

Teaching about refugees

One highly mobile group of pupils in Islington schools is refugees. Being a refugee is a global issue that is very much part of all our lives. Islington has hosted refugee communities throughout the last century. There are established refugee communities who are significantly contributing to the borough's public, professional, social and cultural life.

Some facts about refugees in the UK:

- There are about 11 million refugees in the world today and over 100,000 refugee and asylum seeker children in UK schools.
- There are an estimated 4,800 children from a refugee background in Islington schools, which is close to 20% of the age 5-16 school population.
- The largest refugee groups in the borough are from Turkey and Somalia. However there are also significant numbers from Latin America, North Africa and the Middle East, French-speaking Africa and Albania/Kosovo.

Refugees are seeking safety from persecution and political violence in their home country. Although refugees are unique individuals with very diverse backgrounds and different experiences, the refugee experience is essentially one that involves loss.

'Loss of what is obvious, tangible and external such as possessions, a home, work, role, status, life style, a language, loved members of the family or other close relationships; and loss that is less obvious, "internal" and "subjective" such as loss of trust in the self and others, loss of self esteem, self respect and personal identity' (Baker, R. Refugees: An Overview of an International problem. 1983).

Refugees coming to an Islington school are also likely to be experiencing many obstacles in their attempts to rebuild their lives.

Developing better understanding of what it means to be a refugee and raising awareness of people in host communities is a vital first step in both understanding the needs of children and supporting their integration and achievement in school.

There are many other reasons why schools should develop the curriculum to teach about refugees:

- People's views of asylum-seekers and refugees can be negative. However, research shows that many young people would like to find out more about asylum seekers and refugees, suggesting that they have not been able to access accurate information
- 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.
- The study of refugees links strongly with the National Curriculum Programmes of Study, across a range of subjects. Learning about diversity, identity and racial justice are central elements of the Citizenship curriculum. Education about refugees

links closely to people's engagement with and consideration of global citizenship issues at both an individual and local level.

- The prevalence of myths about asylum seekers provides real opportunities for engaging young people in critical analysis.
- Ofsted have found that, for many schools, the admission and integration of newly-arrived asylum seeker pupils proved to be a "litmus test" to how the principles of inclusion and race equality were applied towards all pupils and families.

Schools' contact with refugees enhances everyone's awareness of global issues. Celebrating the presence of refugees helps schools articulate a clear stand against war, violence and the abuse of human rights. It also supports school links with refugee children and parents, building social bridges and supporting their integration.

Good practice

Islington schools are developing curriculum work on refugees in a range of subjects, including the Expressive Arts, PSHE, Citizenship, History, RE, and English.

When teaching about refugees, teachers should be aware that:

- There may be children from a refugee background in the class. Refugee pupils will appreciate their peers developing greater awareness about refugee issues, and they may also appreciate opportunities to share their own experiences. However, teachers need to be sensitive and be careful not to make refugee children feel exposed and vulnerable.
- There is a need to create a supportive environment for pupils to discuss the issues safely. Lesson activities can be planned to support positive identity and self-esteem. Good communication and co-operation can be explicitly taught, for example through role-play and drama. Collaborative strategies can promote empathy, and help build the trust and the participation that allows the expression of genuinely held positions.
- Schools can invite refugee speakers and put up displays that give information about global events and refugees. Empathy can be best developed by providing opportunities in the curriculum for pupils to hear or read about the experiences of refugees first-hand.

One strategy growing numbers of Islington schools are using to increase curriculum work on refugees is to celebrate Refugee Week. Refugee Week is a nation-wide programme of events that promotes understanding about refugees. It is an excellent opportunity for schools to celebrate cultural diversity. CEA@Islington EMAS can share useful teaching materials and resources with schools.

Case studies and support materials for schools:

Teaching resources for Refugee week

A resource pack for schools with some curriculum activities and useful links for Refugee Week. The pack includes handouts with information for teachers.

- [Download Refugee Week resource pack \(link to Resource pack download\)](#)

Pooles Park Primary School: Celebrating Refugee Week

Pooles Park Primary school began celebrating Refugee week in 2003. That first time, awareness was raised primarily amongst staff. Staff discussed information shared by parents and children at admission interview. There was significant surprise expressed about the experiences of refugee pupils. The school made a video of interviews with willing refugee parents, to raise staff awareness further.

In 2004 the school joined up Art Week with Refugee Week. Curriculum activities were planned across all classes around the key themes of identity, celebrating diversity, and raising awareness of refugees. The week was a resounding success. Staff valued the increased opportunity for pupil talk. Teacher comments included:

'The best week of my entire teaching career to date' (assistant head teacher).

'It proved to be a very emotional week, with the children sharing stories from their countries, identifying similarities and differences. All in all, an extremely positive experience. Since then the children have continued to share stories and the entire ethos of my class is far more open and positive' (phase team leader, Yr 3).

The school has two tips for teachers:

'It's best to start classroom activity with a school assembly.'

And ...

'One good assembly activity was showing pictures of each staff member as a baby on a power-point projector. Don't say who it is but provide 5 facts about each teacher. We chose details around our experiences of journeys/migration; for example, 'Ukrainian grandparents' or 'parents were refugees from....'. Pupils then have to talk to each other and come up with guesses as to which teachers they are.'

- [Download whole school Refugee Week timetable and activities](#) (link to 'timetable' download)
- [Download accompanying teacher's notes](#) (link to 'notes' download)