

‘This I Can Carry’

Everyone has, at some point, packed a bag to take with them on a journey; but how many of us have packed a bag that will hold all we will have left in this world?

When you’re forced to leave your home, what do you bring with you?

What will fit into the rucksack or bag that you, yourself must carry for such a long way?

What size is this bag, how much does it weigh?

How much can one carry: physically, psychologically, emotionally?

BACKGROUND

When I was working on the first phase of the art project ‘This I Can Carry’ with the UNHCR in Greece, I spent time at one of the homes for unaccompanied children – almost always young boys. These boys had had very little experience of packing.

When they left their homes, most of their bags contained only the food to sustain them on their journey and money to use as bribes to hopefully smooth their passage. They journeyed to a place of which they didn’t know the name nor what length of time it would take them to get there. Many arrived with just the clothes on their backs.

If you were asked to pack a bag, you would want to know; ‘Where am I going? ‘How long will I be gone?’ These are the questions people who have to leave their home, often through necessity, may not know the answer to.

When I was reading reports and seeing television commentaries focusing on an exodus of refugees, I started asking myself the question about what to carry. I also realised that there are certain ways to pack a bag. Packing can be an experienced act and, if, given time, we can reconsider and repack until we have contained, within a bag, what we consider essential.

My initial reaction to the plight of the refugees was to find a way to spend some time in Greece to meet and make work in collaboration with refugees there. I ended up working with the UNHCR and a local organization, Nostos. The idea was to let the

objects the refugees managed to hang on to from their home country, to speak for themselves, to us, the lucky people who have a home to go to. This work can be seen on my website link, listed below.

LEARNING PROPOSAL

I now propose to structure a classroom experience surrounding the idea of 'This I Can Carry' so that the same question can be asked and discussed by both the young people in schools and with their parents at home.

'This I Can Carry' asks questions to which we may not have answers, or, depending on your circumstances, we may have a marked alternative response than your fellow classmates.

The idea is very simple but will make students, and their parents, consider the topic of necessity and our links to our culture and family.

METHOD

Each child will be asked to pack a rucksack or bag with objects that they feel they would need to bring with them should they be in the same situation as the refugees, or those who have to leave their home through environmental emergencies or economic plight. The rucksack should be something that they are able to carry themselves.

In class we will go through each child's rucksack and they can explain why they have chosen the objects. It would also be worth pointing out where the countries that the refugees come from and where they would like to end up on the globe and work out the distance traveled.

I have many years experience teaching children through art, mostly at primary level. I would like to be able to say that I think that this is a project that would resonate with pupils, especially in those classrooms where there are children from different cultural backgrounds.

We will look at the notion of departure, the essential objects in our lives and reasons why we would bring one thing and not another. I would like to allow the pupils to voice their opinions. The question when you have to leave a place, a place called home and to go to

somewhere foreign, new and how you can begin to consider what must be taken with to keep with you some sense of self.

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