

refugee boy:

Geography, inclusion and inequality

Greg Wallace



Can one text help schools to raise achievement in geography, promote inclusion and combat inequality? For the last two years, Woodberry Down Community Primary School in Hackney has been developing an innovative approach to geography planning that has resulted in some remarkable work. The school, situated in one of the most deprived areas of the country, serves a culturally-diverse population where 25% of the pupils are refugees and over 60% are entitled to free school meals. This article focuses on a project based around *Refugee Boy* by Benjamin Zephaniah (2001).

'As the family lay sleeping soldiers kicked down the door of the house and entered waving their rifles round erratically ... The soldier who was in command went and stood so that his mouth was six inches away from Alem's father's ear and shouted. "What kind of a man are you?"'

Life is not safe for Alem. His father is Ethiopian and his mother Eritrean – and with both countries at war, he is welcome in neither place. So his father does an astonishing thing, which at first appears callous, but is in fact the ultimate gift of love from a parent to their child.

With Alem – and his family – Benjamin Zephaniah has created a brave young man who, despite all that happens to him, maintains a shining spirit of courage throughout:

'As a treat, Alem's father takes him on a holiday to London: he sees grey skies, smooth roads, bad television, traffic fumes, and old and new buildings side by side. But when he wakes, he is alone in the hotel room. To save him from the conflict in their homeland, his parents have given him up to a new home. He finds himself in the hands of social workers, lawyers, foster parents, teachers, judges – in children's homes, hostels, schools, courtrooms. His father had told him that England had compassionate people who understand why people have to seek refuge. As Alem tries to stay strong throughout all that happens to him, he finds that some people seem to understand more than others'.

Before starting on the geography in all this, it is worth thinking about why we chose this particular text.

Refugee Boy is an incredibly powerful and compelling story that engages pupils with all the issues surrounding being a refugee. The central character, Alem, is a role model who children readily engage with. In a way, the following extract from one pupil's letter to Alem, written at the end of the project, says it all: 'You helped me as well with my life because I am a refugee too and seeing you on TV I will not give up ... After hearing your story I am going to be a brave boy and never give up'.

Although many of Woodberry's pupils at the school are refugees, this pupil was not. He was not told to write in this role – in fact, it hadn't occurred to us, as teachers, that this might be appropriate. In terms of changing attitudes, the six-week topic had worked wonders.

It is perhaps true that the best teaching and learning comes when there is a sustained context for pupils to learn about, practice, master and apply the skills and concepts being taught. In fact, could context be key? Could pupils make more progress if the work they did in different subjects was linked by a common theme? There were three key subject areas in the *Refugee Boy* topic: literacy, geography and PSHCE. The topic also embraced maths, ICT and, crucially, a strong and relentless theme about equality and inequality.

The very fact that a six-week, cross-curricular topic is being taught centred around a text about a refugee begins to help validate the experiences of those who are refugees and change the attitudes of those who may negatively associate the word 'refugee'. This could be a whole article in itself!

The geography

But where was the geography? In short, it was the geography that was at the heart of the whole structure of the teaching sequence. Stories about refugees often afford this incredibly rich teaching potential. The settings in *Refugee Boy* encompass Ethiopia, Eritrea, London's West End, Datchet (Berkshire), Reading and London's East End.

In fact, if you want to either engage pupils who have negative attitudes or show respect towards refugees, do they

not all have to find out about the key references in the text? And if these references are places, isn't that a fascinating starting point for geography work? And when will it be best to learn about these places? Before they occur in the book or after?

These were questions we struggled with, and our answer to the last question was both! We felt it would be good for pupils to find out about Ethiopia and Eritrea before reading the book (Figure 1), as the war between the two needed to be understood, and the similarities and differences between the countries are fascinating. In fact, Alem's favourite food is spaghetti. Why might this be? Learning even a little about Eritrea tells us. The geography part of these two initial sections of the project involved pupils using the same set of skills to find out about two different places.

Lesson 2 was a mirror of lesson 1, and lesson 4 a mirror of lesson 3 with an additional concept, identifying similarities and differences, introduced. Why is this important for progress? Because through the marking of lesson 1 we can help pupils to improve/extend learning of the skills being taught in the next lesson. Also, in terms of the book, knowing about both countries had to be equally important. The pattern of repeating/mirroring geography lessons continued throughout the project.

Combining the literacy

Lesson 5 was a literacy lesson as was lesson 6, but lesson 7 was both literacy and geography (Figure 2). Alem's father takes him on a trip to London. They have

arrived at Heathrow and are staying at hotel in Datchet. They get the train into London and see all the sights. Finding these on a map involved constant re-reading of the text. Definitely two subjects at once in this lesson!

Generating enquiry

So we'd done a lot of map work at a range of scales and using different types of maps. We'd used a range of sources to find out information about Eritrea and Ethiopia. How could we make it more practical?

Hackney isn't that far from Datchet and the text is full of references to Alem's time there. Were they true? Pupils re-read this part of the text and started to devise questions for a village study. Some of the questions tended to focus on establishing whether or not the references in the text were real, e.g. 'Is there really a church called St Mary the Virgin?', but they moved on into wider geographical questions:

- 'What are the transport facilities?'
- 'Can you really get a bus from Datchet to Reading?'
- 'How long does it take?'
- 'How far is it?'

The pupils had great fun exploring the village, finding the answers and marking what they found on maps. And we were inspired to follow Alem's footsteps a bit further. One day, after his father has left him, he decides to walk from Datchet to Windsor:

'The next morning after breakfast Alem walked down the two miles of country roads to Windsor. He had read about the castle and thought he might be able to see it ...'

Pupils found the road on the map and did the walk to Windsor. It was almost exactly two miles! They even found the hotel they thought Alem had probably stayed in. There are a few hotels in Datchet – the hotel in the text is referred to as The Palace Hotel. In real life, it turned out to be called The Manor Hotel.

The pupils' engagement with this village study was clearly heightened by their prior knowledge from the text. In fact, the proving/disproving of references from the text added a sharp sense of purpose to their enquiry. Motivation was high.

As the story moves on, Alem is taken into care and stays in a children's home in Reading before finally ending up with a foster family in the East End. The area he moves to is called Manor Park and is, like Datchet, a real place. Even the road he stays in, Meanly Road, is real. From this, the pupils were able to use maps to deduce which school he would have gone to and linked a range of features on the map to an aerial photo.

Chapter 16 inspired further geographical enquiry:

'Alem's father sat with Alem on his bed and explained that he

Lesson	Subject	Key questions	Suggested objectives
1	Geography Prior to reading text	Where is Ethiopia? Can I write factual statements about Ethiopia using different maps and geographical vocabulary?	To identify the countries Ethiopia has borders with To use compass directions to describe locations To identify physical features
2	Geography Prior to reading text	Where is Eritrea? Can I write factual statements about Eritrea using different maps and geographical vocabulary?	To identify the countries Eritrea has borders with To use compass directions to describe locations To identify physical features
3	Geography Prior to reading text	What is Ethiopia like?	To use secondary sources To record and present information To ask questions
4	Geography Prior to reading text	What is Eritrea like?	To use secondary sources To record and present information To ask questions To identify similarities and differences

Figure 1: Planning the geography.

Lesson	Subject	Key questions	Suggested objectives
5	Geography Prior to reading text	What do I think <i>Refugee Boy</i> is going to be about?	To use clues and imagination to predict what might happen in the story
7	Geography/Literacy After reading Chapter 1 – <i>Welcome to the Weather</i>	Can I find the places Alem went to on a map of London?	To use a map of London and the story to locate places Alem went

Figure 2: Combining literacy and geography.

had landed at Heathrow Airport that morning. Then he made his way to central London on the Underground and contacted the Refugee Council. Not wanting to sadden the occasion too much, he only spoke a little about the way the war was impacting on the people. Alem knew that soon they had to talk about his mother but now he wanted to celebrate’.

The first two sentences of this generated another geography lesson. Where is the Refugee Council? How would Alem’s dad have got there from Heathrow Airport? Is there one way of doing the journey or more than one? Earlier on it was mentioned that lessons often mirrored one another. This would be a key example. The pupils had done a similar activity a few chapters earlier to find out how Alem would have travelled to the court in central London from Meanly Road. The successes and difficulties the pupils had encountered with this first task, involving using the London Underground map, fed directly into the second task. Feedback regarding points for improvement given after the first task could have an impact in the second.

Assessment for learning: effective feedback

In any cross-curricular sequence of teaching there is the danger that you can lose the subject-specific focus on the skills needed for a particular area. We were mindful not to do this and the well-developed marking system we use played a full part in the topic.

The system can be used across all subjects and that is both the strength and the simplicity of it. You can read a lot more about it on the website (www.effectivemarking.co.uk).

However, in short, we use a range of principles to inform effective marking:

- focused, differentiated stickers to summarise what a pupil has achieved (the success criteria in child-friendly language)
- response questions and stickers (questions the pupil has to think about at the start of the next lesson to re-visit previous learning) pupils always reply to response questions and stickers in a green pen to make the whole process very explicit: initial writing is in pencil, blue or black ink; teachers mark using a red pen; pupils reply back using a green pen.

There are lots of examples of pupils’ work from the *Refugee Boy* project on the school website (www.woodberrydown.net) that enable you to see the marking system in action.

Conclusion

To be quite honest, I never really enjoyed geography at school! Lessons on compasses and contours confused me, others bored me and field trips were an excuse to have fun and misbehave. For me, in this project, I really found a way to make geography come alive. It was joining forces with the subject I’ve always liked most, English, and with the issues that impact on the world today. Those issues are directly connected to the pupils in my school – pupils who matter a lot to me.

I know when pupils are engaged and when they are not, and this project certainly engaged them. We had used a very similar approach with Beverley Naidoo’s *The Other Side Of Truth* the summer before and those pupils knew we do a lot in and around Refugee Week, so when they saw the piles of *Refugee Boy* books in my office they were desperate to start. They knew we were going on a mini school journey and even the most reluctant readers would come and see me, pick up the book and beg to be allowed to read it!

I think it takes many years to develop a curriculum that is right for a particular school. In fact, it never stops. In this project we found a simple way of making geography a lead player, raising achievement, changing attitudes and having fun.

And yes, the fun was mixed with a sadness born of reality. By the end of the book, both Alem’s parents are dead. His mum killed in Africa, his dad in London. What is Alem’s ultimate reaction?

‘It is not the time to give up
Battle for peace – finish the mission
Mother is gone, miserably dead
Father now also dead, may
peace be upon them
What does the future hold?
Patient and strong
Changed
This is not the end.’

Reference

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

Further information

A selection of further information, including Benjamin Zephaniah’s introduction to *Refugee Boy*, a reading guide, questions and answers and a link to his own website, is available at www.bloomsbury.com

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