

Language Diversity and Educational Attainment of East European Pupils in Primary Schools in England

Research Brief

Introduction

English schools have been educating immigrant children for decades. Recently, however, new arrivals have brought a sizable growth of the immigrant population in the UK. Research conducted by the Migration Policy Institute suggests that the immigrant population as a whole increased by 76%, from 4.9 million to 8.6 million between 2002 and 2015. Of these, 3.1 million were European citizens who migrated to the UK and 1.3 million are Eastern European including 813,700 Polish and 170,000 Lithuanians (ONS 2017). Similarly there has been an increase in the school population. Of 6,626,690 pupils in English schools about 119,580 pupils or 1.8% are from Eastern European countries, with Polish speakers making up nearly half of this group overall with 53,915 pupils (DfE 2016, The Economist 2017).

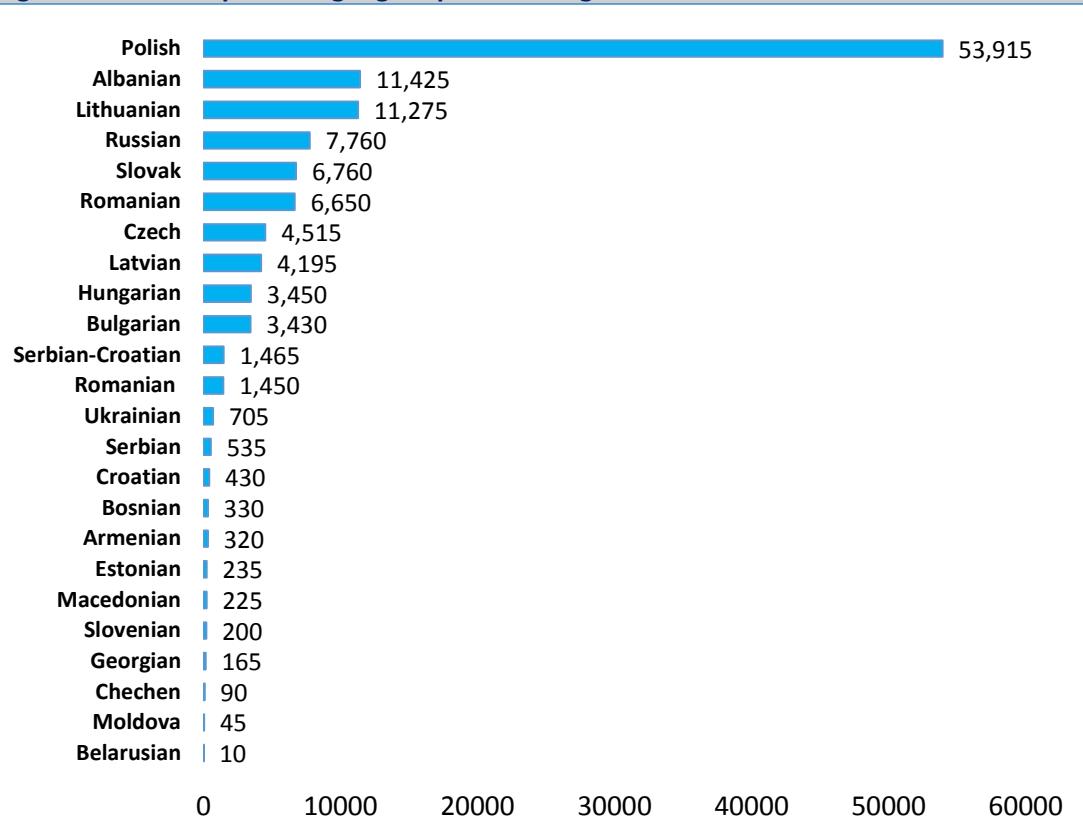
Despite the prominence of this group in public policy, there is still no research evidence or national data of the educational achievement and experiences of schooling among Eastern European pupils in England. This places serious constraints on effecting targeting policy and practice developments at national and local level. This research paper considers empirical evidence from England and examines pupil performance differences among the main East European languages spoken in schools. It draws on detailed National Pupil Database (NPD) and School Census data for pupils who completed Key Stage 2 (KS2) in England in 2016 to answer the questions. The sample size of the pupils who completed KS2 at the end of year 6 in 2016 was 586,181.

The term Eastern Europe is used here to refer to the eastern part of Europe that encompasses many different cultures, ethnicities, languages, and histories speaking one of these languages including, Albanian, Armenian, Bulgarian, Chechen, Czech, Estonian, Georgian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Moldovan, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Slovak, Slovenian and Ukrainian.

Main Findings

Figure 1 shows that in English schools, Eastern Europe is one of the most linguistically diverse parts of the European continent with 53,915 pupils speaking Polish as their language at home, followed by Albanian (11,425 speakers), Lithuanian (11,275) and Russian (7,760). Overall, more than 24 different languages were spoken at home by East European pupils in the NPD, which also included Slovak (6,760 speakers), Romanian (6,650 speakers), Czech (4,515 speakers), Latvian (4,195 speakers) Hungarian (3,450 speakers), Bulgarian (3,430 speakers), Serbian-Croatian (1,465 speakers) and Romanian (1,450 speakers). Other languages included Ukrainian, Arminian, Estonian, Macedonian, Slovenian, Georgian, Chechen, Moldova and Belarusian who had between 700 and 10 speakers respectively.

Figure 1: East European Languages Spoken in English Schools



Source: NALDIC 2012 analysis of NPD data

Figure 2: Map of Languages in Europe



Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_the_European_Union#/media/File:Simplified_Languages_of_Europe_map.svg

In total, 18 different East European languages were spoken in primary schools in England. There were 18,340 pupils of East European origin who took KS2 at the end of primary education.

Table 1. Key Stage 2 Attainment by Language Area

	Reading KS2	Writing TA	Maths KS2	RWM	Pupils
East European Speakers*	48%	61%	65%	41%	18,340
West European speakers**	57%	69%	71%	48%	6,629
White British English speakers	68%	74%	69%	54%	404,146
White Irish English speakers	77%	78%	75%	61%	1,670
National	66%	74%	70%	53%	

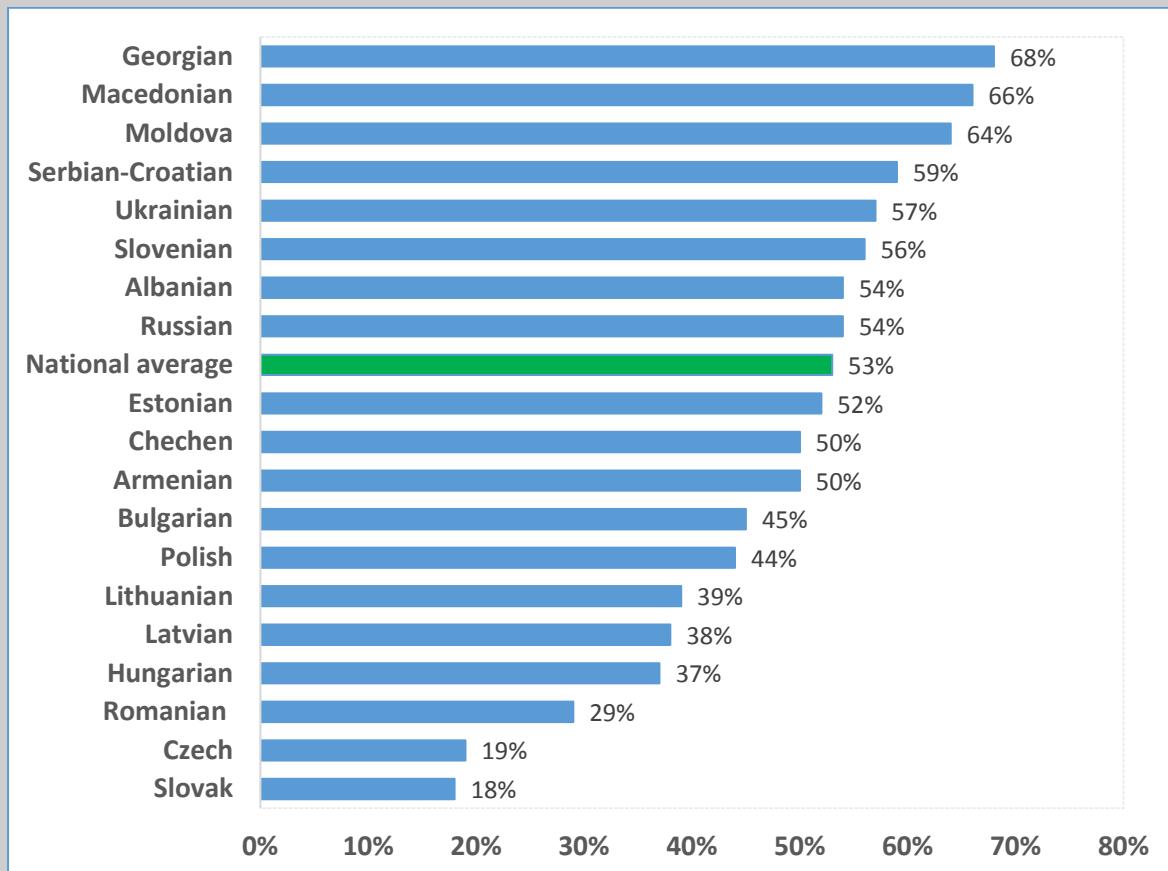
Source: DfE. 2016. National Pupil Database (NPD), Department for Education.

*Speakers of Albanian, Armenian, Bulgarian, Chechen, Czech, Estonian, Georgian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Moldovan, Polish, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Slovak, Slovenian and Ukrainian languages.

** Speakers of Basque/Euskara, Catalan, Danish, Dutch/Flemish, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Icelandic, Italian, Luxemburgish, Norwegian, Portuguese, Sardinian, Spanish, and Swedish. Turkish and Kurdish language speakers are also added to the group on ground of geographical links.

Table 1 and Figure 3 shows that there is a clear difference in performance when the results are broken down by language spoken. Overall 41% gained the expected standard in reading, writing and maths combined compared with 53% of all pupils nationally. The biggest attainment gap was in reading where 66% of pupils nationally and 48% of east European speakers met the expected standard.

Figure 3: Key Stage 2 Attainment by East European Language Reading Writing and Maths (RWM)



Source: DfE. 2016. National Pupil Database (NPD), Department for Education

There are wide variations in the attainment of different language groups within Eastern Europe. East European overall are considered as an underachieving group, but when this is disaggregated by language spoken by the pupil, there are several language groups that are very high performing compared to the national average in England. Figure 3 shows that within the East European group, Georgian speaking pupils were the highest achieving with 68% achieving expected levels. They were closely followed by Macedonian (66%), Moldovan (64%), Serbian/Croatian (59%), Ukrainian (57%), Slovenian (56%), Russian and Albanian (54%) who performed above the national average at Key Stage 2. Notably, of the largest groups from Eastern Europe in English schools, Russian and Albanian speakers achieved better than the national average.

In contrast, Slovak speaking pupils were by far the lowest performing in the East European category, with just 18% of pupils achieving expected levels at Key Stage 2, followed by Czech speaking pupils (19%) and are amongst the lowest performing language groups across the country, with a gap of over 34 percentage points below the national average. Also low achieving from the East European group were speakers of Romanian (29%), Hungarian (37%), Latvian (38%), Lithuanian (39%), Polish (44%) and Bulgarian (45%).

Overall East European languages such as Slovak, Czech, Romanian, Hungarian, Latvian and Lithuanian are some of the lowest achieving groups of all the languages spoken in English schools. This is an area which should require further scrutiny. Czech and Slovak pupils in particular are very low achieving, over 30 percentage points below the national average at KS2. Researchers have suggested that a large proportion of Czech and Slovak speaking pupils in England may belong to the Roma migrant community, a disadvantaged group which is known to provide a low level of access to education for their children.

A further analysis comparing the attainment of East European and West European pupils suggests that East European speakers do less well than West European speakers at KS2 and that White British English only speakers do better by a clear margin (see Table 1). However, it is White Irish English speakers who have the highest levels of attainment with 61% gaining the expected standard in RWM combined. The underachievement of East European speakers is certainly worthy of more detailed investigation.

Conclusions and Policy Implications for Data Collection

The main findings from the study confirm that a number of East European pupils have low attainment and their performance in English schools has been masked by government statistics that fail to distinguish between 'White Other' ethnic groups identified by languages spoken at home. The empirical data suggests that particularly speakers of Slovak, Czech, Romanian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Bulgarian are underachieving and the difference between their educational performance and others is larger than for any other main ethnic groups. Some of the main reasons for underachievement, identified from the study are the language barriers, economic deprivation, a disrupted or non-existent prior education and parental lack of understanding of the British education system. Overall this research confirms that the underachievement of East European children remains a cause for concern and is obviously an issue that policymakers and schools need to address.

The above findings also have implications for the collection and use of data at national and international level. We would argue that the worryingly low achievement of many East European pupils has been masked by failure of government statistics to distinguish the 'White Other' ethnic group that is used in national data collections, by languages spoken at home. Using such categories as it's collected at national level in England can have undesirable consequences in making policy

formulation. Research shows that collapsing into ‘White Other’ ethnic categories makes comparison problematic as this group have the greatest linguistic diversity with a range of other ethnic groups such as Polish, Czech, Portuguese, Spanish, Albanian, Russian, etc. We point out that accurate and reliable disaggregated ethnic and language data are important to address education inequalities. Such data are important to identify knowledge gaps and develop effective programmes and policies. We would argue as a matter of good practice, government and public institutions need an account of people’s culture, ethnic and linguistic background in formulating national and local policy.

References

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Notes for Editors

1. The ‘Language diversity and educational attainment of East European pupils in primary schools in England’ paper was presented to the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association (BERA), University of Sussex, 6th September 2017.
2. The research was carried out by Dr Feyisa Demie, Head of Research and Adviser for school self-evaluation at Lambeth LA.
3. For further information and a copy of the research report E-mail: fdemie@lambeth.gov.uk

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