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# Not National but Local and Global

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ABSTRACT The author describes the theory and practice of a project that took place in Summer 2007 in four classes within three inner city primary schools, that brought together History, Geography and Global citizenship within a progressive educational framework.

One of the worst things about the National Curriculum is that it is national. A one-size-fits-all framework for children whether they live in an isolated rural area, a small town, or in the teeming heart of a multicultural, overcrowded, inner city. It's the same curriculum whether they have been living in England for generations or whether they are mainly recent immigrants and refugees from around the world, whether they are rich or poor, black or white. And where the National Curriculum goes beyond the nation, it does so in very tired and constrained ways. The Key Stage 2 history curriculum has an approved list of seven past societies for its World History studies. QCA recommends studying the distinctly atypical Indian village of Chembakolli in geography when finding out about an 'economically developing country'. I've visited the Adavasi – the forest dwellers of Chembakolli – and their school principal was amused to hear that Britain's educational establishment regards India, a self-sufficient country of more than a billion people with high-tech industries and millions of graduates, as 'economically developing'.

Of course, good teachers recognise these limitations and do what they can to make this alien and alienating curriculum as relevant as possible to their classes. But institutional pressures and expectations they face make only limited adaptation seem possible.

Between April and July 2007 I had the opportunity to break the mould in my local area – the inner London Borough of Islington. I had devised a project bringing together local history and geography with an exploration of their connections with contemporary global citizenship issues and debates. In terms of content, the project's overarching themes were *diversity, interdependence* and *sustainability.*

I called it 'Islington local2global' and, with financial backing principally from the LEA's PSHE and Citizenship budget, I piloted it in four classes of 9-10 year olds in three local schools – Grafton, Hungerford and St John the Evangelist.

Grafton sits just behind the main thoroughfare of Holloway Road and exemplifies the complete demographic diversity of inner London. It has many migrants and refugees, especially Kurdish, Turkish, Caribbean, Somali and Bangladeshi, a growing community from Eastern Europe and a socially mixed white population. Hungerford lies in a residential area dominated by impoverished estates. Its longstanding predominantly white working class English/Irish population has become more ethnically diverse in recent years. St John the Evangelist is a largely working class Catholic school which has significant numbers of children drawn from Islington's older immigrant groups, the Italian and Irish, but also has Catholic families from a wider diaspora – including Colombia, the Philippines, the Caribbean, and Central and West Africa.

## Centred on the Children's Local World

The premise for the project was simple: that in place of the imposed, external National Curriculum, we would have a curriculum that centred on the local world of the children – where they lived, the streets and places they knew, the communities they lived among, their families' histories, the food they ate and the places they shopped, the transport they used, and the football team they support. At every step from that base we would look at how their local experiences intersected with global factors. It was a curriculum not codified and packaged in a book but waiting to be gathered on our doorsteps and synthesised.

It wasn't just the content that broke the mould. The method of teaching I used was decidedly interactive. It encouraged collaborative work and let the children take the initiative wherever possible, especially in the final three weeks of the project when the children were planning for themselves and working on a mini-project that would reflect and respond to the themes they had been learning about. The methods I had chosen were important because the role of the project was also conceived as a professional development opportunity for the teachers of the project classes. I wanted to show them that a different approach to curriculum and pedagogy was possible and desirable.

Each session comprised a 90-minute 'workshop'. Though they had some common features, each workshop was different. They included quizzes, debates, PowerPoint presentations, role-plays, circle work and practical sessions. There were also visits to local facilities – to the treasure trove that is the London Metropolitan Archives and to Islington Local History Centre.

Homework also featured and was enthusiastically done, perhaps because it wasn't maths or handwriting but more enticing tasks such as interviewing

parents or neighbours, finishing a poem, or devising a manifesto of children's rights.

## Teaching without Prejudice

The other element of the teaching on local2global that I was determined to carry through was an experiment in what I term 'teaching without prejudice'. In an educational world where the letter 't' is much more likely to refer to targets, testing or tracking than to teaching, where children are labelled and stereotyped by perceived 'ability' from such an early age, I wanted to challenge this. As an outsider entering these institutions for a brief period I had licence to do so.

I held an INSET session with the class teachers a week before the project started in which I provided a rough outline of what I hoped to cover. I used the metaphor of a journey of discovery hoping that it would be such a journey for the children, their teachers and myself. I asked them for details about their classes in terms of ethnic/cultural/linguistic background and information about any children with significant emotional issues so that I would teach with due sensitivity, but I asked nothing about perceived ability, and if teachers started volunteering this information I changed the subject!

I worked with a general expectation of what would be both age-appropriate and challenging. I operated on the assumption that if I provided several entry points to understanding the themes that would be covered and made it cross-curricular, if I utilised the children's own lived experience as much as possible and encouraged collaborative work, then they would all be able to access and contribute a lot to the project, and benefit from it. And so it proved. Some teachers remarked that children who had struggled and rarely participated in their day-to-day work had excelled during local2global.

Hungerford teacher, Mary Michael, commented:

> Having this cross-curricular activity has brought out the best in them. The subject matter was interesting and relevant. It was multi-sensory – there was something there for everyone. Personally I have learnt that out local area has global connections, and professionally I have learnt to have more confidence in allowing children to direct their own learning and that allowing children to take ownership of their learning can produce the commitment.

## Introducing the Workshops

It was important to establish a positive and open atmosphere with each class at the outset, so I began the first session by introducing myself, putting four quirky objects reflecting my different interests on a table in front of me, and inviting the class to find out as much as they could about me through asking 15 questions which would not have simple 'yes' or 'no' answers.

The main activity of this session was a multiple-choice quiz about the history and geography of Islington, which I used to get some basic local information across. I showed them a reproduction of an Elizabethan map of Islington with about 50 buildings scattered among farmland and we looked at population statistics. The children perceived Islington as a busy, crowded place so they were not too shocked when I told them it had 180,000 people living there today. They were staggered when I told them that just over100 years ago there were more than 320,000 people living in Islington. This prompted several demographic questions that we started to address: who lives in Islington today? What languages can you hear locally? Where do people living in Islington today come from? Why did the population rise so rapidly in the 19th century and fall so fast in the 20th century? Have any famous people lived here?

I assured them that some of the answers could be found by studying our own families and set them a task of constructing a profile of themselves which asked questions such as where they and their parents were born, what they like or dislike about Islington, what their favourite food is, what they like doing out of school. I challenged them to think of at least one way they were connected to another country.

We returned to these profiles at different times through the project. They provided excellent entry points to the next two sessions – about immigration to Islington, and about refugees. I showed a PowerPoint which explained about immigration and told aspects of my family history, as someone living and working in Islington today, whose grandparents came as jewish immigrants from Poland and Ukraine. Staff from London Metropolitan Archives arrived with pictures of early Italian and Irish immigrants to Islington and maps of the streets where they settled. We watched a video clip about the Irish famine of the 1840s that prompted mass emigration and looked at the jobs these communities specialised in after they arrived.

In Hungerford School we found a living breathing resource – the Teaching Assistant working with the Year 4 classes. Sonya had arrived in Islington in her early 20s from Grenada, where she had been working as a teacher. Many years on she remains a teaching assistant here, usually working with individuals or small groups of children. Through this project she had her first opportunity to address the whole class with her story – her hopes and expectations before she travelled, and what she has experienced in her new country.

The session that followed, on refugees, was enhanced by a visiting refugee poet, Choman Hardi, She came from Kurdistan as a teenager at the beginning of the 1990s without a word of English but later graduated from Oxford University. She used poetry techniques to enable the children to empathise with and articulate the refugee experience. Several children proudly acknowledged their own refugee status through the sessions. In place of the rather hackneyed task: 'If you had a suitcase and you had to leave in a hurry, what would you put in it?', she posed a more surreal and powerful challenge in poetic form, in which children could imagine being able to take with everything they would most

miss if they had to flee from England, by folding them up really small. For example, you could roll up the park down the road and put it in your pocket. The children responded beautifully to this, imagining putting all manner of meaningful things around their neck, dangling from ear-rings, behind their ears, in their socks and in their hearts.

Moving from diversity to interdependence we focused the next session on fair-trade, thinking about the foods we ate, where we bought them, where they originated and what life was like for the producers. We were joined in some of these sessions by a volunteer from Traidcraft – an organisation promoting fair-trade – who divided the children into five groups representing the different stages of banana production from workers to supermarket. On the basis of a banana costing 30p, each group had to argue the case for how much of that 30p they were entitled to, whilst recognising that others were entitled to a proportion. They were astounded to find out the reality afterwards that the producers get around 1p out of every 30p while the supermarkets get as much as 13p for their less arduous role. In one class I did an exercise whereby I asked them to make bananas – by drawing, colouring and cutting – and then simulated the role of the only major local buyer for these independent banana producers. I asked a child how much I could buy her bananas for. She said they were three for £3. I replied that I thought I might get them cheaper elsewhere. I was then offered bananas for 50p by another child. Within a couple of minutes I could get 10 for 10p as each producer was desperate for my custom – thus revealing to them the real economic situation that small, independent producers faced.

Through these sessions we realised how much of what we buy, eat, wear and use is imported, and we looked at the terms of trade. They became very enamoured of the idea of 'fair-trade' and determined to tackle their parents on the issue.

Session 5 took the children on a visit to the London Metropolitan Archives (LMA). Our theme was how Islington had changed physically, culturally and economically, and the children studied a series of photographs, artefacts and maps. LMA staff had found old photographs of individual schools involved in the project, which fascinated the children. They were also very drawn to a colour-coded map which showed the varying degrees of bomb damage in the local area during World War 2, some of it right next to their schools and homes.

## Most Popular

Evaluation exercises at the end of the project showed that the next session was the most popular, which related to their local football team, Arsenal.

I began the session with a PowerPoint presentation about the history of Arsenal Football Club. The slides described Arsenal's origins in south London as a factory team in the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich, who obtained red shirts donated from Nottingham Forest, an already established club that two of the

factory workers used to play for. Children who have grown up regarding football as a glamour industry in which huge amounts of money flow, were surprised to discover that most professional teams began life as more humble groups of local factory workers.

The slides showed how, even in Arsenal's early days, more distant geographical links were made as three of their first six managers were from Scotland. The presentation detailed the club's move to Islington in 1913 and subsequently to the Emirates stadium in 2006. It showed how the demographic base of Islington had changed considerably from a largely white English/Irish population to a much more diverse, global population and how long this took to be reflected in the players who were recruited who reflected this diversity. Arsenal's first black player – Brendan Batson – who was born in Grenada – played only 10 games (in the 1970s) before being transferred, and it was not until Ian Wright was signed in the early 1990s that black players established themselves in the team and a serious challenge could be made to racism on the terraces.

The slides showed that the arrival of a foreign manager – Arsene Wenger in 1996 – heralded a dramatic change as he brought in players from other parts of the world, especially from Africa, Latin America and southern Europe. Arsenal's women's team was also becoming more diverse. I highlighted a local player, Anita Asante, whose parents were born in Ghana, and I left hanging the question of what conditions were like for children in Africa who aspired to be footballers.

After some questions and discussion, two project workers from a charity called Alive&Kicking UK continued the session. Their charity makes good quality leather footballs and netballs, sourcing local materials, in cooperatives in Kenya, South Africa and Zambia. Each of their footballs is printed with health messages about malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS, providing a springboard for organisations that buy their balls (schools, youth clubs, projects with street children etc) to engage in health education.

They showed a DVD, which illustrated the need for the balls, as it revealed the rough surfaces that African children typically play on, with lower quality but more expensive balls manufactured in Asia for European surfaces. The DVD showed children making their own improvised balls from plastic bags, newspaper and string. Children in the project were given these same materials to make their own balls and we tested them in playgrounds and PE halls.

Returning to the classroom we discussed what it was like to make their own balls and how well their balls withstood being used. I asked the children to interpret the sentence: 'Every child has the right to play.' This led on to a discussion of what 'children's rights' are and what they ought to be. In one class at Hungerford, Omar, a young Somali refugee, whose teacher told me afterwards that he very rarely contributes to any discussions, participated enthusiastically, and offered, 'Every child has the right to be loved.' Children

were given a homework task to write their own mini-manifesto of children's rights and identify which ones were most important and why.

## Gang of Four

We returned to our history theme in the next session, which took the children on another visit, this time to Islington Local History Centre. Our focus here was on significant individuals who had lived locally whose work for social justice had impacted on the lives of others. Together with the centre's director we selected four such individuals. We made joint presentations about them and challenged the children to identify the thematic connections. With the bicentennial of the outlawing of Britain's slave trade in our minds, our eclectic gang of four were John Wesley, founder of Methodism and a determined anti-slavery campaigner; Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a freed slave who later studied theology in Islington and returned to Africa to work against slavery, Dadabhai Naoroji – Britain's first non-white MP, who represented Finsbury (now South Islington) in the late 19th century, documented the inequities of Britain's domination of the Indian economy and was an early proponent of Indian independence, and finally Lenin, an exiled revolutionary leader who spent two periods living in Islington producing a newspaper that was smuggled back to Russia to be clandestinely printed.

One child whose family were refugees today from the wars in Sierra Leone was delighted to find out more about Wesley, as her family regularly attend the chapel he built which remains standing locally.

The final session before time was handed over for the children to devise their own mini-projects, focused on sustainability and the local environment. We returned to the profiles children had written at the start of the project where they described what they liked or disliked about their local environment. Many described their local environment in overwhelmingly negative terms – dirty, overcrowded, noisy, polluted, and full of threatening gangs. We looked at some of the causes and effects of environmental problems and speculated about what going to school in Islington would be like in 50 years time. Would the environment have been made more tolerable or would children be wearing gas-masks on their way to school?

We then began to imagine our perfect environment. There was obviously a huge gulf between what they experienced and what they desired, so we began to think about what steps could be taken to bridge that divide. In each class I held a formal debate on a local environmental issue such as: 'Should any family be allowed to have more than one car?' or 'Should cars be banned from Islington's main roads on weekends?' I took an indicative vote (eyes closed) before the debate began and then set up separate 'yes' and 'no' chairs for the children to stand on as they argued their side of the debate. Before the final vote I asked for contributions from those who had changed their minds during the debate and then I encouraged the children to share their voting intentions with a child sitting nearby and try to persuade them to vote the same way.

## Mini-projects

Several children took up the environmental theme, in the class at Grafton in particular, when they were developing their own mini-projects. A group of children collaborated on a superb 3-D model of what they would like Islington to look like in 50 years time. Trams had replaced buses on Upper Street. There were lots of green spaces, recycling facilities as well as a bike-lending station. Grafton's children also produced a lot of display work about refugees.

At St John the Evangelist the theme that was most prominent in their mini-projects was fair-trade. Several groups of children made information and campaigning posters and two children collaborated on making their own PowerPoint about fair-trade, based significantly on their own research.

The classes at Hungerford were particularly taken with issue of refugees and of children's rights, making excellent books, poems and posters.

In the final class-based session children showed their projects to each other and carried out a range of evaluation activities. These included tape recorded interviews, written responses to questions and more open activities – being presented with a printout of a wall with plain bricks for them to complete, graffiti style, with their comments about local2global. There was also an end-of-project quiz, which confirmed that they had internalised many of the themes and much of the information we had covered.

The comments they made through the evaluation activities indicated an appreciation of what they had learnt, how they had learnt it and what they still hungered to find out about.

Derek from Hungerford said he learnt: 'that refugees don't come to another country because it looks nice, they come if they are in danger.'

Mina from Hungerford felt that the most important thing she had gained was knowing: 'where the word "refugee" came from, the history of Arsenal and some children's rights.' Another Hungerford child, named Prince, said he learnt: 'that children have the right to be treated fairly.'

Sasha from Grafton described the project as: 'a really fun way to learn about the local area and the world.'

Shannon from St John the Evangelist said that local2global, 'helps you learn about places that are nearby and places that are on the other side of the world.' Her classmate Ryan concluded: 'People around the world should do more to save our planet.'

At the end of local2global, Eleanor from St John the Evangelist said: 'I want to know more about my past'; Desi from Grafton wrote: 'I want to know more about Islington's environment', while Fowzia from Hungerford wanted to, 'know more about children's rights and the history of Islington.'

## What Was Gained

The project closed with a celebration event attended by the classes, their teachers and teaching assistants and some accompanying parents, hosted by the London Metropolitan Archives. All their projects were on display so that each

class could look at the mini-projects produced by children in other local2global schools. Each class also did a short presentation about what they had learnt and enjoyed from the project. The Grafton class performed a very moving dramatic presentation which revealed the migrant and refugee roots of many children in their class and celebrated how as a whole class they can support each other.

The role of the project in enabling children to learn more about each other was emphasised by St John the Evangelist teacher, Deborah Martin. She said:

> The biggest thing they have gained is that they have shared their background identity with each other. Some children did not realise they had relatives from the same country and I think this has had a big impact on their relationships with each other. That has been brilliant! I learnt a lot about their identities and the countries they come from. It has brought them closer together as a class.

For Grafton teacher Emma Davey, the crucial achievement was the growth of the children's own sense of worth. She said:

> The pupils have become empowered. They have become more familiar with their environment and community and recognised that they are able to influence what it is like now and in the future. They have much more pride in their environment and community and recognise the diversity and richness of Islington – they see this as positive and embrace each other more openly. They have a deeper understanding of how Islington has changed over time, and learning about influential others in Islington has inspired them to think that they too can make a difference!'

As a pilot project Islington local2global succeeded in gaining enthusiastic support from teachers, teaching assistants and most of all from the children, and it stands as a working model that can be replicated elsewhere. The class teachers from the project schools intend to run their own local2global topics with their classes during this year. In a period where the 'Excellence and Enjoyment' agenda ought to be encouraging schools to customise their curriculum, perhaps there are schools out there who will want to re-fashion their curriculum along the lines laid out by Islington local2global.

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