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Public Sector Focus article
A nation at war with its own conscience

Donna Gaywood is a senior lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire, teaching on the Children, Young People and Families course. She is one of the conveners of the Special Interest group for the European Early Childhood Education Research Association and was a member of the team which developed the early education resource toolkit to support children from refugee or migrant backgrounds. To write this article, Donna drew on her own PhD research, which looked at the post-migration lived experiences of refugee children in Early Childhood Education and Care.

A nation at war with its own conscience

Watching the human impact of war, famine, or climate change on television, is unsurprisingly disturbing. Hearing about human rights abuses and the oppression of the LGBTQI+ community in other countries, also tends to cause people deep concern. However, as a nation, Britain seems to be caught in an uncomfortable internal struggle about how to view and respond to refugees and asylum seekers, who are often victims of these situations. Many arguments put forward by politicians which inform the debate, are both political and economic but it is difficult to disassociate from humanitarian concerns and lived experiences of real people.

What drives the ongoing narrative about refugees or asylum seekers is unclear. The press seems to persist in mis-naming people who are fleeing for their lives as 'migrants' which describes people who have moved from one country to another, usually for work. The word 'migrant' is often weaponised by press and politicians alike. There is an unspoken inference that 'migrants' are somehow coming into Britain to not only benefit from our generosity but also change the way we live. This attitude attempts to re-call a mythical golden age of history, where all was well in Britain. Politicians have done little to address these false narratives and have often unhelpfully inflamed the situation with openly hostile remarks. By using inflammatory words and assuming all refugees and asylum seekers are one homogenous group, it is easier to de-humanise them and so pursue inhumane policies.

A refugee was defined by the United Nations in 1951 as a person with a,

well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

Article 14 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that everyone has a right to seek asylum from persecution in another country. Yet, these appear to be of little consequence to the British Government, whose policies have recently been condemned by the United Nations.

In direct contrast, people have watched in disbelief as Russian tanks moved into the Ukraine in an unprovoked attack, causing an outpouring of support. Homes have been made available for new arrivals and the Ukrainian flag displayed as a sign of solidarity.

Images play a powerful role in informing the public perception and response to refugee or asylum-seeking children. The terrible photos of Alan Kurdi who drowned whilst making a perilous sea crossing, became an unforgettable reminder of the desperation of people fleeing their homes. Other equally traumatic images have fuelled the humanitarian response from the public and in turn the Government, who have set in place supportive resettlement schemes for Syrian, Afghan and Ukrainian people, administered through local authorities.

Britain and the British people seem to be amid an identity crisis. The government are choosing to rigorously and openly pursue policies which are illegal according to international law and have been slow to act to address serious issues at the Manson processing centre in Kent apparently ignoring over 1,000 children in appalling living conditions. Whereas the British public genuinely have offered support for many fleeing the war in the Ukraine, but the same overwhelming and united response was not afforded to Syrian or more recently Afghan refugees. Despite the resettlement schemes, Britain seems to continue to struggle to afford the same welcome to those outside of Europe. For some reason, the Ukrainian people were deemed 'more deserving' of support and generosity. It is difficult to reconcile these two positions and continue to believe that Britain is a wholehearted welcoming country.

National narratives about refugees and asylum seekers can be unhelpful. People who seek asylum or refuge are seen as traumatised and requiring saving and Britain positions herself as a 'saviour.' Unfortunately, these positions hide a further tension where long term gratitude is expected from newly arrived people for Britain's generosity, but this only enables people to remain a guest rather than develop a deeper sense of belonging.

For young refugee children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), this duality can be extremely challenging. Whilst most educators are kind, ethical and generously minded, refugee children still face significant challenge. Narratives about marginalised people groups tend to surreptitiously seep into individuals understanding. This means that many professionals caring for and educating refugee or asylum-seeking children most likely hold unconscious and unhelpful beliefs about children and their parents. Research has shown

that refugee children are often 'invisible' to early educators and interactions with them tend to be less warm and perfunctory. The prevalent trauma narrative can be limiting and negative connotations unhelpful. Children are often described as "having EAL" (English as an Additional Language). Support is targeted to enable children to learn to speak English. A deficit model is often subtly held rather than a celebratory approach which focusses on what the richness refugee children bring.

The lives of refugee children are complex, yet very few resources are available for early educators to assist them in supporting children to feel included and develop a sense of belonging. A Special Interest Group from the European Early Childhood Education Research Association worked in partnership with Good Chance to develop a research-informed, power-sensitive, and ethical educational resource. Partially funded by the Froebel Trust and supported by Centre for Research in Early Childhood in Birmingham, the education pack was developed and trialled by educators in Greece, Turkey, England, Australia, and Poland. Educators are encouraged to use play-based activities to support host and refugee children to think about home, migration, fear, climate, adventure and welcome, whilst educators are assisted to adapt the pack to meet the needs of the children they are working with.

Link to the website with the education pack: www.refugee-early-years.org

Twitter: @SIGRefchildren