COMPASSION, JUSTICE, AND SANCTUARY: CAN ASYLUM-SEEKING AND REFUGEE STUDENTS ‘BELONG’ IN BRITISH SCHOOLS?

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Abstract
Numbers of people seeking asylum and refugees (ASR) have increased in the last decade, giving prominence to asylum and immigration policy in public debates, and attracting considerable hostile media and public attention. A key debate today is whether a migrant (including ASR) child is a migrant first and a child second, or vice versa. Asylum-seeking children have no formal citizenship status within the UK, but they carry rights under the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including a right to education, which is reflected in the Every Child Matters (2003) agenda. Similarly, local authorities have a legal obligation to provide education for all children under the Education Act 1996. Against this background, this paper explores whether ASR children in UK schools feel secure, feel they could belong and develop their potential, and whether schools can foster a sense of compassion amongst ‘citizen’ students.

The paper is based on sociological research undertaken in 2006-7, entitled Schooling, Security and Belonging, with concepts of compassion, security, and belonging used to inform the research. The project employed qualitative methods, and focused on three inclusive school case-studies in England, representing different educational contexts. Data collection included interviews with ASR and ‘citizen’ students, and teachers. We reveal the complex ways in which ‘citizen’ students address asylum and Britishness, and ASR students’ determination to succeed despite concerns about racial hostility and experiences of exclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing numbers of people seeking asylum and refugees (ASR) in Britain in the last decade has given prominence to asylum and immigration policy in public debates. Since the 1990s the number of asylum applications has grown, reaching 103,000 applications (including dependants) in 2002. Though this number decreased to 28,300 in 2007, the presence of ASRs in Britain continues to attract considerable hostile public attention. There are at present no accurate demographic data on the numbers of ASR students in
British schools; Rutter (2006) estimates that in 2005 there were at least 60,000 ASR children of school-age residing in the UK.

Refugees and asylum-seekers (ASR) are physically and symbolically 'out of place' – the ‘other in our midst’. From this position, they force receiving societies to address issues of membership, rights and belonging and their moral obligations to these so-called 'non-citizens' (Benhabib 2004). The ways in which asylum-seeking communities and individuals are defined as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of state support form a central part of the material and symbolic boundary-making activity of Western nation-states today.

The refugee child carries contradictions that the adult does not (Brysk, 2004), a key debate today is whether a migrant child is a migrant first and a child second, or vice-versa. The contradiction is seen in recent immigration legislation largely designed to ensure more effective control over migration, and education and social legislation, where local authorities have a legal obligation to provide education to all children regardless of their status (Education Act 1996). Whilst ASR children have no formal citizenship status within the UK, they have rights as children under the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Every Child Matters (2003), including the right to education.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989, all children have rights as children; they should all enjoy minimum standards of care, including the right to education and the right to be consulted, regardless of their status. Article 28 also states that 'States Parties recognize the right of the child to education'. The Convention begs the question of when and how to provide for children whilst they remain transient residents awaiting decisions on their rights of residence as refugees. The UK ratified the CRC in 1991 but with the reservation (one of three) that the UK would only apply the CRC insofar as it coincided with immigration and asylum policies. Largely as a result of public campaigning, the Labour government agreed in 2008 to remove this reservation.

Although local education authorities have a legal obligation to provide education to all children regardless of their status, government policy to exclude immigration authorities from the responsibility of safeguarding under the new framework of Every Child Matters (DfES 2003) means that asylum-seeking youth are not able to take up their full legal entitlement to quality education. The UK discriminates against asylum-seeking youth by dispersing them to schools that may not be prepared for multi-ethnic diversity, for children with English as a second language, and for diverse religious traditions.

In this paper, we are interested in whether ASR students in UK schools feel secure, feel they could belong and develop their potential, and whether schools are successful in sustaining a sense of compassion (based on social justice rather than pity) amongst citizen students.
RESEARCHING COMPASSION, SECURITY AND BELONGING

Three concepts informed our research: compassion, human security, and belonging. Our overall framework is that of social justice. It is primarily about what Williams (2008) recently called the ‘moral psychology of social justice’. We are informed both by our data and by Bauman’s (2003) observation that although historically asylum was associated with compassion it is disappearing in the face of hostile public discourse and exclusionary immigration policy. We use compassion as a yardstick for tapping into the tensions between national and local responses to ASR children.

We found philosophical interpretations of compassion particularly useful in framing our research. A major conceptual distinction is especially helpful: first a concept of compassion based on the need to care for and help those who have suffered in their lives and seek help and shelter. This notion is based on concern (whether empathy, sympathy or pity) for those who are victims of circumstances. Secondly, a concept of compassion in terms of justice – offering help for those who are in trouble on the basis of notions of equality and human rights. We were particularly interested in the second type of compassion as articulated by Simone Weil.

Martha Nussbaum (2001) describes the concept of compassion as pity as ‘victimhood’. Moral social judgements of compassion need to be based on a notion that the Other who suffers has agency and is only a temporary victim of circumstances. Nussbaum argues that such compassion can occur at two levels: the level of individual psychology and the level of institutional design. When educational institutions turn to become intensely concerned with ‘tragic predicaments and their prevention’, they embody compassion. Compassionate students and teachers can ‘keep alive the essential concern for the wellbeing of others’. In this context, compassion becomes not just an emotion, a motivation or a form of reasoning but a form of social solidarity especially in relation to diversity. It provides the conditions for human rights, equality and social justice, anti-racism, anti-homophobia and anti-xenophobia.

Weil points out that rights are often used as ‘a barrier which insulates and isolates others from us’ (Weil quoted in Teuber 1982, p.235). Compassion, she argues, require that we see rights as a means designed to secure and protect. Therefore, in order to act with compassion it is necessary not merely to respect the rights of another, but also to look ‘behind’ his rights to the interests his/her rights are designed to secure and protect (Teuber 1982: 236). In other words compassion calls for a needs-based equity.

Belonging is seen as a ‘thick’ concept that enables us to capture the affective dimension of identity and citizenship. It involves reciprocal relations between group members, and between an individual and a group (Crowley, 1999). Belonging is about who belongs and how it is determined; it is also about whether an individual feels that they belong, whether they develop an attachment, a commitment to a certain group (Yuval-Davis et al, 2006). We ask therefore whether ASR children have the opportunity to develop a sense of belonging within UK school communities.

Concepts of physical and psychological security have particular resonance for our study of the politics of compassion and belonging since we can assume that the concept of compassion
involves encouraging those seeking asylum to achieve on the one hand a feeling of belonging to a common humanity but also of having the rights to ‘feel safe.’ The three concepts of safety, belonging and compassion come together to frame global notions of human security. - a concept we found particularly useful in thinking through what questions to ask ASR youth in our school based research. While there is not as yet a universally agreed definition of human security¹, the UNDP Human Development Report (UNDP 1994) has been an important forerunner in the debate. This report posits a universal, preventive, ‘people-centred’ approach that focuses on ‘freedom from fear and freedom from want’. Recently, Alkire (2002, p.1) has suggested that a working definition of the objectives of human security (in keeping with the ethos of the 1994 UNDP definition) should be, ‘to safeguard the vital core of all human lives from critical pervasive threats, in a way that is consistent with long-term fulfilment’ - with the ‘vital core’ describing fundamental human rights or absolute needs. These relate ‘to survival, to livelihood, and to basic dignity’ (ibid, p.2).

The concept of security plays a major role in the ‘politics of belonging’. As Nira Yuval-Davis et al., (2005) argued belonging has a number of dimensions one of which is about social exclusion and the experience of labelling:

how subjects feel about their location in the social world which is generated partly through experiences of exclusion rather than about inclusion per se.. [and] about both formal and informal experiences of belonging (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005: 526, emphasis in original).

These authors argue that belonging involves ‘an important affective dimension relating to important social bonds and ties’ (ibid., 528) - it is an important and pertinent question to ask of schools in the context of research on the politics of compassion, whether the ‘non-citizen’, the Other, the asylum-seeker can be included and supported by the school sufficiently to develop a sense of belonging. We know that as Yuval-Davis et al., pointed out, that:

being labelled as a member of a racialized group, such as asylum-seekers, often has determinant effects on their position in the world and how they see themselves and in terms of ideas of belonging and otherness (ibid, 530).

Our aim was to explore in depth whether the inclusive ethos of the schools we sampled actively prevented the building up of feelings of hostility, hatred or indifference towards asylum seekers amongst mainstream so-called ‘citizen’ children and support the building of a sense of security and of belonging in young people seeking asylum in the UK. We sought here to tap another layer of inclusion, that of youth culture. In doing so, our study needed to develop an appropriate set of qualitative research instruments to investigate the shaping of a compassionate society in schools by interviewing ASR and other students about what they felt would constitute the conditions for safety, compassion and belonging. Our strategy was first to see whether young asylum-seeking students felt supported, secure and safe in their classrooms. Did ASR students encounter compassion, empathy and fellowship? In effect our research focused on the types and levels of compassion experienced by the 'non-citizen’ ASR student and his or her attempts at belonging not just within the school but also in British society. At the same time, we explored how ‘citizen’ students in the same schools engaged with the issue of asylum and the politics of
belonging in the UK. We explored how these two groups of young people interpret, navigate and respond to the different and sometimes conflicting messages they might receive in relation to asylum and forced migration from key players in their worlds – their teachers and school, and the media and public in the world outside it – and the extent to which they themselves work on ‘being compassionate’.

THE RESEARCH

This paper is based on sociological research undertaken in 2006-7 by Madeleine Arnot and Mano Candappa, entitled *Schooling, Security and Belonging: Relations between asylum-seeking and ‘host’ students*. The aims of this small-scale study were to explore different school approaches towards ASR students; and to consider whether and how these approaches might relate to the development of a sense of security and belonging in ASR students, and compassion amongst what we call ‘citizen’ students.

The project employed qualitative methods and included three school case-studies in England, representing different educational contexts, but described by LEAs as having inclusive practices. Fairfield was a multicultural shire-county school with small numbers of ASR students; Fordham a predominantly White shire-county school with a very small number of ASR students; while City school was a multicultural inner-city school with a large minority of ASR students. In each school, in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews were conducted with four ASR students, four ‘citizen’ students, the headteacher, and three staff involved in the education/support of ASR students. Additionally, two mixed-gender group interviews, one with ASR and the other with ‘citizen’ students were carried out in each school. Data were analysed according to the themes security, belonging, and compassion.

We use the term ‘citizen’ student to refer to a whole bundle of people – children of British citizens by descent, of naturalized British citizens, EU citizens, migrant citizens with citizenship in their own country and temporarily resident in the UK, and so on. These ‘citizen’ students, similar to ASR students, were not a homogenous group: the students we interviewed were all British nationals by birth, many had roots in as diverse a set of origins as Italy, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Spain, and in one case, with Roma heritage.

Twelve individual interviews were conducted with ‘citizen’ students, four in each case study school. In individual ‘citizen’ students’ interviews we showed participants separate written scenarios depicting experiences of war traumas and tragedy, poverty and hardship, and the violence and brutality endured by three refugee children, Bazi, Rathika and Sheik, taken from Candappa and Egharevba’s (2000) study. These stories were used to provoke responses to asylum issues and stimulate discussion in the interviews. Specifically, we used the stories to explore students’ feelings of compassion or otherwise, whether these refugees and their families should be granted asylum in Britain, and whether they might come to feel at home in their school and eventually become British.

The ASR cohort included young people who had arrived as unaccompanied minors as well as those who arrived with a parent or family member, those whose applications were still
pending and those who had already received refugee status (and even citizenship) and were in the UK for already long periods of time, and from home countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. We interviewed ASR students individually. This aided conversation on such a sensitive topic. Five interviews with ASR students were conducted in Fairfield School, and four each in Fordham and City schools. With ASR students, in the interview, we did not explore their personal narratives of forced migration, but instead focussed on issues around compassion, security and belonging in Britain, particularly their experiences of schooling, of friendships and security, and whether they felt they might eventually become British. Secondly, we used semi-structured interviews with a group of ASR students (ethical difficulties with ASR focus groups are discussed in Pinson et al., 2010).

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS, EXCLUSIVE YOUTH CULTURE

Schools and local authorities have been left with the micro-social costs of immigration policy. The challenge they face is how to educate ASR children in the context of a legal agenda which appears to deny the humanistic values of schooling and a national media that is negative and hostile. Against this backdrop, educationalists, schools and teachers, are called daily to make moral judgments and to take up a moral stance. Some schools as the ones in our project, positioned themselves against the Home Office approach that a migrant child is first and foremost a migrant, not necessarily with the right to belong. They construct them as children first and foremost and the school as safe havens, potential city of refuge. The three case study schools had a strong inclusive ethos which they used to reposition the ASR child as a learner citizen (Arnot, Pinson and Candappa, 2009; Pinson, Arnot and Candappa, 2010).

By exploring ASR students' emotional experiences in the school through the lens of inclusion, friendship and security; where security extends to friendships and human relations, and safety includes freedom from fear and aggression, we sought to build up a sense what belonging means. The ASR students we interviewed wanted to be allowed to get on with their lives without fear or harassment. In the words of Jamil, a Lebanese student, 'I wasn't looking for sympathy or pity. I was just looking for equality'.

ASR students in our study were clear that they wanted to gain a good education and to succeed at school, and were prepared to work for it. Many came from countries where education was the province of the wealthy, or the social infrastructure had been damaged by conflict, and they were eager to avail themselves of the educational opportunities presented in Britain. They mostly had aspirations to go on to higher education, some wanted careers in areas as varied as medicine and fashion design - one student aspired to high political office in his home country. A safe learning environment was therefore crucial to them.

On the surface, all three case study schools offered these students a supportive environment turning ASR students away from their pasts to their present status of being learners in the classroom. The students saw no difference or discrimination between how citizen and non-citizen students in their school were treated. They became just like British learner citizens, something that students noticed:
Daran: We're all the same, no matter if you're British or not British. We're all like treated as the same
Sabeen: They welcome you here, right? They don't make you feel like a stranger or anything. (ASR Group, City)

They were also aware and appreciative of the extensive support they received from their schools and teachers. In Fordham School (a predominantly White school) where these students were a small minority, Lena a Year 11 Nigerian girl commented:

they have like a system, which is learning support, which you can go in there and they help you with things such as reading. They do help you ... and you have teacher to talk to if you're like.... And they do look out for problems, so they do definitely help. They don't take anything, like, such as bullying.... (Fordham School, ASR Group)

In Fordham School, the LEA peripatetic teacher additionally provided help with homework in the students' homes, as part of a total package of care for children looked-after by the local authority. Hassan (a Year 8 Pakistani boy) noted that she came for about two to three hours each week to his house to teach him English. Similarly Ishaq a Year 10 Afghani student commented, 'she come into my place one day a week ...in my home... she help me... After the school. Evening’

Another scheme provided support to new arrivals in their first few weeks by establishing 'buddies' or 'class friends' to take them to lessons and familiarise them with the school. 'Buddies' are usually volunteers who, if possible, speak the home language of the new student. At City, Farouq commented, ‘I just hung around with them, being a part’. The scheme also helped build lasting friendships; he added, ‘They are still my friends, and I've got new friends’.

However, despite these positive experiences, the ASR students we interviewed also portrayed a sense of exclusion within the school. At one level, they felt accepted and included by teachers within these inclusive school settings, on another level they talked about the difficulties they had fitting in with their peers. Security relies upon being treated as a member of a community, rather than as an outsider. The experiences of ASR students we interviewed seemed to arise from (mostly) low-level bullying and harassment directed at their Otherness. The ASR students were newcomers but they were also outsiders; the foreignness of their language, their lack of English skills, and the prevalence of strong local youth cultures were described as important factors in this process of exclusion within an inclusive school environment. The bullying they encountered tended to be of a general nature, not necessarily directed to their ethnicity or immigration status. Candappa and Egharevba (2002) pointed to subtle forms of racism, such as through lack of concern for cultural values through which social exclusion can arise. Similarly Rutter (2006) found that even when racial bullying did not exist, students would nevertheless draw on media discourses and use anti-asylum and racist discourses interchangeably.
On occasion ASR student reported that bullying in the school had a more serious nature especially when harassment was targeted on perceived weaknesses. Farouq, for example, who arrived at City with good English language skills, having spent three years previously in another British school, spoke of his experiences of bullying:

I see people getting bullied… just people asking for money, and they’re [victims] quite scared…. Sometimes they beat them up for no reason… not racist bullying, just people who are like quiet, then people just beat them up… I used to be quite a bully of some friend at the end of Yr 9. He took my money [picked his pocket], so I went back and got my money back… Asked for my money back…and then we fight, and so I fight him, that’s why he’s scared of me.

When Farouq reported the matter, the school protected him and the bully was excluded by the Head. Farouq is slightly-built and has a mild manner. However, when he retaliated to end the bullying (a behaviour described as 'life affirming violence', (Ringrose, forthcoming), he then described himself as a bully for resorting to the same behaviour.

Bullying seemed most often to be targeted on the most obvious signs of Otherness, such as lack of competence in English and/or 'uncool' dress or an obvious lack of knowledge of youth cultural norms. In Anna’s (Y9 White British girl at City) account she referred to students being 'horrid' to other students because they were newcomers, even though what she referred to was potentially commonplace in school, and directed at all new students. However, an ASR student might not perceive this, and could experience such hostile responses as a lack of acceptance and as exclusion rather than a painful rite of passage. For example, Toma, a Year 9 Croatian boy at Fairfields, arriving at his primary school without knowledge of English left him open to being the butt of light-hearted student pranks:

When you can’t speak English people just look at you… In lower school .. my friends .. they used to teach me how to say swear words, and said it was good things, and they would say, ’go say it to the teacher’, and I .. went and said it to the teacher .. They used to laugh but, you know, it didn't get me into trouble...

For Lauryn, a Year 11 Congolese girl at City, and a fluent French speaker new to English and to Britain, this sort of behaviour was more upsetting:

Lauryn: When I first come here they say some thing, just disturb me, yeah .. They say to me the bad thing – ‘f***off’. .. Miss Butcher [Head of Language Development Department] say to me, ‘don’t follow [listen to] them. Be quiet and they leave you alone’... the first day I come, I can’t speak English and they say anything about me. I say nothing and looked at them because I no understand…

Int:... and the people who were saying ‘f*** off’ and stuff like that, they were English - ?
Lauryn: Yeah, they English people… Mainly boys.
Lauryn was obviously upset at her treatment; the teacher she approached for support, seemed unsurprised at her experience and advises her to ignore the bullies, in a sense to remain silent, invisible. However, Lauryn went on to retort, ‘...well, now they’re nice because ... if they speak, I speak loud – “don't want that, don't like it”’ . Standing up to her harassers seems to have won Lauryn respect, and the bullying ended. Students, who arrived with fluency in English but with a foreign accent, might also find themselves excluded because 'citizen students' found it difficult to engage with different accents. However, as Lena’s experience shows, this could be relatively easy to negotiate:

When I came to England I used to talk so fast, people could not keep up when I talked. But now they can keep up with me, and I've slowed my pace of talking down. (Lena, Fordham).

Lena adapted her speech to be accepted by her peers. However, exclusion through language can be painful to students and carry an emotional cost. This is seen very clearly in the account of Theodros, a Year 11 Congolese boy from City School, now a popular student and leader of the basketball team, who described his experiences on joining the school:

with boys it was okay, but not with girls. They were sitting there and teachers said, ‘you have to sit next to him’. ‘Oh, no, he doesn’t speak English, I don’t want to sit next to him’... Ask a girl, ‘Can you help?’; ‘No, I don’t want to help him. He doesn’t speak English, I can’t help him’. That was hard. Lasted a whole year… there was some boys coming around me, sitting next to me, but you can’t send any girls next to me.

Theodros’ story also indicates that this type of exclusion could be gendered - suggesting that that girls only help girls whilst boys help both sexes. In contrast, Lauryn from the same school talked about being bullied by boys and being helped by girls: Lauryn, an ASR student, commented: ‘The girls were nice. Very nice people’. Yet, a Year 11 girl from Albania, Edona, who had been at the same school for two years at the time of interview, recounted a different experience:

When I first came in class ... students were kind of rude actually ... And I mean still, there are like some good students, like they can like help you and talk to you, but still some of them are bad. I mean, they just don’t leave you alone…. It’s just because ... like ‘you don’t understand us’, or something you know, it’s just like start saying bad words and whatever, just picking on you...

Edona was clear that it was both girls and boys who created the problem, commenting, ‘Actually ... it’s like a kind of game. It’s like “you don’t know nothing, why did you came here in this school, why did you came here in England”, and things like that’. This type of harassment, this 'game' had persisted over time,
and while a few peers had helped her, she had not found a way to gain acceptance and entry to peer friendship groups: ‘Even I am like two years here in this school, I feel like I’ve still haven’t find the friends I wanted to find actually’. Gender relations were subtly linked to potentially exclusionary behaviour. But ‘games’ such as these can have more than one explanation, and give rise to new sets of issues many of which have not yet been researched.

**Britishness and Belonging**

It is one thing to feel safe, it is another to feel that a person belongs within a community. Anthony Heath and Jane Robert in a study conducted for the Goldsmith Report on Citizenship (2008, p.86) found that having a positive experience of Britain and British people certainly helped non-British to create a positive British identity. Not only was paid employment very important to this sense of integration but so too was cultural knowledge which enabled ‘non-citizens’ to make friends. However, most British were reported to have found it hard to define Britishness.

These themes were clearly present in our discussions with ASR students who sought ways of reconciling their national identities, their experiences of Britain and the pursuit of that elusive concept of ‘being British’. For all but one of our ASR interviewees (who felt that being a British national might prevent him from contributing to his home country in later years), the security of having British nationality and a British passport was described as important to their future well-being. For some, it guaranteed their safe travel to the home country and elsewhere, and offered them a legal status that would be respected there. For others, British citizenship and a British passport would add to their feeling of belonging in the UK. For example, Yasmin at Fairfield School commented, ‘if I had a British passport and then if I call myself British, then I feel that I belong to this country’.

ASR students revealed conflicting emotions. They sought to belong, but understood that belonging might come with a price. The difficulties they described about being included by their peers (the conditionalities of belonging as it were) meant adopting certain aspects of youth cultures which were an obstacle for achieving and performing belonging. Rashid, from Fordham School, explains that although he wanted to be British he could not just copy other students:

Rashid:…I want to be like one of those guys when they talk about me….I want to be like one of these English boys, because I want to understand what they’re talking about. Because sometimes I just keep my mouth shut, because I don't understand exactly what they're talking about, you know what I mean? And then they ask me, ‘why you quiet?’, and I just tell them that I'm down today, stuff like that……

Int: .. Do you think that you could feel the same things as British kids, or do you react differently?
Rashid: I can't be like them because – I don't know why, but I can't... I can't be like them, like acting like too stupid.
Int: In, like, the things that you mentioned [earlier]? - about getting drunk and smoking, or what - ? Stupid in what way?
Rashid: Yeah, that's stupid. What you want to get drunk or thingy, smoke, or all those stuff... And they go to a shop and rob something. I don't want to do that.

Rashid perceived a fundamental Otherness between himself and British youth. This feeling of Otherness persists despite being comfortable in Britain and among British peers, and even being seen by them as British. The difference was 'inside' and was unchangeable.

BETWEEN COMPASSION AND BELONGING – ‘CITIZEN’ STUDENTS NEGOTIATING THE SOCIAL MORALITY OF ASYLUM

Youth culture can indeed be exclusive, however, as we saw, not necessarily exclusive specifically to ASR youth, but to new-comers in general. When confronted directly with the notion of asylum and the testimonies of asylum-seeking children, our research revealed the complex ways in which citizen students address asylum, on the one hand demonstrating compassion in the name of social justice and sympathy, and on the other, defending territorial national–demographic space, and English identities.

As expected, the scenarios of Bazi, Rathika and Sheik drew an immediate emotional response from ‘citizen’ students, reacting variously with expressions of pity, concern, sympathy, incredulity and outrage at the children's predicaments. When they considered the issues in greater depth it was possible to see different types of compassion at play: compassion as pity; a notion of compassion as ‘fairness’ which often involved an Aristotelian cognitive moral recognition of the suffering of another; and the more radical conceptions of compassion in terms of social justice and human rights, associated with Simone Weil’s theory.

Compassion as pity was much in evidence when discussing the experiences of Rathika; in individual interviews, nearly half of the students responded initially with pity and sadness. For example:

Just like, a little bit sad... She would have had to like leave all her friends and all that lot behind her, and just move to another country where she didn’t really know about (Steve, Fordham)

The students expressed sadness for the suffering of a fellow human being. They seemed to understand the gravity of the consequences of being displaced or forced to move. Bazi, Sheik and Rathika were represented as deserving of compassion first and foremost because their suffering was seen as not their fault:
I kind of feel sorry for the people that have to go through that experience, ‘cause at the end of the day it’s not, it’s not their fault they have to move from their country, whether they are going to be risking their lives and things, and have to travel, like, … and when they come to like, Britain and that, they haven’t got much money to get the things they want, making their life, that bit harder. (Martin, Fairfield)

But the fact that Sheik's suffering involved not only displacement as result of threats to his safety and life, but also physical abuse, made the ‘citizen’ students look at the wider moral circumstances and consequences of such stories. It made them reflect on issues such as the right to safety and the vulnerability of children, perhaps also of themselves – as Martin had simply put it he felt ‘really scared’.

A few students expressed their compassion at Rathika and Sheik's stories through a language of human rights and social justice from the outset. When discussing Sheik’s story, Alex revealed how the language of rights was central to his thinking:

Crikey! That appalling... That's crazy... There's no words to describe that. ...There's no way out for that kid… That is the worst case scenario that somebody can have… But also I feel really appalled that this is allowed to happen. Once again, I come back to the fact of rights. People have rights to live. People have rights to have friendship anyway. This kid didn't... was denied his rights (our emphasis)

Alex’s responses reveal the emotions he is grappling with as he considers the children's stories – compassion, outrage, admiration, based on a strong notion of rights and of justice, which, in his scheme of things, have to be upheld by government.

**Becoming and Being British**

To explore what it means to belong within British society, we asked the groups of ‘citizen’ students' how they might define Britishness themselves and who they believed could be or become British. For some, there was a clear distinction between 'Englishness' and 'Britishness':

You know, I think that if people call themselves English, it's like because they've got no sort of other kind of mix of blood in them (Shada, British-Moroccan Y10 girl, City, Group)

For Martin from Fairfields, Britishness denoted a multicultural inclusive identity whilst, in order to be English, a person would have to be born in England:

English, I see like this one where it's kind of, like being born in the country, and that's like the main language and stuff. Whereas I see British
as like becoming - you can become British and stuff, whereas English, I see as more of like uh, roots, kind of like your background.

For the ‘citizen’ group in Fairfield school, bloodline and country of birth were the main factors shaping Britishness and Englishness. Tim,(a White British student), Jena (White British-Italian) and Michael (White British) who were all in Year 9 argued that anyone could become British citizens, but not everyone could be British:

Michael: But then you'd probably still call yourselves from wherever you are from, because if you were born here – aren't you a British citizen? So if you move here from another country …say from Africa, you would call yourself African even if you get a British passport. You won't call yourself British just because you've got a passport, you'll say, 'Well, I was born in Africa, my parents are African, so I am African'…

Tim: I'd say that, I ... I mean you can become a British citizen or French citizen or whatever, but I'd say it actually does come from your background and your actual blood.…

Int: But you are saying that being British is something more than a citizenship or passport or something - ?

Tim: Yes. Yes, I think it is.

Int: What is it?

Tim: I think it is just blood from your family. Like I said just then, I think like if you have a mum who is just like – if you have a dad who is English and a mum who might be French and Spanish, I would just say you are English, I think.

Int: ... But what does it actually mean to be British?...

Jen : You can tell if someone is like not – like if someone is from Africa or Asia you can tell that they are not British, but that is only by skin colour. That is the most obvious thing that you can tell...

For this White group of students, the passport seemed to be just a legal document, and did not confer Britishness; this came through a bloodline, defined by Tim as patrilineal. For Jena drawing on a racial discourse of belonging, this also meant Whiteness.

The discussions of the ‘citizen’ group of Year 10 from City School comprising an ethnically mixed group not surprisingly had different emphases. Two boys, James (Black British), Aaron (British dual heritage) and three girls - Shada, (British Moroccan), Larita (White British-Spanish) and Catrin (White British) explored the conditions for Britishness using a bundle of criteria that included ‘race’, culture, residence and passports:

James: Maybe you could say that being acknowledged as a British citizen...
You could be one but people still might not think of you as one…
Shada: Depending on the way you dress and the colour you are, people might not see you as British... I don't think you have to do anything or to be the way you have to be, to be known as British... Like I don't think... eating fish and chips shows that you're British. Or, you know, going to the pub shows that you're British. …

Larita: Or being Cockney and you know... I think being British is having – being a British citizen. Being born in Britain....

Catrin: If you live here and you're like permanently here, or you like have a future for staying over in Britain, then I think, yeah, and you actually want to – you like the country, and you want to stay here. And you don't have future plans to go and like live in France or whatever. Then I think that makes you British. Because I know if I went like to a different country, I'll always feel – I classify myself as British. Even if I lived there for like a long time....

James: ... like you could be born here and like been raised here and that, but if they still don't class you as that – people still might look at you and say, think like otherwise...

Aaron:...I don't think like... to be patriotic... matters

Int: Can foreigners become British?... if they get a British passport?

James: You don't need your passport, you just need your stay. Because ... in order to get your passport you need to stay in England...

For Larita and Catrin being born and/or raised in Britain, living permanently in the country and choosing to build a future there would make a person British. By implication, this definition allowed Britishness to be multi-cultural. However Shada and James pointed out that, to be British, someone had to be *acknowledged* as British, to be allowed to belong. Public perceptions of Britishness being seen as synonymous with Whiteness and Western dress and norms could thus exclude you, whether or not you were born and raised in Britain or had acquired a British passport through domicile.

Overall, ‘citizen’ students from the three case study schools did not speak with one voice, not least because of their own very mixed ethnic and cultural origins. Many of these students had hyphenated or hybrid identities themselves and therefore they themselves did not necessarily ‘feel British’. Other influences on their views would be the cultural politics of the locality they lived in and the effect of media debates. Most, whatever their background were prepared to discuss issues of national identity. It was only Rebecca and Alex, both London students, who seemed to reject the concept of nationality. They saw everyone as part of a common humanity, making any argument for Britishness null and void in their scheme of things; they adopted what might be seen as cosmopolitan identity.

The diversity of meanings attached to British nationality and perceptions of how to achieve belonging among ‘citizen’ students were important not least because such meanings influenced in turn the ways in which citizen students responded to the politics of asylum and immigration policy.
Blair’s Dilemma

Whatever the level and type of compassion shown to the stories of Rathika, Sheik or Bazi the question of whether Tony Blair, as Prime Minister at the time, should allow asylum-seekers such as these three children into the country led to considerable disarray amongst ‘citizen’ students. The need to contemplate the political case for offering long term asylum raised new concerns and gave expression to different politics of belonging amongst the group we interviewed.

The main reason for allowing asylum-seeking youth such as Rathika, Sheik or Bazi into the UK would be in order to secure their safety. Here compassion on the grounds of asylum was clearly strong amongst the ‘citizen’ group in all three schools. The messages of the 'citizen' students we interviewed in the three case study schools came through very clearly - the UK should offer them refuge, they should be allowed in.

However, many citizen students like Alex also showed themselves to be aware of national concerns about population numbers and costs to the country even if in the event, compassion would outweigh such concerns:

I'd let him [Sheik] into this country…We shouldn't deny anybody but if they're poor then, yeah, the government should be able to help them. But... The government doesn't have enough money to help every single poor person in the area, but they have got facility to help them develop their own business. Help them to develop their own ways of making their own money. With Sheik's and Rathika’s story, yes, they're in a war and if I was the Prime Minister I'd happily let them into my country. I'd happily give them a home to live in. I'd happily help them out with the right school because, as I said, a life is a life and a life is worth living. And I'd be... I'd be inclined to help them out as much as I can.

Concern about the size of the British population and the number of potential asylum-seekers was something which the City 'citizen' student group was concerned about:

Larita:....there’s loads of other people, and if you’re gonna make an exception for one, you have to like look at.. what’s happened to everyone else’s lives…
Shada: You can’t just think about one. Because there’s probably so many other families, and then if you let them all in there’s gonna be no more space...
Catrin: But not many of them have probably gone through what he [Sheik] did. And, yeah, but they’ve all had different experiences, and some of them probably worse. Some of them a lot less -
James:… courage he[Sheik] showed, basically to sacrifice himself like that. I think we should let him in.
Having a strong sense of fairness, they were clear that the country could not just randomly protect some and not others; but also the government could not accept everyone, because then there will be ‘too many of them’. In their search for a ‘fair’ way to determine those who are deserving of protection the group suggested that Britain should rely on assessing the scale of the suffering of those seeking refuge.

The group of ‘citizen’ students at Fairfield struggled even more with the idea of how to respond. Although based in a multi-ethnic school where many of the students come from different ethnic backgrounds, in the discussion these students battled between the human dimension of asylum, the need of safety and protection from war, and the need to protect the country from becoming ‘full up’.

Michael : They could go to other countries… because Britain has got a lot of asylum seekers …But we could help them but I don't know how you can say 'No' to them really….  
Int: So you wouldn't say 'No' to them because....  
Michael: You wouldn't really say 'No' because if they were in danger….Well the first thing you'd say... Well you would try and make them safe and... Most people would think that if they come to this country then they are safe and the government will keep them safe…

Tim: The detention centres they are for refugees who come over aren't they?… they could make more of those I suppose for the people who arrive but maybe people would hear about it and think, 'oh that is a place we can go'. And then they get all full up and more and more keep on coming in. I mean I don't have a problem because it doesn't seem to affect... Well in the short term... I don't think any of us would notice any difference in the way we live because of it. But maybe in the long term there might be…

Ines:…at the same time … you usually don't let a lot of people in, and then they are going to start families off anyway .. And then if they have their own families here and they start having more children, and more people come in… Eventually there is not going to be any room for like anymore people to come in...

Michael: ...our towns will just be like houses with estates and stuff...  
(Fairfield School citizen group)

Finally, in Fordham, a predominantly White school, the students’ discussion on what to advise Tony Blair (the then Prime Minister) on the admission of asylum-seekers, shows the whole range from compassion to fear of overcrowding, while trying to find the criteria by which asylum-seekers could be allowed into the country, and allowed to stay:

Connor: If they haven’t got, like, if they just, like, was in poverty, then yeah. Probably would.  
Rakim ˙… it may sound cruel, but I’d only really let them in if I was Tony Blair, I’d only let them in if they came in legally;… if they just came to the
country and just expected everything then I wouldn’t let them, but if they were legal, yeah.

Rakim: If they came in asylum thing, yeah. If they just, like, got false identities and everything, then, if they just were completely illegal immigrants, then….
Lisa: I don’t know if I’d let them in, because on one hand they’re like, they need somewhere to stay and they need to be safe. On the other hand they could cause like more problems, and like racism and things, and people saying that they’re illegal and things, if they’re not. So I think it would be quite a hard decision.
Int: So you said you’re not sure, is that right? Because you said on the one hand about being safe, you said something like that?
Lisa: Yeah, they would be…they could be safe, and they would be happy here, and they wouldn’t get diseases. But on the other hand, they could, like, people could bully them for racism.

The influence of official, public and media discourses on asylum in this conversation is evident. They used the legal, criminalised discourse to suggest that there are genuine and unlawful asylum-seekers, they feared Britain becoming swamped with asylum-seekers and they raised concerns about the influence of a large intake of asylum-seekers on race relations, an expression of racism, allegedly worried about the safety of asylum-seekers.

Indeed, for this group of ‘citizen’ students, of equal importance to asylum policy is where ASR youth and their families would be safest. It is not clear from this discussion that it was in their best interests in the long run to stay since their safety could not necessarily be guaranteed given the racism that they might experience in the UK:

Int: So ….is this for their sake you’re saying you don’t know if it’s a good thing, about the bullying for racism? Is that what you’re saying?....
Lisa: I think it would be for their sakes.
Int: Right. And do you think it might be, it might be better for them to stay in the refugee camp?
Lisa: Yeah.
Connor: Yeah. Rather than going out and other people, like, pickin’ ‘em…
Int: Right.
Rakim: But then they was, there was lots of diseases there, so….they could just move somewhere
Connor: - else in the world.
Rakim: Yeah, ‘cos, like Britain has got a ridiculously high population, because it’s such a tiny island, so –
Lisa: Or a special place where they could all go together, so they’re all, like, the refugees are all together, and then there would be no-one there to, like, bully them, and they could be free from disease and be safe.
Rakim: I think it would be safer for them and us if they stayed in a certain area, so if they did bring disease in, then it wouldn’t spread….
Lisa: They could, like, still come to the UK, and, like, they could build an island, somewhere like the Isle of Wight, and then they could put them all on there...
Rakim: What about Ireland?
Int: You want to send them to Ireland?
Rakim: No, no, it’s not, not really, it’s more of a joke, really. But, yeah.
Connor: If they could go to, like, America or some other big country, then it would be easier for us, and for them, because they would have more space, and it wouldn’t crowd England up too much.

Here compassion for asylum-seekers is mediated through the lens of where to put them - for example sending them to different countries (such as Ireland or even Russia according to the Fairfield group) or settling them all on an island. Compassion was also affected by the fear of the Other (they might bring diseases) and their association with an increase in racial conflict given existing racist sentiments. It seems that, despite the compassion that the same students were able to express towards individuals, when the larger political issue of asylum-seekers coming to Britain was considered, asylum-seekers became the ‘human waste’ which ‘we’ should dispose of in as practical a way as possible. The morality of this latter position, of sending ASR to ‘some place’ noticeably worried some of the ‘citizen’ students at Fordham keen to retain some notion of fairness:

Lisa: Or they could, like, every so many years, about a year or two years, then like all the leaders of the smaller countries could come together, and then they could divide up the refugees like evenly between all the countries.
Connor: But you’d have to keep families together though.
Rakim: Yeah. (Fordham, Host Group)

These three group discussions suggest, at minimum, that when forced to consider asylum issues on national not an individual level, such students are confused and ambivalent, finding themselves caught between the politics of compassion and the politics of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Our study demonstrates that the micro-moments of interaction between ASR students and other students are fraught with the tensions of disadvantage, youth cultural signifiers, intolerance of English language learners, and clear notions of citizenship as a ‘filled space’ in which there is not necessarily any room for compassion, even if desired. The ASR students we interviewed experienced these tensions. Perhaps they did not report on instances of overt racism - however, they encountered moments of exclusion within the inclusive cultures of their school where markers such as language, style and also colour became obstacles for belonging and encouraged them to remain silent about their pasts.
References


Various authors present differing emphases (see for example, King and Murray, 2000; Leaning and Arie, 2000; Rothschild, 1995, Sen, 2000, Thomas, 2000),