

Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

WIGAN and the asylum seekers – Combatting ignorance

For over a hundred years, certain newspapers have been obsessed with 'asylum seekers', depicting them in a way which stirs up fear and hatred. Although the UK has a long tradition of granting asylum to those fleeing persecution, they often experience hostility and suspicion. So what does it mean to seek asylum or refuge? Who are the people behind the labels? One project was devoted to helping young people bridge that gap.

In 1999 people from Kosovo began to flee to England for safety from persecution by the Serbian government. When groups of Kosovan refugees arrived in Wigan, North West England, local youth workers took positive steps to integrate and welcome the young people to their new community. Youth worker Ruth Poole, "Our main objective was to try and prevent problems that might have been caused by any ignorance about refugees...The national media often portrays a very negative image of asylum seekers, there are lots of myths surrounding them. Facts and figures about things like how many are in this country, or how much money they receive, are often exaggerated or taken out of context. We wanted to make sure that young people understood what the situation really was."

Senior Youth Officer Steph Green added that it was particularly important to develop work around race issues in Wigan, which had the smallest percentage of ethnic minorities in Greater Manchester. "We worked to help the young people empathize with the refugees and understand their backgrounds. We held discussions and tried to answer their questions."

We talked to the refugees to find out what their interests were and organized a programme of activities for young people on the estate and asylum seekers together, like mountain biking, a games night and walking. As youth workers we have encouraged the young people not to segregate themselves but to talk to the asylum seekers and offer help if needed. Language need not be a barrier."

Wigan Council, in collaboration with local newspaper the Bolton Evening News, ran a young people's newspaper, *Youth News*, edited by a group of young reporters who also contributed articles and helped design the paper. They were keen to interview asylum seekers and Mark Farrar, Youth Development Officer at Wigan Council said, "We felt it would be a good way to let young people across Wigan know more about [the asylum seekers]... The reporters were mainly curious about the refugees' interests - whether they liked football, what sort of music they were into, and what they thought of Wigan, rather than anything that might have been too painful to answer. However, many of the asylums

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seekers volunteered information about some of the horrific events they had witnessed.

Young reporter Naomi Yates, 14, gave her view of what it was like to meet the refugees, "You may picture these men as images you see on the television but I can assure you they look like and, more importantly, **are** regular men who have been through a great deal. They were just normal men, mechanics, students, truck drivers and footballers, who had had their lives torn away from them. Besnick told me: 'Most of us are without our families and it is difficult to contact them. Some of us aren't even sure where our families are. We're bored because we're not allowed to work until we've been here for at least six months. We spend too much time thinking about the things we've seen and things that have happened to us... We will remember the warm welcome we received and if we ever go home we'd like to take back freedom as you have here.'

After the project, young people said, "It annoyed me that there were people on this estate who caused problems for the asylum seekers...I will always say hello to them and be friendly when I see them on the street....We would want other countries to help us if we were at war."

Discussion:

Ruth Poole says that a main objective was to prevent problems that might arise from negative stereotypes that people in Wigan had about asylum seekers (often based on media representations). What steps did Poole and her colleagues take to do this? Create a chart with the following categories: initiative, potential risks, potential impact and fill it in with specific examples that show the particular steps the youth workers, youth and asylum seekers took.

The reading refers to media representations of asylum seekers. Choose a couple of newspapers with stories about asylum seekers. Place these stories on chart paper. First have students respond to what they see (only describing what they see). Then have them reflect on the meanings behind the words and images and discuss the impact. How do the words and images make the students feel? As an assignment ask students if they can find a positive representation of asylum seekers in the media.