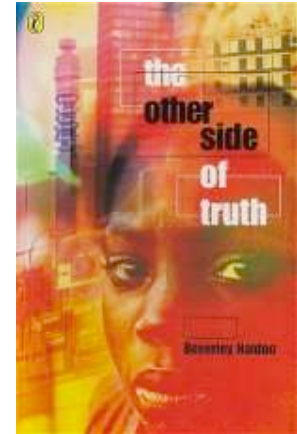


A cross-curricular project on *The Other Side of Truth* by Beverley Naidoo



How one school successfully made the study of refugee issues part of the core curriculum

Background

Woodberry Down Community Primary School is located in the London Borough of Hackney. Many pupils are refugees (25%); some stay at the school for many years, others for a short time. Our children who are refugees come from all over the world, including a considerable number from Somalia and Nigeria.

The school has been running successful programmes of events for Refugee Week since 2004. These have been well-received by children and parents, but in 2006 we wanted to go a step further. We were inspired by previous positive responses from children to the things we had done in school- and also by a quote from Benjamin Zephaniah:



"Refugee Week is important because it reminds us that refugees are not just statistics to be used and abused, they are living, breathing people. I am British, I was born here and I have no intention of leaving here, so I want to create a society here where compassion is built into our culture, in this society we will be so aware of the world around us that we will not need a Refugee Week. Until then this is how we do it".

So we set about planning a six-week cross-curricular topic based on Beverley Naidoo's award-winning book *The Other Side of Truth*.

Approach

On reading the book, we saw the potential for an innovative teaching sequence, making real links between subjects, inspired by the narrative. It made sense, to us, to plan and teach the geography lesson on Lagos before the children had started reading the text (which starts in Lagos). Equally, when Sade refers to the family home near Ibadan, it makes sense to follow this up in geography with a lesson on Ibadan. Other links quickly sprung to mind...

When the Nigerian currency (the Naira) is first mentioned, it seemed like this would be a good opportunity to explore this in a maths lesson on converting currencies. This in turn

would be well-supported by and ICT lesson using spreadsheets to help convert currencies. In fact, it seemed there were endless opportunities...

And when Femi and Sade are abandoned at London's Victoria Station they desperately try and work out how to get to the London College of Art (where they hope to find their Uncle Dele, who works there). Couldn't our children do this? (It is actually, Camberwell College of Art.) Couldn't they actually make the journey, like the fictional characters did? Wouldn't their recount writing afterwards be particularly purposeful? And wouldn't their reading of the text be more heightened and focused?

Outcome

Well they made the journey, their work was great and the text moved and engaged the 120 children involved in the project. You can see numerous examples of the children's work on the school website – www.woodberrydown.net

What made this better than what we had done before? It was the intensity of the plot and the fact that so many lessons, in so many subjects, were driven by the power of the story. Sade and Femi were real people to the children, they identified with them and wanted them to be safe, successful and reunited with their father. They hated the way that these fictional children were treated: by immigration, by the adults they encountered and by other English children.

My delicate, beloved dress
Sewn by my dead mother
Scissors appear
They cut through the glistening
thread
I feel absolutely devastated
I attempt to try and grab
But am taken back
And left to watch

Cruel cuts destroy
My most precious possession
But the memory *must* live on

Temitope

A child's poem written in response to the text.

Customs officials destroy one of Sade's few possessions as she arrives in the UK.

And they talked about their own experiences more than ever before. The most moving story from a child, for me, came through a comment she wrote to me when I had marked a piece of work. The children had explained the meanings of some of the similes and metaphors used:

'Two sharp cracks splinter the air.'
'His body is wooden with fright'

These sentences come from the opening chapter, when Sade's mum is shot.

I wrote: *Which is your favourite sentence and why?*

She replied: *'A few seconds, that is all. Later it will always seem much longer.'* *It reminds me of my dad's sister because the same thing happened to her and it does feel much longer.*

This child's aunt had been shot in Lagos.



Rev Tunde Roberts

The sharing of experience wasn't confined to children. When one of our school governors, Rev Tunde Roberts, came to speak to us about Nigeria it transpired that he had been asked to work for General Abacha (the military leader in power at the time of the book). He was asked to come to England and spy. Within days he had to flee the country.

Another inspirational contribution to the project came from the author of the book. Beverley spent an amazing day with us and later said:

'I loved meeting the children at Woodberry Down and experiencing their enthusiasm about reading a story that reflected something of the world they know. The quality of their work around The Other Side of Truth is outstanding! The way the children have engaged with the novel so creatively and thoughtfully is also a tribute to the way their teachers have 'led' them into the story through such a lively cross-curricular approach. How I would have loved to join them on their 'detective' journey from Victoria Station to the 'London College of Art' on the Number 36 Bus! Perhaps that will also have inspired new stories of their own... as indeed any bus journey can if you listen and look carefully enough. Many congratulations to readers and writers, young and old, at Woodberry Down... and let's continue to read and write the world!'



Beverley Naidoo signing books during her visit to the school



At Camberwell College of Art

We made the journey to the 'London College of Art' on a very hot Saturday afternoon in late June. We were walking back towards Camberwell Green to buy ice cream when one child said, 'When are we going to see Sade and Femi? Where are they?'

Turquoise skies, gentle breeze, hot sun
Cool water of beach is waiting
Long-faced
My precious family and friends
London
Freezing, grey, gloomy, savage
Faces stare, heads turn.
Embarrassed
Happy ending, will I?

A child's poem, written at the end of the book and dedicated to Damilola Taylor

Fiction and reality became one in many different ways during this project. Carefully creating the conditions for this level of engagement and response ensured that refugee issues were not an 'add on' to the curriculum; they were at the heart of it.

These were lessons, and a story, we will never forget.

Greg Wallace
Headteacher

The blurb for *The Other Side of Truth* by Beverley Naidoo

A novel about two young people who overnight become refugees...

A shot. Two shots at the gate in the early morning and a car screeches away down an avenue of palm trees. A tragedy - and a terrible loss for Sade and her younger brother Femi, children of an outspoken Nigerian journalist. Now terror is all around them and they must flee their country. At once. And alone. Plans for their journey have to be hastily arranged. Everything must be done in secret. But once Sade and Femi reach England, they will be safe - won't they?