

Background matters

Schools can play a vital role in promoting the well-being of refugee and asylum-seeking children, and including issues in the curriculum which affect these children can help with participation, integration and achievement. But how do you do this? **Karen Shead** visits a primary school in Hackney to get some answers

ELEVEN-year-old Sodique Olabiyi stands up, holds his head high, takes a deep breath, and recites a speech which begins "I have a dream..."

It is a speech many are familiar with, but few would be able to recite with as much confidence as Sodique. The reason he knows it so well is that last October his school year, Year 6, performed the UK premiere of a new American play about Martin Luther King called *We Are the Dream* and Sodique played the main role.

It was performed by pupils of Woodberry Down Community School as part of Black History Month, an event the school celebrates with gusto each year. The play is one example of the many innovative projects which take place at the school with the aim of involving all of the children, many of whom come from different backgrounds. Out of the 420 pupils some 80 per cent are from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

**Headteacher
Greg Wallace,
Woodberry
Down
Community
School**



Every year during Black History Month each school year studies a different person who has played an important role in black history, for example Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks. And after delivering his speech Sodique had no problem reeling off facts and figures about them.

Headteacher Greg Wallace believes it is important to embrace such events. "Including black and ethnic minority

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children has to come through what you teach the children and not in a one-off lesson," he says. "If you want to change ideas and show children their background is something you value, you need to include issues in the curriculum

in a sustained, meaningful way."

The school has gained recognition for its inclusive work with refugee and asylum-seeking children and for making issues which affect these children part of the curriculum. Twenty-five per cent of the children are refugees, many from Africa, in particular Somalia and Nigeria.

"It's about changing the ideas of children who have misconceptions about refugee children," Greg explains. "Some children think it's a bad thing to be and use the word 'refugee' as an insult, but in reality it's a brave thing and is often the start of a tragic story."

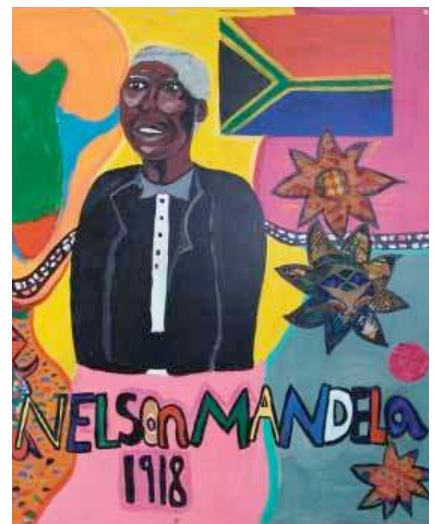
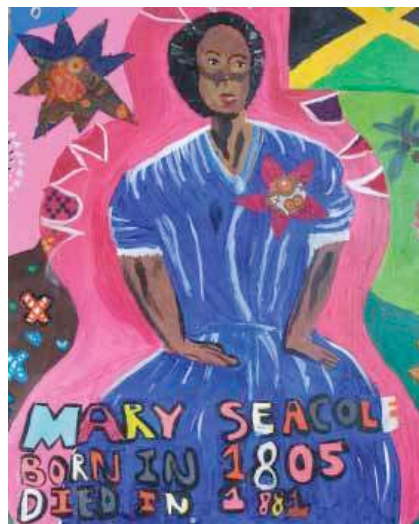
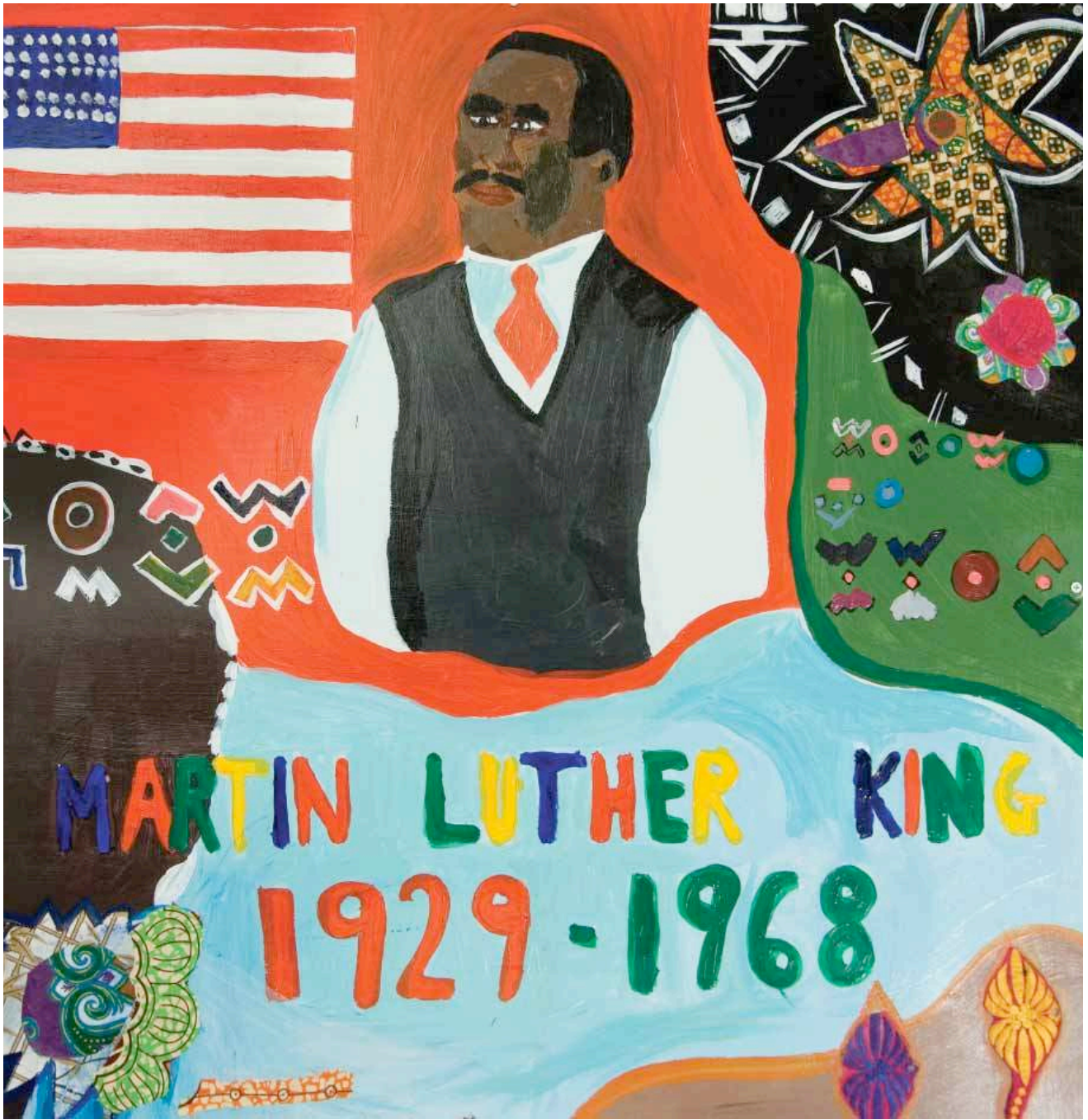
The school has developed a project based on a book called *The Other Side of the Truth* by Beverley Naidoo. The

book tells the tale of two children from Nigeria, a brother and sister, who are forced to flee from their homeland and seek refuge in England.

The six-week project is unusual in that it is a cross-curricular one. It brings in many subjects including English, geography, maths, PSHE and citizenship, and a strong focus is placed on learning key skills.

"We did lots of work about Nigeria before they started reading the book," says Greg. "This kind of preparatory work enabled children to comprehend what they were reading; they already had images in their heads to support their understanding of the text. If we want to include refugee children, or change attitudes, we need to find a common starting point."

The project inspired staff to take children on a trip to the other side of ►



Photos: Philip Wolmuth, Paintings by pupils from Woodberry Down Community School



the city to follow the journey from Victoria to Peckham that the two characters did when they came to London.

"We were walking down Peckham Road and one boy asked me 'When are we going to see Sade and Femi?' He thought these two – the main characters in the book – were real, which was great!" Greg exclaims. "Inevitably, all the children start to identify with the plight of the children in the book.

"We have started with a book which has more relevance to the children here at the school, and they come to each lesson wanting to know what happens next," says Greg. "The teaching and the learning for the children is much better."

The content of the book also lends itself to discussion on emotional and personal issues, which fits into PSHE and citizenship.

"The book is dedicated to Damilola Taylor, the schoolboy who was killed in 2000, and so we talked about him. We also talked about Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian writer and activist who was executed, and bullying.

"These are quite complicated issues for children and there's no easy way to explain these things to them. But avoiding that fact isn't an option. In fact, to change negative attitudes to include children who have experienced terrible things you have to delve quite deeply into realms that perhaps aren't associated with the typical primary

school curriculum," Greg stresses.

The school also ran a programme of events related to the project during Refugee Week in June. Every year the school celebrates Refugee Week and in the past pupils performed a musical about Diwali and took part in a Cuban night and a Turkish

night. The latter included a mosque, built by pupils, which today sits in one of the school corridors in all of its colourful glory.

Greg strongly believes in making subject content relevant to pupils. "We work in one of the most challenging schools in London, in one of the most deprived areas," he says. "People say there is a lot of disaffection in schools, but if you want to raise standards you need to study things which are relevant to these children."

Professor Jan Blommaert, chair of languages in education at the IOE, says that in today's society it is relevant to make

refugee issues part of the curriculum.

"There are now more than 300,000 refugees and asylum seekers in the UK, so this is no longer a small and negligible minority," he says.

But, including issues which affect these children is not always easy, he explains.

"The category 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker' doesn't tell you much about how you can teach these children," he says. "In order to teach them you need to be familiar with where they come from, which languages they speak, whether they are literate and if so, in which writing system?"

"Well, just as you think you have assembled that knowledge about a particular group – say people from Congo – a group of people from Sudan or Iraq come in, and you have to start from scratch."

This description is familiar to Greg.

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"It can be a challenge," he says, "but it is a journey that can help you, as a teacher, to constantly review, change and develop.

"In London we have the potential to become world-class educators by embracing diversity as the starting point for what we teach." ■

Over the next few months there are several CPD courses taking place at the IOE which relate to teaching refugee and asylum-seeking children. They include:

- 28 February:** Supporting refugee children in the early years
- 8 March:** Teaching refugee and asylum-seeking children
- 14 March:** Teaching mathematics to pupils with EAL in the primary school
- 16 March:** Whole-school responsibility for the inclusion and achievement of secondary EAL and minority ethnic students
- 8 June:** Developing speaking and listening opportunities for EAL pupils

For more information about CPD courses, contact the CPD unit on **020 7612 6589** or cpd@ioe.ac.uk