

'PACK YOUR BAG, WE'RE MOVING!'

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Here, Sarah explores how confronting the challenge of teaching pupils about refugees and migration can create a solid awareness of our changing world.

Throughout my experiences in schools, I have been shocked at the lack of pupil awareness about the changing world around them, and their ready acceptance of 'bite-size' news headlines as the total truth. When spending time in schools, I saw limited teaching of current world events, which made me curious as to whether pupils could grasp the complexity of different world events and can empathise with people's experiences that are very different from their own. The National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) states that high quality geography teaching should 'inspire in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people'. Pupils are citizens of this world as much as anyone else; therefore, teachers are responsible for exploring how pupils' fascination with the world around them affects how they interact with it.

Through my Primary Teaching degree, I had the opportunity to conduct research with year 3 pupils into whether the medium of role play could be used to challenge their perceptions of recent world events. I chose to focus on the Syrian Refugee Crisis, which led to some fascinating results. I used a range of role-play activities in order to scaffold the pupils' learning and their interactions through a range of direct and indirect experiences (Martin, 2005). Clapper (2010) describes how those who are involved in role play are also actively involved in the construction of their own learning. This approach enhances pupils' critical thinking skills, especially when used in conjunction with good facilitator questioning techniques. Clapper (2010) recognises that, as well as requiring critical thinking skills, a role play challenges learners on emotional levels, because they are thinking about someone else's point of view. Before the session, I interviewed the pupils to discover what they knew about refugees. Most of them stated that they 'knew nothing'. Also, when I asked if they liked role play, the majority said that they would not know what to say, or would find it difficult to get into character.

Setting the scene

To set the scene, I read the pupils a story of the first weeks of the crisis in Syria, and how it spiralled into civil war. After the scene was set, the pupils split into groups of six. Each pupil was designated a role as a family member (e.g. pupil a: Mother, pupil b: Father, pupil c: Child, and so on), and the groups were given situations the pupils would discuss in role as that family member. This proved most insightful because, through their discussions, the pupils demonstrated a range of skills, including critical thinking, evaluating and persuasive arguing. Even though the majority of pupils had said they found role play difficult, everyone became involved and engaged enthusiastically with their character's point of view.

Getting into character

The first activity the pupils were tasked with was to imagine the family could only afford for three family members to travel to England from Syria. First, they had to discuss who would escape. This extract from one group's discussion demonstrated that all the pupils became actively involved:

Pupil in role as Child –

'I would be really, really, scared and if I might get killed then I think I should go. It is clearly not safe and I'm the youngest so if Dad dies I won't be able to do anything for myself'.

Pupil in role as Father

'No. I think I should go; I don't want to be killed! You know what? I think that Granny should stay because look at her, she's had a good life and could die at any second, they are after me so I am obviously the most important'.

Pupil in role as Granny

'I agree with your father. I think that I should stay here. I am going to die anyway and you young folk should be free. I can hide away and not be caught, I am sneaky like that!'



Through their discussions, the pupils demonstrated a range of skills, including critical thinking, evaluating and persuasive arguing. Photo © Sarah James.



The pupils were clearly comfortable in the use of role play to question and challenge each other's rationale and answers. Photo © Sarah James.

It was interesting to see the pupils critically thinking through, logically, the emotional reasons for and against why each member should or should not escape from the conflict. The development of their arguments indicated the pupils were thinking about the ramifications for the whole family. For example, one pupil in role as Mother, said:

'Well I will have to go with the children because Dad can't cook!'

This demonstrated that the pupils were able to relate their thinking to real-life situations, expressing and arguing their points of view using contextual knowledge of families. This surprised me because it ran contrary to the pupils' negativity about becoming involved in role play. Instead, the pupils were clearly comfortable in the use of role play to question and challenge each other's rationale and answers. They were thinking outside the constraints of a traditional class discussion. I had not considered that pupils would use such in-depth critical thinking to challenge each other's responses while contemplating what a family would have to take into account in order to survive. In my experience this could only be achieved through role play because, when leading a class discussion, I had not previously encountered this level of consideration and reflection.

Packing to leave

Asking individual pupils to take on a specific role gave them the opportunity to develop a deep emotional connection with that character. Through this they explored what it would be like to face the decisions a Syrian refugee family faces. The pupils' empathy was evident when they discussed what to take in their suitcase with only ten minutes to pack. Two pupils (in different groups) in-role as Children both demonstrated an increasing understanding of a family having to cope with the emotional impact of being forced to move from their home and facing permanent separation:

Pupil A in role as Child –

'I would want to take my teddy to keep me company because... I would be sad that I don't live at home anymore. I think I would take a photo of my family too, because if Granny doesn't come with us I might forget her'.

Pupil F in role as Child –

'I would take a book, so I don't have to see anything scary and I like reading'.

This aspect of emotion was particularly interesting, because I had not divulged to the pupils whether the family members would see each other again or not.

Impacts

Through these lessons, I discovered that pupils are both curious to find out more about the world around them and able to respond to different tasks with maturity and logic. Through research around the topic and discussions with colleagues, I became aware that teachers are apprehensive about teaching sensitive or controversial issues (Oxfam, 2006). My work identified that role play allows pupils to explore other perspectives and to develop a deeper understanding of the world. Geography is critical in this, because it helps pupils become well-rounded individuals with balanced opinions. The value of pupils' empathy with other people is often a core value to a school's ethos (Lambert, 2013). Because schools are governed by moral purpose, geography teachers should help pupils prepare for their adult lives by learning tolerance and respect (DfE, 2014).

This research has had a huge impact on my pedagogy: I feel confident about introducing controversial issues in the classroom to explore with my pupils. Currently, I work with the whole of key stage 2. We watch *Newsround* after lunch and then discuss the main stories. It is very rewarding as pupils gradually become better able to express their opinion and develop understanding and empathy.

References

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