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Tutoring project for children from a refugee community: tutor perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Background: The question of how best to support children who are refugees to resettle and thrive in a new country is important and complex. One of the many challenges experienced by such children is disrupted education. It is widely recognised that a sense of belonging and integration within a new school and community are key to enhancing children's chances of achieving their potential. Tutoring programmes, where tutors work one-to-one with tutees, can offer a form of support in this regard.

Purpose: Set within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study sought to explore experiences of tutors involved in a pilot project in Scotland for primary schoolchildren from a refugee community. The home-based, online tutoring project focused on building confidence and a sense of belonging in order to support achievement in school.

Methods: Participants were 18 tutors who had taken part in the pilot project. Semi-structured questionnaires were used to gather rich data about the tutors' experiences of working with the children from the refugee community. Data were analysed qualitatively, using a reflexive thematic analytical approach.

Findings: Tutors believed that relationships between tutor and child were essential to success. Personalisation appeared key to building confidence and helping children progress. Tutors spent time getting to know their tutee and took care to let their tutee get to know them as a person, as a way of bringing down barriers and helping the child connect. Tutors reported that they needed knowledge of the local curriculum, liaison with class teachers and understanding of the refugee community. They described the peer support network as invaluable for sharing knowledge. Although each worked with a different child, tutors learned from and assisted each other through their support network, sharing resources and ideas.

Conclusion: The study highlights the value of a professional learning community, particularly when tutors are working in isolation. It also draws attention to the importance of training for tutors taking on such roles, including support with the pastoral aspects of working with a child, such as the personalisation and relationship-building that was of such significance in this study.

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Tutoring; volunteers; integration; disadvantage; children from refugee communities; professional learning community

Introduction

Across the world, the question of how best to support children and young people who are refugees to resettle and thrive in a new country is an important and complex one, particularly as many who are displaced have experienced disrupted education. Within Scotland, many refugee families have been resettled under the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy (Scottish Government 2018). This article reports on research into a programme which aims to support integration from the moment refugees arrive in Scotland. The programme uses a holistic approach, focusing on various areas of everyday life including housing, physical health, education, language acquisition and social connections. Through the programme, 'New Scots' should be offered support to meet their needs in all aspects of life, thus allowing them to share their own experiences and skills with Scotland. There is wide recognition that education and connection with the local community are key to effective integration (Hek 2005; Morrice, Tip, Brown and Collyer 2020). This is especially important for children and young people.

Given the right support, children from refugee backgrounds can be high attainers in school (Prentice and Ott 2021). When considering how best to support children who are refugees to integrate within their new country, Veck and Wharton (2021) identify the importance of cultivating a sense of belonging and trust in the school and those within it. Pinson and Arnot (2010) found that one route to integration and belonging can be through doing well academically in school and gaining the qualifications that will improve career and higher education opportunities. Their participants, however, acknowledged that a child can 'achieve academically, and not necessarily be integrated as a person' (Pinson and Arnot 2010, 259). This contrasts with the structural or functional integration that tends to be prioritised over social integration at national policy levels (Dryden-Peterson 2020). Children who are from refugee backgrounds need to feel safe in school, have their needs met and have friends (Prentice and Ott 2021). They need to receive compassion rather than pity, and positive relationships with teachers and classmates are essential (Lynch 2013; Pianta et al. 2003; Veck and Wharton 2021). Pinson and Arnot (2010) identify that schools working effectively to support children who are refugees place great value on holistic approaches that value and nurture the whole child, not just their academic achievements; thus offering the choice and meaningful experiences integral to genuine inclusion (Florian and Beaton 2018). Furthermore, children may not be considered fully integrated in the school community until they are also participating in non-academic activities of their choosing (Pinson and Arnot 2010; Veck and Wharton 2021). Such holistic approaches to the inclusion of children who are refugees can help develop confidence and agency (Veck and Wharton 2021).

Thus, the socio-cultural process of relational integration is essential for refugee inclusion (Dryden-Peterson 2020). Furthermore, feeling a sense of belonging or school connectedness, and the associated relationships and positive emotions, are characteristics of, and contributors to, positive mental health (Holt et al. 2022). In the Scottish context, these holistic relational processes and child wellbeing are addressed within curriculum policy documents such as *Getting It Right For Every Child* (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government 2005) that makes it the 'responsibility of all' those working with children to understand wellbeing indicators and ensure that children are safe, healthy, achieving and included (Scottish Government, 2010,1). As Lustig et al. (2004) clarify, children who are refugees

are likely to have experienced significant stressors 'pre-flight', 'during flight' and throughout 'resettlement' (Lustig et al. 2004, 25). Individual stressors are widely documented within in the research evidence base and are therefore not the focus of this paper (Silove et al 2017; Scharpf et al. 2021). There is general acknowledgement that the mental health of refugees is likely to be fragile, and that targeted and universal initiatives (Holt 2020) to promote positive mental health are essential (Lustig et al. 2004; Scharpf et al. 2021).

One recognised barrier to a sense of belonging and achievement can be language. Working in partnership with members of the refugee community and those sharing a first language was identified by Prentice and Ott (2021) as extremely advantageous to helping children who are refugees to understand and feel part of the school language and culture. Parallel to this, with such a partnership, educators can come to know more about the particular refugee community and the experiences, needs, culture, hopes and fears of those within it (Bailey and Sowden 2021). Furthermore, it can reduce the likelihood of educators considering children who are refugees as 'other' and/or regarding them with pity (Veck and Wharton 2021; Nayeri 2019); rather, it can empower educators to become more confident working with such children (Perry and Luk 2018).

It is widely recognised that children from refugee backgrounds may benefit from additional support in education. It is therefore important that the support they receive is appropriate and that those offering it have the knowledge, skills and understanding required to meet the social, emotional and academic needs of the children. The focus of the study reported in this paper was to gather the perspectives of volunteer tutors who worked on a tutoring project as part of the programme in Scotland mentioned above, supporting the children from the refugee community. One intention of the research was to evaluate the structure of this tutoring project and to determine what support the tutors themselves needed to be able to carry out their role. It should be noted that another important aim of the research was to gather feedback from the families to understand whether and in what ways the project was of valuable to them; this aspect will be reported separately elsewhere. Before presenting the study in further detail, however, we seek to contextualise our work briefly with reference to research on supplementary tutoring for refugees, and by explaining the background to the study.

Background

There appears to be limited literature on the provision of supplementary tutoring for refugee young people; however, some studies show support for this approach. Naidoo (2009) evaluated the experiences of a tutoring group on the educational attainment of young people with refugee status and found positive feedback regarding its effectiveness. Tutors who had experience of immigration were particularly effective in building relationships with refugee students and understood some of the difficulties faced in school (Naidoo 2009). Ferfolja and Vickers (2010) describe a similar tutor provision in which trainee teachers were recruited as tutors for students with refugee status. They highlighted the importance of a safe space to discuss challenges and creative methods of teaching to build pupils' confidence.

As our study was conducted in Scotland, it is relevant to explain briefly some aspects of the specific educational context. In line with the Scottish Government guidance 'A guide to getting it right for every child' (GIRFEC) (Scottish Government 2005), all children should

be provided with the support, tools and skills needed to reach their full potential, including practical resources, connection to the internet and access to qualified educators. Additionally, in accordance with the Scottish Attainment Challenge (Scottish Government 2021) and the Additional Support for Learning Act (Scottish Government 2017), young people in Scottish schools whose first language is not English should be supported to overcome this potential barrier to learning. Research suggests that support outside formal schooling may be an effective method of reducing the attainment gap between New Scot young people and those who are not New Scots (Naidoo 2009; Beck 1999). This type of support is often provided by third parties.

We carried out our study during the pandemic. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, schools in Scotland and elsewhere were forced to change the way in which they taught their pupils, moving to online teaching. It was felt that these restrictions particularly affected the attainment of primary school children (Chen et al. 2020), as they found it more difficult to work independently without support. Furthermore, it was predicted that pupils from refugee families would be even more affected by the closure of schools and the move to online learning (Menashy and Zakharia 2022). Additional barriers for New Scot families included the set-up of online accounts without correct equipment, limited knowledge of the educational system and parents' challenges to support their children with home schooling due to language difficulties.

In most situations, the inclusion of, and support for, children from refugee backgrounds in schools is typically influenced by political and financial factors, and there may be regular changes in who holds the power to make educational decisions (Dryden-Peterson, 2020). Projects and initiatives that sit outside of educational systems might have the freedom to act in ways beneficial to refugees that are not possible in schools. Dryden-Peterson (2020) believes that valuable insight could be gained from exploring how out-of-school education projects may bridge attainment gaps. Re-Act are a Scotland-based charity who work closely with New Scot families, providing support across various domains (e.g. social support, language facilitation, resource provision). Among the New Scot community with whom Re-Act work, education was highlighted as a key issue for primary school children, especially during the period of COVID-19 restrictions, when learning opportunities were limited.

This current study was carried out as part of the evaluation of an intervention for New Scot children. It explored the pilot of a partnership between children from refugee families, their families and their schools through a Re-Act tutoring project (i.e. the intervention) that aimed to build confidence, language skills and a sense of belonging. To establish this partnership, the tutoring project comprised members of the local Syrian community, longstanding Re-Act volunteers, University of Edinburgh teaching students and a teacher educator. Prentice and Ott's (2021) study considers how educators of children from refugee backgrounds become able to carry out their responsibilities. Much emphasis was placed on learning from a more experienced other, whether that experience was in years of teaching refugees, the language, the specific refugee community or lived experience of being a refugee (Prentice and Ott 2021). The composition of the Re-Act project team intentionally included volunteers bringing a breadth of these experiences, in addition to those with experience of teaching and the Scottish curriculum. The researchers carried out this study on a voluntary basis as Re-Act volunteers and not on a commissioned basis. One of the researchers works for the same university that awarded

Re-Act a community grant that funded IT resources. The researchers were not tutors, nor were they directly involved with the families outside of the research purposes.

Purpose

The specific aim of the investigation reported in this paper was to explore the experiences of the tutors who were involved in the Re-Act pilot project for primary schoolchildren from a refugee community in Scotland. This home-based, online tutoring project focused on building confidence and a sense of belonging in order to support academic achievement in school.

Methods

The qualitative study reported in this paper involved the collection of data from the tutors involved in the Re-Act pilot project using semi-structured questionnaires. The questionnaires were analysed using thematic analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was received from a University of Edinburgh Ethics Committee and careful consideration was given to informing potential participants of the project aims and evaluations. All information about the research was translated and shared with the families, in their first language. It was made clear to the refugee families that participation in the research was not a condition of participation in the tutoring project. A follow up study has been planned to focus on family and child perspectives. All participants (tutors, parents and children) gave informed consent and were advised that they could withdraw from the project at any time. Additionally, participant data was anonymised by removing any identifiable information (e.g. names or places).

Participants

As noted above, the participants of the particular study reported here were the tutors of the Re-Act pilot project. However, the focus of the pilot project itself was the New Scot children and their families. Twenty children were invited to participate in the pilot project, with education support provided by twenty tutors. The children (nine girls and eleven boys) were identified by their families and Re-Act volunteers working in the community. They were all primary school age (7–11 years old) and attended various primary schools throughout the area.

The eighteen tutors (predominantly female) participating in this study were recruited from two main sites: students studying teaching, and established volunteers from the Re-Act charity. Tutors varied in level of teaching experience (8 were students of teaching, 2 were tutors, 6 had no prior experience of teaching and 2 had unknown teaching experience). The majority (16) were first language English speakers. It was felt that having tutors familiar to some of the children and families (i.e. from the Re-Act charity) would help to establish close relationships throughout the project. All tutors took on the role in a voluntary capacity and were required to

complete training regarding online tutoring, resource provision and safeguarding. The majority of the tutors involved in the project itself were participants in this study.

Procedure for the tutoring project

New Scot family participants were integral to the development and maintenance of the tutoring project. Concerns had been highlighted by the New Scot community regarding their children's education: they were worried about their children's progress in school. The families were informed about the tutoring project through an online message group used by Re-Act families to share information and provide peer support in Arabic. Information sheets were developed, translated and provided to potential participants in the tutoring project. Families who were interested in receiving educational support were asked to provide details of their child's abilities and goals moving forward.

The project was conducted in three stages. At Stage 1, via DigitAll (funded by the Scottish Refugee Council and University of Edinburgh), all families were provided with appropriate equipment including computers, headphones and desks to enable full participation. Families were also supported to set up and use online video calls as the main source of contact for tutors.

During Stage 2, the project had aimed to liaise with class teachers to identify the learning needs of each child, so that tutoring sessions would complement and support the work in school. Parents were given a consent form explaining the project and giving permission for school to talk to the tutor about the child's development needs. However, restrictions put in place during the pandemic meant that parents were not allowed into schools and that sharing of physical paperwork was discouraged. This, therefore, left many teachers unaware of the project. Tutors were paired with a family first, in order to introduce themselves and set up a convenient time for a weekly tutor session. There was an initial meeting between the tutor, the family and a volunteer known to the family so as to facilitate introductions, set expectations and establish goals for the sessions. Tutors aimed to meet with the children online for one hour per week, focusing on English and mathematics provision. This second stage of the programme took place over five months, beginning towards the end of a second national lockdown (January 2021). Finally, during Stage 3, data collection from study participants and analysis of data was undertaken, in order to evaluate the project.

Data collection from tutor participants

Semi-structured questionnaires were chosen as the most appropriate way to gather data on the perspectives of the tutor participants. The semi-structured, open-ended nature of the questions developed for the questionnaire allowed the researcher to set the agenda without presupposing the response (Cohen et al. 2018). Additionally, within the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, questionnaires were considered the best substitute for interviews. The questions were designed with reference to the aims of the project as a whole and intended to prompt participants' thoughts on their overall experiences, including the practical aspects and how it felt to be involved. Whether through messaging app or email, the questions remained the same and included the following: *What were your reasons for volunteering as a tutor? Explain what you have been doing so far; What worked well and why? What challenges did you face? What would you do differently? What other feelings do you have about the project? Is there anything else you would like to tell us?* In addition,

relevant demographic information was collected from the participant tutors (e.g. first language, teaching experience and volunteering status).

Participants were given the opportunity to engage with the questionnaires via email, online meetings or the messaging app, thus optimising their ability to give their perspectives. In all, four tutors returned questionnaires by email; one tutor chose to meet with the researcher and answer questions via a video call; and 13 tutors completed theirs via the messaging app. There were ongoing channels of communication between researchers and tutor participants, so that follow up questions could be asked or participants could add things they had previously forgotten to mention. As mentioned earlier, family data were also collected and a follow up study is planned, although this is not discussed further in this article because it is not the focus of the study reported here.

Data analysis

Set within interpretivist methodology, the data collected from the tutor participants via the semi-structured questionnaires were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke 2021), which includes writing up as Phase Six. Inductive analysis allowed for themes to emerge from the data. Starting with Phase One, familiarisation involved reading and re-reading the questionnaire responses; codes were applied to the data at Phase Two. Initial coding clusters were subdivided for clarity and formed the basis of initial themes (Phase Three) which were then reviewed (Phase Four). Table 1 shows the review and refining process. Then, final themes that best reflected and summarised the qualitative data were determined as part of Phase Five: refining and naming. It is important to note that themes were often inter-linked and over-lapping due to the richness of the qualitative data emerging from participants' experiences.

Approaches ensuring data reliability must be ontologically appropriate (Guba and Lincoln 2008). Therefore, reflexivity was used as a process through which the researcher sought to identify and reflect on the impact of the researcher, the participant and the relationship between the two at each step of the research process (Pillow 2003). This was particularly relevant during the analysis stage, with the need to reflect on possible intentions/motives around participants' responses and make sure this was recognised in interpretation and analysis. Looking for consistency or any contradiction within a single participant's responses helped confirm the reliability of their data. Braun and Clarke (2021) assert that researcher subjectivity is essential to successful thematic analysis. However, it is also important to reflect and identify any personal bias of the researcher and what this may mean in relation to the findings, in order to make sure that the themes arose from the data (Pillow 2003). Inter-rater reliability checks were therefore not considered appropriate to the research paradigm, as such checks can result in superficial under-developed themes (Braun and Clarke 2021). Instead, themes and summary findings were shared with participants, who were asked to check that researcher interpretation had not distorted their perspective and experience. Findings are intended to be useful to practitioners and so ensuring themes are accessible and meaningful to them is essential (Guba and Lincoln 2008).

Findings

In-depth analysis of the data we collected allowed us to identify the key themes, strengths, challenges and perceived effectiveness of the pilot project, from the perspectives of the tutors. Table 1 displays the final themes and how these emerged from the data. In total, there were six

Table 1. The emergence of final themes from the data analysis.

First clusters	Subdivisions	Final themes
Curricular knowledge	Challenges of not having teaching or classroom experience 'Curriculum for Excellence' terminology Need for 'crash course' for non-teachers	(1) Experience of teaching and curriculum knowledge
Pitching level	Challenges: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Obtaining information from schools ● Access to 'Curriculum for Excellence' benchmarks ● Difficulties with understanding and assessing progress ● Preparation time 	(2) Personalisation
Using knowledge of child	Desire to match child's interests Knowledge of child's motivations Building relationships Understanding child as a person, rather than as a subject Prioritising positive, confidence building experience over academic outcomes	
Support	Sharing resources Supportive network of tutors Messaging group Need for clear tutor role description Need for mentoring for tutors with no educational background Importance of initial set up meeting	(3) Support
Tutor observation Online video	Observing experienced tutor Challenges of using online video Benefits Suitable for safeguarding and child protection requirements Screen share facility	(4) Resources and electronic delivery
Resources	Access Preparation time needed Commercial resources Shared online folder	
Pupil access to laptop Positive relationships	Building positive relationships with pupil Taking time to get to know the child Building trust	(5) Partnerships and relationships
Communicating with family	Setting up sessions Negotiating times Difficulty getting information from schools via families	
Pupil motivation	Absent Highly motivated	
Enjoyment perceived benefits	Rewarding experience Seeing pupil confidence grow Humour Building trust Anxiety	(6) Challenges and benefits for the tutor
Challenges	Preparation time needed Contacting schools	

inter-related final themes, which were: (1) Experience of teaching and curriculum knowledge; (2) Personalisation; (3) Support; (4) Resources and electronic delivery; (5) Partnerships and relationships; (6) Challenges and benefits for the tutor. In the sub-sections below, each theme is explored in detail. Where relevant to illustrate notable points from the analysis, anonymised quotations from the data have been included (the symbol [...] is used to indicate where quotations have been shortened).

Experience of teaching and curriculum knowledge

As mentioned earlier, the participant tutors had varying levels of teaching experience. Specifically, whilst eight tutors were student teachers coming to the end of their studies, others were already involved with the Re-Act charity but not tutoring, some had experience as teaching assistants and two brought personal experiences of relocating to a new country and having to learn an additional language. Consequently, the findings related to teaching and curriculum were diverse in nature. However, as can also be seen from the discussion of the Support theme, a key point that emerged from the analysis was that the mixture of experiences allowed for invaluable peer support.

The main challenge reported by the student teachers was having minimal or no communication with the school (as explained above, the study was conducted in the context of the pandemic). Those new to the Scottish curriculum and inexperienced in helping children learn encountered this difficulty along with a range of other challenges; most notably with respect to their own confidence and belief in their abilities. Pitching the work at the right level was, therefore, a cause of anxiety for some tutors. A few requested an assessment tool to help them understand what level their pupil was currently at and what they needed to do to support their development. This concern is reflected in the following participant quotation:

Difficult to know where to start, what to look at and where to jump in, have been trying to pick up assessments so I know where to start. I think we need a form to give the teacher that is more specific with targets.

It was interesting to note, however, that others appreciated the absence of such tools, having been told at the start of the project that quality, one-to-one time with the pupil and helping them to build confidence was the most important part of the process. For example, one tutor reflected:

The lack of pressure and assessment was really good, as it allowed me to not worry too much about achievement, and focus more on making sure the sessions were enjoyable and confidence boosting.

Alongside the issue of pitching work at the right level for the pupil was the matter of getting to grips with the language, methods and approaches of the Scottish curriculum. As one participant commented:

I plan to spend some time checking out the [Scottish Curriculum] for my pupil's year group to get more detail about what stage he should be at [...] I have been a little thrown by some of the terms I have encountered.

It was evident that tutor confidence and curriculum knowledge increased through the sharing of materials and policy documents in an online shared folder, as noted in more detail under the Support theme below. Nonetheless, a noteworthy implication of our analysis is that tutors might benefit from a training session focused on the curriculum and how to facilitate learning.

Personalisation

An awareness of the importance of personalisation appeared to contribute significantly to tutors' determination to understand the curriculum and meet the unique needs of each

pupil. All tutors, irrespective of experience, worked hard to plan learning experiences or lessons that suited the interests of the individual with whom they were working. The following quotations are illustrative of this:

I tried to make my own slides based on the things my pupil told me he was interested in, because I thought my main job was to get him excited about learning.

As I got to know her, I took note of things she likes [...] finishing with a short plenary to discuss what she thought went well, what was difficult and what she would like to focus on the following week.

Tutors placed great importance on 'getting to know you' sessions, in which both tutor and child learned about the other as a person, rather than solely as teacher and learner. This sense is evident in the quotation below:

I worked quite hard to develop a good relationship with my pupil. [...] each session had some 'getting to know you' questions and some general chat about how our weeks had been, etc.

A focus on personalisation allowed tutors to customise materials and seek resources that would address a learning need in a way that they hoped would appeal to their pupil. The more comfortable tutors became with curriculum, the better they felt able to individualise the learning experience for their pupil, with one tutor reflecting:

He enjoyed times tables and I found that our most productive lessons were based around these.

Support

Tutors acknowledged the benefit of the support they received from Re-Act. Additionally, they noted their appreciation for the initial meeting between the tutor, Re-Act and the family. For example, one tutor described this meeting as

A great opportunity to get to know the child and her mother, discuss what she would like us to focus on and arrange a set time going forwards.

Some tutors said they would have liked more regular formal meetings with the whole team during the course of the project, with one explaining:

Sometimes people weren't sure if they could continue over Eid or into summer etc. so regular texts and updates could help that.

The analysis indicated that all tutors valued the support they experienced from being part of a messaging group. The two quotations below are illustrative of this feeling:

I also found the support of fellow volunteers via the [messaging] group really helpful and a great way of communicating, sharing ideas and resources.

As silly as it sounds, sometimes I felt I didn't even know what questions to ask, but ended up picking up some helpful ideas from the chat regardless.

The opportunity to build their own peer support tutor networks related to the year group of the pupil was also highly valued by tutors. As one noted,

I also had some good communication with other Primary [year group] tutors [...] We had a breakout chat for sharing [year group] concerns and resources.

Most tutors were offered the chance to shadow a more experienced tutor before they started with their own pupil. According to the analysis, the impact of shadowing opportunities varied significantly, possibly as a consequence of the time limitations of the electronic platform used. Many tutors were very positive about their shadowing experience, as the below quotation suggests:

Shadowing the lessons helped me to understand and imagine what my own sessions would be like, as I haven't done something like this before.

However, it is also evident from the data that their usefulness did depend on opportunities to discuss things with the tutor that was being shadowed. One tutor explained:

Since I don't have any teaching experience, I sat in on another tutor's sessions every week. I did not find these very helpful without having conversations with the tutor without the pupil there.

The analysis suggested that tutors regarded shadowing a more experienced tutor as valuable; however, it was clear that consideration should be given to the structure of these meetings. Specifically, tutors felt that they would benefit from discussion of the tutoring methods during an induction or specific training session. This is because tutor and 'shadow' would need time to build a relationship, discuss strengths and development needs. Much can be learnt from this tutor's experience of shadowing:

We met before the first session and at the end of every session. She sent me the material she was going to use in advance so that I could ask any questions. [...] We then did a brief feedback at the end of each session and a reflection on how the session had gone and how we felt the pupil had engaged with the session.

Tutors gave suggestions about how support might be better delivered to aid their role with the children. They felt that additional induction was required for new tutors, with one tutor reflecting as follows:

In retrospect, I would have liked a much clearer explanation at the beginning of the whole process about the exact role of the tutor.

Resources and electronic delivery

The many kinds of support available appeared to provide tutors with ideas for resources and the opportunity for sharing. Tutors suggested that the electronic platform placed specific limitations on the tutor shadowing experience. However, the use of the online video platform for the sessions was regarded as a primarily positive experience:

[Platform] was scary but actually much easier than going to meet somebody and safer for child protection.

There was sometimes background noise but my pupil was mostly engaged with the lesson.

Although reportedly easier than anticipated, the electronic context did require additional learning for some, with tutors describing, for example, some challenges with document and screen sharing. Whilst some limitations of the online approach were identified, for example:

As it was all on a screen, [opportunities for active learning were] limited so each week trying to come up with interactive fun ways to teach things was a challenge.

It was also the case that some tutors noted specific benefits to online teaching:

Using the shared screen and interactive games often went down well with the child as it meant they were not just scribbling on paper the entire time and meant it was fun for them. As it was online was actually in some ways easier to arrange sessions and work out times that could suit with busy schedules.

It was evident from the data that tutors adapted their teaching to the online context when they needed resources that would usually be available physically in a school setting. For example, one tutor described needing 'dice and a stopwatch' for maths games: 'I used an online website for dice and I found a stopwatch on my phone'.

Even though the tutoring project provided all pupils with a refurbished laptop so that they could access the sessions, the tutors observed that some pupils still used their phones, with one explaining:

When the laptop was not available (e.g. charger couldn't be found), my student used the phone. She managed to read text and annotate documents on that tiny screen – I have no idea how!

It was clear from the data that the support networks allowed tutors to share a range of resources and tips for overcoming some of the challenges of working in a digital context. Overall, the tutors appeared to report that the benefits of the electronic platform outweighed the challenges.

Partnerships and relationships

The tutors' focus on building positive relationships with the child they were tutoring was identified above as part of the Personalisation theme. However, according to the tutors, relationships with the pupils were not the only partnerships contributing to a successful experience for those involved. Depending on the experience, the analysis indicated that tutor and pupil either benefited from or experienced challenges based on the level of involvement with the child's class teacher. It must be borne in mind that the study was carried out in the context of the pandemic. Discussion with local authorities suggested that the best way for tutors to communicate with the various schools during this time was to ask the parents to pass on an information and permission letter. This had varying results; for instance, when teachers communicated with tutors and families, the tutors had more of a feeling that they were in a partnership:

The notes from the class teacher were indispensable, as my student didn't often bring questions or requests to the lesson.

However, when tutors did not hear anything from teachers, it could lead to frustrations and additional challenges. More confident, experienced tutors found ways of adapting to overcome this, as one explained:

There were some weeks where, because I had not heard from my tutee's teacher, I planned a lesson on a topic he had already learned about [...]. I began to plan ahead with harder or easier tasks to do in case it was a topic he had already done, or never done.

Sometimes, the quality of the tutor-school partnership was enhanced by the relationships between the family and school, and the family and tutor. The data reflected how it was important for tutors to develop trusting relationships with their tutee's family. Whilst the tutor's focus was on the tutoring session, it is important to remember that this session was just one part of the busy lives of the family, as one tutor observed:

Often there was considerable background noise of voices. There seemed to be no quiet place for the student to be, and the lesson seemed to put constraints on the whole family. Again, this improved slightly as time went by and the routine was established.

Alternatively, there were incidences of pupils forgetting a session or the family being too busy for it to take place. It was evident from the analysis that many of the difficulties resolved over time, as the tutoring became established and the tutors became more familiar with the home situations of their pupils. The sessions thus became valued, for example, with one tutor describing how 'The mother was hugely appreciative of the input to her daughter, expressed in texts after the lesson'.

Finally, within a focus on partnerships, the analysis drew attention to how the tutor-pupil relationship was enhanced by the focus on personalisation and the commitment of the tutors. As one of the tutors remarked:

A large part of the role is to offer 1:1 support to a pupil, an opportunity to build a relationship and get support with things they might be struggling with.

It was evident that the tutors worked hard to build positive relationships with their pupils, to get to know them as children, not only as learners. Many tutors commented on the commitment and motivation of their pupils and there was an evident focus on enjoyment, for pupils and tutors, as reflected in the following quotations:

I think it is most important for the pupil to enjoy the sessions, be excited to take part, and for it to be different from school.

Their mum told me they were excited for the session each week. I think the project has been a great way to support students in a fun, low pressure environment.

Challenges and benefits for the tutors

Tutors identified some challenges during the project. The analysis indicated that the time commitment was greater than many had expected, particularly those new to teaching:

I had to allow 4–6, sometimes 8 hours to prepare. Then up to an hour afterwards to complete the tutor form.

I set aside an afternoon each week to complete my lesson plan, and this was sufficient most of the time. However, sometimes my research for the lesson took longer.

As previously mentioned, unfamiliarity with the curriculum was noted as a challenge. In general, it was evident that aspects perceived as challenging were varied, as these quotations suggest:

I became quite anxious. I came across phrases I had never heard, like Homophones.

The student often didn't retain what had been taught from one week to the next, and I began to feel doubtful about whether what I was doing was of any help.

However, overall and for all tutors, it was evident from the data that anxiety and concerns were balanced out, or even outweighed, by the perceived benefits. They all expressed a level of enjoyment in the experience and a sense of satisfaction. Some also reflected that they had developed skills through taking part, as reflected in the following comment:

Overall, the project was a really positive experience for me personally. It has improved my confidence working with children, taking on new situations, and improved my teaching skills.

Discussion

Our study sought to explore the experiences of tutors involved in a pilot project for primary children from a refugee community in Scotland. Through in-depth qualitative analysis of the participant tutors' responses, we gained insight into themes that reflected their perceptions. Overall, it was particularly noteworthy that tutors in our study felt that they had increased their skills through their participation in the pilot project, gaining a better understanding of the complexities of teaching and the preparation required from educators. This resonates with Buckley and Zamora's (2007) study of tutors, where some participants noted a similar change of attitude towards teaching after taking part in their project. Also in line with Buckley and Zamora (2007), tutor participants commented on how the role was much harder than anticipated, could feel challenging, and that it often required significant commitment and planning. Further, tutor recognition of the value of being part of an online tutor support group is consistent with Prentice and Ott's (2021) study. For example, eight student teachers in this current study acknowledged that they had gained confidence in their own abilities through taking part in the project. They noted that sharing their knowledge with non-teaching volunteers through the support network gave them an increased recognition and allowed deepening of their existing skills. This exemplifies learning as a social practice (Vygotsky 1978).

Lynch's (2013) conceptual framework for tutor-learner relationships builds on the premise that learning is a social act, and that literacy learning, in particular, involves social relationships in order to be effective. In that paper, 'getting to know you' activities similar to those applied in this project and to which the pupils appeared to respond positively are evident. Our analysis suggests that, according to the tutors, building relationships of trust and providing an experience that was personalised for the individual pupil were highly important factors in the pilot project, which chimes with Lynch (2013). Trust is important to children from refugee backgrounds (Veck and Wharton 2021), and the way that tutors took time for tutor and learner to get to know each other appeared fundamental to building trust and creating a safe space for learning. Furthermore, the personalised learning that was so significant in the tutor participants' responses seemed to allow the child to feel that their likes and dislikes mattered and that they were being listened to. These are essential elements of building trust in relationships (Veck and Wharton 2021). This highlights the need for volunteer tutors to have a level of support and induction that can prepare them for these kinds of social and emotional elements of learning, in addition to providing training on the curriculum and other aspects of teaching. As with teaching more generally (Benekos 2016), gaining knowledge of the child and understanding how

children learn are essential skills for a tutor. Whilst curricular knowledge can be shared through mentoring and support groups, the personal qualities and motivation of the tutor may well be the most crucial factors in helping their pupil learn.

One advantage of this project was the contextual knowledge that tutors had regarding their tutees: that knew that each tutee was a New Scot child who was a refugee from Syria. The focus of the initial meeting between family, Re-Act volunteer and tutor was to discuss their expectations and needs, and to get to know a little more about the home context. This formation of a shared understanding is an absolute priority in such work, according to Bailey and Sowden (2021), as it can help avoid assumptions and misconceptions on the part of the tutor. It can also help reduce tutor anxiety, identified by Perry and Luk (2018), which can be caused by not having sufficient knowledge about tutee backgrounds.

Thus, the existing strong relationships between the Re-Act team and the refugee families was of real benefit to this project. In line with Prentice and Ott (2021), there was recognition of the benefits of learning from others more experienced in working with refugee children. Re-Act volunteers brought their knowledge of the community and the families and were able to share this experience with those new to working with New Scots families. For instance, the strength of the established relationships helped by way of reducing language barriers when making contact with the families and also provided opportunities for volunteers new to the charity to gain understanding of their pupil's home situation. Indeed, a notable absence in the data was any mention of language barriers: competence in English was not raised by participant tutors as a barrier or facilitator to the child's progress or the wider tutoring experience. Research indicates that the tutor pupil relationship and individualised nature of the learning are important factors in supporting those new to the English language (Wardman 2013). The one-to-one relationships inherent in the structure of a tutor-tutee pairing and the potential of quality time this may offer can allow more opportunities to negotiate meaning and come to a shared understanding.

In addition to the necessity for close communication and positive relationships between tutor and pupil, Bailey and Sowden (2021) draw attention to the value of relationships with school. Notwithstanding the challenges of the pandemic in the context of our study, this resonates with the benefits acknowledged by the participant tutors who were able to develop meaningful relationships with schools to support the needs of the tutee.

Limitations

As explained earlier in the paper, the focus of attention in the small-scale study reported here was the tutor participants who were working with the children from the refugee community. Given the scale and approach of the study, the findings should not be generalised: rather, the value of the study is that we were able to gain fine-grained insight into the tutor perspectives through the detailed qualitative analysis of rich participant data. It is also important to emphasise that the tutor perspective forms only one part of the larger research picture. A follow-up study will allow exploration of the family and child perspectives in similar richness of detail.

A further limitation of the current study concerns attainment and progress data. In future studies, specific measures of attainment or the inclusion of teacher assessments could perhaps be utilised to offer specific insight into the children's progress. It would be important, however, to ensure that any measures used are culturally sensitive.

Implications

Our analysis of tutor perspectives suggests a number of implications that may be helpful for consideration in respect of future tutoring projects. Firstly, tutor feedback indicates that tutors may benefit from more formal preparation or 'induction' for this role. In addition to facilitated meetings between the tutor and the families, this could involve, for example, information sessions on the local curriculum and training on how to be a tutor. It could also usefully include preparation and support for the social and emotional aspects of the role. An induction process could help to increase tutors' awareness of any ongoing support available to them.

It was clear that the opportunity to 'shadow' a more experienced fellow tutor was regarded as valuable. However, tutors suggested improvements to the process that could potentially help the benefit of this experience to be fully realised. For example, an observation framework for the tutor shadowing process could help focus attention and a reflective framework would help both tutors (i.e. more and less experienced tutors alike) to reflect on the session, what happened, how and why it was (or was not) effective.

The findings of this project underscore the importance of a peer support network. The analysis suggested that this helped the tutors to maintain confidence as well as enabling them to share ideas and experiences. Regular 'check-ins' with the organising body were also regarded as vital for reassurance and to provide opportunities for tutors to raise questions, concerns or discuss support needs. Although the context of the pandemic made it challenging, the significance of building relationships with key staff at the children's schools should not be overlooked, as this could further improve the learning and tutoring experience for all involved.

Conclusion

Understanding how best to support children who are refugees to resettle and thrive in a new country is vital. Our study provides insight into tutor perspectives on a pilot project in which tutors worked with children from a refugee community. The findings will be of interest to those in the international community of educators who are involved in supporting the learning needs of children from refugee communities. Our analysis suggests that tutors felt that the pilot programme offered benefits. They voiced hopes that their pupils gained from the quality one-to-one time afforded by the tutor-tutee pairings, and from engaging in learning related to their schoolwork, in addition to opportunities to build confidence and develop their fluency in speaking English. These findings are in line with similar literature and help extend the research base for evidence-based practice.

A key reflection from our analysis of the tutor participants' perspectives is that ensuring there is a focus on personalisation, rather than solely on attainment, is essential. The tutors' observations bore out that there is much to be learned from the trusting, valued relationships established between the children and their tutor, and the time tutors invested into getting to know the child with whom they worked. Given the varied backgrounds of the children, the tutors personalised their approaches around the child's interests and in their individual context. This highlights the need to recognise the uniqueness of every child and family, and for that recognition to be embedded in tutor programmes. Indeed, being part of a professional learning community and having access to relevant training were identified as important aspects for tutors taking on tutoring roles. The participant tutors' descriptions

of way they built relationships and personalised the learning experience to suit the needs of their tutees can provide a valuable model for informing future projects.

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