

# Perspectives

## SUPPORTING SCHOOLS TO TEACH ABOUT REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

**Liz Hibberd**

**Abstract:** This article outlines research undertaken as part of an MA dissertation. It shares how classroom practitioners feel in relation to teaching about refugees and asylum seekers and what further exploration uncovered in terms of the cause of those feelings, as well as what support and resources they would need to feel more confident and able to deliver lessons in the area. It also outlines findings around the relevance and suitability of resources created by Development Education Centres (DECs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), particularly in terms of developing critical thinking skills, signposting curriculum links as well as how they can be used in the classroom. A positive outcome of the research was identifying whether the resources had a focus on viewing through different lenses, addressing stereotypes and understanding difference.

**Key words:** Refugee; Asylum seeker; Teaching resources; Teacher confidence; Learning about and from; Perspectives.

### Introduction

The world is experiencing movement of people on a scale never seen before. There are around 65 million people displaced from their homes (Refugee Council, n.d) and around 25 million refugees globally (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2017). All of these people are seeking safety in places they weren't born in as a result of ongoing conflict, persecution and poverty (HEC Global Learning Centre, n.d). Therefore, understanding and engaging with refugees and the surrounding issues is arguably more important than ever.

Despite the fact that asylum applications fell eight per cent in the United Kingdom (UK) in the year ending March 2018, with around only 26,000 applications made (with approximately 14,166 grants of asylum made) (Home Office, 2018), there is still a great deal of anti-immigration rhetoric. For example, the advertising strategy of the Leave campaign during the UK European Union (EU) referendum where billboards depicting long lines of refugees were used to promote the benefits of leaving the EU. Added to this, the regular headlines some tabloid newspapers use to ‘stir up’ negative feeling towards those that come to the UK seeking safety and a better life. The Daily Mail, for example, recently ran these headlines in their online edition: ‘Refugees a drain on UK, think young’ (Daily Mail Online, 2018a) and ‘Refugee minorities more prone to terrorism’, (Daily Mail Online, 2018b). Halliday in The Guardian found that over a three-year period the Daily Mail and the Daily Express used the term ‘illegal’ when writing about migration ten per cent of the time (Halliday, 2013). However, at the end of 2014, just 0.24 per cent of the population in the UK was a refugee – an estimated 117,161 people in total (Institute of Race Relations, n.d) - and yet refugees are viewed as a burden on an already overstretched and failing benefits system, a threat to security and a peril to the British identity (Devereux, 2017). An 89 per cent increase in reported hate crimes in schools after the EU referendum (Busby, 2017) highlights the negative feelings that a large proportion of the UK feel towards the ‘other’ (Said, 1978), with many refugees and asylum seeking children reporting instances of racial harassment including spitting, verbal abuse and physical attacks at school and around their home (Hek, 2005).

It is, therefore, likely that children in schools will have an opinion about refugees and asylum seekers irrespective of whether or not they have ever met, let alone interacted with one. Schools, therefore, are ideally placed to create spaces where opinions and ideas can be shared, questions asked and discussed, and dialogue around more sensitive and potentially controversial issues can take place.

The focus for this small-scale study came from my personal interest and experience as a primary teacher and a long-term volunteer in the Calais Jungle refugee camp. Whilst much work has been done on how best to support refugee and asylum-seeking children once they arrive in the UK and enrol in school (National Education Union, 2014; Rutter, 2006; Walker, 2011) there is little, if any, research on how teachers and schools engage with this issue on a day-to-day basis. For those that incorporate this topic into their practice, it often runs the risk of promoting a surface level engagement (Andreotti, 2006) that fails to unpack the key issues and does little to portray refugees and asylum seekers as anything other than a homogenous group of victims. This single story is limiting at best and damaging at worst. Initiatives like Refugee Week, Schools of Sanctuary and Refugees Welcome are moving in the right direction of positively promoting engagement with this topic, but lack a comprehensive and long-term engagement nationwide. They fail to promote a more realistic and balanced view of people seeking sanctuary and their experiences. Whilst the Global Learning Programme (GLP) (DFID, n.d.), a UK-government-funded programme that enables teachers to engage with global issues and development, is an ideal vehicle to create opportunities for interaction and exploration around this topic, its impact has been limited due to the lack of schools that have joined nationally.

### **The process of the research**

The methodology for the research was designed to collate an overview of teachers' initial feelings relating to teaching about refugees and asylum seekers, and to capture reasons for this. This was done through an anonymous online questionnaire form. A cohort of four teachers, who indicated they would be interested in being interviewed, was recruited to participate in a more in-depth interview where their answers were examined in greater detail. Alongside this, Development Education Centre (DEC) staff were interviewed and an audit of materials was undertaken. The materials were a range of teaching and learning resources created by DECs and/or NGOs, included but not limited to UNICEF's 'Unfair Tales' (2016), Amnesty International's 'Seeking Safety' (2017), Action Aid's 'What would you take' (n.d), Development Education Centre South Yorkshire (DECSY's)

‘Arrivals’ (2017) and HEC’s ‘Learning about Refugees’ (n.d). This was primarily to gain a greater awareness and understanding of the resources readily available for teachers in the public domain. The interviews and audit were designed to find out whether the materials available were fit for purpose and able to offer the teachers support to deliver well-rounded lessons that had depth and promoted critical thinking and questioning about refugees and asylum seekers. Understanding the underlying motivations and challenges placed on the material designers themselves would allow a greater understanding of any limitations of the resources and shine a light as to how they could be improved.

Having been out of mainstream teaching for several years, there was a lack of entry points in terms of finding schools and teachers to take part in the survey. This was partly resolved by contacting the DEC where I had been volunteering and requesting that they share the survey amongst their teaching networks. Simultaneously, personal contacts within education were asked to share and complete the questions and ‘cold-calling’ schools and emailing them the survey was employed. Clearly, there were limitations and issues with this method of reaching out as it did not allow the best tracking of results or ensuring that certain areas and demographics were covered. Gatekeepers in the form of receptionists could have had an impact in terms of whether or not teachers were given access to complete the survey, and of those that did, it is unclear as to how candid they were with their answers. It was hoped that by remaining anonymous, teachers would feel able to be completely honest with their answers and by self-selecting whether they worked in a diverse or non-diverse school it could show interesting trends in terms of whether teachers thought teaching and learning in this area was more or less important and necessary as a result of this.

Structured interviews with a smaller selection of teachers allowed a more in-depth analysis of opinions with the option of unpacking answers more thoroughly. Similarly, the interviews with DEC staff would illuminate key drivers and obstacles in terms of how materials are created and their focus.

## **Findings: an overview**

Despite the many limitations experienced in collating the research, it was possible to collate the information from the 49 respondents (40 teachers who completed the questionnaire, six teachers and three DEC staff members who were interviewed) and while it was impossible to draw any definitive conclusions, interesting patterns and trends did emerge. Further clarity from the interviews consolidated some of this, although much more robust research would be needed to verify this further.

### Teachers

For the most part, teachers felt refugees and asylum seekers should be welcomed in the UK (95 per cent). They felt that there was a need to teach their students about the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers and engage in discussions that challenge stereotypes and negative perceptions. This was particularly important as they recognised that many of their students had a real lack of awareness of the issues around this topic (60 per cent), with only 25 per cent of respondents feeling that their students felt positively towards this group of people. This is perhaps not the most reliable research finding, based as it is on the teachers' opinions rather than student feedback, but it could point towards teachers' perceptions and assumptions and illustrate potential biases teachers held about their students. Around 50 per cent of teachers engaged to some degree with these issues, but the key barriers for those who did not were lack of personal understanding and awareness, lack of dedicated time in the curriculum to explore this, and lack of support and guidance.

Coverage of this area in schools was patchy and lacked a cohesive and robust strategy for the most part, with almost half of the teachers questioned stating that their school did not have scheduled lessons. Delivery was seen to be *ad hoc* and dependent on the teacher, with outside speakers and one-off events making up the majority of content delivery. Teachers thought that the most important skills and attitudes needed to teach this topic well were undoubtedly an awareness of the context and issues (55.2 per cent), followed by empathy (30 per cent) and then an awareness of

background (22.5 per cent). Training in cultural competencies and questioning did not feature highly, and meeting and engaging with someone with lived experience was least important to teachers. When asked what would help them most, the majority identified resources as being the key to their confidence and ability to deliver sessions relating to refugees and asylum seekers. An interesting point to note is that the level of teachers' experience did not have a great impact on their confidence, nor did the Key Stage they were working in.

### Resources

A variety of school resources that focused on refugees and asylum seekers, created either by NGOs or Development Education Centres were audited. All resources were able to provide a way for children to access and start to engage with issues relating to refugees and asylum seekers. For the most part, the resources consisted of lesson plans, teacher notes and links to the curriculum; this alongside ease of use helping to ensure that they will be used in schools. However, there is a lack of engagement in the deeper levels of critical thinking and a failure to provide development in terms of skills and competencies. Because many of the activities and lessons are stand alone and not part of a series, there are limited opportunities for progression in understanding and awareness to take place, both for teachers and learners. This keeps the concept of refugees and asylum seekers as static, something to learn about rather than learn from or with, and it fails to recognise the connections between each other. This fails then, to dismantle the idea of refugees and asylum seekers as homogenous but rather groups them together to facilitate a generic understanding. Often the prevailing 'single story' (Adichie, 2009) is of the refugee as victim, encapsulated at this moment in time, rather than an individual with a past, present and future. The fact that few, if any, of the resources involved refugees and asylum seekers in their development, also highlights a limitation some of these resources had.

### Development Education Centres

DECs have to balance their key aims of developing critical thinking and questioning skills, as well as the ability to challenge stereotypes and negative

perceptions, while ensuring that resources are appropriate and accessible. Requiring links to the curriculum and potentially to school aims and targets as a way of creating ‘buy-in’ sometimes has the unintended result of working at the more surface level of engagement. However, a closer, personal working relationship with schools can provide an excellent way in which to develop more engaging and critical resources that upskill both teachers and students allowing more interaction and greater progression in understanding and skills.

### NGOs

NGOs have a wealth of understanding and experience engaging with people with lived experience of seeking sanctuary. They also have the funds and reach to develop excellent resources for schools. However, in order to fulfil their remit, and/or to continue to secure funds, they may have a vested interest in portraying refugees and asylum seekers in a specific way. By highlighting their struggle and their ‘need’ for support and acceptance, NGOs continue to justify the role they play and keep their existence necessary. Some of their resources, while an excellent starting point, really needed developing in order to get as much from it as possible. Teacher notes were included in some but not all and, depending on the confidence of teachers, sometimes this impacted how successful the delivery and use of the resources would be.

### Key Takeaways

In terms of the key takeaways, it can be seen that teachers and schools value and want to engage with teaching about refugees and asylum seekers. They simply need greater support to do this effectively and appropriately. A greater connection to broader global issues could ensure that schools are better able to integrate teaching and learning in this area and ‘justify’ its inclusion. This would also help to promote a deeper understanding of the complexities as well as their interconnectedness. There needs to be a whole-school commitment to engaging with this topic in order for teachers, students and parents to see its value and the importance of including it in the curriculum and school ethos. Resources exist to guide teachers. With some

amendments and adaptation, they can more easily facilitate a greater understanding of the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers as well as the differences that exist within that community.

### **Discussion: implications**

The research findings indicate a national situation that, whilst currently not ideal, is ultimately open and receptive to change. Recognition that school children need not only access and exposure to topical and global issues, but engagement and interaction with them exists, and is a key element for moving forward. For teachers and schools to ‘buy-in’, in terms of commitment, there needs to be a belief and understanding that it is useful and necessary. But this belief has limited impact without guidance and support. This is a stumbling block when thinking about the demands and pressure placed on already over-stretched teachers and over-burdened decision makers. Could a joined up provision be the answer? Curricula, resources, training and evaluation: is this what is necessary in order for teachers to deliver sessions that challenge and ask critical questions?

But this already exists and has done so for a long time. Global Citizenship Education, development education and their many guises, have been in existence since as early as 1939 (Pike in Bryan & Bracken, 2011), gaining more traction from the 1970s onwards, with programmes such as the Global Learning Programme (DFID, n.d.), Connecting Classrooms (British Council, n.d) and Send my Friend to School (n.d.), creating opportunities for schools to participate in and engage with global issues. Is it, therefore, a lack of awareness of the support available an issue, or is teachers’ personal lack of interest and confidence the biggest barrier to engagement? Half of the respondents to the survey teach about refugees and asylum seekers in some form or other and, whilst it is not clear to what extent this is a deep and critical engagement, it seemed to come from the teachers themselves. Of course, it would be useful if the school environment and ethos support the teacher and create the right atmosphere for this to happen. But, in some respects, teachers who want to will do so regardless. One teacher’s response, however, was telling: they said they would feel more confident and



competent if they had access to resources. When they were informed about the resources that existed, they said that they would prefer someone to come in and teach the sessions, highlighting a lack of confidence as a primary factor preventing this from taking place.

A lack of engagement with issues relating to refugees and asylum-seekers is not an option. The idea of upskilling teachers to interact with complex and potentially controversial and difficult topics needs to be opened up to include a wider ranging variety of topics, not just relating to refugees and asylum seekers, but also poverty, development, climate change, identity; in short a common framework for engaging with global/controversial/relevant issues is needed. Failing to address the ‘big questions’, the barriers that some children experience that prevent them accessing education – be that disability, gender, age, immigration status – the ways in which students are perceived to be ‘different’ to their peers perpetuates a ‘them’ versus ‘us’ mentality where the larger student population ‘learn about’ other people in different situations rather than ‘learning from’ or ‘learning with’ them.

The key is to see the bigger picture. Viewing and teaching about refugees and asylum seekers in isolation is not enough. Ideally, a robust framework would exist, one that is cyclical in that it links with teachers, schools, councils, the government and organisations like DEC’s, that are committed to the same end goal. Creating materials and training that extend teachers’ and learners’ skillsets in terms of reflection, critical thinking and upskill them to challenge negative viewpoints, moving away from the binary thinking of ‘them versus us’ and linking with curriculum subjects and global issues is a starting point. But this needs to be done consistently and with guidance that allows for systematic progression through the age groups.

There needs to be a framework that covers resources, professional development and training that addresses all issues that are either termed controversial or sensitive. There needs to be support and guidance for engaging with issues about the movement of people, but this can also be

broadened to include difference as a whole. Providing young people with the understanding and awareness of issues including homophobia, transphobia and islamophobia are essential. Linking to issues of development, poverty, climate change and inequality are themes under which many of these issues can sit. Space in the curriculum is also needed. Whilst Citizenship Education was an ideal home for these topics, this subject has since been removed from the revised 2014 National Curriculum. Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) and Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Education (SMSC) are vehicles for teaching and learning about these issues as is Philosophy for Children and other dialogue based methodologies. In these spaces, children and teachers are seen as collaborators in learning (Freire, 1972), with neither having the ‘right’ answers but being willing and committed to exploring understanding and knowledge about something together. Unfortunately, this can sometimes unnerve teachers as they feel they are ‘letting go’ and are no longer in ‘control’. It means they do not know which direction the learning is going to take and without knowing that they are unable to assess the learning in relation to the lesson objections. A risk that teachers find increasingly hard to take as head teachers demand such a focus on results.

### **Conclusion – more research needed**

As recognised earlier, this research is not conclusive, but does highlight that schools and teachers are in an interesting place when it comes to engagement with global issues, specifically when thinking about refugees and asylum-seekers. It is possible to see this situation, where some teachers value the importance of providing opportunities for their learners but perhaps lack the skills and confidence, as a potential jumping off point to a brave new world of joined up provision and delivery. To effectively discuss these issues in the classroom, teachers need the backing of the school, the parents and the government (in terms of curriculum space, recognition of the value and support to teach about these issues) to begin a collaborative learning journey (Freire, 1972) with their students; to question, to explore and to begin to understand the world around them and their place within it.

But this is unlikely to occur and remain in place without the involvement of OFSTED (The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, n.d.). Without the threat/promise of an inspection, the development of fully rounded, civic-minded, global citizens is limited as schools and the teachers themselves are not held accountable or responsible for teaching about these issues. Without this, there will continue to be an ad-hoc delivery and engagement, potentially leading to a mismatched national coverage with inconsistent importance placed on this.

What does this then mean for refugee and asylum-seeking children? Well, it can mean several things. Non-refugee children will lack the opportunity to learn about the experiences of those seeking safety and miss out on the chance to ask questions and develop a great understanding and awareness. These children may also continue to hold negative and unchallenged ideas about those arriving in the UK to claim sanctuary. It could mean that, without this greater awareness and understanding, children who do arrive here miss out on the welcome and support needed for them to integrate successfully and for them to access education and to develop socially and culturally rich lives in their new homes. It could mean that segregation becomes more deep seated, differences become more prominent and issues of identity and belonging become more pronounced. Without the confidence to provide spaces for dialogue around these issues and, most importantly, to challenge negative stereotypes, they can often be avoided, ignored or remain unchallenged, something which can be particularly detrimental to the group that is targeted (Bryan & Bracken, 2011).

Moving forward then, it can be seen that further research is vital. A more robust and conclusive study needs to be undertaken to provide a clearer picture of how teachers engage on a daily basis with these issues. A more detailed analysis is necessary to determine how schools vary in their approach to engagement and delivery, especially in terms of their own diversity. Ultimately, a multi-faceted approach to teacher training, resource creation and monitoring and evaluation would provide the most

comprehensive way to support effective teaching about refugees and asylum-seekers.

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