

"I much prefer roasted rat": Engaging Children in Refugee Experiences

Josie Stevens from Hackney Museum, Eithne Nightingale from Child Migrant Stories and Maurice Nwokeji, musician and storyteller

Notes by Amy Hughes

The workshop began by doing a warm up where participants wrote down what the word "refugee" meant to them after discussing in groups of around 6 people.

Josie then briefly explained how the Hackney Museum, a local history museum, is putting "stories of ordinary and extraordinary local people at the heart of everything they do". Maurice Nwokeji was then introduced as a contributor to the Hackney Museum for an exhibition during black history month in 2013.

Eithne then introduced [Child Migrant Stories](#) and the many films they have produced about child migrants which have included:

- Voices Past and Present.
- Passing Tides about Linh Vu using her drawings
- Life is a Destiny (Cyprus, Turkish cyriot)
- Ugwumpiti - A child's journey from Biafra to London (Maurice)
- Home (Kindertransport)
- The House is not There (animation of the return of Henry Bran to El Salvador)

They are also developing a new film entitled "Child Migrants Welcome?" which is about childrens' current experience of welcome in schools and in their communities.

They have worked with Hackney museum to develop a quiz and have developed important learning resources available on their website for ESOL and schools. Hackney museum have put on events where the people who have been part of the films have also spoken & answered questions which has worked very well.

Then Maurice's 20 minute documentary film "Ugwumpiti - Maurice's Story - A child's journey from Biafra to London" was shown. Some shocking facts from the film: 2 million people died and 1,000 children were dying daily during the Biafran war. Of the 250,00 children that fled to Gabon only 5,000 returned. Maurice came to England when he was 9 with his brother of 7 having not seen his mother since he was 2 and having never met his father. He shared his experiences of growing up in Hackney having previously grown up in mud huts in Biafra, catching snakes and roasting rats. He then related his experience to current crises in Syria, Somalia, Yemen etc.

We then shared ideas of how best to share this film with learners. Someone from the Scottish Refugee Council expressed an interest in hosting Maurice as their theme for Refugee Week in 2018 is to focus on the experiences of young people. Eithne also drew attention to a film about Bute Island, an island in Scotland welcoming refugee families, which could be useful to show.

We then heard from a representative of National Education Union who said there is research to show that there is often a fear in schools from child refugees to tell other pupils that they are a refugee. This was discussed in more detail and was returned to at the end of the session for more discussion.

Josie then introduced an interactive activity which they have been utilising in their workshops with young children. They have created an interesting way to engage children through utilising suitcases to zoom in on a personal story, focusing on history as a collection of personal stories as opposed to headlines.

The participants, in their groups, had to look in these suitcases, analyse what was in each suitcase and deduce, by looking at the objects, what story people had lived through. Each suitcase was based on the experiences of those child migrants in the films created by Child Migrant Stories. Then each group was asked to share their favourite object with the room and explain why.

To conclude the workshop the floor was opened to questions and discussion. A few key questions arose such as “how to empower children refugees at schools?” and “how do we get teachers more involved in putting these issues on the agenda?” Often time constraints, curriculum constrictions and lack of training have restricted teachers in the past. It was agreed that there’s so many resources yet not enough training. Eithne recommended the Think Global, Global Learning Programme as a training programme.

A representative from Single Homeless Project (SHP) resettlement service then put forward an interesting idea for a refugee week event to be held in an education setting. She described how it would be interesting to put on classes in the language of the refugee to show people how difficult it is to be in a class where you don’t understand the language to create empathy amongst peers.

Maurice stated that the most important thing is to ‘humanise the children. It’s a bigger trauma being here and it is important to enable other children to understand that’.

Maurice - “There’s no action, without a reaction. These kids have had a difficult experiences and it will eventually come out. It could take 40 years or it could take 4 months. It is important to support people when they are ready. Because it will come out.”

Maurice - “I had been brought up to admire people who had killed lots of men. It took quite a long time before that ambition left me.”

Maurice -“Everything I’ve ever heard about war is from politicians or soldiers and this is from my perspective as a child.

A representative from the British Red Cross then put forward of ideas of how to inform children about refugees. Firstly by making it relatable by using examples (Paddington, Rita Ora, Mo Farah) and secondly they wrote messages of hope and advice for the local area.

We then heard from a Syrian refugee, with a translator, who said that “you are lucky if you are able to leave with a suitcase, many of us had to leave without valuables”. Thinking about objects that children miss, had to leave behind or something they value is a great way of making it real.

A teacher from Gloucestershire then described an assembly they had put on in their school which was remarkably successful. They told a personal story and used props to make it come to life. She described how she started the assembly by asking the children who’s backpack this was that she found in the playground and then by taking out the items one by one they revealed that this was a backpack of a child refugee fleeing war. They accompanied this with a slideshow and then asked the children what action they would take if a refugee came to their school, into their community.

To finish Josie showed us feedback from their workshops with young children: “I learnt that sometimes you can start off with a nice life and it can change”.