

# Making a difference: how a school in Scotland worked to integrate students and address allegations of racism.

## What was the problem?

How school systems respond to migration has an enormous impact on migrant integration. Schools can be a vehicle for social integration and mobility, and for developing a sense of belonging to the local community. But schools can also be an isolating and discriminatory place and act as a barrier to integration. Within schools, teachers are key for creating opportunities for learning and participation, especially for migrant students. However, teachers may also inadvertently reinforce the barriers due to the assumptions embedded in their institutional structures, or their own unexamined beliefs.

One school in Scotland participated in the research project [Teaching that Matters for Migrant Students](#) (TEAMS)<sup>1</sup>. The school had just emerged from a high-profile investigation into allegations of racism in the school community. The allegations made by current and former pupils claimed that students had suffered racist discrimination in the school, and that the school hadn't done enough to address those incidents or prevent them from happening. These and the subsequent investigation coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic and the unprecedented challenges this placed on schools.

Having carried out an investigation into this school and four others, the local authority shared a summary of its findings in advance of the full report to help school staff plan for change. They found that, although there was 'no culture of racism in the school', there were several important improvements and changes the schools involved must make:

- Schools should set out clear processes to report discrimination incidents
- Schools should manage discrimination incidents sensitively and ensure follow up actions are taken
- Schools should review their curriculum to ensure it does not perpetuate and actively challenges racist, colonialist, or other discriminatory attitudes
- Schools should improve their culture to clearly show zero tolerance of racist conduct

## What did the school do?

An equalities lead was appointed, and a staff equalities committee created.

The equalities committee gathered information from colleagues and found that staff morale was low; staff confidence in dealing with equalities incidence was rock-bottom and there was a recognition among staff of the need for change, more training and better engagement with the young people in the school.

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<sup>1</sup> The TEAMS project focuses on teachers' work within institutional structures, and in relation to other professional and social groups and networks, including students, their families, school colleagues and specialists. Its aim is to address the urgent need to understand and help teachers support migrant students integration in terms of their academic success and cross-cultural socialisation, and a sense of belonging in the school community

The committee created a plan of improvement activities for year one, starting off with a video that went out to all pupils – addressing concerns and introducing the staff equalities group. Importantly the school entered into a partnership with [Intercultural Youth Scotland \(IYS\)](#).

## What happened next in the school?

### **Reporting and management of racist incidents**

The Equalities Committee carried out intense work on improving reporting and management of racist incidents in line with the findings of the investigation. This was backed up with staff and pupil training sessions along with other awareness raising activities.

### **Curriculum review**

IYS and the Equalities Committee met with each faculty to look at ways to make the curriculum more inclusive for all the protected characteristics. Teaching staff and pupil volunteers were involved in this review.

### **Staff culture**

Morale and confidence were boosted through training, communication and sharing of clear expectations and guidelines. All staff received regular updates on equalities work and any incidents reported. IYS and pupils led sessions for staff.

### **Pupil culture**

A pupil equalities committee was formed; an equalities notice board was set up, populated and regularly refreshed; a cultural/diversity calendar was established that reflected the entire student body; important speakers from the BPOC community were invited; safe spaces were created for students; IYS delivered anti-racist classes.

Accordingly, student confidence in reporting racist incidents was bolstered and a year later the whole school came together in a massive celebration of its diversity on 'culture day'.

## What did the project bring to schools?

The TEAMS collaboration came at the right time when people wanted to talk. It provided a safe space for staff to reflect honestly with someone external without fear of judgement or 'saying the wrong thing'.

The findings have encouraged staff to collaborate with each other, using the knowledge in the school community to help solve problems, rather than leaving any issue related to migrant students to specialists and thereby 'othering' them.

Reflection on the feedback from the research allows staff to gain an understanding of the experiences of both students and their colleagues along with the complexity of relational networks in schools.

It allowed school leaders to reflect on the lines of communication in their schools and how they affect collaboration, comparing this with other schools at home and abroad. It also allowed them to reflect on the most effective ways to use the limited time they have with visiting specialists in order to maximise the impact of their expertise.

The TEAMS project created several opportunities for professional learning for staff. For instance, all the school staff were present to hear about the project's findings and to reflect on the implications for their own practice during a CAT session. This research employed social network analysis and ethnographic research across seven school sites in Scotland, Finland and Sweden to examine how

teachers interact with students, their families, school colleagues, specialists and external agencies to address risks of exclusion, underachievement or other forms of marginalisation. A comprehensive analysis of teachers' day-to-day interactions over three school terms focused on how they build inclusive school communities, which are critical for building 'protective networks' to address barriers to learning for migrant students. The cross-country design helped to gauge the impact of particular policies and strategies that facilitate migrant integration across contexts. The project also created opportunities for students to participate in creative workshops, and produce artwork, including film and photography, to express and share their experiences. These can be found at <https://migrant-education.net/community/> .

The final project meeting involved members of staff who shared experience at a knowledge café style event. This meeting also created opportunities for international learning. The school's equalities committee plans to work with researchers to devise a future improvement plan that will be incorporated into future school development planning.

You can stay up to date with the TEAMS work via our newsletters, blog, and publications on our website [migrant-education.net](https://migrant-education.net)