

MIGRANTS, RIGHTS AND VALUES

SALLY ROBBINS



Figure 1: Behind the borders 'They're like us, Miss'. Photo © Zoltan Major/Shutterstock.com

Sally describes how, with year 5 pupils, she brought issues on migration and human rights to life through the power of geography, story and poetry.

My task was to teach about British values through a topic called 'Best of British'. At the time, the media was full of headlines like 'Migrants Swarm to Britain,' 'Brutal crimes of the Asylum Seekers,' 'The Swarm on Our Streets' and, quite frankly, at that point I felt quite ashamed of Britain and the values of some of its people. The task that lay ahead felt farcical. Previous research had made me very aware of the impact that media headlines and images could have on children. I needed an approach that pushed the curriculum boundaries, but one which would lead to pupils having a greater understanding of our place in the western world.

The pupils arrived chattering, eager to learn. Instead of the usual maths challenge, I gave each pupil a copy of an image. It showed a man holding his child as he climbed from a small boat; his face

contorted with grief, anguish and relief. I invited the pupils to write whatever came into their heads. Their responses ranged from single words, such as 'sad', 'scared' and 'relieved' to deeper questions including 'where are you from?'

One pupil wrote 'human'. It was one of those moments you get as a teacher when the hairs on the back of your neck literally jump to attention. There was hope: the pupils were empathising. I wrote underneath 'Still human. Still here', a phrase used by a coalition of more than 60 organisations campaigning for a fairer asylum system (see web panel). The pupils paused for reflection, and one responded: 'They're like us, Miss, and they're not going away' (Figure 1).

Back to our 'British Values' topic... We began by looking at what it was to be British. My school is predominantly made up of white British pupils and there is a significant number of Asian extraction (mostly Muslims and Sikhs from India and Pakistan). As homework the pupils were asked to find out about the origins of their name and about any family members who had come to Britain from another country. Together, we discovered that the

class covered virtually the whole world: with pupils of Peruvian, Swedish, South African and Canadian descent (to name a few), and one who had great-grandparents who came over in the *Kindertransport* during the Second World War (literally, 'children's transport' – a series of rescue efforts that brought thousands of refugee Jewish children to Great Britain from Nazi Germany between 1938 and 1940).

Our work began in earnest. We looked at why people had chosen to settle in Britain. What was it that people admired about British values? Why had Britain opened its arms (to refugees) during the Second World War? When immigration was mentioned we questioned the different meaning of terms such as 'immigrants', 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'. We read Benjamin Zephaniah's poem 'The British' and discussed the country's history of invasion and settlement.

I read *Boy Overboard* (Gleitzman, 2003) – in my view, this book is the perfect antidote to the dehumanising approach used by the media. Morris Gleitzman's main aim seems to be to explain to the pupils the horrifying plight of asylum seekers.

'Violent and vicious, the sea crashes against the boat,
Young and old crammed together like unwanted
books on a library shelf,

Searching for freedom, searching for safety,
Still human. Still here.'

...

'Terrifying traffickers, grabbing at money,
Children's savings, precious possessions, birthday gifts,
All thrown into one big pocket,
Still human. Still here.'

...

'At last they've reached their safety,
Joyful but tinged with fear,
Still captive. Still trapped.
Still human. Still here.'

...

'How can they do this?
Ruling with fear,
Afraid to be somebody,
Still human, Still here.'

...

'Nobody is nobody,
No one should feel mere,
We all should have freedom.
Still human. Still here.'

...

'They have no freedom of speech,
Their government as mean as what they teach,
Not allowed to believe what they think,
Just looking for a hand to reach,
Still human, Still here.'

...

'Full of fear, full of shock,
Tears streaming down faces,
Short people, big people, all people,
Smugglers snatching their hope,
Still human, Still here.'

He attempts to humanise the characters through the story. I have read this book many times to different classes (my copy is coming unglued from its spine), but never before has it seemed so relevant or had so much impact.

This class includes many 'boundary-pushing' boys, yet, from the moment I read the opening line: 'I'm Manchester United and I've got the ball and everything is good', they were transfixed. For those teachers that have yet to read *Boy Overboard*, the main character is absolutely fixated on soccer (to something of an annoying extent). This helped the pupils relate to the asylum seekers in the story and makes them appear real rather than 'other'. The children in the book became our friends, and my pupils genuinely cheered and cried for them.

The question is: how do you measure the impact of your teaching on pupils' attitudes? One way was looking at what pupils wrote how they felt about refugees and asylum seekers:

'I used to be scared of them.
Now I know they are just like us.'

'I thought they would take our
houses and our belongings, but now
I think they just want to be safe.'

'They're not as bad as people say.'

Our school is a Rights Respecting one, so we also investigated the rights that every human has. Finally, the pupils wrote poems based on the slogan, 'Still human. Still here' (Figure 2), which really brought home to me just how much the pupils empathised, cared and understood that people crave the values of democracy, fairness and equality.

Reference

Gleitzman, M. (2003) *Boy Overboard*. London: Puffin.

Zephaniah, B. (2009) 'The British (serves 60 million)' (see web panel).



WEB RESOURCES

Gleitzman on *Boy Overboard*
(includes sample chapter):
www.morrisgleitzman.com/boy-overboard.htm

Still human. Still here: <https://stillhumanstillhere.wordpress.com/>
Young people and Benjamin Zephaniah read 'The British':
<https://youtu.be/dZ1yYOAwvvo>

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Figure 2: Extracts from the pupils' poems on the theme of 'Still human. Still here'.