

Initial Assessments

The more information the student teacher has on their pupils' previous experience the better. It is important for student teachers to find out as much as they can about their pupils' previous experience of formal education and life in general. Whilst it is useful to know whether a child comes from a wealthy and/or well-educated family or a poor and/or illiterate one, this information of itself will not tell the student teacher how the child has reacted to and learned from such experiences. The crucial point is not to make any assumptions, instead the student teacher should make every effort to find out as much as possible about the child's social and educational background so that they can meet their needs and help them progress from whatever starting point they are at.

The child's wider social context

The availability of key information on the main countries of origin of children in a school will help student teachers place a new arrival in context. Rutter (2004) contains a wealth of such information and although her focus is on refugee and asylum-seeker students, the types and range of data she presents is illustrative of best practice. A further source is the QCA Pathways to Learning website which provides [extensive background information](#) as detailed below on many countries of origin.

Student teachers should try to find out what background information the school provides on its pupils for its staff and in what form. The school may, for example, store such information in an A4 ring-binder in the staffroom so that it can be referred to and updated easily. Some schools use regular staff briefing sessions to focus on a particular group of students or individuals.

The types of information that might usefully be covered include:

- **Statistics** showing a pattern of migration or indicating parts of the country where the group is concentrated and which might be useful in terms of locating community support groups and other resources. Local authorities (LAs) with larger numbers from a particular community may help nearby LAs with small numbers of isolated learners by providing resources such as interpreting services.
- **Languages** commonly spoken Where several languages are spoken in a country, it is helpful to know the major varieties and the official varieties used in schools. Turkish children, for instance, may include both Turkish and Kurdish speakers, but only Turkish is used in school. It is also useful to know which languages are mutually intelligible and which are not when making decisions about placing a new arrival in a class that has another child from the same country; they may or may not be able to communicate! Ideally there should be some information about the written form of the language (where there is one), for example whether it uses the Roman or another alphabet, how many characters the alphabet has, what direction it is written in (left-right, right- left, top-bottom), etc.
- **Names** – different cultures have very different naming systems, for example Vietnamese names have three parts. The family name comes first, followed by a middle name and then a personal name. The middle name is a second personal name and may add meaning to the first as in Minh Chau – Beautiful Pearl. The middle name indicates the person's sex, such as Khin for a boy and Nhi for a girl. Women do not change their name on marriage but are commonly addressed by their husband's family name.
- **Education system** It is useful for the student teacher to know about access to education in a particular country. Is it compulsory? If so, up to what age? Is it free? When do children start school? Is the curriculum the same for boys and girls? What is the medium of instruction? What is the examination system? Does it vary significantly from the UK system? The student teacher should not, however, assume that a student in their class will have had a 'typical' pattern of education for that country.
- **Economy** Although many parts of the world today are industrialised the images we tend to see of places outside the northern hemisphere are of rural communities with poor amenities. This can lead to false assumptions about a child's educational background and previous life experiences.
- **Religions** It is easy to assume that, say, all Sudanese people are Muslim. Although some 70 per cent are, the second largest religion is animism (18%) followed by Roman Catholicism (8%). Some information on important religious festivals can be very helpful both in making a new arrival feel included and in raising the awareness of the other children of the diversity of beliefs, especially where the class is largely mono-cultural.
- **Divisions within the larger ethnic group.** It can be very important to know whether there are rival factions within/between particular ethnic communities. It would be wrong to assume that because a child is a Shi'a Muslim they should not be placed with a Sunni Muslim, as – at least initially - they are likely to have more in common with each other than with their non-Muslim classmates. That said, it is as well for student teachers to be aware of potential tensions in relation to outside events, which may affect students from the various communities very differently.

Individual information on the child

As well as providing general information on a child's wider context, it is important to ensure that the student teacher is provided with an individualised profile of a new arrival so that informed decisions and appropriate plans can be made. This can take many forms depending on available information and resources.

Information from admissions interviews

A major source of information for the student teacher is contained in the school's initial admission interview with the child and their family. These allow the school to gather the data it needs for planning and also to provide the family with information on their child's schooling and what help might be available. [Salisbury WORLD](#), a Refugee Centre based in a London primary school, sees the admission interview as providing 'an opportunity create trust between parents and teachers and a successful home-school partnership.' Their advice applies equally to non-refugee students.

Typical information that might be gathered on a child includes:

- Name (and name known by)
- Age
- Gender
- Parents/carers
- Date of birth
- Place of birth
- Ethnicity
- Siblings and position in family
- Address (and whether it is permanent or temporary)
- Telephone number
- Emergency contacts
- Whether the child has had a recent change of carer
- Whether the child is in care
- Entitlement to free school meals
- Language(s) spoken
- Language(s) written
- Languages(s) used for previous education
- Request for interpreter/translation
- Date of admission to school
- Date of arrival in UK
- Refugee status
- Religion
- Previous schooling (UK and/or abroad)
- Community language/ supplementary school attendance
- Contact teacher
- Buddy
- Additional information family chooses to disclose (e.g. SEN, relevant experiences)
- Other information (e.g. skills, interests, health)

Initial language assessment

Schools will normally arrange for an early assessment of the child's skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking (generally undertaken by an EAL specialist). This might include more or less detailed comments in relation to the child's abilities in English, perhaps in relation to national curriculum levels in terms of speaking and listening, reading and writing. Mathematical skills can, to some extent, be assessed without much use of English and may reveal facilities with, for example, number and shape hidden by a lack of English. Similarly, assessments of skills in areas such as drawing, singing, and physical coordination, provide insights that narrower English-based testing could not possibly capture. Schools encouraged to use NC English Levels and QCA ['Steps'](#) (QCA, 2000) for assessment purposes, but schools and local authorities also commonly use their own sets of 'stages' (typically 1-5, with 1 indicating beginner and 5 native-like competence). [Assessment Practices in Schools](#) offers more details on the range of assessment practices which trainees may encounter.

Ideally, children's abilities will be assessed in their strongest language(s) as well as in English so that as rounded a picture as possible is available to support planning for the child's education. Where available, the support of a bilingual assistant from the same linguistic background will obviously be extremely valuable although it is possible to make a superficial assessment on the basis of children's ability to read or write a text in their first language more or less fluently.

Based on these initial assessments it should be possible to suggest specific teaching strategies to support further developments in key areas, as set out in the example below. Milton Keynes (2004) provides more extensive guidance on initial assessments and suggested teaching strategies.

Name	Class	Home language	Previous education and literacy	Language & curriculum access strategies
Mokbul Islam	4	Bengali/Sylheti	Mokbul is fluent in Sylheti but not literate - very little primary education. Has some basic spoken English.	Mokbul should sit with a Bengali speaker. Responds well to pictures and diagrams and likes to copy. Let him dictate what he wants to write first.
Angel Jimenez	6	Spanish	Angel is from Cuba and has had a full primary education in Spanish - fully literate and appears very able.	Angel has just arrived in the UK and his parents say he is very quiet. Allow him to remain silent and tune in - he will understand and absorb a lot. Encourage him to use a bilingual dictionary to look up words.

Many schools may produce much briefer profiles that provide a 'short-hand' overview (e.g. by assigning a commonly understood NC level) and focus on 'survival' information (e.g. 'She has been educated in a Tamil medium school – fully literate; vegetarian, Indefinite Leave to Remain; Guna Jayamaha in Y5 speaks Tamil'). Aspects other than curriculum knowledge and skills might be the focus, for example, a school may profile the pupils' 'group skills', i.e. their perceived strengths in or need of: friendship, paired work, talk partners, peer group support, collaborative work, problem-solving, mixed ability work and guided work. A school that has frequent new arrivals may send out regular 'group' profiles of all new arrivals containing a single paragraph summary of the child's language skills and previous education and a further paragraph suggesting some broad strategies to help the child access the curriculum. Whatever the scope and format of the information the student teacher has available to them, it only becomes valuable when it is used purposefully in planning for a child's learning needs.

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