

Teaching and learning about refugees

There are about 13 million refugees in the world today and over 25 million internally displaced within their own country. There may be over 100,000 refugee and asylum seeker children in schools across the UK. In their 2003 report *The education of asylum-seeker pupils*, Ofsted found that schools had responded positively to their arrival. They also found that school staff and pupils had gained a great deal personally and professionally from their contact and work with them.

Despite the very positive work of schools, the media have predominantly portrayed refugees and asylum seekers negatively and many young refugees have talked about their experiences of racism in the UK. Research undertaken by MORI's Social Research Institute in 2003 revealed that young people's views of asylum-seekers and refugees might be largely negative. However, many young people said they would like to find out more about asylum-seekers and refugees, suggesting that they have not been able to access accurate information.

Teachers need to respond to this challenge. The Race Relations (Amendment) Act introduced a new general duty upon schools, educational institutions and local education authorities to promote race equality. They must aim to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and promote good relations between people of different racial groups. Teachers can tackle racism by challenging the myths that denigrate refugee children. All children will benefit.

Good practice

Schools are increasingly developing curriculum work that involves the study of refugees and other related human rights and global issues. Work has been developed across curriculum subjects, particularly, though not exclusively, in expressive arts subjects, PSHE, Citizenship and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD).

When teaching about refugees, teachers should be aware that the classes they teach may have children from a refugee background in them. They may have suffered traumatic events that are not easily discussed openly. They may also be still worried about family members left behind, or feel insecure in the UK if still awaiting a decision if they can stay. Indeed there are many reasons why teachers need to be sensitive to refugee pupils and be careful to tackle refugee issues without singling them out. However, many refugee pupils appreciate increased awareness and understanding about their experiences. Some benefit from opportunities to share their own experiences either with their teacher or fellow pupils.

Teaching about asylum and refugees can also be seen as controversial. There may be negative feelings held by other pupils about refugees that can impact on pupil confidence and participation. Teachers must be ready to create a safe and supportive environment for any pupils who may be unsettled by the issues discussed. Regular displays about life in refugee-producing countries and visits by refugee speakers can be helpful. It is also important to ensure that curriculum work provides opportunities for pupils to read or hear the testimony of refugees so that those who flee are humanised and empathy can be developed.

Teachers will find it helpful to plan for active and collaborative learning. Lesson activities can encourage pupils to communicate and co-operate with each other, facilitating the safe exploration of their values and the values of others. Throughout the lessons it is important that pupils should feel able to express themselves freely and talk about the issues without feeling that they have to say the 'right thing'. This is particularly relevant for those who live in communities where the 'asylum issue' is something that they feel very strongly about.

Supporting the positive identity and self-esteem of all pupils is central to how issues of cultural diversity should be introduced. Young peoples' own cultural backgrounds, linguistic heritage and experiences need to be explicitly valued throughout the work. Therefore, teachers should plan initial activities that can develop trust and understanding. Drama can play a role, particularly for the explicit teaching of social and communication skills, and developing activities that promote empathy. Information that increases understanding of refugee issues, critical reading of the media and extension activities that promote responsible action can then be further developed.

"Collaborative strategies... seek to gain the active co-operation of young people so as to engage them in genuine dialogue. For this to happen, they need to feel their own experiences are respected and their views listened to.

Dialogue of any kind rests on an implicit understanding between both sides to communicate in good faith and group leaders must, therefore, show themselves willing to understand the young people's position if they wish them in turn to be prepared to consider alternative viewpoints."

Education for Citizenship, Diversity and Race Equality: A practical guide, The Citizenship Foundation and me too, 2003

Teachers can also involve their classes in celebrating Refugee Week. Refugee Week is a nation-wide programme of events that celebrate cultural diversity and promote understanding about the reasons why people seek sanctuary. It is an opportunity to tell people about the contributions that refugees have made to British society. Refugee Week can provide a focus for schools to learn about refugees and celebrate their contributions to life in this country. During Refugee Week, schools organise activities, displays and assemblies. Some schools collaborate with artists, theatre groups and writers and put on special events for children and parents. This is a good time to involve parents in school activities.

Frequently asked questions

How can I persuade colleagues to teach about refugees in an already crowded curriculum?

Learning about refugees links closely with National Curriculum Programmes of Study across many subject areas. For example in English it can promote speaking, listening, analytical and debating skills in English and provide a rich source to non-fiction study. It resources important historical topics such as the era of the second world war and the Holocaust, the growth of multi-ethnic Britain and the Arab and Israeli conflict. Religious education can address persecution because of religious beliefs, and examine many of the religious and moral dilemmas of a multi-ethnic society. Studying refugees helps pupils to understand how they are linked to other nations through migration, encourages positive attitudes towards cultural diversity and enables pupils to explore themes demanded in the Citizenship Education Programme of Study or in ESD. These themes include justice, human rights, identity and global sustainability. The prevalence of myths about asylum seekers provides real opportunities for engaging young people in critical analysis.

How can I promote Refugee Week in our school for the first time?

Refugee Week usually takes place in June. The Refugee Week website is given below. It provides information and guidance for teachers and schools, along with information about Refugee Week events in local areas. The website also provides free downloadable curriculum resources that you can adapt for your school. Refugee Week is celebrated in many schools and it is worth enquiring of other schools in your vicinity to see if they have successful curriculum initiatives to share, or want to link up with you to plan a joint activity. [Local Authority Ethnic Minority Achievement Services](#) often play a coordinating role.

Authors

Bill Bolloten
Tim Spafford

Last updated 24th September 2005

Key readings

Aegis Institute (2003) *Refuge: learning about refugees with refugees - a citizenship education project*. Nottingham : The Aegis Institute (www.refugeproject.com)

- The pack covers the key skills in Key Stages 3 and 4 Citizenship Curriculum, and the Key Stage 4 Respect For All Curriculum: Migration in Britain. It also includes many opportunities for cross-curricular links. It can be used as a modular programme or separate individual units. The video/DVD resources are suitable for Year 9 upwards, while the written materials are targeted for Year 10 students.

Donnellan, C. (Ed.) (2004) *Refugees*. London : Independence Educational Publishers.

- Using the latest statistics and news, this book looks at the current refugee situation, both in the UK and around the world.

Ellis, D. (2004) *The Breadwinner* Oxford : Oxford University Press

- In Afghanistan Parvana's father is arrested and taken away by the Taliban soldiers. Under Taliban law, women and girls are not allowed to leave home. Parvana, her mother and sisters must stay inside. Four days later, the food runs out. They face starvation. So Parvana must pretend to be a boy. It is a dangerous plan, but their only chance. In fear she goes out - and witnesses the horror of avoiding landmines, and the brutality of the Taliban. She suffers beatings and the desperation of trying to survive. But even in despair lies hope ...

Hoffman, M. (2003) *The Colour of Home*. London : Frances Lincoln Ltd

- The story of Hassan's first day at an English school, after his family flee the war in Somalia. It

describes his sadness, and how the school helps him to feel welcome and settled. A beautiful picture book, suitable for ages 5 – 11.

Mitchell, P. (2004) *Petar's Song*. London : Frances Lincoln Ltd. (Key stages 2 and 3.)

A family become refugees in the Balkans. Illustrated storybook for key stage 2.

Naidoo, B. (2000) *The Other Side of Truth*. London : Puffin

- A fast and vivid account of a family's flight from threat and murder seen through the eyes of 12 year old Sade and her 10 year old brother Femi. It traces their frightening experiences in both Nigeria and England. Suitable for key stage 2 and 3.

Rosselson, L. (2002) *Home is a Place called Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

- 'Amina has run away from the only home she has ever known. Alone and frightened, she is determined to find her real mother.' The story of a young refugee's attempt to find her real story. Suitable for key stage 2 and 3.

Rutter, J. (2004) *Refugees: We left because we had to* (3rd Edition). London : Refugee Council

- This comprehensive citizenship teaching resource for 11-18 year olds is packed with guidance for teachers, lesson plans, illustrated refugee testimony and information.

Rutter, J. (1998) *Refugees: A Resource Book for Primary Schools*. London : Refugee Council

- A popular resource book for 5 - 11 year olds containing activities, personal testimonies and background information. Invaluable for teachers wishing to cover refugee issues as part of Citizenship, English, History, Geography, Religious Education and other subjects. Comes with a Journey to Safety game.

Show Racism the RED Card (2004) *A Safe Place: Video and Education Pack*. [Orders through the Red Card website: www.TheRedCard.org]

- The video features young asylum seekers talking about their experiences of seeking asylum in the UK. Also featured on the video are Gary Lineker, Thierry Henry, Shaka Hislop, Lomana Lua Lua, Shola Ameobi, Sven Goran Eriksson and Ashley Cole. The video also features a quiz on asylum aimed at combating racist myths. The accompanying education pack provides guidance on using the video in classroom and outlines links to several curriculum areas including Citizenship, English, History, RE and PSHE. A range of follow-up activities are also provided.

Spafford, T., Bolloten, B., McAusland, R. (2004) *I am here! Teaching about refugees, identity, inclusion and the media: a Citizenship / PSHE resource pack for 11 to 14 year olds*. London : Save the Children.

- This teachers' pack provides lesson plans, a video of young refugees' testimony and other resource materials to raise awareness amongst indigenous school populations about diversity and refugees. It includes a one-hour training programme to raise teachers' confidence teaching about refugees.

Westminster Education Action Zone's Refugee Achievement Project (2004) *A Welcome Experience: A PSHE/Citizenship programme of work for Key Stages 1 & 2*. London : School Effectiveness / Westminster LEA.

- The aim of the programme is to address the refugee experience through the mainstream primary curriculum. Themes dealt with include the importance of family, friends and home, similarities and differences between people and welcoming newcomers thus making the programme relevant to all children. The booklet consists of tried and tested lesson plans with accompanying photocopiable activity sheets plus ideas for additional activities. Each lesson is illustrated with examples of work by Westminster pupils.

Wilkes, S. (1995) *One Day We Had to Run!* London : Evans Brothers Ltd

- Refugee children tell their stories in words and paintings.

Zephaniah, B. (2001) *Refugee Boy*. London : Bloomsbury Publishing

- The story of Alem, a 14 year old refugee who has come to live in England. His mother is Eritrean and his father Ethiopian, and with both countries at war, he is welcome in neither place. A thought provoking book, useful for discussion from year 6 onwards, and for teacher background information.

Online Resources

<http://www.icar.org.uk/>

Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees website to promote understanding of asylum and refugees.

<http://www.nc.uk.net/esd/index.htm>

QCA Education for Sustainable Development website includes some useful case studies of work on learning about refugees - Fortress Europe ks3 - http://www.nc.uk.net/esd/teaching/case_studies/case_study_q.htm and

<http://www.refugeeweek.org.uk>

The Refugee Week website provides information and advice on organizing Refugee Week activities. Free educational resources are also available for download, including the RAP– Refugee Activity Pack and Making the Difference.

<http://www.asylumsupport.info/publications/savethechildren/viewsofchildren.htm>

Save the Children Scotland/Scottish Refugee Council (2002) I Didn't Come Here For Fun...Listening to the Views of Children and Young People who are Refugees or Asylum-Seekers in Scotland. Edinburgh: Save the Children

<http://www.unhcr.org.uk/info/resources/teachtools.html>

A range of resources are available from the UNHCR office in London.

They include:

- Teachers' guides and films
- Lesson plans
- Magazines and booklets
- Posters and display materials
- Videos

Copyright NALDIC 2011