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Forced neediness:
Refugee identity, misrecognition and belonging in a Scottish Catholic school

Mishal Francis

Mishal Francis is a Youth Officer at the Archdiocese of Glasgow and the Diocese of Motherwell. An Aeronautical engineer by education and training, she is currently completing a Professional Doctorate at the University of Glasgow. Mishal is a Trustee for Hope HDWA, a charity that supports persecuted Christian women in education.

Abstract

This autoethnographic article reflects on the experience of a young Pakistani Catholic refugee entering a Scottish Catholic secondary school. It develops the concept of 'forced neediness' to describe social and institutional processes through which specific support needs become a defining identity, obscuring agency, faith and contribution. The class-room narrative reveals wider assumptions about refugee dependency. Through memories of naming, educational placement and belonging, the article examines tensions between this reduction and Catholic commitments to dignity and the common good. It argues for recognition with appropriate assistance, intellectual expectation and reciprocal participation. Refugee pupils must be received as persons whose needs, however significant, do not define their identity, dignity or capacity to contribute.

Introduction

A school may recognise a refugee pupil's need for support while struggling to recognise the person beyond that need. Under these circumstances, support can become a form of misrecognition. This article approaches this

tension through my lived experience of entering a Scottish Catholic secondary school as a Pakistani Catholic refugee. I recount my memories of a classroom introduction, repeated changes of English class, religious participation and eventual friendship for a practical theological reflection that illuminates my negotiation of dignity, identity and recognition within a new and unfamiliar environment. The narrative exposes unspoken social norms and institutional classifications that expose how a refugee child can be received through categories that diminish her.

The article develops the concept of 'forced neediness' to describe the process by which my specific support needs become a defining social identity. Whereas vulnerability belongs to the shared condition of creaturely life, forced neediness is socially and institutionally produced. It reduces a refugee person to be primarily recognised through presumed deficiency, while their knowledge, aspirations and capacity to contribute remain secondary. Under these conditions, support and misrecognition can coexist: the institution provides a place while narrowing its understanding of the person who occupies it. Against this reduction, Christian theology affirms a dignity that must be recognised in practice through attentive pedagogy, solidarity and hospitality.

'Forced neediness' describes a wider social process, while the classroom encounter reveals how it can affect a refugee pupil's everyday experience. Schools do not originate assumptions about refugee dependency, difference, and belonging; however, these assumptions can be reproduced or contested through school relationships and practices.

Placing the argument within the Catholic setting raises significant theological questions within the narrative. I arrived expecting shared faith to provide common ground. My subsequent difficulties within the school therefore raise questions about how a Catholic community committed to human dignity recognises its members and resists social expectations that reduce the person it seeks to support.

Thus, reading the narrative alongside Scripture and Catholic social teaching, I examine educational and social practices that can turn support needs into an identity that obscures capacities and restricts participation. The theological response is to move beyond administrative inclusion and cultural familiarity towards a pedagogy of recognition that embraces assistance, expectation and participation together. The response to forced neediness is to receive the refugee pupil as someone with needs and gifts; neither of which define their personhood.

Methodology and positionality

This article uses autoethnographic reflection to bring autobiographical memory into conversation with social experience, educational practice and Christian theology. Heather Walton's discussion of autoethnography provides a methodological orientation for examining personal experience in relation to its wider cultural setting and theological significance.[1] In this article, autobiographical writing is therefore a record of experience that examines how its personal, social and theological meanings become visible. I present my narrative reflecting on experiences first lived in adolescence, where dialogue is reconstructed from memory and conveys the remembered substance of exchanges. Thus, the narrative preserves the emotional texture of those experiences while also bearing the marks of retrospective interpretation.

The account brings together remembered encounters, their significance to me at the time and the meanings I now discern in them. Descriptions of feeling exposed, unwanted or underestimated express how institutional relationships were experienced and do not establish private intentions of individual teachers or pupils. Interpretations of others' responses should therefore be read within the situated perspective of the account.

One experience cannot represent all refugee pupils or establish the prevalence of particular practices across Scottish Catholic education. Nor can it demonstrate that one public representation or policy determined an individual classroom encounter. Its contribution is more specific: to make available for theological examination an experience in which welcome, assistance and exclusion are intertwined. The value of autoethnography lies in its capacity to make visible the ordinary practices that so often remain unnamed because they appear natural, reasonable or benevolent. The article questions the relationship between social categorisations, professed dignity and belonging.

The theological engagement of the methodology provides a reciprocal lens. Scripture and Catholic social teaching offer resources for evaluating the experience and enquiring how these commitments are enacted.

The school and the other individuals appearing in the narrative have been given pseudonyms. The narrative is presented with care to protect

[1] Heather Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection* (SCM Press, 2014), 3–9.

privacy and the dignity of all persons named within it, including former teachers and peers. The purpose is to remain focused on the wider cultural, institutional and theological arrangements that shaped one refugee child's experience of arrival, recognition and belonging.



Autoethnographic account: 'She's a refugee'

'She's a refugee.'

'Yes, Sean,' the teacher gave an exasperated reply shaded with amusement, 'Mishal is a refugee. She came from Pakistan and now lives in Glasgow with her family.'

Late May. The air already carried the looseness of summer; teachers had begun to relinquish order, and the timetable softened into films and half-hearted lessons. Learning, it seemed, was something that could be paused. Teachers filling time rather than shaping it. It was my first week of high school, Second Year, though I did not yet comprehend what that meant. I was herded midway into the Glaswegian secondary education system that would supposedly assimilate me into the social and cultural norm.

I stepped into the uniformed halls of St Margaret's Catholic School. The polished floors reflected the early sunlight, and the faint, familiar aroma of incense from the school chapel lingered in the corridors. The bell rang sharply, calling us to assembly, attendance taking and prayer before class.

Struggling to find my way, I joined the others and lined up outside the classroom for Social Education – first period. The passageway hummed with restiveness, with laughter too loud, bodies jostling and rules temporarily suspended. When the door swung open, the disciplined line dissolved rapidly. Seats were claimed quickly and territories were established by the sworn friends in cliques. Everyone rushed for the coveted back seats, where whispered jokes and social lives thrived. I hesitated just long enough; gambling away my chance of being among the cool kids, taking what was left for scraps: an ostracised chair at the very front, directly opposite the teacher's desk. Exposed and visible, there was no hiding there.

Mr Martin wheeled in the television trolley, squeaking, screen thick and grey, its presence both exciting and ominous. He cleared his throat in his 'teacher voice', the one meant to gather and contain us. A loud and clear voice that expected to be obeyed immediately.

'This isn't a film', he declared. 'It's educational. You'll be watching a video about childbirth. It might be …', he hesitated and then continued, 'erm … uncomfortable.'

Silence spread through the room. Mr Martin's deposition of caution was a way of claiming back his power. There was no preparation beyond that. No disclaimer or explanation to help us receive what we were about to see. No sense that some of us had never encountered such imagery before, or that modesty might not have a shared cultural baseline.

The lights were dimmed and the screen flickered.

Sharp and unrestrained laughter erupted almost instantly, mostly among the boys. I did not understand what I was seeing, only that I sensed I should not be seeing it. My body stiffened before my mind could catch up. I collapsed into my seat, wishing to disappear. There was no looking away without being seen looking away. Heat rose to my brown cheeks and my clammy hands gripped the edge of the frigid chair, searching for somewhere to anchor myself. My seat at the front of the class revealed my position in the social order. Simultaneously, this Western woman's groaning body breaking itself in order to bring life into the world, seemed to give birth to my fragile adolescent femininity that had remained respectfully concealed under the veil of cultural diffidence. It exposed her lack of control in her current situation. And mine.

I tried not to look, but there was nowhere else to turn. A few minutes in, the teacher could not bear it either.

'Right. That'll do. Never mind, boys and girls. We'll leave it there.'

The lights came back on, but the room did not settle.

A thin, partial relief trickled over me, as if I was being pulled out of water only to realise that I was to be served next as the catch of the day.

Mr Martin turned towards my chair, identifying his next haul.

'You're new. What's your name?'

'Mishal', I said. 'I moved here not long ago.'

'And where are you from?'

'Pakistan', I replied, with the simple but careful honesty of a child. The next sentence slipped out as well: 'We came here because we were persecuted as Christians.'

There was an agonising pause.

'Oh – you're Christian?' he said, surprised.

'Yes', I responded resolutely.

'Are there Christians in Pakistan?' he boorishly enquired.

I responded with the same certainty: 'Yes.'

Then, from across the room, a voice cut through the air.

'She's a refugee.'

Sean did not whisper it. He announced it, affirmed it in the open, as if naming me for the first time, confidently explaining everything about me.

Something shifted in that moment. A word I had not chosen attached itself to me, settled on my shoulders, and began to speak for me. It was not entirely untrue – but it was not the whole truth. Still, it was the truth that mattered in that room – a powerful place, propelling the beginning of my symbolic exclusion.

No one reacted really, just an antiphon of awkward apprehension played quietly inside my head. I had already been wrestling to understand how to fit among this new world, in which I had already been placed. It is hard enough to enter a new culture. Harder still when your body marks you as different before you speak or have the confidence or language to resist it. But this naming did something deeper to my vulnerable teenage mind. It made me aware, suddenly and sharply, of a hierarchy that measures who belongs without question, and who must be explained. It was not a neutral naming ceremony; I was being announced into a category.

After the birthing video, I had been christened as 'Refugee'.

Not girl. Not student. Not Mishal.

Refugee.

That word stayed with me through the long summer. It echoed in quiet moments, in the absence of conversation, in the spaces where friendship might have been. I was different. I was strange. I was a disruption, one who needed explaining. I was, perhaps, less.

No one said this directly. They did not need to.

The girl delegated to guide me through the school would often desert me and disappear among the sprawling complex of buildings and corridors. I would find myself standing alone between classes, holding a timetable that felt like a map written in a language I almost, but not quite, understood. I learned quickly that invisibility and hypervisibility can coexist. I desired to be noticed, to be recognised. I wanted to be seen, at least by God. All I was seen as was a reduced version of the condition I had found myself in.

When we returned after summer, we were in Third Year. No exams had marked the transition; we had simply been moved along. I found out that progression in the early years was automatic.

However, in English class, I was to be assessed on my grasp of the language, and I was asked to write a short story. I wrote an exciting and dramatic story about a vivid dream in which I was an ingenious scientist. My research had gone terribly wrong, and my experiment had turned into a giant purple monster. The night before, I had watched the Spider-Man movie, and my imagination was bursting with ideas.

The next day, I was moved to another class. I wondered if my teacher wasn't so pleased with my taste in genre.

In the next class, I wrote a more careful story about my bus journey from London to Glasgow, amongst the chaos of travelling with an eclectic group of people, namely my family. Instinctively aware that this was something I could do well and enjoyed doing, even if I did not fully understand the system I was in, I shaped my writing to what I thought was required of me. The next day, this teacher too moved me to another class.

And again, the following week.

Then again.

Each time I was moved, I felt displaced and continuously tested. No teacher was willing to receive me.

Eventually, I was placed into what they called the top general class. Not the highest stream, there was still a ceiling I was not expected to reach, but higher than where I had begun. It was a middle space of compromise where I was to stay.

My desk was at the front near the door declaring their interest in my wellbeing, but it appeared to be a covert coping mechanism to ameliorate their anxiety about my perplexing persona. Perhaps, it was the teacher's way of being available to me.

Months passed. Mrs Thompson often remarked that the class was too large, that one teacher could not manage so many students. Another pupil, especially one who might need 'extra help' was not ideal. I began to feel that I was part of the surplus she had in mind. I was a complication.

They determined I could not be moved to the 'credit' class. It was decided, quietly and without discussion, that 'general' was sufficient. Good enough for someone with English as their second language. Sensible, even, for someone like me.

I trusted their judgment. Teachers, I believed, knew where you belonged.

But then I began to notice a disparity.

The girl beside me, lovely, kind eyes, maybe even a friend, consistently received C grades in her essays. She would turn to me for help, asking me

to read her work, and at times to correct it. There were some grammar mistakes, and she often wrote 'were' when she meant 'where' – a mistake shaped by her accent. This was interchangeable to her ear, identical in the Scottish intonation and indistinguishable in sound. I approached this sensitively, privately explaining the errors. I don't think there was much improvement.

Meanwhile, I was receiving A grades in my essay writing. Yet, I was being considered as the one in need, someone limited. I felt I was certainly far from being linguistically perfect. I still needed help with interpretation, navigating unfamiliar literature and cultural contexts. My analysis could deepen, to comprehend the meaning behind the written word and to find my critical voice. That need, nevertheless, went largely unmet. It seemed that the system could distinguish my deficiency using it to discriminate against my competency.

Building up the courage to ask for guidance, I was often met with impatience, or at times simply absence. The teacher, already stretched, did not seem inclined to invest more time or effort than necessary. I was managing, and that was enough. Even in my expectations, I felt limited. For two years, I remained in that unhopeful seat.

I did not want to be moved again. The instability of those early weeks had taught me how fragile placement could be. There was comfort in knowing where to go, in sitting beside someone familiar, in not having to begin again. But I also wanted more. I wanted to be taught. I knew I could improve and I wanted to receive direction. Time and time again, my quiet effort and persistence went unnoticed.

I, too, became accustomed to the indifference I was subjected to. I worked harder than I knew how to name. Education, for me, was not inconsequential. In Pakistan, it had been something we fought for, something my parents sacrificed for, something earned and something deeply valued. It carried weight, respect and dignity and my embodied hope for a better and brighter future. Here, it was free and, to many around me, seemingly optional. Or perhaps that was just the story I told myself to make sense of the gap. My commitment to learning even in the absence of adequate support refused to internalise these constrained circumstances.

When Standard Grade exams drew closer, I needed to prove myself. I achieved the highest marks in English reading and speaking. My writing, moderated across the board, placed me in the credit band, just enough to shift my overall grade beyond what had been expected of a 'general'

student. This opened a door for me, allowing me to move into Higher English, bypassing the intermediate trajectory that had seemed, for a long time, inevitable.

From there, things began to change, slowly. I went on to take five Highers. I joined the school choir performing in a few school shows. I found my way into an after-school literary group and submitted a poem to a teenage magazine – and they published it. I joined the Air Cadets and was promoted to Cadet Seargent, going on national and international trips, sometimes being the only one representing Scotland in foreign settings. Who would have imagined a brown girl, who didn't embody the part, representing a white man's country she wasn't born in?

Nonetheless, achievement did not immediately translate into belonging. At St Margaret's, many of my peers were second- or third-generation Irish or Italian immigrants. I thought faith would be common ground upon which I could establish friendships. In my naïve optimism, I attended morning Mass, in the hope of finding a fellow student with similar interests. I observed that faith was a quiet and reserved practice, I could even say it was at times only a cultural practice. While I had lived in Pakistan with constant awareness of the fragility of being a Christian, the students around me treated faith as a ritual obligation and not a lived, interrogated experience. I, by contrast, would ask questions in Religious Education class, seeking deeper understanding: Why do we pray this way? How does this Church teaching apply to real life? The teacher would often seem uninterested or unequipped to answer, insisting instead that we reproduce what was in the textbook without question. Nobody helped me understand the subtle cultural codes in how faith was expressed. My zeal for inquiry made me stand out and further reinforced my outsider status. I felt isolated. I was the tallest and oldest altar server in my parish, a clear sign that I was not only outgrowing my alb but also past the age when it is socially acceptable to be associated with the Christian faith. The one thing I thought might bridge the gap, my Christian faith in a Christian country, became the very thing that separated me more. I longed for connection and often found that the cultural and social frameworks within the school, designed around uniformity and conformity, did not provide space for my difference to be understood or valued.

Friendships eventually came through my extra-curricular interests. It wasn't easy or sudden, however. I began to find companionship among,

on the fringes, individuals who in different ways, did not quite fit or belong at the centre of our social world. Like me.

And somewhere in all of this, I began to understand that recognition and belonging do not always come when anticipated. Sometimes it is delayed, filtered through assumption, restrained by systems that cannot quite see you clearly. Neither is recognition entirely withheld. It blooms in its own time, like an uncovering of a possibility that that was nearby all along, and I was unearthing it through my small group of friends.

I was still on the outside. But I was no longer alone.

Theological reflection

The classroom, wider social imagination and forced neediness

The classroom is not a self-contained social world. As, I reluctantly recall that moment when I was named, exposed and quietly diminished, the impression of it lingers in my memory as a naming ceremony. Carelessly announced by a classmate, 'She's a refugee' seemed capable of explaining my presence because the category already carried meanings beyond the encounter. A single label named my circumstances of displacement and confidently organised expectations about my dependency and difference. The laughter, the fixed gaze and the announcement all participated in a form of symbolic exclusion. I was positioned as Other and marked by lack. Although, refugee identity need not be shameful, and recognising displacement may be necessary for protection and support, there was a stigma around the word.

Naming is never neutral. To name is to locate; to define. In Scripture, names carry ontological significance. They shape how one is known and how one comes to know oneself (cf. Gen 17:5; Isa 43:1). Christian theology of divine recognition challenges the assumption that an imposed description can express personhood. God addresses Israel through the assurance: 'I have called you by name, you are mine' (Isa 43:1). Read within its covenantal setting, the passage offers me a declaration of self-worth and a theological language through which to resist the assumption that a social description defines my identity. This divine naming explains a deeper, quieter truth about who I am, more than my status as refugee, migrant or outsider.

This resistance is grounded more broadly in the understanding established in *Gaudium et spes* that insists that every human person is inviolably created in God's image and possesses an inherent dignity, regardless of status or circumstance. This dignity cannot be reduced to utility, category or social function.[2] Daniel Groody similarly makes the *imago Dei* central to a theology of migration challenging divisions that obscure the humanity of migrants and refugees.[3]

Moreover, *Gaudium et spes* places this affirmation alongside an account of human beings as inherently social.[4] Dignity and relationship belong together acknowledging that the refugee person is neither reducible to a status or academic performance nor able to flourish apart from others. Without this, a distortion of right relation is manifested, where the other is not seen truthfully. The difficulty arises when the term 'refugee' displaces attention to the person it describes. Read alongside Simone Weil's account of attention as integral to love of neighbour, the narrative suggests that failing to see another person beyond a social category is a failure to recognise their dignity.[5] The classroom scene set out above reveals a failure of recognition. The classroom encounter affected the relationships through which my dignity could be acknowledged and exercised. To affirm that I remained known by God is therefore also to question arrangements that made me known chiefly as a problem, an exception or a mere recipient of aid. I was perceived chiefly through deficiency: grasp of language, cultural difference and educational shortfall. A merely consolatory response that reassures the excluded pupil that she remains valued by God, is therefore insufficient. Catholic teaching intensifies this enquiry without making Catholic schooling uniquely responsible for the problem. A community's participation in wider social assumptions must be assessed alongside the resources it possesses for resisting them. Its professed understanding of the person creates responsibilities that benevolent intention alone cannot fulfil.

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[2] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, December 7, 1965, §12.

[3] Daniel G. Groody, "Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees," *Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2009): 643–44.

[4] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, §12.

[5] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951), 114–15.

The refugee status seemed to make dependency readily understood while leaving other dimensions of identity less anticipated. My capacities and my intellectual abilities were not fully recognised or trusted, despite clear evidence of academic competence. I was Christian, academically capable, uncertain, ambitious and in need of assistance. However, these aspects were unequal to the weight it carried in the classroom. The narrative expresses this through the coexistence of visibility and invisibility. I was conspicuous as a refugee while remaining less visible as a pupil with abilities, questions and aspirations. My experience invites examination of how those meanings entered the room and shaped what could readily be understood about me. I was identified but did not feel known.

This paradox echoes Hagar's story in Genesis, where she names God as *El Roi*, the God who sees (Gen 16:13). To be seen by God is to be recognised in one's full humanity. This divine seeing exposes the partial and distorted ways in which I was perceived within the institution. Catholic social teaching offers human dignity as a necessary corrective to reductive naming. Dignity must also be socially mediated and institutionally recognised. In my case, dignity remained intact in principle. It was not consistently affirmed in practice. The gap between Christian doctrine and lived reality discloses a critical tension within institutional habits: the ease with which dignity is professed, and the difficulty with which it is enacted.

Holmes and Castañeda's analysis of representations of the European refugee crisis offers a helpful comparison. They examine how media and political discourse distinguishes the 'deserving refugee' from the 'un-deserving migrant', shifting responsibility away from historical political and economic structures and towards displaced people themselves.[6] Their study concerns a different setting but nevertheless provides an interpretive resource for questioning the assumption that the classroom simply encountered a neutral description. It shows that the social pattern already existed outside the school environment and was mirrored in the classroom setting. Yet, its practices had the authority to reinforce, modify or interrupt assumptions brought into it. This question shifts the distinction to situated responsibility of the educational establishment where ordinary encounters and decisions participate in wider diminution of the refugee person to need.

[6] Seth M. Holmes and Heide Castañeda, "Representing the 'European Refugee Crisis' in Germany and Beyond: Deservingness and Difference, Life and Death," *American Ethnologist* 43, no. 1 (2016): 13.

Likewise, I was not seen as a credible source of knowledge in my own right. I was positioned as someone whose knowledge required mediation. Miranda Fricker's account of testimonial injustice offers a qualified comparison. She identifies the wrong that occurs when prejudice leads the hearer to give a speaker less credibility than she deserves, thereby wronging her in her capacity as a knower.[7] The narrative cannot establish that each placement decision involves such prejudice. It does, however question if my knowledge of my own learning was taken seriously. My ability to help a classmate, alongside my request for more demanding guidance, complicated assumptions and centred my identity on linguistic limitation.

'Forced neediness' names this reduction. Human life involves dependence, and education necessarily includes relationships of assistance. However, the reduction mentioned is more than a synonym for vulnerability, dependence or material deprivation. When the specific needs of a person become a defining identity that tapers their standing as an interpreter, participant and contributor, the issue arises there. As much as assistance is readily available, forced neediness presents organisation of support around expectations that are insufficiently responsive to the person.

The childbirth scene at the beginning of the narrative deepens the theological reading. The exposed, uncontrolled body on the screen becomes a mirror through which the teenage girl interprets her own experience of being forced into neediness. An implicit analogy emerges here with the Christian understanding of vulnerability. Christ's entry into radical exposure in Philippians 2:7–8 is a voluntary self-emptying in love. The girl's experience of vulnerability is an imposed and unjust stripping enacted by systems and structures. Judith Butler's account of precarity draws attention to how failing social and economic networks of support expose certain populations to heightened vulnerability and harm.[8] The school context falls short in mediating practices of attention, cultural sensitivity and pedagogical investment.

As much as the term 'refugee' can operate socially as a shorthand for deficit, dependence and disruption, the wider consideration of refugee lives is persistently presumed as needy. Thus, 'forced neediness' describes

[7] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 1, 20.

[8] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Verso, 2009), 25.

an imposed social location produced by society, culture and institutional practice. These forces shape whose dignity is readily recognised and whose is conditional. Schools rarely invent such meanings. They reproduce and naturalise them. Schools translate public culture and policy into the grammar by which certain lives are understood as burdens, risks or exceptions. The migrant child is pressed to prove belonging in a society that has already made belonging conditional. Read alongside Leah E. Robinson's discussion of disinheritance in Scottish practical theology, the narrative raises questions about exclusion from the relationships and opportunities through which full participation becomes possible.[9] Consequently, there are three complications that become visible in the account. Refugee status first provides an apparently comprehensive explanation of the pupil. Uncertainty about language and cultural familiarity then appears to influence expectations of broader capacity. Finally, those expectations become difficult to question because the pupil does not understand how decisions are made or reconsidered. The right response would be a kind of balanced assistance that remains open to revision by the recipient's knowledge, capacities and aspirations.

One possible explanation is that these movements emerge through limited time, established routines and assumptions that appear reasonable to those employing them. Their significance lies in the relationship they produce: the institution identifies the need, determines its meaning and supplies the response, while the person receiving support has limited influence over that interpretation.

Educational expectation and the common good

The repeated changes of English class and eventual placement disclose the institutional production of educational limitation. Each move displaced me further, partly because their purpose remained unclear to me. The decisions were based on reasoning that I could not understand and consequences I did not know how to challenge. The final placement offered stability. Still, stability and intellectual development must not be considered as competing entities. I was measured against an expectation already lowered by my status as a refugee pupil with English as an additional language. I desired

[9] Leah E. Robinson, "Practical Theology in Scotland: Embracing Disinheritance," *Practical Theology* 10, no. 3 (2017): 221–35.

familiar faces and more challenging teaching. A system attentive primarily to finding a suitable class was missing the educational need that persisted within it. The categorisation did not necessarily hold me back from succeeding. It perpetuated systemic conditions under which success became less expected.

Placement decisions, lack of tailored support and low expectations suggest a systemic failure to recognise and cultivate potential. My experience raises the question of whether the structures around me were oriented towards my flourishing. A Catholic understanding of education cannot treat the migrant child as an administrative complication. The common good requires social arrangements that enable all persons to flourish, including those whose gifts are least easily recognised by dominant cultural expectations. The common good was unevenly distributed. It was accessible to some and only partially available to others like myself.[10] Thus, care became detached from authentic accompaniment. What appeared as support formed a fractured gaze: an institutional courtesy capable of registering need, yet not capable of discerning the particular form of need that would enable deeper flourishing. This begets a breakdown of pedagogy and pastoral imagination, where differences are processed and not received.

Gravissimum educationis understands education in relation to the development of the person's physical, moral and intellectual capacities and to participation in social life.[11] The common good similarly concerns the social conditions through which persons and groups can pursue their fulfilment.[12] In practice, these commitments direct attention beyond whether a pupil has been placed somewhere manageable to whether the arrangements enable her development. Were language needs distinguished from wider ability? Could placement be reviewed? Did I understand the opportunities available to me? Forced neediness emerges where presumed limitation becomes a reason to settle for less where it is essential to identify more precisely what would enable learning.

The teacher's comments about class size complicate any account centred around individual blame. Recognition partly depends on the conditions under which teachers work, including the organisation of provision and

[10] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), §§164–70.

[11] Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum educationis*, October 28, 1965, §§1, 5.

[12] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium*, §§164–70.

the time available for assistance. A critique attributing every failure to individual indifference would overlook pressures visible within the story. Responsibility thus extends beyond the classroom, even while becoming personally consequential within it.

Schools may become overly concerned with dispensing assessment, classification or efficient administration, while producing practices that remain insufficiently responsive to the person they are intended to serve. A stable and settled placement can resolve an organisational question while leaving an educational question unanswered: What would enable this pupil to develop? Although I do not claim that efficiency motivated the teacher's decisions on my behalf, the narrative does invite scrutiny of what happens when an administratively workable arrangement is treated as an adequate educational response.

Furthermore, my eventual progression cannot establish that the earlier arrangements were adequate, or whether opportunities were unnecessarily restricted or the right to attentive education depends on exceptional attainment. A pupil with less successful examination results would have the same claim to dignity, appropriate teaching and participation. The critique would then replace one conditional identity with another: belonging granted only to the needy refugee who proves herself.

Shared faith and reciprocal belonging

The teacher's surprise that Christians lived in Pakistan unsettled my expectation that a Catholic school would provide an immediately recognisable home. I arrived as someone seeking safety. I was also bringing a faith shaped by minority existence and social vulnerability. In contexts such as Pakistan, Christian identity is often lived under conditions of marginality and pressure, with limited access to quality education and systemic discrimination in schools and curricula.[13] This heightened my hope that Catholic schooling might provide common ground for shared faith. This was not something I had readily anticipated. As such it revealed the fragility of cultural Christianity. What I found instead was a religious culture that could mistake faith for inherited ritual rather than interrogated commitment. The school that receives the refugee child as a bearer of

[13] Open Doors International, *World Watch List 2026: Pakistan Country Dossier*, 2026, 2–3.

divine dignity must recognise that they may bring a different depth of faith experience. The disappointment that followed names a deeper theological recognition: solidarity requires thoughtfulness, interpretive patience and receptivity to lived faith beyond cultural continuity.[14] Daniel Groody expands this notion that migration reveals both the wounds of division and the hope of communion.[15] Shared Catholic identity did not automatically generate solidarity and institutional affiliation alone was not adequate for belonging. Christian tradition insists that the stranger is neighbour. The stranger's need to belong must be interpreted within a horizon of shared humanity and mutual responsibility. It must cultivate its capacity to receive the stranger's faith as living, questioning and transformative and whose reception is a measure of communal faithfulness.

On reflection, the events are recorded as how it appeared from within an experience of isolation. They do not determine the depth or authenticity of other pupils' beliefs. The theological question is not whether my Catholicism was more genuine, but why different histories and expressions of shared faith did not graciously become occasions for encounter. A critique of misrecognition must itself resist reducing others to the categories through which I first understood them.

Gravissimum educationis identifies the distinctive vocation of the Catholic school with a community animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity.[16] Catholic identity therefore places demands on a community to make room for religious experience beyond familiar cultural forms. Here, the language of welcoming the stranger requires special care. Hospitality becomes one-sided if established members remain permanently cast as hosts and newcomers permanently cast as guests. I was unfamiliar with the school, but not with Christian faith. I needed assistance navigating the institution and I brought questions and experience that could contribute to its religious life. This concern with participation rather than reception alone connects the present reflection with my earlier writing on parish belonging.[17]

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[14] Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, §44.

[15] Groody, "Crossing the Divide," 638–67.

[16] Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum educationis*, §8.

[17] Mishal Francis, "A Place in the Parish," *Open House Scotland*, no. 316, April 4, 2024.

Shared faith must welcome pupils of other faiths or none and understand that they possess the same human dignity. The Catholic setting reveals a particular contra-diction when a refugee pupil's religious experience remains peripheral within a community that professes a faith she shares. Here, forced neediness can obscure ecclesial as well as academic agency. The refugee person's need for support is recognisable whilst her capacity to contribute to the community's understanding of faith is neglected.

The right response would recognise the refugee as a bearer of gifts even after her dependence has been overcome. I could receive assistance and contribute to communal life. Helping a classmate with writing, asking theological questions and participating in music disclosed dimensions of personhood that a deficit-centred interpretation fails to accommodate. The relationship between personal experience, gifts and vocation also connects with my earlier autobiographical writing.[18]

I would make a distinction here that the language of giftedness can itself become conditional. If refugee pupils are welcomed because they demonstrate exceptional resilience, academic success or religious commitment, recognition remains tied to performance. The argument remains that my needs do not define my identity, and that neither achievement nor usefulness should have been required to establish my place. Recognition asks the community to receive both without requiring either exceptional resilience or conspicuous usefulness.

Gifts, agency and the refusal of conditional worth

The friendships described at the narrative's close offer a different experience of participation. Through shared activities, I encountered belonging among those who were themselves on the edges. Paul's account of the body provides a theological image for this interdependence: those members regarded as weaker are indispensable. This alternative vision for community, though fragile, can offer mutual recognition and shared vulnerability. It challenges any division between people understood principally as providers and those understood principally as recipients (1

[18] Mishal Francis, "Fire in My Heart: A Young Pakistani Woman Discovers Her Vocation," in *Visions and Vocations: The Catholic Women Speak Network*, ed. Tina Beattie and Diana Culbertson (Paulist Press, 2018), 88–91.

Cor 12:22). It declines the notion that marginalised people must prove their usefulness and reinforces that a community misunderstands itself when it discounts its members.

Moreover, neither perseverance nor friendship should make the barriers appear acceptable. My agency persisted within constraint; that did not excuse the school's responsibilities. These relationships disclosed possibilities of cultivating recognition and belonging within the school and the wider society of which it was part, without resolving the institutional conditions that had made belonging difficult.

Suggestions towards a pedagogy of recognition

A response to forced neediness must change how support is interpreted and organised. A pedagogy of recognition is one situated response that suggests four connected commitments.

First, introductions should respect pupils' participation in describing themselves. Although, displacement may be relevant to understanding their circumstances, it should not become their defining public identity.

Second, assessment should distinguish unfamiliarity with language, literature or curriculum from judgements about broader capacity. Placement decisions should be explained and revisited with pupils, while support should develop strengths as well as address difficulties.

Third, religious education and pastoral care should make room for questions and experiences arising beyond familiar cultural settings. The newcomer must be able to contribute to the community's life whilst learning how established members participate.

Finally, belonging must not depend on evident achievement. A pupil requiring sustained assistance must be received as fully as one whose accomplishments become publicly visible.

The wider implication concerns how communities understand need. Refugee needs require attentive interpretation. Those receiving support must be able to question its assumptions and influence its form. Recognition requires the community to remain open to being corrected by the person it seeks to assist.

Conclusion

'Forced neediness' describes what happens when recognition of need becomes reduction to need. In this account, a classroom naming, educat-

ional uncertainty and cultural unfamiliarity made presumed dependency a persistent framework for understanding the refugee child. The classroom may not have originated that framework; it did nonetheless become a place where wider assumptions could acquire practical force. Assistance was present; the difficulty was that the refugee's capacities did not consistently reshape the interpretation of her needs.

This retrospective narrative exposes the tension Catholic education must confront: that support can coexist with practices that obscure agency and narrow participation. The school is neither the sole bearer of that tension nor exempt from responsibility for its local enactment. Its Catholic identity offers resources for this resistance. Dignity, the common good and reciprocal belonging require more than benevolent inclusion. It is imperative to question institutional practices that allow the person's capacities, questions and aspirations to reshape how her needs are understood. The response refuses to replace the 'needy refugee' with the 'gifted refugee', making contribution another test of worth. The response must recognise that needs and gifts belong to the same person. Dignity is neither bestowed by the institution nor earned through achievement; it places concrete demands on institutional life. The child named 'refugee' must also be recognised as Mishal: a pupil, a believer, a friend and a person whose future exceeds the categories through which she first became known.