

Chapter 19

Refugee Voices on Active Citizenship and Social Justice: Life Stories From the Field

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to explore whether the opportunities and challenges that refugees face in education prepare them or hinder them when exercising active citizenship. The author will analyse the challenges and opportunities that two refugees, Amal and Amani, faced in their education journeys and which enabled them to become active citizens by bringing positive change to their communities. Using a narrative approach, the author will attempt to gain an empathetic insight into several aspects of social justice and active citizenship in education for refugees. Such exploration of knowledge will be carried out through the analysis of the perceptions and experiences of the refugees, subjects of study, as well as the personal involvement of the author. This chapter intends to spark reflection in the audience through the exploration of refugee voices.

INTRODUCTION

You know, most of the time people who are speaking on behalf of refugees are not refugees; or people who are speaking about migrants on migration and displacement, they are not migrants, they never felt displaced.

Amal-

It is because of education that I learn more about the world around me, more about the people around me, more about the reason for peace, the reason for conflict at the local level and also at the global level, and what I can do to solve that. It is through being in school and learning through other people that I have tried to look at myself and who I am in my community and what role I play.

Amani-

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When researchers decide to use a narrative approach to study human behaviour, they are really studying the way that humans experience the world, they reconstruct personal and social stories and they become the very storytellers and characters in their own stories and in the stories of others (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

The reason behind writing this chapter is rooted in the author's own very personal story as a pedagogue, this is, my own story. As an educator, who has been teaching in international schools for fifteen years, I started noticing the real gap that there is between different education systems and contexts. Becoming aware of my own privilege, whilst being part of institutions whose mission was to "develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world" (International Baccalaureate Organisation, 2020, Mission section, para. 5), started to resonate in very confusing and rather contradictory terms in my head. I realised that privileged communities, such as the ones I was part of, had privileged access to a wide range of opportunities whilst, at the same time, they were claiming to act in the name of equity and social justice. This thought became more solid as I found other academics supporting the fact that international schools seem to be addressing aspects of social justice whilst, at the same time, they perpetuate some sort of global wealth disparity (Hughes, 2020).

Whilst everyone has the right to education (The United Nations General Assembly, 1966, art. 13), schooling is simply not enough for this right to be fulfilled. Minors must receive a quality and adapted education to their specific needs, without generating exclusion and by promoting and developing human rights, respect, democracy and the culture of peace (Esteban, 2020). As I continued reflecting upon these issues, I noticed that if I was to promote equity, social justice and peace throughout my work, as it was indeed my intention as a pedagogue, I had to be prepared to challenge my own privilege. Nave (2019) claims that privilege can either be promoted or challenged, and that therefore, the question one must ask oneself is whether to use our own privilege to preserve it, and therefore potentially maintaining inequity, or whether to use our privilege to challenge the very notion of it, by promoting diversity, inclusion and equity. These thoughts led me to re-consider my mission as an educator. Moreover, they morally forced me to learn more in depth about those communities who did not have many opportunities in education and who were actually finding themselves in rather vulnerable situations. These communities were those who I had been ultimately intending to protect behind the values of peace, sustainability and social justice in my daily work, for more than a decade, and through different education and cooperation projects, activities or methods, such as service learning, as one approach to it. As I continued to learn and reflect on other students' realities with fewer opportunities, I became academically acquainted with the fields of Intercultural Studies, Education in Emergencies and Migration Governance. My motivation since then has therefore been focused on learning about the realities and problems that vulnerable communities face nowadays, especially refugee communities, and in this particular chapter, my purpose is to learn about the experiences and perceptions of two refugees in the way that they exercise active citizenship conducive of positive change in their communities.

Education is a vital aspect to guarantee social cohesion, since it contributes to the participation and political inclusion of citizens (Esteban, 2020; Harmon 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). Education is also the primary vehicle that can be used to lift children out of vulnerable situations and obtain the means to participate fully in their communities (Ramos, 2016; UN, 1999). For most societies in the Global North, education represents the curiosity of the mind, the discovery of one's passions, the preparation for the world of work, but for refugees, education is the necessary path to find dignity and purpose after the traumatic experience of displacement, so it should aim towards self-sufficiency bringing an end to months or even years depending on others (UNHCR, 2019). The

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