

The Compassionate Education Foundation (CoED) is a charitable organisation that sets out to encourage schools to bring the development of human qualities alongside other priorities in learning. Kindness, generosity and making an effort to be a decent person are part of the very nature of most schools but external pressures and accountabilities can lead schools to lose some of the human aspect of education - in the pursuit of measurable targets, for example.

One example of the support that CoED can offer schools is the production of occasional 'Think Pieces' which can act as resources for teachers who may wish to develop some work with children in their schools. These are not necessarily teaching resources or planning kits (most teachers are perfectly capable of doing that); the idea is that the papers will give some background and rationale which illustrate the logic of addressing issues. The so called 'migrant crisis' affecting Europe is a good place to start.

At CoED we hope that reading the Think Piece will provoke discussion and through that you will have confidence to do what seems appropriate for you and your school and pupils. You might gain some ideas of how to move forward and some tangible suggestions of how difficult and controversial issues can link to work that we already do in school.

If nothing else, the Think Piece will help you to consider the wider role of teachers as one of the consciences of society. We are not charging for the think pieces but we are a tiny charity that is staffed largely by volunteers, many of whom finance the charity out of their own pockets. So we are asking that each person who reads the materials [donate](#) whatever they can-even if it is as little as a pound, which if you gift aid it gives us £1.20.

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This think piece on Refugees is our first ... read it and then look out for the next.

# THINK PIECE NO. ONE

DECEMBER 2015 REFUGEES



One of the greatest mass movements of people in history is currently taking place. It is estimated that well over a million people have travelled to Europe during 2015. In fact, people are also on the move in masses across the Americas and Asia. Even numbers of refugees to Europe are dwarfed by the number of Afghan people going to Pakistan which stands currently at 2.5 million. Indeed, some Syrians have found their way to South America and are settled in Brazil. Many Mexicans continue to seek refuge in USA. Whilst the flow towards Europe dominates our media, migration is a world-wide phenomenon.

Our children see images in the media almost daily of people, many their own age or younger, as they make perilous and confusing journeys with their families in the search for a better future. The oldest pupils in our primary schools must have many questions about what they see. Is it the role of schools to address these questions or do we leave children to be influenced by media or prejudice in their own community? If we were to offer a compassionate outlook in our education, wouldn't this be one of the natural areas for consideration?

The adult world is discussing serious matters about the migration agenda. The vast numbers are creating moral, cultural and social dilemmas. Within this context, religious leaders are grappling

with spiritual challenges, whilst at the same time, commentators marvel at the spirit of people prepared to risk everything.

In our schools, the four letters SMSC are supposed to be carrying new weight. Inspection is expected to judge the extent to which schools are teaching pupils well in Social, Moral, Spiritual and Cultural education in keeping with their growing maturity. Yet, in many schools, the 'migration issue' is getting little more than a mention in assembly.

We are supposed to be including character education in the provision of our school. The DfE has produced information outlining the essential traits, attributes and behaviours that schools should be seeking to develop. Take a look at the list below with the image of migrating, desperate people in mind and consider whether there is a connection with each of the essentials:

- perseverance, resilience and grit
- confidence and optimism
- motivation, drive and ambition
- neighbourliness and community spirit
- tolerance and respect
- honesty, integrity and dignity
- conscientiousness, curiosity and focus

Surely the journeys of migrants across continents, over water in makeshift boats, sometimes walking for hundreds of miles and often at the mercy of unscrupulous traders, speaks of perseverance, resilience, motivation, drive and focus. Their decisions to set out on the journeys display ambition and the fact that they keep going shows optimism. The arrival of migrants in parts of Europe has been met with neighbourliness, community spirit, some curiosity and respect. While no doubt some migrants have stretched respectable limits of behaviour, most seem to have displayed honesty and integrity in circumstances when holding on to dignity must be extremely difficult.

If our government wants us to 'teach character' and the current situation displays so many of the facets outlined, what do we do?

Is it enough to draw attention to a mass charitable collection by buying an on-line recording of 'Help is coming' produced free by celebrities and VAT exempted by the Chancellor? It shows we care and it is a good discussion for children to have. What do 'taking action' and 'doing something about it' really mean? At the root of citizenship education (not now statutory in primary schools) is the notion that people should resist saying 'they should do something' and instead ask 'what am I going to do?' It is about personal responsibility towards society.

The perennial story of the Good Samaritan might come alive in our consideration of where and why help is extended or not. The message of the inn keeper making available a humble barn for Mary and Joseph so they had somewhere to rest might have a resonance with some Austrians opening their borders to despairing travellers. Being an island restricts entry to UK and years of

experience in holding a trickle of migrants at the other side of the Channel has prepared our defences for the flood. Part of developing character, of course, is to balance the natural urge to do something with the considered and careful brake that has to be deployed to avoid an action having unintended consequences. There are real fears that a migrant flow would put our infrastructure under intolerable pressure. We might consider with children some of these issues, including the extent to which our nation 'wouldn't be able to cope'. Children in the final year of primary school are just a few short years from being adults, voters, and standing for election; are they old enough to start considering mature, philosophical and ethical issues?

What we need is a gentle and serious on-going conversation with our maturing children to place the current events in some context. There are some straight-forward points: migration is not new and people have done it over time for four main reasons. We already teach about these and the challenge is surely to make explicit the migration element and make links to the contemporary events.

One reason for migration is that people are trying to escape from danger. People running away from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq are under threat, fearful of the war going on around them or afraid of reprisals. They are seeking refuge, either temporary or permanently, in a place far away from the threat and danger of their current home. Traditionally in British schools, children have been told the story of Moses leading his people across the Red Sea to a 'promised land', just as countries in Europe represent a promise nowadays. The story of Moses is recorded in the Jewish Bible and Old Testament in the book of Exodus and the same story appears in the Qur'ān. And yet, a real life, modern exodus appears on television almost daily.

Our National Curriculum expects children to be taught the story of the Mayflower and the Pilgrim Fathers. As early settlers in the 'New World', these people decided to leave their homeland to avoid religious persecution and to begin life anew.

Holocaust Day asks us to work with children to try to help them understand the persecution of Jewish and other peoples during the Second World War and since. Even the child evacuees in World War 2, often so enthusiastically taught with role play and in some cases with suitcases and train rides, were refugees. As they set off to the countryside from the cities, they did not know what we now know as history; that they would be back again in six years.

Tibetan refugees have lived outside their own region in China for over half a century. When children study world religions, they may be interested to know that the religion of Buddhism is founded on the concept of taking a vow of 'refuge' (in the Buddha, Buddhist teaching and the Buddhist community) and seeking the answers to problems within oneself.

A second reason for moving is that people seek a more prosperous future. Many of the people from African countries believe that Europe offers more prosperity than they could anticipate if they remain where they are. They believe that Europe offers work, money and a more secure future. These are often referred to as 'economic migrants', a term which is used to imply that they are less worthy than refugees. When the Huguenots set off for England or some English set off for North America as 'settlers', they were taking their skills to look for work in lands of opportunity. So

many schools teach the story of the Titanic and draw the distinction between the conditions for those in the wealthy staterooms and those in the steerage. Those in the steerage were heading to the New World in search of prosperity; they were economic migrants.

Many schools teach about the 1960s, a decade which saw a rise in immigration from Commonwealth areas such as the Asian sub-continent and the Caribbean. These people were seeking a better life though they had also been asked to come to Britain to help rebuild the infrastructure after the War. Many of these people came to work in our hospitals and on our public transport system. Similarly, Britons were encouraged to go to Australia and New Zealand to help their economies, through the 1960s, and many took advantage of the £10 'Pom ticket' for their family to sail all the way to the antipodes.

A third reason for migration is that some people are made to move. We teach children that, as the 'wild west' was tamed in North America, the Native Americans, who were, at the time, called Red Indians, were sent to spaces where they were expected to stay. They were placed on reservations, land that the immigrants had no use for and often away from the native hunting livelihoods of previous generations. Though not a curriculum topic for those primary schools that follow the National Curriculum, the partition of the Indian sub-continent in 1947 saw the British rulers organise the mass migration of people according to religion with consequent large-scale bloodshed in transit. On the other hand, Britain has a history of offering refuge to displaced communities – to those from Bosnia, Vietnam and Uganda, for example.

A final reason for migration is that, throughout history, some have had a desire to explore and sometimes a will to dominate their new surroundings. For the local population, this might be seen as 'invasion'. The imposition of culture can leave lasting impact, such as the legacy of Roman Britain or the European empires across the world. However, invasion usually implies an imposition, force and subservience which is why there is usually resistance. Britain has repelled invaders, as we teach currently about World War 2. Might this be why migrants are sometimes described with value-laden terms such as 'swarms', 'hordes', and 'armies'? Yet Britain has a history of colonisation with its former empire stretching across the globe.

These are philosophical considerations. There seem to be no instant answers but there are questions, conundrums and understandings. In a historical and geographical context, children could be exploring that other big agenda of our times: values.

There are lots of charities developing parts of their web sites to include aspects of migration. The excellent work that many schools do with Philosophy for Children (P4C) could be developed further by using the materials being produced. Can we trust our oldest primary children to debate and grapple with big issues for the future or are they to be confined to fuelling league tables?

The children in our primary schools will grow up to be part of a very different world, continent and country from the present one. Might we not expect schools to be fully involved in supporting our children's futures and positively affecting our society for the better? Do we need to develop a compassionate outlook towards the phenomenon of migration with the young minds in our schools?

*For much more detailed nuanced understanding of SMSC and how it can support the development of compassion please see [Towards the Compassionate School From Golden Rule to Golden Thread](#) (Coles ed.) published by IOE/Trentham 2015*

*A planning sheet accompanies this Think Piece. It contains some ideas and a way of organising some learning around the theme of refugees for a few weeks for Year 5 and 6 children, though it could be adapted for older year groups. We are grateful to [The Victoria Primary School in Dudley](#) for allowing CoED to use it here.*