and where to seek help.

The children often came with little information. This, combined with language barriers, complicated communication, and made it important to draw on other people, such as additional staff or interpreters. All three groups discussed the role of interpreters. They highlighted that language is not always enough for good interpretation and understanding.

Some of the interpreters’ experience of special needs within the country they have come from, they haven’t got the knowledge or they have a very specific knowledge about what it’s like. And they don’t know what it is like here or how it is different (Specialist Teacher).

As this quotation shows, an important role of interpreting is *(cross-)cultural literacy* - the knowledge about and ability to participate in a given culture or in the borderlands between cultures (Clark and Flores 2007). It involves having the ‘knowledge and understanding of other cultures’ patterns of interaction, values, institutions, metaphors and symbols, as well as cross-cultural communication skills’ (Saravia-Shore and Arvizu 1992/2019, preface). In the context of the present study, this would specifically involve knowledge about the educational system, perceptions of SEN, and educational approaches towards children with SEN.

However, our participants also emphasised the importance of acknowledging that their own experiences, and those of other professionals, are similarly shaped by culture.

... there are some students who arrive and within some cultures it is the norm to not stare at people too long and not make eye contact. If you are in a classroom for a period of time and there is a student who will not look at you or they won’t engage or you know they seem to be quite shy with making eye contact ... it might not necessarily be what you think

it is, because in their culture it is not considered polite to have eye contact for too long (SENCo).

Our cultural references that we use with them in the classroom, things they might have seen in television, or part of natural things, things they have had through an English upbringing, playgroups etc., they haven't had it (SENCo).

Their narratives thus also highlighted the importance of *cultural sensitivity* - knowledge, awareness and respect of cultural differences (Foronda 2008), including the acknowledgement that one's own cultural expectations and references might not always be the same as those of others, and awareness of how this might affect practice.

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## INFORMATION NEEDS

A clear finding in all three interviews was that there was a general need for more information. Lack of information accompanying migrant children was described by the SENCos as a common challenge when trying to ascertain their level of learning and progress. The interviewed SENCos expressed a wish to have more information about the children's medical condition, what support they had been receiving, either in the country of origin or in other schools preceding theirs, and the general family situation. They also mentioned the need to know more about the language of the children, again bringing it back to the key role which language played in assessments and development of support.

The specialist teacher group mentioned the need to know the child's age, as this would have had an impact on the level of education and extent of school experiences they have had in their country of origin. They also strongly emphasised the need to know about the child's family background. Highlighting the importance of the previously mentioned concepts of cultural literacy and sensitivity, they described how this was key to their interaction with families.

If you are going to somebody's home, it is simple things, like how you approach that family, how you greet them, how you enter their home (Specialist teacher).

The specialist teachers' groups mentioned that some schools, similar to the ones described in the literature review, held a view of migrant parents as disengaged and 'not showing up', when in fact their lack of attendance at events or meeting was often due to work obligations. This supports the above-mentioned need for teachers to know more about the children's family background and circumstances.

The question however remained as to how this much needed information could be collected. In the school setting, the SENCos described how coming across information sometimes almost happened by chance or as a result of time-consuming 'digging' around. Furthermore, information was sometimes directed at the wrong person in a group of people with different, overlapping roles.

Similarly, the specialist teacher team talked about differences between schools in the levels of cooperation. They mentioned that ideally, information about the children should be documented in an "All About Me" sort of document that went with them. However, they also posed the very important question of who would be completing this document and how.

Given the sensitivity of migration, it is perhaps not surprising that trust and relationships were emphasised as key to the role of gathering information, particularly in the interviews with the caseworkers and the specialist teachers.

Trust is key. Here the majority of our clients, we put them in a situation where they are very open to discuss anything really, because that is the only way we can give them the right support. So, we give them the feeling that they can trust us enough to open up (caseworker)

Given the potential wariness of parents in sharing information and the importance of trust and relationships, gathering information in a standardized way may not always be possible. Our findings thus seem to support a more individual and personal approach. One specialist teacher for example described how she would get the children to talk by asking them to identify familiar places on google maps. The team also pointed out that standardised assessments were often not possible or appropriate, because of the complexity of the children's condition or situation.

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## SKILLS AND TRAINING

The SENCo group mentioned the need for specialists who could help them in their work with migrant children with SEN.

you are always told – don't put EAL and SEN together but when it comes to assessment you are under pressure to be able to show progress or evidence of progress. You almost slip into that without realising, because they are the only assessment systems you got in front of you and if you don't have the experience and no one to guide you... (SENCOs).

Their experiences highlight the need for skills development and training in working with migrant children with (or with suspected) SEN. The specialist teachers discussed how they had developed expertise and knowledge over time to get the confidence to select the right tools for their assessments. They also mentioned that the complexity of needs they worked with sometimes resulted in assessments becoming indicative - 'let's try a bit of this and a bit of that' (specialist teacher), rather than absolute standardised assessments.

The SENCOs described situations where parents would bring in their own explanations or private assessments of their children, in an attempt to get the right level of support for their children. This emphasises an additional issue, which was also picked up by the specialist teachers – that of schools' financial resources – and their impact on SEN assessments, referrals and allocation of support. In relation to training and skills developments, they also mentioned that both funding and time pressure might impact on schools' willingness to engage with training and skills development.

The caseworkers mentioned that schools sometimes asked them to come in to deliver presentations about different cultures and about different legal entitlements. They also mentioned that training for parents might be helpful. This was supported by the specialist teachers who also noted that it would be useful for parents to have more knowledge of the education system more generally.

Finally, the case workers mentioned that training would also be useful for migrant organisations and centres, who are not specialists in special educational needs and therefore might not detect a potential need. Particular areas of training mentioned were: how to recognize special educational needs, how to start the process of referral, how to approach parents and what questions to ask them, and finally, understanding the cultural element of special educational needs and disability so that they could pass a clear message that ‘this is fine.’

## DISCUSSION

Bringing all three parts of the study together allows us to understand our stakeholders’ perspectives in context and flag up some of the many complexities in this area. All three participant groups in our study focused on language as a key element in their work with migrant children. In the reviewed literature, language was similarly discussed as one of the main challenges to communication and assessment. Educational policies also highlighted language as one of the main reasons for interventions. However, not all migrants speak another language than the majority language. The overwhelming focus on language within policy runs the risk of neglecting other more cultural elements of communication and perceptions of SEN, such as those described in the group interviews. A more explicit focus on *cultural literacy* and *cultural sensitivity* amongst professionals might help address some of the cultural deficit approaches identified in the literature review. It might also help teachers identify and understand the culturally defined expectations and frames of reference which influence their practice.

In the narratives of our participants and in the literature from the UK, there was an explicit emphasis on the separation between EAL and SEN. This can perhaps be linked to existing policy and guidance, which also explicitly distinguishes the two (e.g., Rosamund et al 2003; DfE/DoH 2015, p. 85). However, our literature and interview data indicate that because of the difficulty in distinguishing the two, some practitioners may worry that needs go unrecognised. In other countries, particularly Spain and Italy, policy seems more open to include cultural and linguistic difficulties within SEN. It can be hypothesised that this may risk an over-representation of migrant students within SEN-provision (Migliarini et al 2019). However, without proper comparable data, it is impossible to draw any firm conclusions.

Another element which came up in the literature and the interviews was the implications of school funding structures. These may have an impact on decisions to either refer migrant students to special support (as no other support is available) or, on the contrary, ‘wait and see’ whether a suspected SEN is a language issue which might resolve over time.

Our participants noted that schools were quite different in their approaches, and this was also evident in the literature review. Our study, which included people from different local areas (both rural and urban) furthermore brought up some interesting differences in terms of the challenges they experienced. Much of the reviewed literature, like our own study, was small scale and also often focused on a particular school or locality. However, the policy review showed that there might be significant differences within countries and local authorities, too. These differences within countries and local areas highlight the need for much more research

into the complexities of migration and SEN as they play out in local, as well as in national educational contexts and settings.

Our participants expressed a wish for more information about the children, their family and their previous experiences of education. Their information needs and wishes corresponded well with questions suggested for practitioners in other, albeit slightly dated guidance documents (e.g., Cline 2009; Rosamund et al. 2003). However, our participants also acknowledged that all information gathering tools are essentially administered by people and that questions about migration are potentially of a sensitive nature. Moreover, our data suggest that the information required to support migrant children with SEN is highly individual and that a flexible, personal, and expert approach may therefore be needed to locate children's area(s) of need.

The final point worth mentioning is the lack of parental and child perspectives in the literature as well as in our project. As previously mentioned, this was not intentional on our part. However, the lack of parental and child voice is a significant gap in this emerging field of research and one that will have to be addressed in future research.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Our main recommendation from the project concerns the value of further research being conducted in this area. Future research should address the complexities around locality, different types of migrant and SEN groups, and include the perspectives of children and parents.

Our research begins to reveal an important picture of policy and practice in this area; but it is a nascent one. Without a more extensive policy and research literature to work from and a common international terminology, our ability to draw conclusions across contexts is limited. Consequently, our recommendations below are also necessarily tentative and a point from which further work in this area can build.

### **What information do British schools need in order to respond to the needs of migrant children with SEN?**

Our findings show that professionals would like more information about migrant children in order to best support them. Some of their information needs were related to the children, others to their cultural background.

- 1. It is recommended that schools actively seek information and knowledge about migrant students who join the school, including their family and educational background. They should use this to adopt a culturally sensitive approach in their work with the children and their families.*
- 2. When developing support measures and interventions, schools should seek to understand relevant factors, such as parents' employment and care arrangements, as well as parents' present knowledge of the educational system to which they have come.*

### **What are the challenges of collecting data on migrant children with SEN in British schools?**

Our data illustrated the importance of language, but also some of the potential challenges posed by cultural miscommunication.

3. *It is recommended that schools and organisations, where possible, consider both language and cultural literacy skills of interpreters.*
4. *It is also recommended that schools adopt a culturally sensitive approach, which acknowledges that children and parents may have cultural perceptions that are different to those of professionals, for example in relation to SEN.*
5. *Professionals are recommended to reflect on the culturally specific expectations that they themselves bring into their work with migrant children with SEN. These may include taken for granted practices, which either need to be adapted or explicitly explained to the children and their families.*

### **What would be the best methodological approach to collect better data and facilitating better understanding in supporting migrant children with SEN in British schools?**

Here our recommendations are necessarily speculative. Our findings showed that a personal approach may be most appropriate for collecting data for this particular group of children. However, the need for more coherent and consistent data also suggest that high-level standardised data might be helpful in providing a better understanding of the general situation of migrant children with SEN.

6. *It is recommended that schools and organisations build in trust and relationships as a key feature of their work with migrant children and families, acknowledging the importance of a personal approach and the wariness that some families may feel about sharing information.*
7. *It is recommended that schools and organisations set up a system for informal conversations with parents. This could take the form of exploratory open-ended conversation, rather than assessments, and include questions, such as the ones suggested in the discussion and in existing resources (Cline 2009; Rosamund et al. 2003).*
8. *It is recommended that educational bodies consider ways in which high-level standardised and anonymised data could be collected to provide a better understanding of the situation, without posing risks for migrant children and their families.*

In addition to these recommendations, the research also supports a number of additional recommendations in the areas of training/skills and policy development.

**For training and skills development our findings support:**

9. *Better and more extensive information for migrant parents in the educational system of the UK/England, including SEN specific rights, entitlements and responsibilities.*
10. *SEN-training for migrant organisations, particularly focusing how they might address the issue of SEN within migrant communities and who to refer to, if parents are unsure.*
11. *Inclusion of migration as a sub-theme in the learning outcomes for SENCoS, which in England are under current revision.*

12. *Strengthening the knowledge and expertise of teachers and SENCos in identifying and understanding the complexities of working with migrant students with SEN, and the aforementioned need for cross-cultural literacy and sensitivity.*

Finally, **for policy**, we would recommend:

13. *That policy makers consider the impact of funding-structures within schools on decisions to refer children for assessment or special education provision. These may potentially result in delays or lack of support.*

14. *That policy makers consider working alongside interested groups to develop a plan for collecting information about migrant children with SEN; this would help develop an evidence base, surface examples of good practice and generate more knowledge about this particular group. Any plan of this kind would need to take into consideration the potentially sensitive nature of such information and the importance of data protection, as well as the importance of trust and relationships between families, schools and those collecting the information.*

15. *That policy makers consider making more funding available for this under-explored area of research, especially given the growing number of children identified as having SEN and the general pressure on schools.*

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