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Citizenship education and non-citizens: learning about asylum-seekers and refugees in the UK

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In June 1992, Ruhollah Aramesh, a 24-year old Afghan refugee, was murdered in south London, while defending his sister from racial abuse. Ruhollah Aramesh was a much-liked volunteer interpreter at the South London Refugee Project and at the Refugee Council. He had intended to study medicine at university. Twenty nine other people have been murdered in Britain by racists during the last fifteen years. As well as British citizens, their numbers include refugees from Turkey, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan: people who had come to the UK seeking refuge from persecution. For every murder there are hundreds of thousands of incidents of racist attacks and abuse, most of which goes unreported. Most perpetrators of racial harassment are young. This paper examines how schools can challenge racial harassment, and the role citizenship education can play.

Asylum-seekers and refugees in the UK: terminology

The terms ‘asylum-seeker’ and 'refugee ' are used throughout this paper; both have a specific legal meaning. An asylum-seeker has crossed an international border in search of safety, and refugee status, in another country. To be recognised as having refugee status a person must have left his or her own country and be unable to return to it 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.' (from the *1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*). Over the world there are over 18 million asylum-seekers, refugees and people living in refugee-like conditions, and at least 25 million internally displaced people (US Committee for Refugees, 2002). The vast majority of refugees and displaced people live in the world's poorer countries.

In 2001 some 71,700 asylum applications were received in the UK: their main countries of origin are listed in Appendix One. Their cases were determined by the Immigration and Nationality Department of the Home Office. 31 per cent of them were given refugee status or other types of residency status in 2001. There are an estimated 80,000 asylum-seeking and refugee children in the UK, and in Greater London about 6% of the total school population are asylum-seekers or refugees.

Legislative changes: depriving citizenship rights

The UK has a long history of immigration. During the first 70 years of the twentieth century Britain accepted three waves of refugees from Europe: eastern European Jews (1870 - 1914), those fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe (1933-45) and eastern Europeans fleeing communism (1946 - late 1980s). During this time the UK had immigration controls and asylum legislation, but this was less complex than now. Refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe and Eastern Europe were treated like other immigrants: it was expected they would settle permanently, integrate and take out British citizenship.

Since the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962) the Government has exercised much greater control over entry, but the expectation continued that asylum-seekers and other immigrants would become British subjects after a relatively short period. Until the 1980s

asylum-seekers had few restrictions on their rights to work, study and claim benefits and housing.

From the mid-1980s onwards, all over Europe, this policy changed. It was made more difficult to enter the EU, and the asylum-seeker increasingly lost the economic and social rights of the citizen. The British Government developed a four-pronged approach in changing asylum legislation and policy, namely

- raising barriers to prevent asylum-seekers arriving in the UK, for example demanding visas from them, and fining airlines that transport those without the correct documentation
- deterrents that make settlement in the UK more difficult, for example restricting rights to housing, benefits, work and education.
- tightening the criteria by which the Home Office judges an asylum application, so that more asylum applications are rejected.
- a democratic deficit in immigration and asylum practices, with greater emphasis on immigration rules and on secretive attempts to harmonise European asylum practices (Rutter, 2001, p20-49).

The citizenship gap between the asylum-seeker and the refugee widened in the 1990s. Policy and legislative changes removed economic and social rights from asylum-seekers, and media discourse and the remarks of some politicians linked asylum-seekers to 'scroungers' and 'bogus' refugees. Asylum-seekers were bad non-citizens, while refugees were good, almost-citizens, who needed help to integrate into British society.

Recent asylum legislation and policy changes are summarised in Appendix Two. Legislative changes have been accompanied by the scapegoating of asylum-seekers in the media. This has undoubtedly contributed to increased racism and xenophobia, including violent attacks on refugees. Even in school playgrounds the words 'bogus' and 'scrounger' have been used to taunt refugee children.

Increasing hostility

Attacks on refugees appears to be increasing, although at present there is no research on this. The negative media coverage of asylum has undoubtedly fuelled public hostility, as has the badly planned dispersal of asylum-seekers to housing throughout the UK. Racial attacks are perpetrated by a small number of individuals, but for this to happen there is almost always tolerance of racism within the larger community, and widespread negative feelings towards ethnic minority groups. Interviews conducted by the author in areas accepting dispersed asylum-seekers after 1999 indicate that the following factors contribute towards the racial harassment of refugees:

- existing local tensions
- high unemployment and bad housing, leading the to the easy scapegoating of refugees
- negative portrayals of refugees in the local media
- inflammatory statements by local politicians
- ill-planned dispersal of asylum-seekers
- no local consultation over plans to house asylum-seekers
- little previous settlement by ethnic minority communities
- failure by the police to pick up on growing tensions and to protect victims effectively

- failure of schools to challenge hostility to refugees from non-refugee pupils and their families.

The everyday experiences of refugee pupils in schools

Refugee pupils' experiences of racism in schools mirror what is happening in the wider community. Studies of refugee pupils' experiences reveal that many experience racial harassment in their schools and neighbourhood. Thirty-two refugee children (from a range of national groups including Bosnians, Turkish Kurds, Somalis and Vietnamese) were interviewed in a study in the London Borough of Hackney in 1995. All the children were judged by their parents and teachers to be 'coping' in school, but nineteen of them reported that they had suffered racial harassment and nine had moved school as a result.

Isolation was another common experience among refugee children. Only one child reported that he had visited the home of a fellow pupil judged to be 'British'. Lack of language contributes towards isolation, but arguably so does negative media coverage with its portrayal of refugees as the 'alien other'. The events of September 11 also affected the experiences of asylum-seekers and refugees, contributing to greater Islamophobia. Most current asylum-seekers are from countries where the majority identify themselves as Muslims.

Refugee children and their families have unequal access to support and redress after racial harassment. Many crimes are not reported to the police, an issue facing all ethnic minority communities. Under-reporting more likely because of a lack of facility in English, and by the real fear some refugees have of the police, based on experiences in their home country. In such circumstances, the police must meet with refugees to allay their fears, and local authorities should fund racial harassment prevention projects that employ people who speak the refugees' languages. The third-party reporting of racial harassment might also be considered - where community groups, schools, colleges and other groups can telephone the police to report racial harassment on behalf of refugees. Some local authority asylum teams have police officers seconded to them, another positive practice.

Racial harassment in schools

Roger Hewitt made an important study of the perpetrators of racist action and of the impact on them of anti-racist policies (Hewitt, 1996). He claims that fifteen years of anti-racist and multicultural education policies have changed the attitudes and behaviour of many school pupils but that there remains a core of racist youth in the predominately white areas he studied in the London Borough of Greenwich. Hewitt distinguishes between the 'passive' racism of private jokes, graffiti and racist opinions and the 'active' racism of assaults and verbal abuse. Active racism is almost always carried out by groups of young people, suggesting that peer pressure may encourage assaults or abuse, and that active racism requires the perpetrators to feel safe. Hewitt's research lead him to conclude that

- Greenwich was ethnically divided, with areas where ethnic minority communities did not live or even visit. The ethnic divide was perpetuated by housing policies which allowed public housing to be passed to the next generation;
- the main agents of reproduction of racist attitudes were the peer group;

- the policing of racist attitudes came more from the peer group than from parents, although parents might exert pressures on girls not to have boyfriends from ethnic minority groups;
- white males seemed more vulnerable to peer pressure. Girls that articulated the clearest arguments against racism. Anti-racist policies should give more direct and indirect support to these exceptional girls;
- most children in the predominantly white areas had little social contact with children from ethnic minority backgrounds until they entered secondary school, by which time they were becoming aware of themselves as part of a specific peer group;
- the majority community played down the racist element of violence and abuse;
- the majority community interpreted local authority anti-racist policies as being ‘unfair to whites’, stoked by coverage of anti-racist initiatives in the right-wing tabloid press. The clumsy management of some local authority anti-racist initiatives may also have caused majority community resentment;
- two domains of school activity were considered unfair to whites: discipline, and the way cultural differences were dealt with;
- some schools dealt with disciplinary incidents in a way that stressed the school's anti-racist policy rather than asserting the fundamental wrong of the offence;
- schools often portrayed minority cultures as single units in events such as ‘Africa Week’. Students from the different African communities cannot identify with this simplified 'culture', and so feel that they have no culture. Schools need to portray minority cultures in a true to life complex form. School celebrations of diversity must not exclude whites;
- anti-racist initiatives must run alongside practices addressing other oppressions such as poverty and sexism.

Research carried out for the Refugee Council by Rainey, Kelly, Campbell, Roafe, an advertising agency is reported in *Refugees - from a small issue to an important cause*. They interviewed two groups of young adults, none of whom had strong views on immigration or refugees, in an attempt to identify strategies that could be adopted by refugee agencies to generate sympathy towards refugees. Refugees in the UK were not part of everyday life but were ‘hidden away’ in hostels. None of the interviewees had any social contact with refugees, so it was easy for media stereotypes to take hold. Although many interviewees expressed superficial sympathy towards refugees, this was not coupled with identification. Refugees’ backgrounds and plights were considered to be ‘other-worldy’. Using statistics and hard facts was of limited use in challenging popular stereotypes: refugee agencies should rather stress that refugees are ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, by drawing on personal testimony and asking ‘how would you feel if ... ' questions. As one interviewee said: "Instead of making it a charitable thing - oh look at the poor refugees - it makes you think about refugees as people like you."

An approach that stresses common humanity and challenges negative stereotypes and the construction of refugees as ‘alien other’ should be used in the planning of projects that aim to raise awareness about refugees and challenge hostility to them. Often the arts - creative writing, poetry, testimony and the visual arts - can be employed to do this.

So what can schools do?

Schools can challenge racism in five different areas:

- an evaluation of previous anti-racist work - what initiatives have been tried, and did they work?
- school ethos - does the school promote human rights and respect for all? Or do pupils have low self-esteem or attend a school with an atmosphere of barely contained violence?
- multi-agency work - how does the school work with other agencies in society that should be involved in challenging racism? These may include parents, the police, youth groups, tenants organisations, Race Equality Councils, football clubs, local authority housing departments and others. As Hewitt stressed, multi-agency work to challenge racism is usually the most effective and many areas have multi-agency working groups on racial harassment. In schools it is essential to involve all parents in projects and work on issues of race and justice, by inviting parents to attend assemblies and look at displays of work, for example, and informing them about what is going on.
- effective monitoring and sanctions - monitoring should be consistent and schools need guidelines to all staff (including lunchtime supervisors) on what constitutes racial harassment and what does not. Sanctions against pupils who perpetrate racial harassment are needed and should be seen to be fair.
- using the curriculum to promote diversity and equality - schools can use the curriculum to raise awareness about refugees in a way that stresses their humanity - the arts in particular offer many opportunities. Examples of curricular projects are suggested below.

In the secondary English curriculum students can develop speaking and listening skills by role-play and debate about refugee issues, presenting information, negotiation. Students can use non-fictional texts such as newspaper articles about refugees, autobiography, diaries, letters and leaflets. Writing skills can be developed by informing others about refugees, or presenting written arguments, stories and narratives about refugees.

The primary history curriculum can deal with the growth of multi-ethnic UK; the era of the Second World War; local history projects about migration and oral history of refugees.

The secondary history curriculum can consider the Huguenots; Jewish migration in Victorian Britain; the growth of multi-ethnic Britain 1880-1970; the era of the Second World War and the Holocaust; the development of the United Nations and International Humanitarian Law; the colonisation of Africa and post-colonial Africa; the Arab-Israeli conflict; the Vietnam War and relevant oral history work.

Primary geography can research refugees' countries of origin; prepare projects on migration and journeys; and examine links with other countries in an interdependent world. The secondary geography curriculum can examine similar issues and also explore the impact of refugee migration on the host society.

Religious education can concern itself with religious festivals of many faiths; or with some of the many cases of persecution because of religious beliefs. Stories in religious texts can be used as a basis for looking at the way that society treats the outsider (for example Jesus' flight to Egypt or the Hegira – Mohammed's journey from Mecca to

Media). Religious education also involves the study of contemporary moral issues, for example poverty, war, the arms trade, social justice, race and immigration issues and responsibility to others.

Art can include looking at art forms from other countries and using art to represent feelings. Cross-curricular themes in primary schools might include danger and being scared; loss; children's rights; safety; how we treat others; justice and issues of identity.

In September 2002, all English secondary schools must have a citizenship programme and this will embrace many of the issues suggested. Citizenship education will comprise three strands; political literacy, social and moral responsibility, and community involvement - the active citizen. Secondary schools will be obliged to teach about the 'origins and implications of the diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the UK and the need for mutual respect and understanding' (QCA, 1999).

Curricular projects in schools: some final thoughts

More and more UK schools have refugee students, and teachers need to be sensitive to their needs, particularly when initiating class projects on refugees. Refugee children may have experienced traumatic events in their home countries or during their escape. They may have seen members of their family injured, arrested or killed. Such horrific events cannot easily be discussed in classrooms. Refugee children may not want to talk about their home country or family circumstances because they are worried about family left at home, or because they feel that it might jeopardise their chances of staying in the UK or eventually returning home. They may not want to be made to feel different from other children, and may feel embarrassed about the popular images of their home country. For example, some Somali children in London schools have felt unable to admit their origin because the only image their teachers and fellow pupils have of Somalia is of famine and war.

But there are many ways of making refugee students feel secure, while at the same time increasing all the students' knowledge, such as producing displays about life in students' countries of origin. Schools can invite parents and members of refugee communities to talk to students. Importantly, all school work on refugees must seek to humanise those who flee, and encourage non-refugee students to feel empathy towards their refugee classmates.

Sometimes teachers are afraid to tackle issues like the movement and reception of refugees because they see them as controversial and requiring much knowledge to be properly understood. Teachers may assume that they must solve or at least confront the problems in advance of presenting them to children and that this will not be easy when issues are contestable. They may decide to ignore controversial issues completely. The curriculum resources produced by the Refugee Council take the approach that children should be helped to understand how different opinions are formed. Many of the activities give children the opportunity to explore different opinions and the complex feelings generated by examining how we receive newcomers in our society. And more and more projects in schools throughout the UK are looking at refugee issues in schools.

References

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Appendix One: Main Countries of Origin of Asylum-Seekers 1999-2001

Afghanistan	Kosova and other former	Sri Lanka (Tamils)
China	Yugoslavia	Turkey (Kurds)
Iran	Pakistan	Zimbabwe
Iraq	Somalia	

Appendix Two: Changes in Asylum legislation and policy 1987-2002

1987 Immigration Carriers Liability) Act fines airlines for transporting those without the correct travel documents

1993 Asylum and Immigration (Appeals) Act restricted asylum-seekers' access to *inter alia* social housing

1996 Asylum and Immigration Act stopped benefits for in-country asylum applicants

1999 Immigration and Asylum Act dispersed asylum-seekers throughout the UK, and removed cash benefits for asylum-seekers, replacing cash support with vouchers.

2002 The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill (being debated in Parliament in May 2002). Proposals include

- applicants for British nationality having to pass a citizenship test
- a work permit scheme for highly skilled migrants
- housing asylum-seekers in large camps, with children being educated separately.