

Bleak vision of our world

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MIGRATION, VIOLENCE, family breakdown and a society that is more interested in the cult of celebrity than addressing climate change the world is an increasingly perilous place for primary children, the interim Primary Review says. The review is the biggest inquiry into English primary education for 40 years.

It cites the case of an entire Polish village transferring to an enclave of inner-city Leeds as an example of the social challenges that schools and their communities must tackle.

Levels of security, inconceivable at the time of the Plowden education inquiry 40 years ago, illustrate the uneasy relationship between schools and the world outside their gates, the report says. "Today's children, it was felt, are forced to grow up too soon, and the prospects for the society they will inherit look increasingly perilous."

Children are anxious not only about global poverty and climate change but also about threats closer to home such as traffic, rubbish, graffiti and gangs of older children with knives and guns.

Heads, teachers and parents to whom the researchers spoke expressed an even more "pervasive pessimism". They pointed to commercialism; the breakdown of family and community life; and a loss of respect and empathy between generations.

"The wider world is changing," they believed, "rapidly and in ways which are not always easy to comprehend, though on balance they give cause for alarm."

The report cites migration as one cause of pressure on children. It observes a cultural clash between English parents who want to combine careers with family life and continental European parents who resent the pressure to leave their children and go out to work.

In Leeds, primary schools in neighbouring Chapeltown and Harehills are working to absorb children who have arrived from Poland over the past 18 months. "We were told that one entire Polish village has moved to Chapeltown," the report says.

A newly arrived Polish girl, Zuzanna Zommer, 14, whose parents could not find a school for her, was stabbed to death at home last week.

Father Jan Zareba, the priest at Our Lady of Czestochowa Polish church, said the tragedy was symptomatic of the stresses on the migrant community, whose young members had also suffered racial attacks.

But there were positive signs of integration too, with 115 Polish Catholic children learning their history and language at Saturday school, held in rooms rented from the local Islamic school.

Sixteen Polish children have enrolled at St Augustine's Roman Catholic School and handfuls of Polish children are also enrolled at the nearby Holy Rosary and Bracken Edge primary schools.

Julie Harkness, headteacher at Bracken Edge, said four out of five children in her school were from ethnic minority backgrounds, and 85 per cent of families were on low incomes. While some of the refugee children had experienced the horrors of African and Balkan conflicts, many of the English children had never been outside Chapeltown.

Her school had employed a learning assistant who specialised in teaching English as an additional language and had established a new arrival programme.

Clashes had not necessarily been between religions: two boys, one Kosovar, the other Pakistani, had fought over which one was a "real Muslim".

The Primary Review in context

The Primary Review is being directed by Professor Robin Alexander, fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge and professor of education emeritus at Warwick University. His team, based in Cambridge, consists of 70 researchers and a 20 member advisory committee chaired by Dame Gillian Pugh. This is the first of 32 interim reports and is financed by The Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. The researchers interviewed heads, teachers, governors, support staff, children, the police and community groups. The final report will be published next autumn. | www.primaryreview.org.uk

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