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Refugees: seeking safety

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Many refugees have a simple desire: to return home and get their old life back. What are the options when that's impossible? What can refugees themselves do, and how can their peers in the UK help? Engage students' common humanity and harness their creativity.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the activity students will be able to:

- appreciate the variety of different needs a refugee has in moving to a new country and be able to identify items they personally think would be most useful to them after a sudden evacuation.
- describe ways in which being a refugee now is different from in the past and ways in which it is similar.
- identify different forms of help from their peer group that might be appreciated by refugees in the UK.

On the move

Introduce the subject of refugees. Check that students know what is meant by the word. A **refugee** is someone who has had to leave their home country to find a refuge: a safer place to be. The term **asylum seeker** means broadly the same thing: someone searching for a place of safety or asylum. However, there are legal distinctions between the terms in the UK, which it may be relevant for students to appreciate. See the definitions at the end of this activity.

Spend a moment thinking about what it is like if you are not safe in your home. Then ask students to say what aspect of their home they would miss most. Could they take it with them if they had to settle into a new place?

Then show the **first picture in the Powerpoint**.

Invite immediate reactions. Explain that it shows just one of over 1.6 million people who have had to leave the country because of the armed conflict in Syria.

Note the objects in and on the car. Why might these things have been a priority for this man? What difference might it make to him, and perhaps his family, to have a comfortable mattress to sleep on wherever they end up? What might be in the boxes and suitcases? (There is no more information available, so guesses have to remain guesses.)



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Note that the driver was photographed at a border crossing with others who were trying to get back into Syria. Bombings across the border in Turkey in May 2013 meant many Syrians didn't feel safe there either – so he and others had to change their original plans for a place of safety.

What would you miss?

Ask students to think again about what they would miss about their home and home area if it became too dangerous to stay. Invite them to make their own personal list, using the following categories for inspiration and structure:

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- Physical basics – food, water, shelter, somewhere to wash and go to the loo.
- Safety – feeling that you, the people you care for and your possessions are safe and you have money and identity papers.
- Close relationships – friends and family, people to share personal thoughts with.
- Feeling useful and valued – feeling good about yourself and others, being confident, feeling that you can achieve something, that you have a future and plans, that you are with people who respect each other.
- Being creative, being yourself, passing time – playing or listening to music, playing sport, dancing, exploring fashion.

What would you take?

Move on to practical decision-making, with a space and time limit. Ask students to list what they would take with them, bearing in mind the discussion about what they would miss. Split into five groups and allocate them something to carry their items:

1. a small bag
2. a large suitcase on wheels
3. a bicycle
4. a car
5. a van or a removal lorry.

Allocate a time for the activity – say five minutes – and use a countdown timer to stress the time pressure.

Look again at the lists. What was common to all groups?

Now ask students to imagine being away for a couple of weeks, and also being away for months or years. Would anyone change what they take?

Definitions

To check what students understand by the terms refugees and asylum seekers, use the definitions provided by the UN refugee agency:

What are refugees?

A refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country".

Article 1, 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees

What is an asylum seeker?

An asylum seeker is someone who has applied for asylum and is waiting for a decision as to whether or not they are a refugee. In other words, in the UK an asylum seeker is someone who has asked the Government for refugee status and is waiting to hear the outcome of their application.

Source: [UNHCR](#)

By the end of the activity students will be able to appreciate the variety of different needs a refugee has in moving to a new country and be able to identify items they personally think would be most useful to them after a sudden evacuation.

History

Look again at the photograph of the car driver in Syria. Spend a few moments identifying the elements that indicate that this is a modern refugee, not an historic picture.

Then [show the following pictures in the Powerpoint](#) and read the captions to explain a little about the background to each picture:



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Clockwise from top left: i) Belgian refugees make their way through Northern France in 1914 ahead of invading troops during World War I. ii) In September 1972 people arrive at Stansted Airport on a specially chartered flight to Britain shortly after Idi Amin announced the expulsion of all Asians from Uganda. iii) A refugee drives a car at border gate in Turkey on his way back to Syria in May 2013. iv) Refugees from the war in Kosovo arrive at Prestwick Airport in May 1999 on their way to being resettled temporarily in Glasgow.

Similarities and differences

Splitting into groups, ask students to think of ways that the experience of refugees in those times would be different from today. Use the photographs to trigger suggestions. After listing as many as they can, they should then list similarities. Suggest that students look back on their personal lists from the previous activity for inspiration and ideas.

Finish by asking students to complete the sentences:

- The experience of being a refugee now is the same as it was in the past because ...
- The experience of being a refugee now is different from how it was in the past because ...

Is there a pattern to the answers? Do the **differences** tend to be about practical matters – phones, transport methods, for instance – while the **similarities** tend to be about feelings and emotions? Which has the biggest impact on day-to-day life?

Optional extension: Organise a debate with a motion based on one of the two statements above.

By the end of the activity students will be able to describe ways in which being a refugee now is different from in the past and ways in which it is similar.

Refugee survival

Ask students to imagine that they have been a refugee in an unfamiliar place for over a year.

Below are some scenarios designed to help students focus on the realities of surviving as a refugee. Choose ones suitable for the group and, if appropriate, divide the class into smaller groups. Students' task is to discuss the scenario and then come up with answers to the following three questions:

1. What would be your biggest challenges?
 2. How would you approach them?
 3. What help would you appreciate from others in your age group?
- **You desperately want to go back home. But everyone says it is still too dangerous.** People expect you to be grateful to be where you are. However some media reports suggest you are not welcome any more.
 - **You do not know what happened to your friends and family from home.** No one knows you're safe and you don't know if they are safe. You feel isolated and vulnerable.

- **You miss the food, culture and friends from home.** Everything in your new country is strange and unfamiliar. You feel you are not living, just existing.
- **You're not sure if you are safe now.** You have nightmares about what happened when you had to flee. You have heard stories of attacks on refugees in the local area. You worry that your permission to stay may be withdrawn.

Come together to discuss the groups' work. Draw together answers to question 2. What do they have in common? Is it possible to identify skills, attitudes and resources that help people do better in adversity? List these qualities of resilience.

How did students respond to question 3? Can you use their answers to draw up a checklist of actions that might help teenage refugees in the UK? Perhaps students didn't feel confident in knowing what might help. Where would they go to fill that knowledge gap? Who is in the best position to know what would help?

Optional extension: Consider developing students' responses into a substantial piece of work, perhaps an extended piece of creative writing or a drama improvisation.

Perhaps finish with a discussion of books and films that feature refugees. What have students learnt from them? What book or film about the refugee experience do they wish everyone could read or see?

***By the end of the activity** students will be able to identify different forms of help from their peer group that might be appreciated by refugees in the UK.*

Local action project

Most refugees seek safety in neighbouring, relatively poor countries. However, the UK does have a record of successfully welcoming new arrivals and accommodating them into society.

Ask what students know about the history of refugees in the UK. The Huguenots, who escaped periods of persecution in France from the 16th to 18th centuries, came to Britain and brought the French word refugee with them. More recently there have been Asians expelled from Uganda in 1972, evacuees from the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, and those escaping fear of persecution in Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Libya, Pakistan and India.

For an action project try to find out what local communities have done to welcome newcomers and make the settlement easier. What community centres or services are there? What materials are written in different languages? What organisations exist to help refugees adjust to life in the UK?

Ask students to imagine they have to provide an orientation service for newly-arrived teenagers in their area. Explain that such services are provided in some places by humanitarian organisations to help new arrivals to the UK adapt to life.

The idea is that those with local knowledge will help new arrivals to:

- find their way round, discover where to go for different things and the best routes to get there.
- increase their self-confidence and reduce social isolation through meeting groups and making friends.
- increase their familiarity with UK culture and customs – how people spend their free time, what they like to discuss when they meet and so on.
- get the knowledge and confidence to use public transport.
- be able to access health services, and know when to use a GP, when to go to hospital, when to treat yourself and where the nearest A&E is.
- be aware of what sport, music and other recreation is available.
- know about shops, including markets and shopping malls and what is available in curious retail outlets such as post offices and pharmacies.

It is better to be shown how to do something, rather than just being given a leaflet or told to go to a website. So ask students to devise an intensive week-long familiarisation programme that would quickly get a teenage refugee up to speed with what they need to know locally. Draw up a simple grid and ask students to fill in the timeslots with visits and activities:

	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
morning							

afternoon							
evening							

Invite students to critique their results. Is there logic to the order of the visits? Are there any obvious timing errors or clashes? How exhausting might the schedule be in reality?

By the end of the activity students will be able to describe and justify a programme of familiarisation activities designed to help a new arrival find their feet in the local area.

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