Seeking Asylum in Schools
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Some English people they just don't like us. If you argue with them they just tell you “go back to your country, why are you in England”… they don’t understand why you’re here, so there is no point of talking about it. - Farouq, Year 10

Farouq, an Afghani refugee boy, is well aware of public representations of refugees in the UK. He is an outsider, the ‘other’, and he is unwanted. In today’s world, refugees and asylum seekers are physically and symbolically ‘out of place’ – the ‘other in our midst’, or as Bauman (2004) describes them, the ‘human waste’, the ‘flotsam’ of humanity who are pushed or wafted across national boundaries. They are living what Agamben (1998) describes as a state of ‘bare life’.

Asylum seeking in the UK (and elsewhere in Europe) has become a matter of public debate. The media describe asylum seekers as scroungers and criminals who are flooding ‘our’ country, posing a threat to ‘our’ security, and draining ‘our’ resources; successive legislation makes Britain less welcoming for asylum seekers. Historically, the concept of asylum was associated with compassion. However, growing numbers and the changing makeup of asylum seekers at the doorstep of western countries have led receiving societies to readdress issues of membership, rights and belonging and their moral obligations towards them. The ways in which asylum seekers are defined as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of state support and protection form a central part of the material and symbolic boundary-making activity of western nation states. The asylum-seeking and refugee child is positioned between this draconian political-economic discourse and the discursive idea of childhood vulnerability, although the UK government has repeatedly ignored the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child when it comes to asylum seeking children and increasingly restricts their access to welfare services.

But what happens when these children enter the education system? Can schools offer a ‘safe haven’? Schools cater for the complex emotional and educational needs of asylum-seeking and refugee children, sustaining their professional duty to educate and care for all children whatever their legal status. From the perspective of teachers, political distinctions between ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ migrant families are anti-educational and irrelevant to schools. The UK Home Office sees a migrant child as first and foremost a migrant, while for teachers, they are children first and thus equally entitled to respect and help. An assistant headteacher in a city school comments:

I don’t think we’ve ever refused somebody admission if we’ve got a place, simply because they haven’t had the right documentation… Because to be honest even if it turned out that they were here illegally, in a way that’s not our concern… We would still not refuse because… that’s not for us, the school, to judge.

Asylum-seeking and refugee children are offered different versions of compassion by their teachers. One version expresses compassion as the need to care for and help those who have suffered in their lives and who seek help and shelter. This notion is based on concern (whether empathy, sympathy or pity) for those who are victims of circumstance. Another version of compassion is based on a sense of justice – offering help to those who are in trouble on the basis of notions of equality and human rights and recognising a shared humanity with others. Nussbaum (2001) argues that such compassion occurs at the level of individual psychology and of institutional design. Compassion becomes not just an emotion, a motivation or a form of reasoning, but a form of social solidarity, especially in relation to diversity.

There is evidence for both types of compassion in schools. Here an inclusion coordinator in a large predominantly white school rejects the notion of pity in favour of ‘equal treatment for all’:

…the word pity always has a connotation of almost being condescending, doesn’t it? […] All the children I work with, whether they have a learning difficulty, a behaviour difficulty, they are just children with English as an additional language, or they’re asylum-seeking and refugee children, or they’re looked after children, or they’re abused children … will come to you with a level of need … and my response is to react to [those] needs … in the best way I can.

These individualising discourses allow teachers to see ‘a child’ who is entitled to learn and to be safe from violence. Different compassionate responses result from schools’ first-hand experience of immigration policies, especially detention and deportation. Child deportation reverberates around the school and community and forces teachers to manage crises of grief and loss in the classroom:

…other children [do] not necessarily understand why someone’s gone… well they were happy here, why have they been moved? There’s obviously something wrong with us. Is that why they’ve moved them? (headteacher, predominantly white
Such experiences lead certain teachers to be involved in anti-deportation campaigns which bring them into contact with immigration authorities, police, and a range of professional bodies. Such action is morally and politically significant since it unites concerns about child-centred compassionate approaches with egalitarian concerns about peace and fairness. Witnessing the politics of immigration first-hand reshapes the relationship of teachers to the state.

Immigration policy repositions educational institutions which value diversity and which critically engage with the denial of social and human rights. Such humanistic and critically-aware school cultures could easily be made to appear unpatriotic or out of line in increasingly fortress-like nation states.

Teachers represent the front line of a democratic society, creating the conditions for compassion to flourish within young generations. They can validate asylum-seeking and refugee children’s resilience and extraordinary ability to survive by offering them a chance to take control of their futures. This task is not getting any easier.

Notes
1 All quotations are drawn from Pinson et al., 2010. Thanks to Mano Candappa for permission to quote from the book.

References