Chapter #23

INTEGRATING STUDENTS WITH REFUGEE AND ASYLUM SEEKER BACKGROUNDS INTO SCHOOL: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT
The critical aspect of refugee and asylum seeker education has become almost a worldwide phenomenon. The difficulties of language, culture, acceptance and resettlement all impact on a school's capacity to support these students and ensure that they access to best educational opportunities possible in many countries which are dominated by neoliberalized education systems. Neoliberalized education systems are dominated by the five Cs (Competitiveness, Conformity, Conservatism, Convention and Commerce) and are the antithesis of the European educational child- centred traditions conceived by Pestalozzi, Froebel, Steiner and others. This writing draws on a research project designed to establish the perspectives of members of a school community about belonging. It was conducted in a primary school in urban Australia which has a reputation for developing inclusive practices and an ethos of belonging for its diverse homeland population and its refugee and asylum seeker population which comprised 40% of the school enrolment at the time of the investigation. The research indicated the importance of the teacher perspectives, values and beliefs and has implications for teachers of refugee and asylum seeker students everywhere. It also has implications for preservice teacher education and the importance of preparation to specifically support these cohorts of students and their communities in addition to being flexible and open to change.

Keywords: refugee, asylum seeker, belonging, pedagogies of care, principal, teachers.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, 79.5 million people were identified as being displaced. 26 million of these were refugees, over half of whom were under the age of 18 years UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency (2020). Of these displaced people, 85% are currently placed in developing countries who have few resources to support them. Of the six most wealthy countries in the world, (US, UK, France, China, Germany and Japan) only Germany has hosted a substantial number of these refugees, supporting 1.1 million people. In other wealthy countries and OECD countries, there has been significantly less resettlement. For those who are resettled in the wealthier and OEDC countries, engagement in mandatory education can be an opportunity for healing, integration and a better future or the context of additional trauma, 'othering' and exclusion (Sellars & Murphy, 2017). While much of the prejudice and bias may be instigated at a personal level, the neoliberalized education systems in these countries are typically not the ideal learning contexts for students with traumatic experiences of displacement, loss and grief (Frater-Mathieson, 2004). This discussion focusses on the perspectives held by teachers and leaders in such a school who had successfully mediated these five characteristics to provide a context of acceptance, care and belonging.

The five C characteristics of neoliberal education are summarised as *Competitiveness, Conformity, Conservatism, Convention and Commerce* (Sellars & Imig, 2020). *Competitiveness* is actualised in the types of 'one size fits all' standardized assessments in which many students with refugee and asylum seeker students do not have the language or other academic skills to compete effectively (Creagh, 2016). *Conformity* refers to the narrow, Eurocentric content and curricula which are determined as 'knowledge' worth knowing, irrespective of other epistemologies and ontologies that these student may bring as their 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). *Conservatism* is reflected in the pedagogical practices which are based on economies and efficiencies of a factory model of education espoused in 19th century schools, where the teacher imparts, manages and dictates the content to be learned (Kuhn, 2007). *Convention* keeps students in a chronological, age- based school allocation for the purposes of gathering data and onerous comparisons that act as tools of governmentality (Foucault, 1991), irrespective of the students' prior educational experiences (Brown, Miller, & Mitchell, 2006; Dooley, 2009). These interpolated characteristics work together to serve the solitary purpose of neoliberalized education, to produce adults who are workers and consumers. In this manner students are viewed as human capital trained to sustain the mechanisms of *Commerce* (Ball, 2016; Gary, 2016). In this way, these education systems serve to perpetuate social inequality. The students who are typically most severely impacted, irrespective of their potential, intellectual capacity and other positive qualities, are those from refugee and asylum seeker experiences. This writing discusses the perspectives of teachers and leaders from one urban primary school in Australia who 'pushed back' against the rigours of these five characteristics and developed a learning context that based on pedagogies of love, care and hope, drawing in the early pedagogical practices of Pestalozzi, Steiner and others in the early European tradition of acceptance, pedagogical love and optimism. Incorporated into these practices was an understanding and demonstration of the 'moral purpose' of education so highly regarded by Pestalozzi (Gravil, 1997; Laubach, 2011; Sootard, 1994) and Dewey (1910) amongst others.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of pedagogical love is not always well understood in societies where 'love' is narrowly confined, as is the language itself, to the flowers and romantic varieties or the overly sexual inferences. In both these cases, the constructs are not congruent with the adjective 'pedagogical' and may cause much discomfort and dismay (Gidley, 2016). Pedagogical love is more adequately defined as the genuine, deep caring that is based on the needs of the students, and with the moral purpose of modelling, demonstrating and representing that care in all interactions, with peers, parents and students (Noddings, 2005, 2012). The current Covid- 19 pandemic and its resultant global impact may have played some part in the very gradual resurgence of interest in the notion of pedagogical love in academic literature, highlighting, as it has done, the importance of people over profit, the criticality of good citizenship practices and community relationships and the necessity of responsible public behaviours to safeguard others. Wilkinson and Kaukko (2020) discuss the imperative of principals and other school leaders using their positions to promote pedagogical love in relation to refugee education. Kurland (2018) also introduces the nation of leadership as care, indicating that teachers who work in caring environments where they are cared for by the principal, experience greater professional growth, are more disposed to pass the caring attitudes and action on to their students, where the impact is observed to be improved student success. Arar, Örücü, and Ak Küçükçayır (2019) discusses the care that a female principal in

Turkey extended to her Syrian refugee students, noting that her actions were not always understood by her male staff.

The definition of care is intimately connected to its context and culture. Much of the most recent academic work focussed on care in education has been concentrated on the context of early childhood education (see, for example, Delaune, 2017; Page, 2018). Other literature which recommends an increased focussed on care beyond the early childhood years of 0-8years, is offered by Hemerijck (2015) who discusses a finely nuanced version of neoliberalized education whose focus is still firmly on the economy and commercial value of the 'human capital' in schools, and which is critiqued by Delaune (2017) amongst others as perverting the critical purposes of education to support an exercise in biopower (Foucault, 1991). Fielding and Moss (2011) offer a model which challenges the foundational five C characteristics of neoliberalized education. This 'radical 'vision of schooling advocates for the development of schools fit for children and young people. They envision schools which meet the needs of the students, educate for wisdom and justice in democratic common schools which are resources not only for the students but for the communities in which they interact. They propose a future for education that is characterised by pedagogical love and care in creative contexts in which that common caring and mutual acceptance and understanding can thrive and build better societies. This restructured educational context echoes much of the vision for postformal education that is offered by Gidley (2016), whose paradigm comprises four major themes; conscious, compassionate spiritual development, mobile, life enhancing thinking, complexification of thinking and culture and linguistic and paradigmatic boundary crossing (Gidley, 2016 p. 148). Both the explore from Fielding and Moss and that from Gidley are founded on the tenets of acceptance and fairness, both of which are crucial to the successful integration of students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences.

Integration is inherently different to assimilation and to assume that students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences are better to assimilate into their new homelands than to integrate or acculturate is to assume that these populations do not bring with them any ontological knowledge or epistemological beliefs (Sellars, 2020). It also implies that they are prepared to dismiss their own cultural capital in favour of cultural mores and standards of their new homelands, which facilitates ease of adapting to, and integrating into new cultural contexts (Alitolpo-Niitama, 2004; Fruja Amthor & Roxas, 2016; Oikonomidoy, 2009, 2014; Roxas, 2008). Berry (2009) investigates the complexities in integration, indicating that many factors need to be considered, including the relevance of original language, culture and customs. An investigation of refugee youth, often considered to be a group with particular difficulties related to developmental trauma (De Bellis, 2010). Berry, Phinney, Sam, and Vedder (2006) in their investigation of refugee youth found that individuals who had successfully retained their homeland culture in addition to acculturating into the cultures of their new homelands had the demonstrated the highest levels of psychological and social adjustment and integration, despite their traumatic experiences. Trauma related emotions and behaviours are frequently observed to challenge teachers and school management (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007; Hue & Kennedy, 2013; Hyde, Carpenter, & Conway, 2011) as the neurological impacts can interfere with healthy brain growth and inhibit the development of the cognitive capacities of executive function (De Bellis, 2005). The resultant behaviours may be exhibited as inattentiveness, hypervigilance and illogical decisions and actions, all which need to understood by those who interact with them in schools.

3. CONTEXT

The school was located in a suburb of a large Australian city which had an almost exclusively white population, who dominated every aspect of life in the city, in addition to the educational systems which provided the schooling for the city's children. Previously a rundown area populated by many drug gangs and prostitutes, the suburb was slowly becoming more gentrified. In the past, the school had been bypassed by some members of the local community, indicating that the school culture was not one with which they wanted their children to engage. At the time of the appointment of a new principal, the school had approximately 80 students, which was below capacity for its size. These numbers were rapidly swelled by the intake of newly arrived students with refugee and asylum seeker back -grounds and experiences. At one stage the school population increased by 25% due to the intake of two groups of refugee and asylum seeker students whose families were traditionally opposed to each other and had frequently conflicted. The principal and his staff underwent training in trauma- informed strategies, in addition to learning how to protect themselves and constantly monitor for vicarious trauma. Over a period of time, the staff, working with their leadership team, developed considerable knowledge and expertise about sensitively and productively educating these cohorts of students.

4. METHODOLOGY

The principal and his staff were all invited to participate in an online survey, individual, recorded interview and/or a group or individual videoed interview. Ten teachers, the principal and his deputy, the office manager, two teaching assistants and the Indigenous Liaison officer participated in the study, which was a sequential case study, using the initial data from the semi structured recorded interviews and the survey data to guide the semi structured video interviews. These themes included strategies and perspectives of integration, belonging and radical acceptance, in addition to the overall vision and culture of the school. Included in these participants were the staff who had been engaged as part of strategic recruitment strategy implemented by the principal. One of these teachers was a Kenyan teacher of colour, who was unique, not only in the suburb, but in the city itself, both teaching assistants were ex- refugees, one Syrian and one Congolese. Their responses to the semi structed interviews of this sequential single site study are used to demonstrate their perceptions and practices. The individual interviews and surveys were conducted as the first stage and the themes identified by manual and then electronic coding were introduced as the question to commence and continue the discussions that were recorded on the video. These comprised both individual and group discussions around the themes.

5. THE DATA

The data provided evidence of many examples of how the principal and teachers of this focus school responded to these students with acts of pedagogical love and a clear understanding that things would have to change in the process. The notion of flexibility was built into all aspects of school life. As the deputy principal commented;

..flexibility is important. Being inflexible means that the children's needs, educational needs, social needs are not going to be met. Then you have to be flexible, you have to change. It would be foolish, professionally unsounded not to. It's the people business, we've got to make sure that the variety of needs that people bring are met. It's easy if you've got a will to change a system, it's much harder to change a cultural practice or change someone's mind even.

One of the aspects of schooling that needed to change was the understanding and consideration of students and their families with complex trauma. Understanding that the traumatic experiences of the students would impact on their capacities to learn in regular classrooms, in addition to the language communication difficulties and the nature of their previous school experiences (if any). the staff, under the leadership of their insightful principal, devised other educational experiences. The initial school experiences of these students was, as one teacher expressed, 'both educational and therapeutic.'. An experienced art teacher on the staff gently led the students through an arts-based program for the initial months. The purpose was to allow the students both time and context to express what they were feeling and simultaneously learn the names of the colours and other contextually related vocabulary in English as conversational skills. The program leader stated;

And so we started developing programs based around arts making, about communicating through arts, every child can do that, no matter what culture they've come from. That is a fantastic tactile way of becoming familiar with an environment of learning about concentration and success, experimenting with ideas and images. And so for new arrivals, we have a great deal of visual arts hours, 2D, 3D, painting, drawing into the program. And even something like I said, the first oral language sessions I would do with kids was I'd get out coloured pencils and we learn the different colours in ink some would say them in French, Farsi, Arabic, and whatever. Then we use that like a pyramid model of learning colours, how many colours, counting colours. So, it was a way of scaffolding, simple language into more complex outcomes. (Teacher Participant 4).

This was designed with the support of the principal who explains in his own words why this was an experience that was he felt was important for these students and their integration into the school.

It became the vessel of communication in a valuing of the students experiences that brought with them to school, that point became an artwork, being an object of transmission, the transmission of understandings, transmission of values and attitudes, a transmission of what was important in their lives, the transmission of where they're at, and how they are feeling. It also became that transition from the oral languages, the backgrounds of oracy that students had in their experiences, and they could transfer that through the visual system of art making, and have that also relabelled and recast within English and allowed points of attachment in terms of language and moving between languages, but evaluation of valuing of who they were and what they know, and the fact that they actually brought a lot. There have been amazing artworks that were prepared in that context and as a result of that, you then started the shows.

As indicated by the principal, the students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds joined the other students from the school in a public exhibition of their work at a commercial art gallery where priced and sold their own work. The revenue they raised was kept by the respective artists.

Acceptance of difference and diversity was actively promoted in everyday activities and interactions in the classrooms. The students enjoyed it, almost expected it from newcomers and appeared very open in their curiosity. The teachers also valued the cultural diversity as an advantage for their own classroom pedagogies and content. One teacher explained;

And the kids aren't afraid to ask the other children what language they speak, what country do you come from, whereas if they hadn't had that experience before being in a classroom with diverse range of children, it might be a bit nervous or embarrassed, or whatever to ask questions like that. But they don't feel that here, they just are friends, and everyone is honest and transparent. And as teachers, we try and cooperate there, obviously incorporate their cultural diversity into the classroom, and it's an asset to the classroom. And it brings a lot of resources into the classroom itself, having a range of kids from other cultures and other countries. (Teacher Participant 6).

The strategic recruitment plan by the principal allowed him to bring a shared vision of caring and compassionate perspectives to his entire staff. All the teacher participants in the survey, when responding to the question that asked, 'Who makes these students and families feel welcome in the school?' indicated that they all do – it was a shared professional and personal responsibility that they modelled, demonstrated and represented their ethic of care in all their interactions with each other, with the students, with the families and with the wider community. This deep consideration for these students and all the others in the school was explained by one of the teachers;

It underpins everything we do. So well-being, and I would say, inclusion fits into wellbeing, because we want all of our students to feel like they belong. And that underpins everything we do. That's our number one priority for our kids and their families. Because, simply, they will find learning more difficult in an environment where they don't feel like they belong. So inclusion is the key to well –being, and therefore the key to the underpinning of academic success of the students. (Teacher Participant 4).

The modelling of care extended outside the classrooms. The principal recalled a situation where six sisters of refugee backgrounds were enrolled in the school. The teachers had noticed that only the eldest ever appeared to have any lunch in their schoolbag. As the students ate lunch in their class groups supervised by their respective teachers, it was obvious that none of the sisters ate anything, not even the sister who had the lunch container. On investigation, it became apparent that the eldest had the lunch in the container for all her sisters and herself and that tradition demanded she serve the sisters, starting with the youngest before she served herself. This was impossible as part of the current school routine, so the sisters had to eat during the playtime at the lunch break. Consequently, the routine was changed, and all the students then sat all together for lunch with the teachers supervising a given area. In that way, the sisters were not distinguished from the others and had time after eating to interact with their friends and peer groups. Conventions around food have historically been the catalyst for exclusion in some schools. But, as one teacher of the very young students pointed out, it created curiosity in her class that led to a simple acceptance of difference;

I'm just thinking about the simplest practical things, you know, I get one kid bringing the same cooked food all the time. And it takes him a long time to eat his food. And so the other kids in class ask "oh, why doesn't his mum just pack a sandwich for him?" And there's all these things about, you know, behind the background on why he's bringing whatever he's bringing to school. And while his mum expects him to finish that food by the time he gets home. She doesn't want to see a full lunch box; she wants to see an empty lunch box. And so, just sitting the kids down and saying, that's how he's been brought up culturally. And his

family has never ever thought of making a sandwich for lunch because that's not how it's been forever. (Teacher Participant 8)

Then the children ask a few questions, and you explain it (Principal)

And now all the other kids expect he's going to have his rice and, beans while the other kids are eating their sandwich. There no big deal, kids just don't notice that after a while. (Teacher Participant 8)

This focus was extended into the interactions that teachers had with parents of the students of the school. Due to the many degrees of cultural difference and expectations, the staff and the principal sought ways to decrease the perceived social distances and to engage without excessive formality in an attempt to demonstrate to the parents that they were engaging with the parents in the same caring, friendly ways in which they interacted with the children. The principal was always professionally dressed, but avoided wearing a suit and tie, preferring to present less formally in shirt with smart trousers, and if needed, a jacket. He joked that even the students knew something official was happening when he arrived at school in a shirt and a tie. As a strategy to extend the foundational tenets of pedagogical love to the parents and care givers, he effectively broke down the perceived barriers of authority figures and those who seek to access them. This conversation between the principal, the deputy principal and the Kenyan teacher explains how this became another strategy to including the parents as part of the school community;

A lot of the times, we'll get parents coming in formal suits, because that's how they think to approach a principal. And they sit down with the principal and find out it's a very informal kind of setting. You know, they don't have to be very formal when they come to see the principal because most of them say "Oh, when we go to doctors, we have to dress formal. We have to be in the suits and ties" (Teacher Participant 8)

So, it was right down to children. It was almost down to like babies wearing suits! (Principal)

When they take the children to get a round of vaccination, everyone's dressed up in their beautiful suits and ties, going to see a doctor was an important person, coming to the school was an important place to be. Speaking to a teacher and principal was speaking to an important community council. But I think we found there was that sort of slight intimidation coming from their cultural background, to which Miss X is a wonderful bridge between the two of having a foot in both cultures, I guess. (Deputy Principal)

The ways in which these teachers and school leaders perceived their professional responsibilities illustrated that wellbeing, inclusion and acknowledgement of the students' diversity were priorities and that these were the way to academic success. The last word comes from the principal, whose understanding of the pedagogies of love and care and innovative strategies that captured small but important details, reflected the work of the original pedagogues and their understanding of the power of love, care and change in the academic context. He stated;

But you don't change just by telling people change! People change the world, and it's really experience before explicit. It's the same thing that happens in that sense that's so important in classrooms. I can talk about the supermarket, but if you've never been into the supermarket, you actually don't have a picture of it. So that's one of the things that I think teachers here

do really well is that they understand that and they give children experiences. They unpack those experiences afterwards when they've got something to label, where they've got something to categorize, where they've got something to apply it to.

This data suggests that further research will be important to establish the range of perspectives that leaders and teachers of refugee and asylum seeker students hold in relation to the importance of pedagogies of care, acceptance, tolerance and working with the mandatory, systemic regulations and restrictions to provide the most caring and welcoming school environments for these cohorts of vulnerable students. It could also serve to inform of the creative strategies and activities that support conversation language acquisition and linguistic confidence.

6. CONCLUSION

This chapter illustrated the perceptions from teachers regarding the inclusion and integration of students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences. They demonstrated an explicit commitment to making lives as secure and emotionally safe as possible by their strategies and understandings of the ways in which regular routines and procedures in schools can and must change in response to the changing landscape of student clientele. They showed considerable sensitivity in their trauma related practices and focussed on the critical elements of belonging, wellbeing, inclusion and respect for other cultural ways of doing and making meaning as the means by which they could authentically support students' academic success. The ways in which they operationalized their flexible thinking and strategies to maximize success for all students is an important consideration for the preparation of preservice teachers, as is the awareness and accommodation of trauma and its possible impact. They not only embraced change, they considered it their professional responsibility and regarded it an opportunity to learn and grow. This study indicates the potential and power in pedagogical love in the everchanging pedagogical world of education, negotiating the dominant culture of neoliberal influences.

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