

# Decolonising the English Curriculum for Increased Pupil Awareness of Social Justice

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*Dedicated to Heba.*

## Abstract

This Action Research Project was conducted with an S2 Secondary English class during the 2022-23 Global Pandemic recovery period. It arose from a need to decolonise the curriculum in line with the school's Gold Rights Respecting School status, national guidance on anti-racism in education and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The research was conducted to gauge the methods that would be effective for teaching the novel 'Boy Everywhere,' with a view to enabling learners to have conversations about social justice. The author used a pragmatic mixed methods approach to research, with an emphasis on pupils as co-researchers. Results showed pupils became more aware of social justice issues through hearing stories, talking and writing activities. The key research conclusion was the primary importance of real-life contexts for social justice. The project outcomes highlighted the implications of the classroom as a microcosm of a just society and learners as social justice activists. In turn, this democratisation of the classroom presents one possible blueprint for effective Learning for Sustainability Global Citizenship education.

## How Can I Use this Resource?

Secondary English teachers seeking to decolonise the curriculum will be able to examine data on methodology and pedagogy to encourage conversations about social justice. Classroom practitioners seeking to democratise their learning space and increase pupil voice will be able to look at the benefits of co-research with learners through action research.

## National and International Policy Contexts for ‘Decolonising the Curriculum.’

The Action Research Project encompasses local and international guidance on Learning for Sustainability (LfS) for Global Citizenship Education. The Scottish LfS framework interconnects sustainable development, outdoor learning and global citizenship. (Education Scotland, 2019.) Of these three areas of the framework, Global Citizenship could be argued to be a particularly contentious term. On the one hand, Global Citizenship is promoted by international bodies such as the United Nations through the Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015). Since 2011, Citizenship has been acknowledged within the GTC Scotland Professional Standards as a value that teachers are required to deliver in the Scottish curriculum. However, on the other hand, it is interesting to note that the term citizenship is used explicitly only once in the 2021 Standard for Full Registration whereas ‘rights respecting’ and the umbrella term ‘sustainable learning’ is embedded throughout. This perhaps reflects some of the uncertainties around the term ‘Citizenship’ and how the understanding of what makes a good citizen can be subjective. It is important to state that while the terminology of ‘Global Citizenship’ may be less commonly used in the current policy landscape, the principles of building fair, just and inclusive societies remain intrinsic to being a Learning for Sustainability educator. In recent years, interpretations of global citizenship have largely focused on looking at social justice, rights-respecting schools and anti-racism education. This has been a growing area of policy development, with the consequence that there is now specific guidance for educators to consider in their classroom practice. In 2021 a toolkit was published by the Scottish Government in partnership with Education Scotland designed to support teachers to “embed anti-racism and race equality into all aspects of school life” (ScotGov, August 2021). Much work has emerged from the Scottish Government’s Anti-Racism in Education Programme (AREP, 2021) including the developing of ‘Breaking the Mould: Principles for an Anti-Racism Curriculum.’ (Education Scotland, 2023). The minutes from the Scottish Government’s AREP group show the thinking that these principles could have on decolonising a secondary English curriculum:

“Embedding a culture and an understanding of race equality issues, led by race cognisant teachers, into teaching and learning across the curriculum, for example what fiction is being covered in English literature...Decolonising the curriculum is not just about banning some texts (e.g. Of Mice and Men). Canon

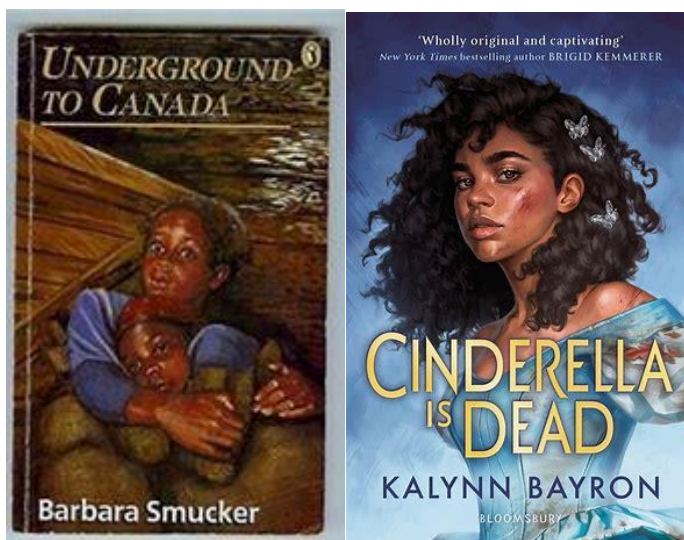
texts can still be taught, although where there is harmful language and representations, teachers need to safeguard their pupils to ensure nobody experiences racial trauma. The racial comfort of white pupils/teachers needs to stop being prioritised in classrooms. Decolonising the curriculum is about looking at the broader curriculum (e.g. collection of texts alongside *Of Mice and Men*), considering which perspectives are missing and valuing knowledge that is produced from the Global South, not just the West” (ScotGov May 2021).

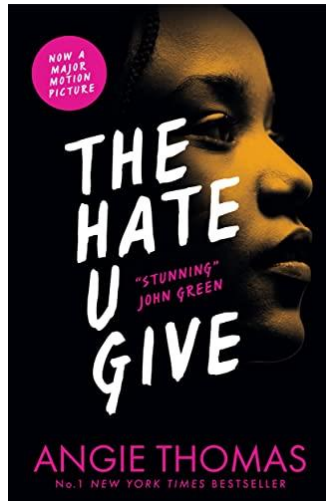
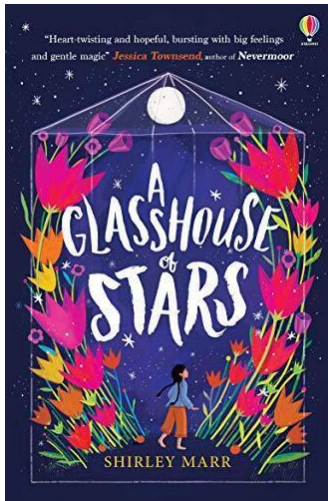
Key to effective decolonisation of the curriculum is the practitioner’s willingness to understand their own identity and positionality. Continued Professional Learning -accessing online resources such as *The Anti-Racist Educator* or the Education Scotland Building Racial Literacy programme- is therefore vital to upskill teacher knowledge to produce effective curricular change.

## Background and local context

The decolonising the curriculum Action Research Project has been undertaken with an English class in a Secondary school situated close to Glasgow which has achieved Gold Rights Respecting School status. The English department was generally traditional in its approach to the curriculum with limited availability of contemporary texts in S2. The average publication date of the S2 texts was 1950 and only 34% of the novels were written by a non-male writer - while there were no texts by authors of colour. The critical incident which had been a motivation for change was when teachers witnessed a black pupil visibly upset and withdrawn in class while studying ‘*Underground to Canada*.’ In this novel the white author Barbara Smucker represents black people as victims who need the help of kindly white people to escape their slavery. This representation enforced an outdated stereotype, de-centring the powerful role black people such as Harriet Tubman had in leading their own emancipation efforts. The novel is part of a suite of commonly taught novels which are written by white authors that focus on the negative aspects of black experience and history. The decades-long prevalence of these kind of novels (in some cases with acknowledged literary merit) have often lead to English teachers mistakenly thinking that by teaching novels about racism that they are anti-racism educators.

Through the EIS Action Research Grant scheme, the English department received funding for five new texts. When any new text is brought into a secondary English department there are a number of push/pull factors to consider – with literary merit and suitability for age and stage as well as teacher preference being primary factors. Rarely is time taken to examine our own biases about which texts are included and therefore this project was a rich opportunity to centre the diversity and inclusion needs of the learners. The five novels were selected to include diverse voices that would contain relevant issues in society for young people and promote social justice across the intersections of race, gender and sexuality. The settings of the novel ranged from a Chinese/Australian community (A Glasshouse of Stars,) a fantasy fiction world (Cinderella is Dead) present-day USA (Booked / The Hate U Give) to contemporary UK and Syria (Boy, Everywhere). One of the texts ‘Cinderella is Dead’ by black author Kalynn Bayron was taught with the class who had the previous year been studying ‘Underground to Canada.’ It was a transformative moment when the same pupil who had been notably disengaged studying ‘Underground to Canada’ was seen proudly clutching ‘Cinderella is Dead’ in the school corridors. This was a very visible illustration of what Charles (2019) concludes about texts having the power to make us feel excluded or included: “What happens to the student when they do not hear their voice at all, or when they do, it is glossed over or framed as a negative? The message that is being communicated is then that you don’t belong.”





It was acknowledged from the outset that the act of decolonising would go beyond inclusion of texts on department shelves and that decolonisation was an ongoing act that would require a change of hearts, heads and hands. This project would enable research on the best teaching pedagogies that would encourage the class to engage in conversations about social justice issues. As a Rights Respecting School using research methods that would encourage pupil voice in respect of UNCRC Article 12 was of paramount importance.

From the selection of the new texts, the S2 class involved in this action research project studied the novel 'Boy Everywhere' by British Syrian author A.M. Dassu.



The novel is about a young boy called Sami who because of war in Syria seeks refuge in the U.K. The key theme selected to focus on throughout the study of the novel was the way in which the author promotes empathy. This was chosen in reference to former UN Secretary General Ban-Ki-Moon's description of 'interconnectedness' as a way of creating pathways of understanding to solve global issues: "Education gives us a profound understanding that we are tied together as citizens of the global community, and that our challenges are interconnected." (UNESCO 2015 p. 14)

Instead of seeing the Syrian characters in the novel as "them/they/other" it was important to draw attention to Dassu's skill at bringing the readers close to understanding Sami's experiences. Throughout the reading of the text, the class therefore began discussing and writing very early on in response to their Critical Essay Question: '*How does A.M. Dassu make the experience of being a refugee relatable in her novel Boy everywhere?*'

There are clear links between studying 'Boy Everywhere' and the Sustainable Development goals, to Global Citizenship in SDG 4 Quality Education and also to 3,10 and 16 through the themes of the novel which covers mental health, inequalities for refugees and the effects of war. Moreover the U.N. are presently highlighting a key concern being the growing number of refugees worldwide, justifying what an important issue this is to be working on with learners.

## Research Methods and Classroom Activities

In order to effectively empower pupil voice within the context of a Gold Rights Respecting school the author considered a number of mixed method approaches to data collection. The underpinning theory is Lois-ellen Datta's (1997) 'pragmatic basis' for research methods – in this case harnessing the naturally occurring evidence that would fall within the scope of teaching a class novel. This was particularly suitable when looking at research participants in a mixed ability group of pupils. Initially, videoing classroom tasks and solo interviews were considered as a possible qualitative data method which would allow for accurate data capture. However, research conducted by Corbett (Clough, P., & Barton, L. (Eds. 1998) suggests that sustained eye contact and

pressure on young people to speak can serve to alienate rather than generate authentic interaction. In order to democratise the classroom, it was necessary to move away from adult-centric practices (Holland et al. (2008) and provide a choice of how the pupils wished their voices to be heard. Furthermore, a wide range of data collection methods would ward against a 'cherry-picking' approach of more eloquent voices which could be mistakenly taken as being a collective form of representation (Fielding, 2007.)

For the S2 class studying 'Boy Everywhere' a social constructivist learning context was centralised, where meaning is shaped through collaborative talking and listening tasks. (Rogoff, 1990; Duran & Syzmanski, 1995). These activities included: pupils reading aloud to each other in small groups; teacher-led reading; presenting a research poster in groups; group discussion tasks and class discussion tasks. Writing activities such as summarising events in the novel, thank-you postcards, exit pass post-it-notes and the writing of a Critical Essay were naturally occurring activities that would allow pupils to express their voices in writing. In addition, to encompass options for those who may prefer independent working outside of the classroom environment, pupils selected a refugee to research as a homework task prior to creating a poster presentation. To expand on inclusive strategies that would widen the scope of data collection the author included the use of drawing as a method of expressing the views of the pupils. According to Brooks (2005) drawing can be a powerful meaning-making tool that does not rely on the confidence of the pupil to express themselves verbally nor in formal writing. One further opportunity arose within the course of the research project which had not been initially planned – a visit from a Syrian Refugee. As will be shown from the results, this ended up being an influential experience on the understanding of the S2 pupils and their ability to discuss social justice.

When collating the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to highlight the key statements that pupils were making in their work with regards to the refugee experience. Frequency codes were identified based upon consistent perspectives that existed across the data, in line with an emergent themes approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2017).

A quantitative data measure was introduced at the close of the unit on 'Boy Everywhere' with a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. This allowed a cohesive point in time where information was gathered and shared with the class on which pedagogies had been most successful in eliciting conversations about

social justice. In the S2 class pupils took ownership of the data results and spent time analysing the results of each question. This was structured through a carousel activity where the data results for each of the 10 questions were presented in the middle of A3 paper and placed on tables around the room. Moving around to each area, groups of 2-3 pupils at a time were invited to write their thoughts around the data to agree/disagree or comment in any way on the overall class results. As a whole class we then looked at the pupil comments written on the data analysis to further interrogate the results of our collaborative enquiry. We then came to some joint conclusions as a class about what the next steps should be for teaching 'Boy Everywhere' with classes in the following year. This approach of pupils as co-researchers was key to democratising the classroom and as Shier (2001) states, creating an environment where "children share power and responsibility for decision-making."

Finally, at the end of the academic year the learners participated in a reflective end-of year 5-point Likert-scale questionnaire offering 6 statements about their experiences during S2 English with the option of providing concluding comments. This also allowed time after the project had concluded to reflect back on the impact it had on me as a classroom practitioner.

## Ethics

At the start of the action research project a Parent and a Pupil Information sheet was produced to detail the purpose and process of the Action Research Project. The language used was chosen to be clear and accessible: '*We want to find out the best ways of teaching the novels to encourage our pupils to talk about social justice.*' And while completion of the naturally occurring classwork was not optional, completion of the questionnaire was -although all pupils who were present in school chose to take part in research. The ethical implications of the project were informally reviewed by the Chair of the Ethics Committee at Strathclyde University and no issues were identified. At the close of the project the findings of the Action Research Project will be disseminated to parents and pupils. To protect the right to pupil privacy, pupils have been identified throughout using random letters of the alphabet.



## Data and Commentary

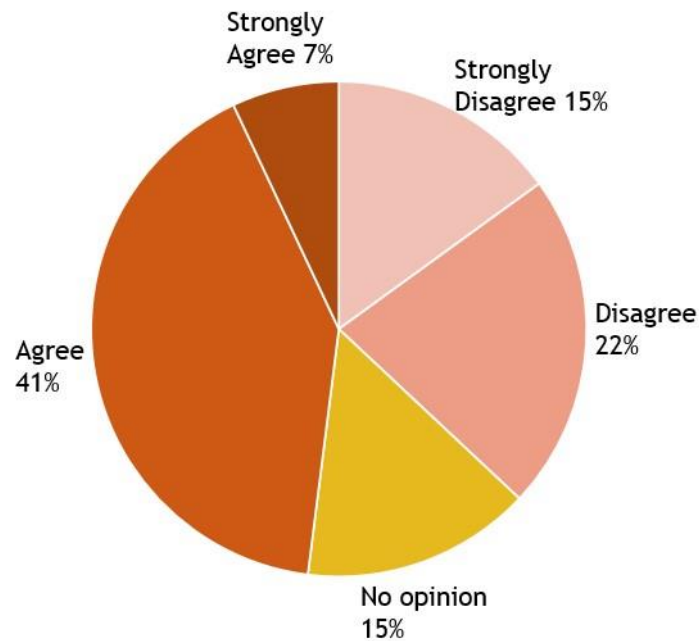
The section that follows presents the quantitative and qualitative data results with teacher and learner insights from co-analysis.

Which ways of teaching the novel 'Boy Everywhere' helped pupils to be able to talk about social justice?					
Pedagogy	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Reading aloud to each other in class	4 (15%)	6 (22%)	4 (15%)	11 (41%)	2 (7%)
2. The teacher reading to us			3 (12%)	12 (44%)	12 (44%)
3. Drawing pictures of what happens in the novel		5 (19%)	9 (32%)	8 (30%)	5 (19%)
4. A Syrian refugee visiting our class			3 (11%)	6 (22%)	18 (67%)
5. Writing the Critical Essay	2 (8%)		7 (27%)	14 (54%)	3 (11%)
6. Summarising what happens in each chapter	4 (15%)	3 (12%)	4 (15%)	13 (50%)	2 (8%)
7. Talking in groups about the novel	2 (7%)	1 (4%)	5 (19%)	14 (52%)	4 (15%)
8. Talking to our family at home about the novel	4 (15%)	9 (35%)	10 (38%)	2 (8%)	1 (4%)
9. Researching a Refugee	4 (15%)		3 (12%)	10 (38%)	9 (35%)
10. Discussing the novel with the teacher and the whole class	3 (12%)	2 (8%)	6 (23%)	11 (42%)	4 (15%)
Correlation of less confident talkers strongly liking drawing but not reading aloud	4 of 8 50% of those who are shy talkers.				

\*pupils numbers vary between 26-27 as one pupil did not complete all of the questionnaire.

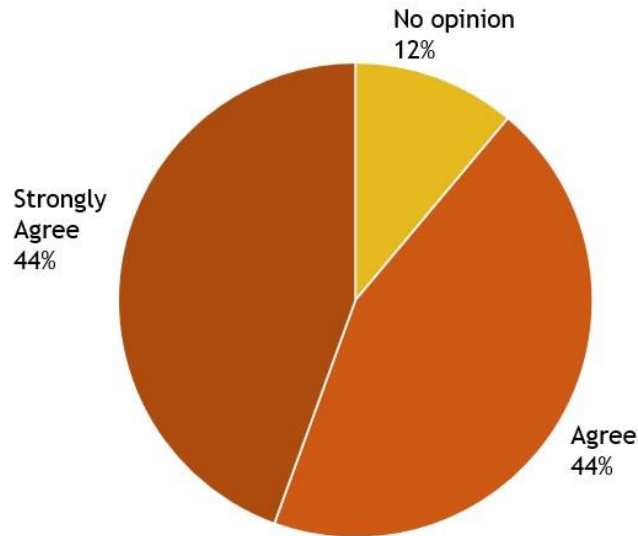
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### Reading aloud to each other in class



1. There is no clear consensus on whether the method of reciprocal reading was beneficial in helping this group of pupils to discuss social justice issues. It is interesting to note that these learners are not used to reciprocal reading in this secondary school and when it was first introduced in the unit there were some pupils who reacted strongly against the idea of reading aloud to their peers in groups. The pupils gave feedback through a post-it note exit pass about how they felt. Three pupils felt uncomfortable reading to their group and four identified that they 'were not a fan of talking aloud'. However, these same pupils were all able to identify skills gained from the task. The most significant skills identified were listening skills, followed by social skills, reading skills, confidence and pronunciation.

## The teacher reading to us



2. The data for this question was significant, with 88% of pupils agreeing or strongly agreeing that the method of the teacher reading aloud to them helped them to be able to discuss social justice issues. There were no pupils who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this. When we discussed this finding as a class during co-analysis there were the following comments:

"It's better when Mrs Aldous reads to us." Pupil D

"I read ahead but I liked the extra books I got to read so didn't mind."  
Pupil H

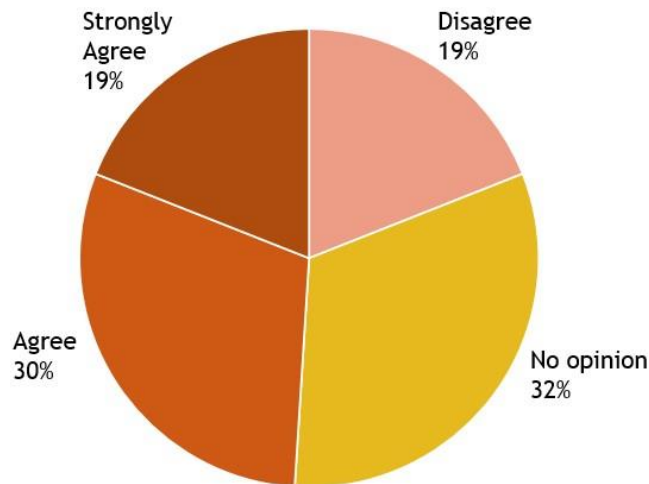
"I can understand what is going on better when read out loud." Pupil Y

A sample reading activity board for 'Reading chapter Two'. The board is divided into four quadrants, each with a task. The top-left quadrant contains an introductory text. The top-right quadrant is 'Quote Finder', the bottom-right is 'Summariser', the bottom-left is 'Illustrator', and the bottom-right is 'Vocab Master'. The board also features illustrations of a pencil, a pen, and a stack of books.

Reading chapter Two	
The teacher will read this chapter to you and in your groups you will have 4 tasks to complete. Split these up one per person.	<b>Quote Finder</b> Select a quote you feel is important in this chapter and explain to the class why you chose it.
<b>Illustrator</b> Draw something that represents what happens in this chapter.	<b>Summariser</b> Summarise the events of this chapter in three short bullet points.
	<b>Vocab Master</b> Find three words that are unusual or advanced vocabulary and look up their meanings in a dictionary.

Sample reading activity

## Drawing pictures of what happens in the novel



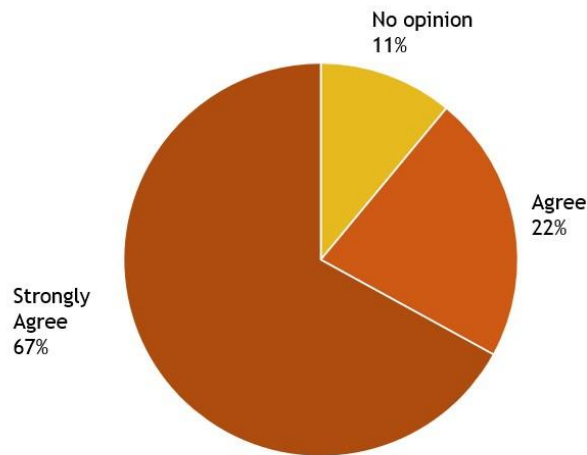
3. It is notable that the 'neutral' section here was one of the strongest responses in the questionnaire. 32% of pupils did not have strong feelings about whether the drawings had helped them discuss social justice issues. Both the pupils and I agreed that the class activity had been very beneficial for pupils who liked drawing. In fact, some pupils who were reluctant speakers were able to express themselves well in drawing and share insightful ideas. Of the 8 pupils in the class who would consider themselves reluctant speakers, 50% chose both a 'strong agree' or 'agree' for drawing and a 'strong disagree' or 'disagree' for reading aloud. This is not a surprising correlation as some excellent work from this group of pupils was observed through drawing while they were less willing to share ideas verbally. During co-analysis Pupil J commented: "I felt it was easier to draw it than to put it into words."



Pupil J draws Sami's reaction to being in a UK detention centre.

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### A Syrian refugee visiting our class



4. This was the most significant piece of data from the questionnaire with 67% of pupils stating they strongly agreed that having a visiting Syrian Refugee to class helped them to discuss social justice issues. With a further 22% agreeing this meant that 89% of the class felt this method of teaching was important to them. When we discussed this statistic together in class the pupils said the data was an accurate reflection of how they felt with pupil E commenting: “Someone that went through the refugee experience came in and taught us which made it more authentic.” When given the opportunity to write an unprompted thank-you postcard to our Syrian visitor several pupils commented on the experience of learning to write their names in Arabic and many spontaneously chose to sign their names in Arabic. Having encountered Arabic words such as “habibi” in the novel it felt that learning some of the language from our visitor created connection to the characters in the novel in a way that had been entirely unplanned.

#### Pupil Comments from Postcards:

“thanks for boosting our learning” pupil J

“it really helped our learning a lot” pupil K

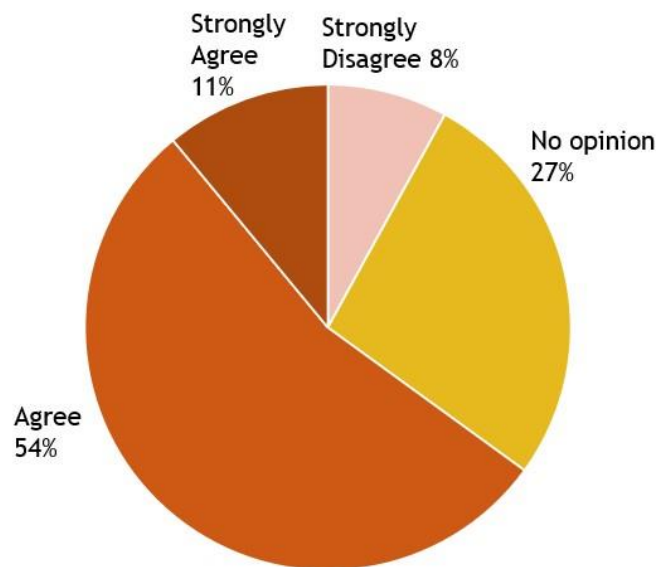
“It was so enlightening and I enjoyed learning Arabic.” pupil L

“I learned a lot” Pupil A

“learning some Arabic was so so cool” pupil C

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### Writing the Critical Essay



5. The pupils generally made a strong connection between writing the essay and being able to discuss social justice issues, with 65% either agreeing or strongly agreeing that this was helpful. This was of particular interest as I had chosen to teach the Critical Essay in small chunks as we read the novel rather than starting to write only after finishing reading the text. When the class came to a key discussion point in the novel we paused to reflect upon the key concept of empathy; investigated and gathered evidence collaboratively and then wrote a paragraph. The class discussion at these points was rich - and I was pleasantly surprised that the pupils themselves had been able to recognise this. During our co-analysis the class were in favour of this method of teaching the novel the following year. Another unexpected benefit of integrating the Critical Essay writing into the reading and discussion as we went along was being able give brief written or verbal feedback after every paragraph. I found that this formative feedback meant that every paragraph became

stronger as the essays went on as pupils were able to revisit and improve their writing skills.

Pupil Quotes from Critical Essays:

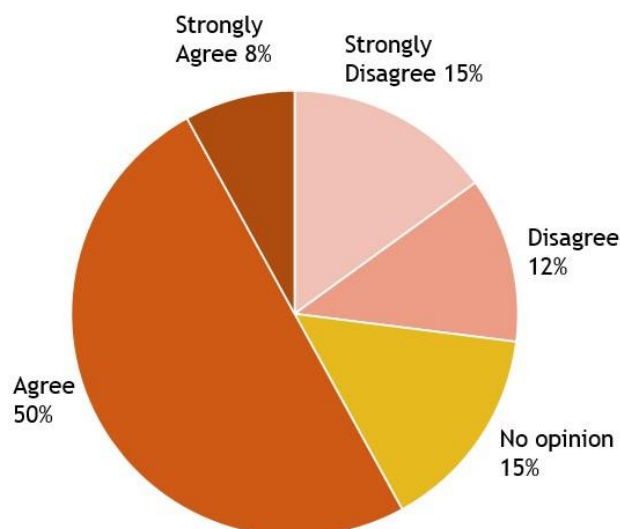
“Everyone deserves a safe home.” -Pupil J

“I think one of the most profound things I have learned is that refugees had lives just like us, some even better, before the war. I find it very important that A.M. Dassu makes Sami relatable now because later on in the book it will make it easier to read as we understand that he really is just like us and that becoming a refugee could happen to anyone.” –Pupil O

“Let me tell you what a parasite is. A parasite is a living thing that uses another living thing as a host. A parasite will take what it needs from its host to stay alive and the host gets nothing at all. What Hassan called Sami is very rude and the reason why he calls him this is because he had to give up his room to them. To be fair here if I had to give up my room I’d be angry about it but I wouldn’t call anyone a parasite.” – Pupil G

“Sami at one point even gets pulled out of school because of the war, getting his right to an education stamped on.” -Pupil EM

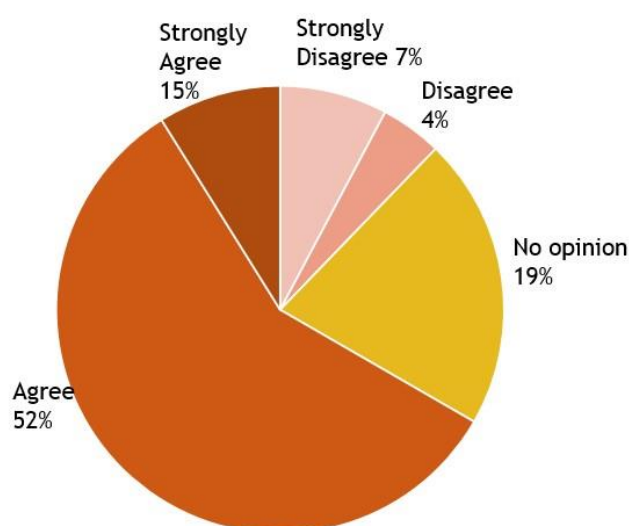
Summarising what happens in each chapter



6. 58% of pupils either agreed or strongly agreed that summarising chapters had been helpful to discuss social justice issues. Around a quarter of the class disagreed that this had been helpful. In further discussion of the analysis of the research data, several pupils commented that it was actually hearing other pupils share aloud their chapter summaries rather than doing the summaries individually that had helped them. This activity seemed to often lead to effective class discussion about what had been the most important themes and incidents in the chapter.

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Talking in Groups about the novel



7. The contribution of group discussion tasks to help pupils talk about social justice was significant data, with 72% of pupils agreeing or strongly agreeing that this was a beneficial pedagogy. During co-analysis comments were written about the stimulus activities used and a preference for talking in groups – although not all pupils enjoyed groupwork.



“The starter tasks were a bit mysterious so it got us talking.” – Pupil E


“I want more group tasks.” Pupil S

“I would like to talk in groups more if I could choose my own group.”


Pupil B

### Sample Group Discussion Stimulus

Chapter 17:  
The  
Detention  
Centre

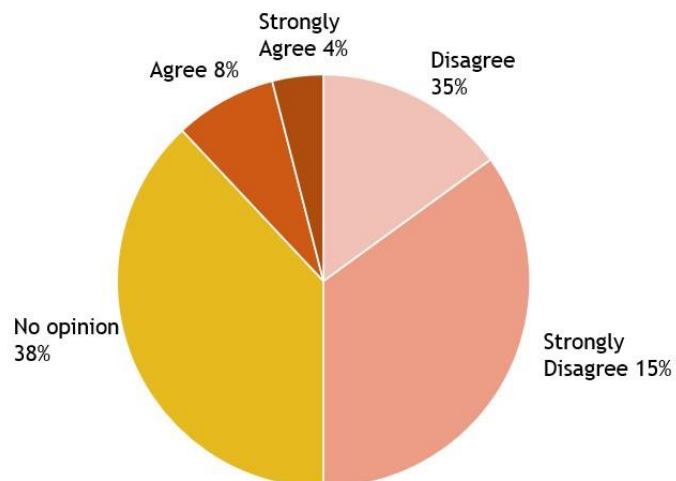


Group Discussion:  
Sami describes his life  
as a brick wall. What  
do you think this  
means?



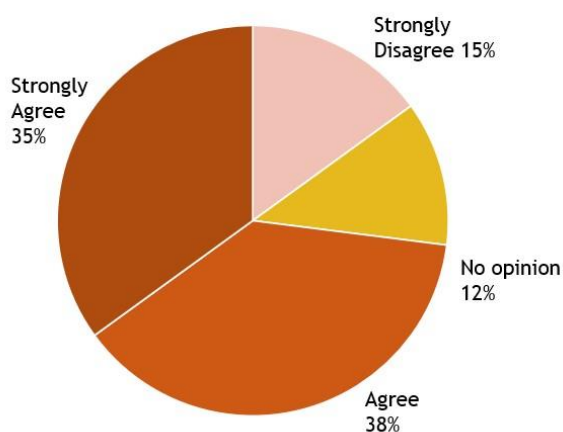
**SEE** What do you see?  
**THINK** What do you think is happening?  
**WONDER** What does it make you wonder?

Talking to our family at home about the novel



8. This was an interesting question to have included on the questionnaire as it was not an explicit pedagogy used in the teaching unit. At no point were pupils given a task to speak to their families at home about the novel they were studying. However, it was a useful question to ask in being to see beyond the scope of a teacher's eye and find out if there had been any unprompted conversations at home that had been triggered either through the refugee research project homework task or general discussion about schoolwork. It was unsurprising therefore that the data shows significant proportions (50%) of pupils either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that speaking to family at home had been a factor in helping them have conversations about social justice. The number of pupils who choose 'no opinion' was also fairly significant (38%) and when co-analysing the data many pupils agreed that they did not speak to their families about the novel they were studying in class. This could be a potential area for future development.

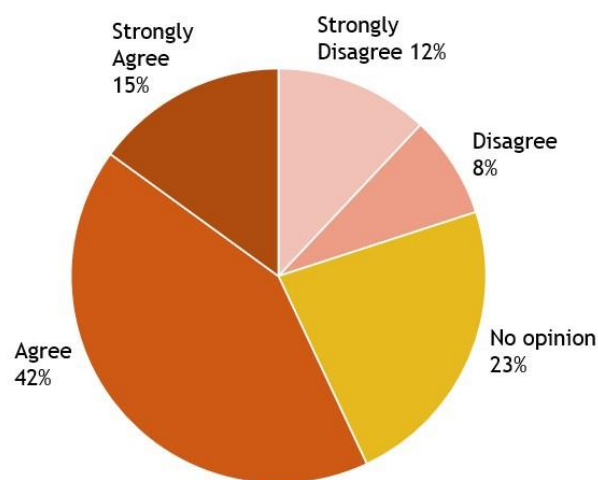
Researching a Refugee



9. 73% of the class were either in agreement or strong agreement that the refugee research project was beneficial in helping them to have conversations about social justice. As they worked on this task as individuals for homework and then presented it in class, they were solely

responsible for discussing the life and career of their chosen refugee. Only 4 pupils in the class strongly disagreed that this had helped them to talk about social justice issues. In the co-analysis discussion several pupils commented they didn't enjoy the refugee research project as they were working from home by themselves. I thought this was an insightful reflection coming out of pandemic lockdown.

#### Discussing the novel with the teacher and the whole class



10. The data for this question was significant, with 57% of pupils either agreeing or strongly agreeing that whole class discussion had been a factor in helping them to be able to talk about social justice issues. Around a quarter of the class responded as no opinion while another quarter of the class disagreed or strongly disagreed. During our co-analysis of the results a number of pupils wrote comments in favour of class discussion tasks:

"I liked to hear what other people said about the novel. It made me think." Pupil H

"I like it when we talk in class." Pupil C

"I didn't want to take part in discussion but I liked listening." Pupil A

## Thematic Analysis

The data used for thematic analysis of sources included the written response to the group discussion sorting task; pupil critical essays, pupil self-evaluations, drawings and thank you postcards to our Syrian visitor. The most prominent themes show an overall understanding of the causes and experience of being a refugee and the accompanying loss of human rights. At least a third of the class expressed direct empathy with the character in the novel on at least one occasion.

Theme	Number of Instances
Refugees can face Racism	25
Having to leave your own country is sad / scary / emotionally complex	25
War, persecution, or natural disaster creates refugees.	23
Seeking Asylum is a human right	19
Being a refugee can mean you lose the right to an education or to play.	17
I would feel the same way as the character in the book if I was a refugee.	10
Refugees can go on to live successful lives.	9
Calling someone an illegal immigrant makes it sounds as if they are moving for no reason	9
Being a refugee is traumatic	8
Researching about Refugees was important to me	8
Sometimes the hardest part of being a refugee is not being welcomed in the country you go to.	7
Refugees deserve to come safely to the UK and rebuild their lives	5
Refugees simply want to survive	5
The importance of family to refugees	5

Hope is important during the experience of being a refugee	4
Friendship is important to help refugees survive	4
Child refugees can face difficult treatment	4
The Importance of Refugees Preserving their Language, Culture and Heritage.	3
Refugees face a difficult journey when leaving their country	3
Becoming a refugee could happen to anyone	3
I can relate the experience of refugees in Syria to refugees in other parts of the world.	2
Refugees have interests like any other person e.g. football.	2
Meeting a Syrian Refugee had a Big Impact on me.	2
Refugees should be called asylum seekers and not illegal immigrants	2
Life is unfair	1
Some refugees are illegally imported or trafficked.	1
Refugees don't choose to leave their homes.	1
It is important to learn about refugees	1
It was important to me to engage with a modern issue	1
Refugees get homesick	1
The events that happen in the novel we studied about refugees reflects what happens in real life.	1

## End of Year Questionnaire

Five months on from completing the 'Boy Everywhere' unit learners were asked to reflect upon their experiences during the year in S2 English. In the optional pupil comment box responses included: wishing to remain together as a class and teacher the following year, that the learning had been new and fun and that they felt encouraged to do their best. Interestingly, several of the pupils chose to draw a response in the comment box rather than use words– it was clear that this method of communicating had been established in the class as a way of communicating their thoughts. Overall, from the end of year data it was clear that the pupils prioritised how they felt emotionally above all else. Being listened to and treated fairly was of vital importance – however not all of them connected these values as having emerged from the action research project. Around a quarter of the pupils showed little interest in having shaped the way 'Boy Everywhere' would be taught in future and around the same number were neutral in their response to whether the project was an opportunity for their views to be heard. From a teacher point of view the connection was much clearer between the project and the resulting class dynamic of fairness and inclusivity.

Pupil Comments from end of year questionnaire:

“This class is very different from every other. It feels more relaxed, comfortable and less claustrophobic. It’s a laid-back way to learn and to benefit my English skills.” Pupil E

“I like that we got to write postcards to the refugees.” Pupil L

“I really enjoyed English this year and I felt very involved. I thoroughly enjoyed the 'Boy Everywhere' topic and all the different fun lessons like meeting the Syrian refugee or writing postcards to the refugees.” Pupil O

		<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>No opinion</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>I think all pupils should have a say in how they are taught</b>			<b>19%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>37%</b>

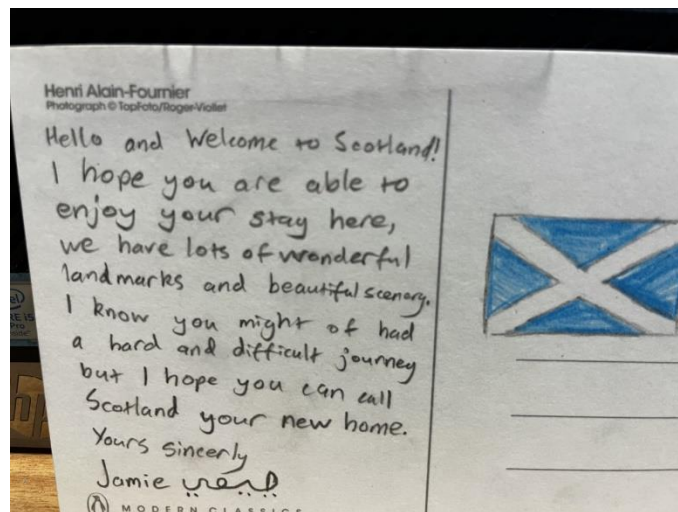
<b>2</b>	<b>Mrs Aldous listens to and takes my views seriously</b>				<b>30%</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Doing a research study on 'Boy Everywhere' was an opportunity for my views to be heard.</b>			<b>22%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>I like that I have shaped how future classes will be taught 'Boy Everywhere'</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>30%</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Mrs Aldous treats us fairly</b>				<b>11%</b>	<b>89%</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>I feel included in this English class</b>			<b>4%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>74%</b>

**“So what *will* you do differently next year, Miss?” - Project Outcomes.**

The action research project highlighted a number of areas of potential decolonisation practice including content, style and pedagogy of lessons. The results showed us the importance of pupils hearing and discussing stories and having the opportunity to respond to social justice topics in a variety of ways. There was no single Literacy strand from within listening, talking, reading or writing activities that was significantly more successful than any other to enable the class to talk about refugees. Rather, the method chosen to teach the unit worked in harmony as a cycle of stimulus to discover, discuss and create. In light of this, for future planning of teaching 'Boy Everywhere,' a mix of activities will continue to be adopted, informed by a model of social

constructivism. However, one aspect which had originally been an ‘add-on’ – the visit from the Syrian Refugee - clearly had the biggest impact on the learning. The key research conclusion from this project is therefore the primary importance of real-life contexts for social justice as a way to effectively decolonise the curriculum.

Several months after the co-research and analysis phase ended– and therefore not included as part of the data in this project – the S2 class had another opportunity to experience a real-life context for social justice. 200 young male refugees from the Middle East were moved into a hotel in a neighbouring town and the community was divided over their presence. A face-off between far-right group Patriotic Alternative and Anti-Racist organisations soon unfolded and our pupils spent a week in English following along with the accompanying media storm. Pupils summarised and discussed the press articles, analysing the language used about the refugees in social media and expressing strong views about social justice inequalities. It ended up being one of the most powerful weeks of lessons, culminating in pupils sending welcome postcards to the refugees.



Originally, I had not considered taking an activism approach to the topic of refugees. However, I instinctively felt that engagement with local issues was an important step in being able to enact Global Citizenship. The legacy of the project was that the role of the pupils as active citizens began to develop.



# GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP AS ACTIVISM

The image shows three overlapping presentation slides. The top-left slide is titled 'DID YOU KNOW' and features a large red question mark. The text on this slide reads: '200 REFUGEES HAVE RECENTLY BEEN GIVEN TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION IN OUR LOCAL AREA?'. The top-right slide is titled 'LEARNING INTENTIONS' and 'SUCCESS CRITERIA'. The 'LEARNING INTENTIONS' section lists: 'TO INVESTIGATE PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF REFUGEES IN A LOCAL CASE STUDY' and 'TO BE ABLE TO SHARE YOUR FINDINGS WITH THE CLASS'. The 'SUCCESS CRITERIA' section lists: 'I CAN INVESTIGATE LANGUAGE IN TEXT TO UNDERSTAND OPINION' and 'I CAN GIVE MY OWN OPINIONS EITHER IN WRITING OR BY TALKING TO OTHER IN THE CLASS.'. The bottom-center slide is titled 'WHAT IS ACTIVISM?' and features a red question mark. The text on this slide reads: 'Do you think it is appropriate for young people to be activists?'.

The Scottish Government details in their review of Scotland and the sustainable development goals that the role of teachers is to “empower learners to take an active role locally and globally to build more peaceful, tolerant, inclusive and secure societies.” However, sometimes the constraints of a teacher not to enter overtly “political” or “radical” spaces can be a strong deterrent to addressing contemporary pressing issues.

## Critical Reflection

The EIS Action Research project on decolonising the curriculum was an invitation to explore the ideas and meaning behind Citizenship as a pillar of CfE. I discovered that there are many complex questions regarding the teaching of Social Justice issues. For example, are we teaching pupils about ‘good deeds,’ becoming politically literate or as Biesta (2011) argues - being critical of the power structures in society? What kind of citizen are teachers responsible for shaping through a decolonised curriculum– personally responsible, participatory or justice oriented? (Westheimer and Kahne, 2004.) Initially I regarded Social Justice as a facet of Citizenship which we would teach to our pupils through the study of the novel ‘Boy Everywhere.’ In order to do this, teachers would need to be the ‘experts’ on a decolonised text and the pupils would be the receivers of our knowledge. Later, this evolved into seeing

Citizenship as something that the pupils and I would explore together. It became a methodology rather than a topic and as such its shelf life lasted long after the 'Boy Everywhere' unit had concluded. Thus, the research project evolved from a teacher-centric process of 'something done to the pupils' into 'something we were doing together.'

Initially, I embarked upon the research project with a level of confidence about the underpinning theory. We were after all, a Gold Rights Respecting School and 'Pupil Voice' as a concept was heavily promoted. The idea of pupils shaping the ways that our texts would be taught was one which was comfortable and felt closely aligned to UNCRC Article 12: "a child's rights to express their views in all matters involving the child." (UN, 1989) It was not until reading theories of child participation such as Hart's Ladder of Participation (1992) and Shier's Five Levels of Participation model (2001) that the full implications to avoiding a tokenistic approach to pupil voice was understood. In order to properly realise pupil voice, the classroom would require to be a democratised space where "children share power and responsibility for decision-making." (Shier, 2001 p1) This is where theory became uncomfortable and difficult to put into practice. I was very aware that the cohort the project was being undertaken with was an S2 class who had lost learning time during the Covid-19 pandemic. Like all pupils in this age range in Scotland, our pupils in S2 had missed out on their primary seven experience. This resulted in teachers seeking to address gaps with learning, confidence and social skills development. In addition, the mixed nature of the class, containing a number of pupils with additional needs, would mean that consideration would be required to be able to hear the voices of all.

It was not until reading Paulo Freire's learner-centred work from the 1970s (Freire, 2000) that I began to grow in confidence. I became determined to find ways to enact the research project in a democratic way where the voices of the pupils would genuinely be impactful. Freire speaks of mutual respect and dialogue between students and teachers; of students responding to problems they see in society around them and becoming critical thinkers; of the need to act and not merely criticise society. He talks about a deep *conscientisation* where teachers and students develop an empowering enlightenment in order to create a more socially just world. I connected with his belief that any set curricula was in itself a political act and reflected our goals and priorities. This reminded me of the key purpose in wishing to decolonise a set English curriculum which had excluded diverse voices.

While it was a mental shift to consider my pupils also being my teachers, I began to embrace this idea and challenge my own assumptions and prejudices. In order to conduct the project in an inclusive and socially just way I needed to avoid viewing our classes as problematic or through a deficit model (Lalvani, 2013) and instead use my knowledge of them as a blueprint for teaching. As such I realised that a number of alternative and flexible routes would be required through the lessons to find ways for pupils to learn and be able to express themselves about the social justice issues in the novel. I considered the principles of Epistemic Justice and how knowledge of the young person could be embraced in *their* classroom and within *their* learning experience. As Burroughs and Tollefsen (2016. P1) state, “The adult can play a central role in creating successful testimonial interactions with children by acting as a “responsible hearer.” Truly hearing and acting upon pupil voice therefore needed to take account of the different ways that our pupils wished to be heard. It is the teacher’s responsibility in a socially just classroom to help pupil express their voices by moving across perceived barriers to learning.

In writing about Critical Reflection, Jay and Johnson (2002 p.79) discuss the process of finding new meaning as non-linear and providing new questions for exploration. They state that “reflective practitioners come to see themselves as agents of change, capable of understanding not only what is, but also working to create what should be.” Through Learning for Sustainability this reflects the goals of a teachers wishing to work with pupils in a socially just way in order to learn together about social justice – continually striving to move beyond pupil voice to democratisation of the classroom.

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