
Helping young refugees and asylum seekers achieve their educational potential

Young refugees and asylum seekers arriving in the UK, often on their own, are some of our most vulnerable young people. Their educational background varies widely. Sir Walter St John's (SWSJ) Charity wanted to find out what helps them make the most of their educational potential in UK schools. It supported two projects working with young people of secondary-school age in two London boroughs. The projects provide lessons for community organisations and education staff working with this group, and flag broader problems that stop young people doing as well as they might.

Main findings at a glance:

- **Fulfilling potential is not just about teaching. Holistic support, tailored to individual needs and fostering self-esteem and social skills, was key to the projects' success.**
- **Good English is central to doing well at school. But the system itself is bewildering. Students gained much from help to understand the special language of school.**
- **These projects helped individuals make real progress. But they also highlight serious institutional barriers standing in the way of this group:**
 - Schools and colleges tend to have low expectations of these students. But these are often based on students' poor English, not their academic ability.
 - Services do not fully understand the challenges facing young refugees or asylum seekers, and often do not give them the support they need. The serious impact on mental health is especially neglected.
 - Support drops off sharply at age 16 and after 18. This causes particular problems for those whose education is already delayed and disrupted, and for those who want to go to college or university.

Introduction

Young refugees and asylum seekers are a very diverse group. Some have had no formal education; others have a high level. Some are on their own; others live with family. SWSJ Charity supported two projects that aimed to make a real difference to individuals' lives and education. The focus was intensive 1:1 and small group support, not work with large numbers. The projects prioritised unaccompanied students and ran from 2011-14. SWSJ Charity made grants to each project of around £30k per year.

The **Education Outreach Project, Klevis Kola Foundation**, worked with individuals and small groups, to develop their English, study skills and general well-being. It also gave more general support with college life and settling into a new area. Klevis Kola Foundation is a community organisation that supports refugees and asylum seekers.

The **Secondary Schools Project, Love to Learn**, provided a small number of individuals with intensive 1:1 holistic support. The aim was to help them make real academic progress so that they could continue improving on their own. Love to Learn is a project of the Katherine Low Settlement, a multi-purpose community centre.

What did the projects achieve?

Klevis Kola Foundation provided 1:1 educational support and broader, volunteer-led activities, including ESOL classes, study groups and advocacy. In all, 40 students received some form of individual support and a further 28 advocacy of some kind.

The project:

- helped students take entry level GCSEs and A levels, secure school and college places, and apply or prepare to apply for higher courses (including university)
- built students' confidence, encouraging friendship and a sense of community
- signposted students to other services, strengthening their support network.

Love to Learn provided intensive 1:1 maths support in class at one school and separate 1:1 tuition in English and basic skills at another. Two project workers supported 5 students each at any one time, 31 in all. These students:

- made more rapid progress compared with their peers
- gained essential study skills, such as doing homework and revising for exams
- improved in behaviour, with project workers able to take time for 1:1 discussions and also encouraging better contact between home and school.

In both projects, students' exam results were better than predicted at the end of the first year. This was less marked at the end of the second, when work became more demanding for most. But, most importantly, students' motivation and confidence grew significantly, giving them a stronger foundation for future learning.

"You [project] give us opportunities. We can think about a different future."

(College student, living semi-independently)



Students from Southfields Academy visit the Tower of London with the Love to Learn Project

What are the lessons for practice?

Young people valued the holistic approach, which mixed intensive subject and language work with help understanding school and activities to boost confidence. Project workers supported students with specific subjects, but also developed their general English language and study skills. They helped young people (and carers, if present) understand the school and further education systems, acting as advocates for them. They also helped them deal with living conditions, like housing problems.

“... when you [project staff] support me I understand everything you explain to me, but when I try myself there are many things that I do not understand, so thank you very much.”

(Student, Year 13)

1:1 support, tailored to what each student needs, is the most important element. Offering 1:1 support in response to individual need – at home, in study groups or at school – is a clear strength of both projects. By building trust with students, project workers get to the heart of what is stopping students learning. They accompany each student on his or her learning journey, giving encouragement and practical support and raising aspirations of what students can do. Students said 1:1 support engaged them with learning, especially with completing homework and approaching exams.

“I like 1:1 support because that really helps. I can ask clearly without shouting.”

(Student, Year 10)

Good English matters but students also need help with the language of school. The project workers used imaginative approaches to help each student improve their general English and understand special subject terms. Love to Learn’s maths tutor also spoke to students in their mother tongue (Somali). Students found this very helpful (although it caused some friction with the school, whose policy is to use only English in class). But school itself has its own vocabulary. Students needed help understanding timetables, rules, homework, and exam questions and techniques. For example, many students had previously been taught by rote learning; now they had to learn how to summarise ideas and express their own opinions.

“The support has helped me to understand things in maths like percentages which I couldn’t understand before.”

(Student, Year 11)



Students after their graduation ceremony from SOAS's Saturday School

Trusting relationships are vital but building these takes time. Project workers spent a lot of time gaining the trust of each young person and understanding their needs. But other relationships were just as important. Projects also needed to build trust with schools. Finding supportive contacts and keeping staff informed from the start – through meetings, attending staff meetings and printed publicity – was important. Strong, active relationships between services, such as housing and social work, are also crucial if young people are to get the support they need. The Klevis Kola Foundation project has led to 27 organisations collaborating to support these young people.

“We are so pleased to find support available that considers all their needs whilst looking at their achievement in education.”

(Secondary school)

Social activities made the biggest difference to young people’s confidence. Loneliness is a big issue for these young people. The projects organised group activities, such as a weekly homework club and drop-in sessions. Some arrived a couple of hours early for these sessions. Both projects got participants to organise joint outings as a way of developing their self-esteem and basic skills.

Love to Learn students arranged trips to Brighton and the British Museum. They planned what to do and fixed details like transport and food, working to a budget. Being in charge of the trip and getting out and about boosted their confidence.

Mentors and peers play an important role. Young people benefited from having a range of supportive adults in their lives. This does require a big pool of committed volunteers. Klevis Kola Foundation recruited and trained 23 volunteers. It also runs volunteer placements for student social workers and medics: these help raise professional awareness of the needs of refugees. Older students from the projects also act as mentors to new pupils in turn. Such peer support provides continuity, community, focus and stability. All the students said how good it was to be with others in a similar situation and that they enjoyed learning from one another.

Better communication with home gives a fuller picture of young people’s lives. Parents and carers often have little information about their child’s progress. They may not understand letters from school and there are rarely interpreters at parents’ evenings. Nor do schools always know what is happening at home. Schools may not even be aware that a student is a refugee or asylum seeker.

B was often tired at school and told teachers he was staying up late watching TV. When the Love to Learn project worker gave him some time to talk about this, he explained that he has to sleep in the sitting room and his family watch TV until around 2am. The project worker was then able to discuss this with his teachers.

Measuring impact on students' academic progress is difficult. Setting a clear baseline helps. 'Success' looks different for different people, from avoiding exclusion or dropping out to increasing confidence to improved grades and career progression.

"The students have made progress which they definitely would not have made without [project worker's] sessions."

(Head of International Dept., school)

What gets in the way of refugees and asylum seekers achieving their potential?

Schools have low expectations of these students. Too often these are based on poor English, not academic ability. Some students behave badly to disguise their difficulties in the classroom. They may be seen as 'trouble' and can be at risk of exclusion, especially when their needs are not assessed. Both projects identified pupils with likely undiagnosed Special Educational Needs. But many students are ambitious, aspiring to become a dentist or aircraft engineer, for example. However, deciding whether they should take GCSEs or improve their English first is complex. It is difficult to motivate students who aim high then fall short. Aspirations need to be set high enough, but with options should the first choice prove unrealistic.

"They don't know me, they don't know who I am, they don't have any clue about what I have been through. So, the qualification thing is important for me."

(16-year-old in semi-supported housing)

Services do not understand the impact of being a refugee. This group has substantial and complex needs outside school that are not being met. This is particularly true for those who are unaccompanied. All the students spoke of a lack of support and information. It is not clear who is responsible for various aspects of their lives. Young people report having no contact with their social worker for extended periods, despite leaving messages. Some said social workers refused to sign consent forms or help them open bank accounts. Two young people were transferred from one social worker to another without being notified, only discovering the change when they asked for a meeting.

Mental ill health stops many doing as well as they might. Schools frequently fail to recognise mental health problems, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), (which is exceptionally high among unaccompanied minors from countries like Afghanistan). Worse, these can be misinterpreted as laziness or deliberate disruption, with students often penalised for this behaviour. As this does not address the underlying issues, the situation simply escalates. There is a severe lack of specialist mental health services for this group. Few meet the high threshold for services. But finding provision for young people before they reach crisis point is a challenge. Difficulties are often made worse by inappropriate living conditions.

Key workers did not spot symptoms of depression and PTSD in two young asylum seekers housed in a young people's hostel. Both had been in prison. Signing in and out with a security guard, passing through a scanner, sleeping alone in small rooms made them feel imprisoned again. After Klevis Kola Foundation made a legal challenge, they were rehoused in small, shared flats. Both achieved GCSEs and continued to study.

Support drops away sharply after 16. Young people who arrive under 16 are usually offered a school place quickly. But those arriving at 16 or over often face delays in being offered a place at college. This leaves them with little routine or purpose in life. Their social worker may be based in a separate borough, as much as two hours away. This means those aged 16-17 in 'semi-supported living' are, in effect, living independently. Social services wrongly register some under Section 17 of the Children Act, not Section 20. This affects what support young people are entitled to, before and after age 18. Section 17 assesses young people as having no significant additional needs and grants very limited support from social workers. Section 20 means local authorities must provide a safe home for those who need one. Klevis Kola Foundation has successfully challenged the use of Section 17 for young asylum seekers.

H lived with a foster family. He worked extremely hard, progressing from GCSEs to AS levels. But, when he turned 18 in spring, children's services said he must leave his placement one week after his final exam. This made him very anxious throughout his exams. Klevis Kola successfully worked with Youth Legal to reverse this decision. H can now remain with his foster family until he has finished his A2s.

Young refugees face enormous barriers accessing further education. Getting advice on college and careers is extremely complex and time-consuming. Students frequently seemed not to know their choices. Funding for college courses is often difficult to obtain and criteria change regularly.

At 19, M cannot stay at school but does not yet have the grades for higher study. She visited a Further Education College with the Love to Learn project worker. The college gave her an unconditional offer for the ESOL Horizons Entry 3 course, with a view to her taking extra GCSEs or a BTEC once her English had improved. The college was at first unclear about funding, then eventually said she would not have to pay. But this was later contradicted and M had to turn down her offer. The project worker is helping her look into an Entry 3 course at another college that may be financially viable.

Conclusion

Given their backgrounds and current circumstances, what these young people have achieved is considerable. The projects reveal that services are often unaware of the many daily challenges unaccompanied young asylum seekers and refugees face. The gap in mental health services is of special concern. Having someone who knows them, has time to understand their life and can speak on their behalf makes a huge difference for these young people. It is, after all, only the kind of support most parents give their children as a matter of course.

SWSJ Charity is now supporting both the Klevis Kola Foundation and Love to Learn in developing the next stage of these projects.

This paper draws on: quarterly monitoring reports from both projects; interim and final evaluations prepared by the projects and SWSJ Charity; and minutes from the Advisory Group. It is written by freelance writer Sharon Telfer.



A Love to Learn trip to the British Museum

Find out more about:

Sir Walter St John's Charity at www.swsjcharity.co.uk

Klevis Kola Foundation at www.kleviskola.org

Love to Learn at www.love-to-learn.org.uk

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