

“There is No Policy and There is No One Responsible For Them”: education policies for accompanied refugee children in England

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Refugee children fit into multiple categories of disadvantage. They are usually ethnic minority, low-income and vulnerable children. Yet the English national government neglects their educational needs, with no mainstream policy directed towards them. This leaves policymaking at the discretion of local government and schools. But what education policies do local authorities have in place for supporting refugee children, and why have they chosen these?

To answer this, I interviewed local government officials responsible for education in five English local authorities. They indicate they do not have policies specific to refugees accompanied by their families. What is striking is the substantial cutbacks in policies over time. Previously, local authorities had English language centres and classes, training for teachers tailored to meeting refugees' needs, and conferences with schools and local communities to promote refugees' achievement. These policies have been discontinued.

A change in the “rules of the game” imposed by the central government comes to the fore in explaining this. Austerity has led to enormous reductions in local government expenditure, constraining the monetary and human resources available to cater for refugees' education. The government has also emphasised delegating responsibility to schools, limiting local authorities' statutory obligations and their access to many different sources of educational funding.

A policy implication of this research is including refugees, among other marginalised groups, in the Common Inspection Framework of Ofsted, the school inspection body. This means Ofsted would inspect schools while considering refugees' educational outcomes as an assessment criteria, showing official recognition of their unique needs.