

Displaced Voices: A Journal of Migration, Archives and Cultural Heritage Vol. 3, No. 1 ©
The Author(s) 2023, pp. 54-68.

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Pockets of Positivity: School leaders' Strategies for Developing School Inclusion for Students with Refugee and Asylum-seeking Backgrounds.

Maura Sellars¹ and Scott Imig

Abstract

Currently, millions of children and families with refugee and asylum-seeker experiences find themselves living in new countries, with different languages, dissimilar cultures, diverse expectations, and different forms of schooling. For school leaders, the challenge of integrating these students and their families, some of whom may have endured and be dealing with trauma and loss, can be challenging. This paper presents findings from a study involving twenty-two school leaders in five English-speaking Western countries (Australia, England, New Zealand, Northern Ireland and the United States), who have created places of wellbeing and belonging for these families. Five major findings from the research are discussed and suggestions for school leaders are offered. Of note, school leaders working with children and families with refugee and asylum-seeker experiences are encouraged to identify and implement high-quality ongoing professional development for staff. These leaders must learn to work within and to modify existing school policies that often have deleterious effects on this group of students and become adept at navigating the web of external resources and organisations that can offer support beyond what schools can provide. This research also offers suggestions for educator/teacher preparation programs as it is

¹ Corresponding Author: Maura.Sellars@newcastle.edu.au

evident that working with and supporting this population is not a competency covered in most training programs.

Keywords:

Head teachers, principals, students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences, school ethos, care, community.

Introduction

The current global diaspora created by conflict, war and violence has resulted in the forced displacement of over eighty-two million people across the world and only a small percentage, approximately 14% of these people have been resettled in high- or middle-income countries, for example the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR, 2020). Millions of people remain in refugee camps on the borders of neighbouring countries which often have little capacity to support their basic needs for shelter, food, education and inclusion in these societies (UNCHR, 2019). At first glance, it may appear that those who have been granted refugee or asylum seeker status and have found new homelands in countries which have the capacities to support their physical, emotional, and social needs, are the fortunate few. However, there may still be multiple challenges faced by this group including how to deal with change, loss, and perhaps racism, exclusion and discrimination, which may impact further on the trauma that they have experienced (Alemi & Stempel, 2018; Edgeworth, 2014a; Hatoss & Huijser, 2010; Lau et al., 2018; Nawyn, 2006). This, together with the distress resulting from displacement, arduous and dangerous journeys of escape and from resettlement in cultures alien to what they are familiar with can be overwhelming and may lead to physical and psychological problems in this population. For children who have experienced great trauma, longer-term educational impacts may be experienced at critical stages of their development (De Bellis, 2005, 2010; Hart, 2009). The ongoing, complex trauma that children and young people may suffer as a result of their displacement (Dryden-Peterson, 2017) may also be accompanied by the loss of significant adults in their lives, separation from family, confusion about identity and uncertainty regarding their place in the society of their new homelands. Although, there are studies underway, currently, there is little information available on the long-term impact of forced immigration and refugee resettlement issues among children and young people. It is easy to

hypothesise, however, these children and young people will experience similar, but more complex issues, as those investigated by Berry (1997; 2005) and Ward & Kus (2012).

Participation in mainstream education for the children and youth with refugee and asylum-seeking experiences may also serve as an opportunity for mediating their traumatic experiences and for developing a sense of belonging in their new homeland (Due, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2015; Sellars & Imig, 2021). However, schools mirror society (Foucault, 1991) and the Western societies in which these children are resettled are often based on neoliberal principles for education. These are characterised by the 5 C's conservatism, conformity, competition, conventions and commerce (Sellars and Imig, 2021). These characteristics appear to alienate refugee and asylum-seeking students rather than providing them with the most effective contexts to meet their diverse needs (Guo, et. al, 2021; Wilkinson, 2002). The opportunity for acceptance, belonging and healing depends on the culture, climate, or ethos of the school (Glover & Coleman, 2005; Sellars, 2021a), and attitudes of the school leaders, namely the principals or head teachers. This paper discusses the major findings of an international study (Imig, Sellars, & Fischetti, 2021) in which school leaders shared the strategies, challenges, and dilemmas they faced when working towards the inclusion of students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences into their school communities, whilst providing a holistic education that focussed on academic, emotional and social development

Schools are at the heart of educational practice. The values and beliefs of the leaders in schools, and their capacities for critical reflection (Sellars, 2017a) are one of the major contributing factors to the nature of the interactions that are experienced by the entire school community (Leithwood & Janzi, 1990). Erikson (1987) in defining school culture stated it is,

"...a system of ordinary, taken- for – granted meanings and symbols with both implicit and

explicit content that is, deliberately and non- deliberately, learned and shared amongst

naturally bonded groups." (p.12)

This definition illustrates the difficulties that students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences are frequently confronted with as they engage with formal schooling in their new homelands. Whilst disparate groups of students with refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds themselves may be 'naturally bonded groups,' they may

have had vastly different experiences from their peers. As Schatzki (2017) indicates, these students will need to unravel the complexities and nuances that are customarily taken for granted by those who are part of this home culture. Their integration requires a more philosophical approach to the 'system of ordinary, taken - for - granted meanings and symbols', one that interrogates the ethos of the school, a construct frequently used interchangeably with school culture, despite the different characteristics of which each comprise (Glover & Coleman, 2005; McLaughlin, 2005). Alder (1993) defined school ethos as pertaining to,

"...human activities and behaviours.....a mood or moods which are pervasive within this

environment, to social actions and their consequences, to something that is experienced,

to norms rather than exceptions, and to something that is unique". (p.63)

Solvason (2005) argued that ethos was a product of the culture of the school, acknowledging that culture was more tangible than ethos, which was more nebulous in nature. Donnelly (2000) proposed distinctions between the formal, aspirational ethos that is communicated through documents and policies and the lived reality of the ethos as subjectively experienced by the members of the school community. As both the formal and experiential expressions of ethos are heavily values laden, and there may be a considerable gap between these actualities, further difficulties may arise in attempts to integrate students with refugee and asylum seeker experiences, obscuring pathways to authentic inclusion and limiting possibilities for these students to develop a sense of belonging.

Belonging is a critical component of student wellbeing and is of particular significance to the emotional and social lives of students who may have multiple degrees of difference from the majority community. These differences may be present as values and attitudes, religious differences, cultural and social mores and physical appearance. They have the potential to create situations of 'othering', (Foucault, 1991; Said, 1978) discrimination and racial bias which are counterproductive to the development of respect, acceptance and a sense of belonging (Oikonomidou, 2009; Green et.al. 2016; Sellars, 2017b; Sellars, 2020a, 2021d; Sellars & Imig, 2021). The importance of authentic inclusion and the development of a sense of belonging can be located in neuroscience and mental health research (Eisenberger, 2012; Immordino-Yang & Feath, 2010; Masten, Eisenberger, Pfeifer, & Dapretto, 2010; Rock & Cox, 2012; Wang et

al., 2014). It appears that social rejection and inclusion? exclusion? impact negatively in the same parts of the brain as do physical injury and pain, creating stress and distress to those who experience it. The multiple degrees of difference that diverse students with refugee and asylum seeker communities may bring to school communities in Western countries are frequently considered to be countercultural in educational contexts, most especially those with neoliberalized education systems that are characterized by competition, conservatism, conventions, conformity and commerce (Sellars & Imig, 2020).

As University academics working in a school of education in a rural Australian city with a two-decade history of receiving families with refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds, we are keenly aware that school leaders often lack knowledge about meeting the needs of these students and their families. Frequent requests for support from our local school leaders were the impetus for the research we describe below. The aim of our research was to identify school leaders in English-speaking, Western countries (Australia, England, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, and United States) with a history of creating welcoming schools for children and families with refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds and then record the challenges and opportunities these leaders faced.

Participants & Procedure

In total, 22 leaders from five countries (Australia, England, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, and United States) participated in the study. These school leaders represented a range of primary and secondary schools, large and small enrolments, religious and government, and in both urban and rural settings. Engaging in a semi-structured interview protocol conducted via Zoom in 2020, these leaders alerted us to the challenges and difficulties they had experienced in addition to detailing their contexts and sharing with us their successes, perspectives, strategies and approaches to inclusion. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, hand-coded and analysed for major themes by the researchers involved in this study.

Findings

Our research uncovered a host of challenges and approaches to inclusion employed by our participating leaders. Of these, five key themes emerged through analyses as the most commonly offered by

the participants. These themes are presented as well as illustrative commentary from school leaders.

Caring and Collaborating. Reframing classroom experiences around an ethic of care and collaboration as opposed to a focus on competition supports the wellbeing and development of all students. For these school leaders, hiring positive, caring educators is the first step in creating these classrooms. A primary school leader in Australia stated, *"I just have one major criteria for all of my staff and that is I expect them to be kind. It's just a simple thing, I know, and it's just be kind to everyone."* A school leader in New Zealand affirmed this position and also stressed the need for educators to be highly skilled and committed, *"For me, you really need to have that big quite special combination: of love; ability to create a lovely learning culture in your room; knowing your stuff in terms of your pedagogy, that is, knowing it from new entrant to a higher level; and, then be prepared to go the extra mile and connecting with your students."*

Development is Key. Many teachers are not adequately trained to support children and families with refugee and asylum-seeker experiences and school leaders must provide comprehensive and ongoing professional development for staff. A primary head teacher in the United States captured the reality of hiring teachers who are usually ill-prepared for the challenge, *"When I interview people, I always tell them about the school first, like this is what it is, because I think you need a separate set of tools in your toolkit."* A leader in Northern Ireland stressed the need for ongoing and innovative staff development, *"One of our teachers is fully trained in Nurture [practices] so he will do a lot of things like Play Therapy, Lego Therapy, and Drawing and Talking Therapy. He is currently seeking some counselling experience as well."*

Navigating Policy. School leaders need to learn to work within and against existing school system policies which are often exclusionary to this population of students. A consistent theme amongst our participants was the need to really understand the limits of policies and a willingness to break? modify/change? policies when they devalue newly arrived students. A high school leader in Australia shared her anger at the way schools and society treat children with refugee experiences, *"As a school, we get incredibly frustrated about our kids being cut out of opportunities by the general society."* This same leader highlighted the absurdity of some policies in the face of the lived experiences of her students, *"They're angry at school; they're frustrated at school. There are all these ridiculous rules. They've just been fending for themselves for years in ghettos, and now I want to tell them to wear a school jumper."* An Australian primary leader articulated his emphasis on making decisions with the

needs of students at the forefront, *"It all comes down to making our own system of thinking. Which completely changes everything because of the way it empowers your teachers not to seek approval, but to make the best decisions that they can for a student at any one time."*

Focus on the People. Our participants stressed that communicating with and supporting carers and teachers should take priority in schools welcoming students and families with refugee and asylum-seeker experiences including unaccompanied minors. (An unaccompanied minor is someone who flees with out an adult family member or carer). These students were considered to be the highest priority in their schools. Leithwood and Janzi (1990) have found the work of school leaders that engages with families or caregivers, is the area where effecting change is the most difficult and time-consuming, yet the area with the greatest benefit for students. A primary school leader in New Zealand stated, *"So, without winning the hearts of families or children, you're not going to create a learning relationship."* A school leader in the United States talked of the importance of maintaining relationships with staff throughout the Covid Pandemic. This leader focused on the importance of connection, *"I'm just trying to think of ways to let them know that I'm here. The other administrators are here to support them."*

Community Support is Vital. Our participants highlighted the importance of working with and learning from community agencies and community members. Understanding the lived experiences of individuals who have been forced to flee their homelands, who may speak another first language and who continue to experience loss and trauma is likely to be beyond the skillset of most school leaders. Many of the leaders we interviewed collaborate with community support agencies to help provide the comprehensive support needed by some families with refugee backgrounds. A school leader in the United States commented, *"We had a church that worked a lot with placement of these individuals, and we could count on them to be a partner to us, for example trying to get some parents in to be translators."* A school leader in England talked about the power of school families to understand the challenges of newly arrived students, *"His parents didn't speak any English at all, it was interesting because they made friends with another family in our school and they got close to them. This meant we were able to tap into that other mum, who does speak English."*

Discussion

Creating schools that support the wellbeing of children and families with refugee and asylum-seeker experiences is a challenge for any school leader. Though the variance among teacher preparation/training programs is vast (Imig et al., 2009), this research indicates current teacher training programs, apart from special education options, lack the courses and experiences to develop educators capable of meeting the needs of these newly arrived students with asylum seeking and refugee experiences. Beyond teaching necessary skills, teacher education programs must focus on developing attitudes and dispositions in candidates capable of recognising the degrees of difference brought to schools. While there has been a push in recent decades to educate teacher candidates to embed culturally responsive (Gay, 2018) and social justice practices (Cochran-Smith, 2010) into their teaching, there has been little focus on preparing teachers for the realities of working with students with refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds. Teachers on the one hand, need to be educated to understand the traumatic events, the horror and lived tragedies some of these students bring with them and on the other, they need to be prepared to guard themselves against the effects of vicarious trauma. School leaders in this study felt teachers need to develop sophisticated understandings of compassion and empathy, yet, as Nussbaum (2001) asserts, teachers must not let their empathy translate into lower expectations or feelings of pity.

School leaders work in neoliberal contexts shaped by the 5 C's of conservatism, conformity, competition, conventions and commerce (Sellars and Imig, 2021). One of the ways in which the 5 C's are challenged by school leaders is through their acts of care as their primary focus, and what underpins their relationships with students and families. Engagement with 'pedagogies of love' (Sellars & Imig, p. 1-12 ; Arar et al., 2018; Arar et al., 2020; Gidley, 2016;), are those which prioritise children's emotional and mental wellbeing in preparation for academic success. These pedagogical strategies have the potential to support improved outcomes for the students and mediate the impact of trauma and loss as they are founded on building positive caring relationships which contribute to the healing process. Developing school cultures or an ethos with an emphasis on care and belonging is not only instigated, but maintained, by the influences of the beliefs and values of these school leaders, often with an awareness of the tensions created by the compliances they are mandated to observe and navigate. Another aspect of navigating policies is to focus on the people as individuals to minimise the focus on competition, compliance, conservatism, and conformity. By responding to the unique lived experiences of students and families, school leaders can make decisions that help meet individual needs and create schools as places of belonging. It is in this area that school

leaders found a need to reach beyond the school gates. The inclusion of entire families and communities proved to be of great importance, as did support from the host societies. This included places of worship, charities, groups of interested community members and local sporting groups, in addition to education professionals such as counsellors, speech pathologists, occupational therapists and specialist advisory teams. This approach of prioritising the families in addition to the students themselves allowed these school leaders to integrate their students more successfully into their schools and into the local communities.

Conclusion

Identifying a pool of school leaders for this research who think they have effectively created places of wellbeing and belonging for children and families with refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds was a challenge. This reality is both a warning about the limited depth and breadth of education and professional development school leaders receive and a reminder of just how difficult and complex the role of school leader truly is. As the global diaspora is showing no signs of abating and schools will continue to receive families who have suffered displacement, loss and trauma, it is imperative that school leader and educator preparation programs work to prepare a generation of teachers and leaders capable of meeting this challenge. This research makes clear that beginning with a focus on care is a start in the right direction.

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