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Barriers to employability for refugee teachers in England

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This paper reflects on fragments of my research involving interviews conducted over the past few years with refugees who have had teaching experience in their home country, are eligible to work in the UK, and seek employment within the education sector in England. Their perceptions and experiences of factors affecting their employability within the sector are presented and help inform understanding of the complexity of their position.

A simple notion of a refugee is someone who has fled from a dangerous place or country to a safe place or country, a journey from A to B with a safe haven being a final destination. Although many refugees expressed gratitude for being allowed entry into a safe place, their metaphoric descriptions of this place located them not in B but in a place somewhere between. One refugee described it so:

I am here, this country, London, but its like I'm not, not exactly, like I've crawled out of the ocean, like I'm lying, lying on beach, I can breath air, solid land is still away and I'm hearing ocean behind me.

This place is somewhere that is and is not, somewhere peripheral, a borderland that is neither A nor B. This other in-between place is both a place of relief and a place of doubt and uncertainty. Lying on the beach the refugee is disabled for now but there is a sense of agency, a possibility of standing, of walking, running to land, perhaps of being helped, dragged up the beach by a passer-by or lifeguard on duty. Another refugee conceived this place as a kind of 'purgatory', a place neither here nor there, between hell and heaven, a place of exclusion yet one that offers the potentiality of passage, a temporal place, a place of deferral, a place where one has to prove oneself, a place that poses many dangers, many challenges, a multi-levelled place, a place with many borders.

... and every time I cross one barrier, there is another, I need some papers, something like this...they put up these barriers all the time.

They seemed to use these metaphors as conceptual tools to communicate to me their experiences as refugees, something that 'is difficult to explain' and that others 'don't understand'. To me, these metaphors resonate with much post-modern theorising that represents the 'other' in socio-temporal space. Thrift (1999) conceives such places as inscribed by borders interwoven of emotion, memory and language.

My interviews with the refugees were semi-structured, conducted individually, in private, with tape-recorder running and confidentiality guaranteed. I had taught all participants on a course at London Metropolitan University designed to provide familiarisation with the English education system, they had volunteered to be interviewed, and I assume a sense of trust in me, though recognise inevitable performance relative to our positions. The interviews were charged with emotion, there

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was sometimes laughter, other times they expressed frustration or anger, and there were often tears, pauses or silences as they recalled memories of home, flight and their experiences since. Their memories run deep, they are part of their present and will be of their future. As one refugee notes, even with British citizenship her past as a refugee is a haunting, not just in memory but also in practicality:

I have my British passport but when I go for jobs I must tell where I come from, why I don't work for sometime [when seeking asylum]...

In all the interviews I am conscious of the refugees use of '*they*'; there is a sense of difference that ascribes a social position, a status of refugee that is experienced as lowly:

They think we're not good enough for them.

Asymmetrical power relations inscribe boundaries between social place, and the social is interwoven with the spatial. For example, the status of the asylum seeker enables the state to use powers to detain and disperse. For some refugees I interviewed their physical environment compounded their feeling of low social status.

... we used to live in a very nice house, in a good area, in the next house was a doctor, next a professor. This estate [in London]..... people take drugs, last night we heard a noise like a gun ...

Beyond the point that the estate in which they were housed mirrored their ascribed place in a social order, a further point this refugee was making is that a sense of well being has a psychological influence on agency:

...to get a job, even in my own country, you need to feel good, confident. It's hard to say 'look at me, I'm a good teacher, I can do a good job' [when] at home we're frightened, like children hiding.

Some refugees saw power as a centralised force, distributed through government agents:

the government don't want us here so schools don't give us jobs.

This may be a reflection of coercive policy experienced in their home country but perhaps also government policy in Britain, which has, as in other Western countries, sought to control immigration and deter asylum application. I am always struck when talking to refugees that my experiences of Britain are very different to theirs. They encounter different people to me, people acting in roles that I have never experienced, and these relations help serve to ascribe and produce refugee identity. This process is seen to begin on first application for asylum:

When refugee people come, it's some kind of community I think - refugee community. Suddenly they all come to a waiting room, with different nationalities and different languages. No one speaks, so the shoe shine boy, whatever, the market man, the old lady on the corner selling her milk, the general, the doctor, and the psychologist and the man who created the

university, the footballer, and the criminal, the whole. All the same, just like that, as simple as that. They are not known by their work, and there is no name, there is nothing, because you are number, your Home Office number is 568805, and mine is 280322, it's as simple as that.

The legal distinction between 'asylum seeker' and 'refugee' is significant. A person is recognised as a refugee only when their application for asylum has been accepted by the Home Office in accordance with the criteria laid down in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, or may, if they do not meet the criteria, be given humanitarian protection and leave to remain with the same employment rights as refugees. Prior to this they are called an asylum seeker.

Awaiting a decision can be a lengthy process, which many regard as time wasted:

...last Tuesday I was ... given leave to remain so, I was so happy at that time because I can do, I can pursue my targets now, clearly now. I have been waiting five years for this.

Once refugee status has been granted government policy aims at integration. Employment is seen as a key factor for successful integration with policy stressing individual fulfilment through work (Department for Work and Pensions); the economic benefit of utilising an available skills base; and, help in promoting social cohesion (Home Office). Despite this aim of integration, in addition to the flow of asylum seekers there is a 'stock' of refugee teachers who have sought, but have been unable to find employment in the education sector.

Although distinction between 'refugee status' and 'asylum seeker' is clear to the refugee the same degree of understanding is not always apparent with employers:

They said 'we don't know if you are eligible to work here, we'll check and let you know', I know I have right to work but I waited. They didn't even write to me.

However, merely providing information may not overcome barriers to employment since the refugee is stigmatised by low social status and its spatial manifestations that marginalise and impact on personal agency.

Refugee status relies on judgement that is contingent on inter-governmental relations for example, and often contested. It is also noted that a refugee could be defined as a 'successful asylum seeker', which serves to blur distinction between asylum seeker and refugee. Moreover, since refugee status no longer grants indefinite leave to remain, temporality serves to further loosen definitions and associated status. Moreover, social usage of the term refugee is not confined to narrow legal definitions. It first entered the English language in the seventeenth century with respect to the Huguenots seeking refuge from France, and from this time associated attributions have been often negative. These endure today in media portrayals of the refugee as victim in their home country and through discrimination here; as psychologically damaged, traumatised by physical or

mental persecution, dislocation and loss; as parasitical, here to scrounge the benefits of a welfare state; as an economic threat, here to take citizens' jobs; as criminal, illegally here, enjoying an easy life through thieving ways, or responding to trauma through violence or narcotic abuse; as a dangerous ideologue, possibly with terrorist intent. Of course these are not attributes one would find as desirable criteria in a job description for a teaching post! For employers refugees may be seen as 'high risk', bringing the potential of problem that others would not bring. There is a feeling with some refugees that they are not judged on their individual application but on their status as a refugee which embraces many negativities that are socially corralled as though family resemblances.

Such conceptualisations of the refugee teacher problematise implicit notions of government policy that envisage smooth passage into employment once refugee status has been granted. This is further compounded by failure to recognise refugees as a distinct group in other policy areas, for example, the TDA didn't until recently differentiate between refugee teachers and other 'overseas qualified teachers'. Lack of data (the government do not collect data on the skills of asylum seekers or refugees) renders the refugee invisible, serving to mask problems and prevent clearly targeted policy. We have a situation where those agencies working with refugee teachers are also marginalized, they survive on short term funding, act at a local level, frequently working with government policy from a different perspective to that of policy makers and administrators, and have little power or influence. One refugee remarks that:

I get very good advice. I know different ways to become a teacher but it doesn't get me a job.

Responsibility to find employment rests with the refugee. There are no specific national pathways to help guide the refugee into the teaching profession, or wider educational employment sector, in England. They are expected to fit in with existing structures, some of which are experienced as barriers to employment. Policy development could overcome some barriers, such as mechanisms for recognising qualifications when certificates have been left behind or lost,

What can I do? My house, everything, was destroyed in the war.

This applies too to the process of conducting Criminal Records Bureau checks, a requirement for all teachers to assess suitability to work with children and young people and increasingly applied to voluntary workers thus affecting refugee opportunity to gain experience of schools in England. Yet beyond these there are still problems with finding employment.

Different pathways into teaching depend on previous qualifications and experience. For some their teaching qualification is recognised as equivalent to that in England, but for the majority this is not the case. They can be employed as 'unqualified' teachers or as teaching assistants and gain Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) through work. Otherwise they can gain QTS through standard university courses. However, this is not straightforward since employment-based routes require the refugee to first gain employment, and re-qualification through the university system can take time.

I am 45 years old with so much experience and I have to start again, from the beginning. It will take me minimum two years [to qualify].

What several refugee teachers found difficult to understand was that past experience as a teacher seemed to be seen as subtractive by some potential employers and university admissions tutors:

The schools they say OK, do you have any experience about working with people, with children? Well you can say yes, but what they mean is have you ever had employment here?

Back in Somalia we did four years {teacher training}.....it would be better at least they have to respect our qualifications. I couldn't get any teaching posts. I was told I didn't have experience ... you know all my background and experience was related to teaching area.

They [teacher training institution] reject me. They said I was not understanding teaching in this country but that's why I [want to] do the course...to learn how to teach in this country.

I applied for a PGCE last year, but because they said I don't have any experience here, so they haven't [given me a place].

For some refugees cultural adaptation to different styles of teaching and behaviour management may well be too difficult, but for others this will not be so. What the refugees perceive is that they are denied opportunity to assimilate or accommodate different practice, and that their previous experience is seen as having less status than experience gained within the English education system.

On the other hand their profession status as a teacher is viewed as additive in working with children from their own community. However, this work is supplementary to mainstream education. A significant number of the refugee teachers I interviewed taught in community schools. Their identity as teacher was strong and this identity carries with it civic responsibility, as a 'good citizen':

I am a teacher, it is my duty to teach.

However, participation is restricted to their community, they are performing their duty at the fringe, not on the main stage, and so their professional identity is marginalized.

A majority of the refugee teachers interviewed saw their proficiency in English language as a barrier to employment in mainstream schools. Clearly some have insufficient proficiency for teaching. A problem is that there isn't adequate provision of English language courses that cater for the specific professional needs of teachers and other professionals (Griffiths, 2003). However, in my opinion (and here I draw on my experience as a director of, and lecturer on teacher training courses, as a school-teacher, and as a school manager and governor), several of these refugees have adequate

proficiency for both teaching children and professional discourse, proficiency that is equal to that of EU and overseas qualified teachers who are actively recruited to teach in England, proficiency that could further develop through experience in context. Yet still these refugees noted language as a barrier to employment. I suspect for some it is a psychological coping mechanism to explain rejection, in that being rejected because of lack of proficiency with English is easier to manage than rejection because of lack of proficiency to teach which would undermine professional identity:

I taught in an English medium school in [country name] ...I like to work with children, I am a teacher...but my English stops me teaching here...I've tried to get so many jobs, in many schools, I've had interviews but I think my English isn't good enough.

Others saw a language barrier produced by discrimination and bound-up with racism:

People, some of them, misjudge on your quality and they judge on the way you sound, that is personal experience I have had before. You introduce yourself on the phone, who you are, what your name is etc. And after a while, at the middle of the call, the telephone conversation, you can feel, you can feel that the employer is taking distance from you already, before you come to your qualification, your experience, he will be, he will have decided about you already and judge about your English. Some employers may have more experience of working with people with accents. As far as refugees are concerned, when they speak English, they [may] not feel comfortable. It doesn't matter how well you speak the language, the way you sound. And, actually your accent is part of your identity and you are integrating it in the work culture and everything.

Whatever the perceived reason for a barrier, whether language or other, it affects agency: the refugee teacher is less likely to actively seek employment as a teacher if they believe their application to be negatively prejudiced. For several interviewees their aspiration sights were lowered:

I should go for teacher post but I think my best chance is teaching assistant.

I argue that representation of refugees in the teaching force is important to help foster a cohesive society. Schooling is a formative social process and teachers are entrusted with many responsibilities. Who is, or is not, given such responsibility sends significant messages to children and the wider society as to who is valued in society and the kind of society that is promoted. An explicit aim of the National Curriculum for England is to develop responsible and caring citizens capable of contributing to the development of a just society, a society that is positively recognised as multicultural, and a key element of citizenship education in England is to encourage active participation in society. A prerequisite to participation is a sense of belonging and representation of refugees in the teaching workforce sends a message that refugees belong. This is important for all but perhaps particularly so for refugee children or the children of refugees as it provides a model for their participative voice in a mainstream arena. Professional participation is also important for the teaching profession as a whole; hearing and critically reflecting on

other voices, voices that have often gone unheard, can positively contribute to practice and curriculum development that will help all children to feel valued, to belong and actively participate in society.

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Refugees and asylum seekers arrive in the UK with experience and education, and also with barriers to learning. The good language learner then draws on various resources, and various informal and formal learning situations, to succeed. A host of personal relationships, courses, social situations, physical resources and emotional behaviours have played a part in the seven participants' acquisition of language. Refugee families, having suffered trauma, displacement and possibly separation, can face uncertain financial security and have concerns about the safety of their children travelling to school. The children themselves may have difficulty accessing education because of language barriers, may be suffering from trauma, find working in a new and different curricular challenging and have experienced months, or years even, of missed learning. The evidence and understanding about the barriers to securing the right to education for refugees is reasonably well established. Teachers can make an enormous difference to the quality of education that all children, including refugee children have access to. Teachers have been a largely ignored part of the research work in this field to date. Having become refugees, kids face tremendous challenges in completing their education. What are the barriers and what can we do to help? Many refugees leave behind more than their home when conflict forces them to flee they must also abandon their school. More than half of all refugees are aged under 18, and some older refugees were displaced while pursuing tertiary education. Nobody needs to be persuaded that it's desirable for kids to stay in school. In my experience, this is particularly true among Syrians, whose culture is steeped in an appreciation of the value of learning. Yet, having become refugees, kids face tremendous challenges in completing their education. What are the barriers and what can we do to help? Let's look at each stage of schooling in turn.