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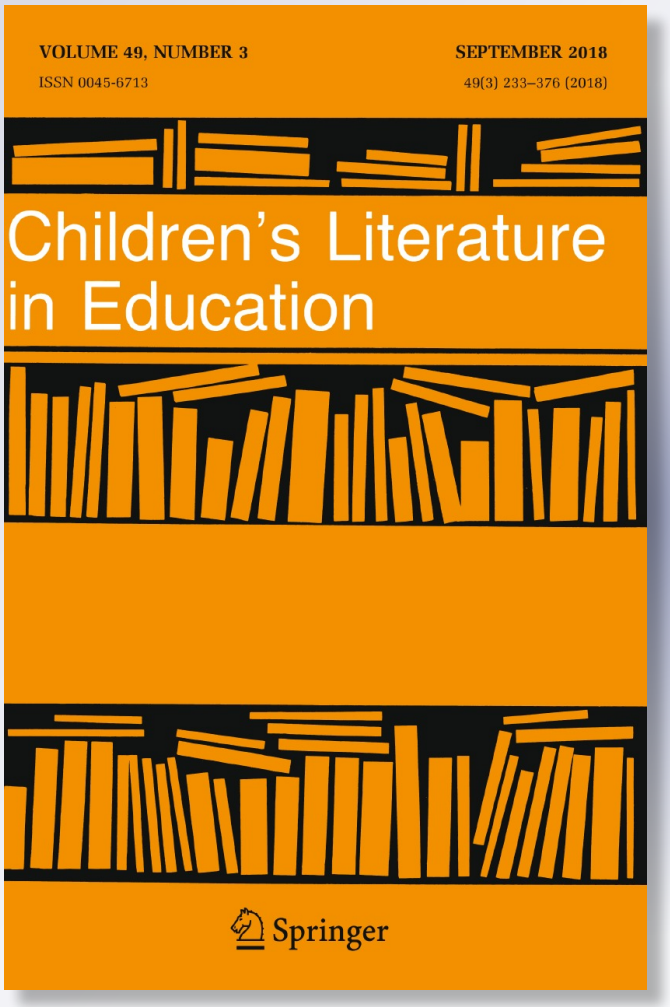

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ORIGINAL PAPER

"The Soldiers Came to the House": Young Children's Responses to *The Colour of Home*

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Abstract This article begins by reflecting on the present refugee crisis and its relevance to children in the UK. It identifies the need for teaching about the refugee experience to young children and argues that literature can provide a conduit for this. Since the millennium there has been a rapid increase in the number of books published for children which take this as their theme, aimed at ever-younger readers. Taking as a case study *The Colour of Home* by Mary Hoffman, a picturebook commonly used in lower primary classrooms, the article considers how this text promotes understanding and validates the circumstances of refugees. It closely examines the motivations and aims of the writer, how the book was mediated by teachers in the primary classroom, and how refugee and non-refugee children read and responded to it. Findings are presented from an interview with Mary Hoffman herself, juxtaposed with data from three classrooms suggesting that pupils gained valuable insight into a complicated and controversial issue. However the research concludes that viewing children through a refugee/non-refugee binary was reductive in not recognising the multi-layered nuances of meaning which were constructed by young readers who brought to bear a wide variety of individual life and family experiences. Furthermore, teachers in the study played a powerful role in mediating the texts when sharing them in the classroom, and devised a selection of stimulating resources to provoke reader response in terms of empathy, "social action", and some critical literacy.

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Introduction

This article begins by reflecting on the present refugee crisis and its relevance to children in the UK. It engages with theorising of the refugee experience and identifies the need for teaching about these issues to young children, arguing that literature provides a conduit for this. Since the millennium there has been a rapid increase in the number of books published for children that take the refugee situation as their theme (200 or more published in English) and aimed at an ever-younger audience. However little research has been carried out on the reading of these texts by young people, while teachers and teacher trainees might question the effect they might have on refugee children in the class who have had similar experiences.

Taking a case study of one picturebook, *The Colour of Home* by Mary Hoffman, published in 2002 by Frances Lincoln, and commonly used in lower primary classrooms in the UK, I therefore examine whether this text promotes understanding and validates the circumstances of refugee children. While reader response asserts that each reader brings their background life experiences to create a unique reading "event", "critical literacy" seeks to engage children in viewing the text as an artefact, which is authored and partial, both of these lenses providing a focus for the study. Initially I present findings from an interview with the author, tracing the motivation and aims of the writer herself in creating the text. I then supply data from a small, empirically based study on how the book was shared in three primary classrooms, with children from 5 to 8 years old.

Presenting the Refugee Experience

"Conflict and persecution caused global forced displacement to escalate sharply in 2015. Now at the highest level ever recorded, it represents immense human suffering around the world" (UNHCR, 2016, n.p.). By end of 2015, there were 21.3 million refugees worldwide, with 2014 showing the highest annual increase in a single year, due mainly to the ongoing conflict in Syria. At the same time children below 18 years constituted 51% of the refugee population in 2015, with nearly 100,000 being unaccompanied or separated children (UNHCR, 2016). Meanwhile negative discourses concerning refugees and asylum seekers are frequently voiced in the tabloid press, constructing them socially and politically as "other" (Ahmed, 2000). In Europe debate focusses on the increasing number of migrants trying to enter by various routes and means, with rescue and resettlement responsibilities becoming another political issue (Kingsley et al., 2015). The recent transportation of unaccompanied children to the UK from the refugee camp in Calais has prompted yet another media storm (BBC News, 2016). With this constant exposure, the plight of the refugee is currently visible to children of all ages.

A useful model to use as a basis for refugee theory is that of Ron Baker (1983), himself a refugee, who formulated the concept of a 'relationship web', shown in Fig. 1, to highlight challenges that refugees face in reconstructing their lives and adapting to a new setting. The upper diagram represents the series of relationships surrounding a person in a secure situation, whereas the lower diagram demonstrates a web that has been blown apart and needs reconstructing in the case of a refugee child.

However protective factors in children's lives can shield them from the worst exigencies, such as stable emotional relationships, social support, a positive educational climate and good role models (Tolfree, 1996) with schools and teachers playing a key part in the reconstruction of refugee children's 'relationship web'. Furthermore many refugee commentators contrast vulnerability with resilience and find plenty of the latter in many refugee children's approach to life (Richman, 1998).

More recently Mina Fazel and Alan Stein (2002) detailed that refugee children could undergo "three stages of traumatic experiences (1) while in their country of origin; (2) during their flight to safety; and (3) when having to settle in a country of refuge" (p. 366). This sequential approach has been further developed by Richard Hamilton and Dennis Moore (2004) who also divide the refugee experience into three distinct contexts composed of pre-migration, trans-migration and post-migration factors, providing snapshots of the different systems that may surround

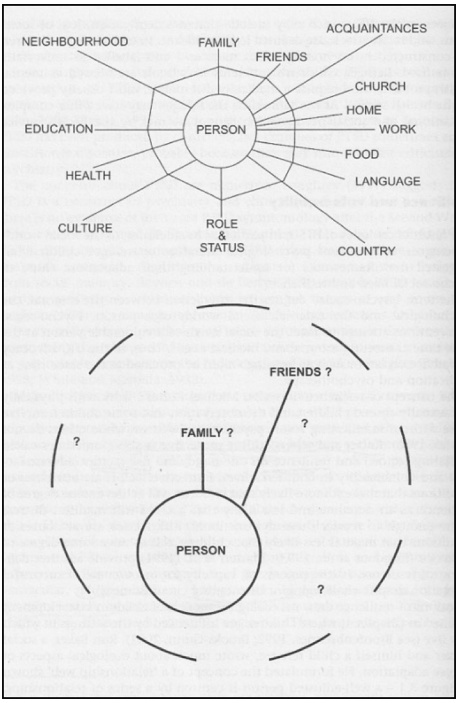

Fig. 1 Relationship webs. (Baker, 1983)

refugees, such as family, school, community and the wider society, at each of the three stages.

Recent studies show that early childhood trauma can result in poor impulse control, aggression, difficulty with interpersonal relationships and poor academic performance (van der Kolk, 2005) and although refugee children commonly "reach out in hope to the future" (Nial, 2005, p. 33), grieving and loss still need to be acknowledged. However Jill Rutter (2006) asserts that the "traumatisation" of the refugee situation has dominated research to the extent that it has presumed homogeneity amongst refugee children, and leads to discourses of pity and non-action. When teaching about refugee issues in the classroom, I would suggest that it is useful for teachers to have an understanding of the basic concepts outlined above, in order to do justice to a complicated and controversial area.

The Power of Narrative

Studies show that the optimum way to give a rounded and reliable picture of the refugee experience is through a mixture of hard data, personal testimony and discussion (King, 2003; Watts, 2004). Teachers can provide figures and facilitate debate, but organising a visit by a refugee prepared to provide stories of their life and journey is not always easy. In the absence of such real-life speakers "literature is …. invaluable for enabling children to explore the affective as well as the factual aspects" (Menter et al., 2000, p. 226). However many theories about the power of narrative and how texts should be approached have developed in recent times, highlighted below, and having a bearing on the reading of children's literature about refugees in the classroom.

Reader response theory sees each reading as an "event", different from any other, depending on the past experiences of the reader (Rosenblatt, 1938). In the reading process the "aesthetic" and the "efferent" (the taking of information from the text) are activated along a continuum (1978). Building on this Paulo Freire's (1987) maxim "reading the word and the world" considered what the reader brought to the text, and furthermore identified a revisioning of the world after reading. For him, the knowledge gained from reading could be transformed into "praxis" or social action. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) also added to the debate by asserting that texts can operate as "windows or mirrors", providing a way into the worlds of others, or reflecting the position of the reader, but creating such binary opposites has been challenged by others such as Elaine Schwartz (1995) as too simplistic.

Contrary to this John Stephens asserted that reader response theory is "a dangerous ideological tool and pedagogically irresponsible" (1992, p. 68). It creates the illusion that readers have a purely personal response, while ignoring the political and ideological currents that they are part of, both explicit and implicit, and fails to acknowledge the wider significance of the text within this climate, of which the author is a part. Meanwhile "critical literacy" has developed as a ubiquitous but often unclear term, so much so that Mitzi Lewison et al. (2002) saw the need to

synthesize the myriad of differing definitions into four useful and interrelated dimensions, defining critical literacy as having a focus on:

(1) disrupting the commonplace,
(2) interrogating multiple view-points,
(3) focusing on socio-political issues, and
(4) taking action and promoting social justice (ibid, p. 382).

In examining the "constructedness" of the text (Fisher, 2008), readers need to ask questions such as:

> How do particular texts work? What effects do they have on the reader? Who has produced the text, under what circumstances, and for which readers? (Comber, 2001, p. 1).

More recently, and again linking to the "affective" possibilities that reading offers, the emergent field of cognitive literary criticism looks at the relationship between fiction and the mind, and suggests that reading imaginative texts has an impact on children's maturing cognitive abilities (Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer, 2013), understanding others' mental states (Kidd and Castano, 2013), and developing empathy. As Maria Nikolajeva points out "empathy is not a natural capacity" (2012, p. 289), but by stimulating mirror neurons in our brains that activate emotionally charged memories, literature can develop a range of feelings in children, and provides a way of helping us understand each other.

Rationale for the Study

Since the millennium it is possible to identify numerous books published in English which explore the refugee experience, and depict children from locations such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, and Vietnam, targeted at an ever-younger readership (Hope, 2008). Marjorie Coughlan (2010) asserts that

> these inspiring books encourage empathy in their readers, which in turn has the potential to stir them to action. (n.p.)

Even more controversially, several picture books about the refugee experience have appeared since the millennium from a variety of writers (Hope, 2007; Dolan, 2014). In the UK *The Colour of Home* by Mary Hoffman (2002), was the first picturebook to appear on the topic followed by *Petar's Song* by Pratima Mitchell (2004), which is deliberately oblique in its lack of geographical specificity. The cunningly-entitled *The Silence Seeker* by Ben Morley (2009) addresses the problems of a refugee adapting to a British urban landscape and touches on the issue of deportation, and recently the well-known author Sarah Garland, has embarked on a new departure with *Azzi in Between* (2012) following the story of a generic refugee child in graphic novel form.

I was interested in how these picturebooks are received by young children in the lower primary classroom, and chose to focus on *The Colour of Home* (2002) because of its popularity in UK schools. Using a case study approach I took a

vertical trajectory, tracing the motivations and aims of the writer, the mediation of the text by teachers in the primary classroom, and the response of refugee and non-refugee children to reading it. In order to investigate the relationship between author intention and reader response I first interviewed Mary Hoffman, author of *The Colour of Home*, which I will refer to in the following case study analysis.

I then approached two local primary schools in South East London, having been alerted to the fact that this text was shared with children in Year 1 (5–6 year olds) and Year 3 (7–8 year olds). The schools were both in an area of socio-economic deprivation, known to have a surrounding community high in ethnic minorities, containing many refugee families. This meant that it would be a particularly rich environment to collect data about the interpretation of the text by children from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, many of whom would be migrants, and possibly refugees. Both schools had a strong tradition of valuing diversity and welcoming new children, something that was a regular part of children's daily experience.

In a small empirically based study, I was therefore able to participate in two Year 1 classes who had one or two lessons about the book as part of Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE), and one Year 3 class who were focussing on the book for three weeks as part of the Literacy curriculum. In order to gather data and evaluate children's responses I observed during the lessons, collating children's writing and drawings, and conducted group discussions about the text outside the classroom. I also interviewed the teachers after the sessions to give them a voice about the experience of sharing *The Colour of Home* in the classroom, but also to add depth to my understanding of children's views.

The Colour of Home

The Colour of Home tells the story of Hassan, a Somali boy, who arrives in a classroom in the UK, with very limited English, and feeling disorientated and homesick. He paints a vivid and colourful picture of his home in Somalia with all his relations, and attendant animals outside, including his cat. However when the picture is complimented by his teacher, he then paints flames, blood, a gun being fired, and smudges out his uncle from the paper. The teacher organises for a Somali interpreter to come in, and Hassan explains his picture to them both. Soldiers had come and killed his uncle, among others, while he hid, terrified, under a bed (see Fig. 2).

The following pages show the family fleeing to safety, first on foot, then by ship from Mogadishu to Mombasa, where they stayed in a refugee camp, and then, after some time and attendant hardships, on by plane to the UK, where "our new country seemed all cold and grey." After unburdening himself, Hassan goes off to play football with a classmate, and later paints another picture of his home in Somalia, with no people, only animals. This time he shows it proudly to his mother, and on reaching their new home in the UK, his father pins the picture on the wall. In the final sentence he decides: "Tomorrow he would ask Miss Kelly to tell him the word for 'home'."

Fig. 2 Detail of spread in *The Colour of Home* (Hoffman, 2002) © Frances Lincoln Ltd

The Colour of Home was published by Frances Lincoln, a company well-known for its multicultural perspectives. Mary Hoffman, an author well-known for writing picturebooks for the younger age group dealing with issues of diversity, was approached with a very simple brief: to write a picture book about a refugee child and the initial synopsis was submitted to the publisher in 1999. Her proposal starts with the statement:

> I.. want(ed) … to use story as a method of reaching out to individuals who find themselves in a particular set of circumstances. If the book can also help to promote understanding and dispel stereotypes in readers from the society into which refugees have fled, so much the better.

A duality of purpose is clear from the outset, Hoffman explicitly aiming to validate the lived experience of refugee children, but also stimulating the imagination to foster empathy and change negative attitudes. After summarising the story, she wrote:

> It is about the adaptability of human beings and their resilience and willingness to start again when life has dealt them an appalling hand.

Here we see a determined effort to move away from the "traumatisation" discourse often connected to refugees (Rutter, 2006) and to focus more on resilience and agency.

Hoffman decided to make her protagonist a Somali child, as Somalis are one of the largest refugee communities in the UK and the USA, and undertook extensive research when writing the book, "far more than you would expect to do for a picture book". Because of her lack of personal experience of the circumstances of forced

migration, she had attended a weekly drop-in centre and lunchtime club for refugees and asylum seekers at a Homeless Action unit, befriending and mixing with the refugee women she met there. The dedication at the front of *The Colour of Home* refers to these women and children:

> For Suleiman, Josè, Naima, Dagma, Flavia, Brunilda, Hagar; Jo, Hasna and all the others who had to leave their first homes and were brave enough to find new ones – M.H.

When I asked Hoffman how she thought refugee children would react to the book, particularly if they had been through a similar experience to Hassan, she stressed the potential catharsis that such literature might provide (known by some as "bibliotherapy" (Crago, 1999; Nicholson and Pearson 2003).

> "I hope that it would enable them to talk about their experience to somebody, as Hassan did in the story... he had all these nightmarish images in his head, and he was very blocked, and very unable to take part in what was going on in the school because of that."

As far as non-refugee readers were concerned, Hoffman saw the purpose of *The Colour of Home* as twofold: on one hand to give children a clear idea of why refugees had come to the host country, and on the other to give children ideas as to what they might do to help a refugee arriving in their classrooms, as a form of "praxis" or social action (Freire, 1987), in order to empower non-refugees:

> "Well the message really is to encourage tolerance and understanding and acceptance because…. and to be welcoming to anyone to whom we give a home in this country, because most of us, thankfully, will never know what it's like to have gone through what these people have gone through."

Hoffman also raised the idea of literature providing vicarious experience, which could engender empathy and understanding:

> "I think by telling the story of one child, but personalising it, it makes it easier to identify with…..To see the refugee experience from the inside, from inside somebody's head."

The importance of literature to promote empathy has been reflected upon earlier (Nikolajeva, 2012).

Teachers as Mediators

> In any classroom, the teacher is the interpretative authority on the text for the students. The narrative is filtered throughout the teacher's talk about the text, that is, the teacher mediates the text to the students. (McDonald, 2004, p. 18)

In Year 1 in particular teachers "gave voice" to the text as they read, and it was during this reading transaction that the immensely powerful role of the teacher was easily visible. During the reading teachers "actualised" the text (Iser, 1978), often competing the gaps or blanks *for* the reader. They also "concretised" (ibid)

elements of the text by highlighting some areas and demoting or excluding unwanted or incomprehensible parts of the story, so that the text had been strongly filtered by the time it reached the child. An excerpt from my field notes demonstrates this process well (T stands for Teacher):

> The T departs from the script and explains everything clearly. She relates rather than reads it. "That's what Somalia looks like" says the T…
>
> All are horrified with the change of picture (when Hassan paints over it). No one could explain why he might do this. T gathers speed, having got their attention.
>
> She makes Hassan's voice very frightened, dramatising the script…

How this is done reflects the tacit ideology of the teacher themselves, for example playing up the violence of the refugee experience, or choosing to focus on "softer" issues such as leaving a cat behind, or confronting language barriers and making new friendships. This can be seen in the excerpt below in a parallel Year 1 class as the teacher directs attention to the pages where Hassan and his family are driven from their home by violent events, shown in Fig. 2 above (Ch stands for child):

> T: "What's happening?" Ch: "He's hiding."
> T: "Why?" Ch: "Soldiers are there."
> T: "Do you think they might kill him? What's happening in this country?"
> Children suggest "War." T: "Yes."

Aidan Chambers (1991) focused on the role of "enabling adults", including teachers, who help children become literary readers. He maintained that a vital part is the opportunity to discuss what has been read with an adult or with other children, or both, as demonstrated above, and maintains that through "book talk" children arrive at a greater understanding of the meaning and significance of a book, than they do as lone readers (Chambers, 1993).

In one Year 1 class, the teacher asked children, "What do you think about this book?" a question that asked for children's opinions of the text, but resulted in a mere retelling of the narrative. In the other class the teacher tried hard to ask children what they thought the message of the book was. However sharing the book in one or two lessons meant that there was insufficient time to develop such ideas properly and children struggled with this analysis, a problem that both teachers freely acknowledged. José Botelho and Masha Kabakow Rudman (2009), assert that there is no neutral, context-free construction of meaning from texts, and readers should be encouraged to consider authors' motivations for writing such as those given by Hoffman earlier. Activities which ask children to think about why the author has chosen to focus on refugee issues would form part of developing critical literacy, but my study revealed that this is a sophisticated concept to tackle with 5 and 6 year olds.

In Year 3, as part of a Literacy topic over three weeks, there were opportunities for more sustained discussion during the reading of the text. Planning included

useful activities to teach about the refugee experience, through a mixture of drama, role play and writing in role. In asking the children to write speech bubbles as a pupil or teacher when a new arrival joins the class, an exercise in welcoming was carried out, which could be seen as a form of "social action" and thus critical literacy (Lewison et al., 2002). The teacher managed to engage children in powerful empathy when asking them to draw a picture and then scrub it out, as Hassan had done, writing each side how he might have felt "before" and "after". The end result was the creation of individual books depicting a child moving home. Considering alternatives to a text is also seen as part of critical literacy, and here children could write about any experience of moving, thus connecting with their own and varied life stories, while possibly circumnavigating the more controversial and political aspects of the refugee experience.

Children Making Meaning

Multimodal Responses in Year 1

A discussion group in Year 1 were talking about Hassan's arrival in his new class. As the children all had migration in their family backgrounds, coming directly or being second or third generation migrants from Albania, Romania, Pakistan and the Caribbean, I was interested to see if there was clear empathy with "newness", either first hand or by association.

> David: "He's in the new school, but he talks a different language, cause he can't understand because other people will talk a different language and he talks Somali."
> Anca: "I think at the end he might be happy because one (sic) was telling the teacher what he was saying."
> JH: "Can you imagine going to a country where you didn't speak the language?"
> Habib: "I would be worried."
> Elbasana: "Scary and sad."
> Anca: "I would try to make friends."

Here the children display direct empathy with the problems facing Hassan; the language barrier and loneliness, demonstrating that fiction can help comprehend the feelings of others (Kidd and Castano, 2013). However they also tackle issues of resilience with the potential for him to feel better, after finding someone with whom to communicate, and the need to make friends, which links with Baker's (1983) "Relationship Web" discussed earlier.

As already discussed, one of the dimensions favoured in critical literacy is a "social action" approach (Thibault, 2004) where students can feel empowered to make decisions about how to act. One of the Year 1 classes was very good at identifying strategies to welcome new arrivals, in response to *The Colour of Home*, arguably because the teacher encouraged this dialogue. Their responses show this:

"Try to speak his language."
"Make him feel happy."
"Teach him their language."
"We help them make friends."

Again the importance of rebuilding a 'relationship web' for refugee children (Baker, 1983) has resonances here. Maria, from Colombia, also suggested the use of a same-language buddy to help in English acquisition.

Many of the children in Year 1 drew a picture in response and wrote their own title or the teacher scribed a caption for their image (see below). An analysis of the interaction of words and pictures produced demonstrates that in terms of children's engagement with the challenging subject matter of *The Colour of Home* meaning was made at some level, although sometimes the picture did not seem to depict the same scene as the caption suggested. In Fig. 3 below we have a "picture within a picture", the actual scene to the left, and Hassan's depiction of his house and cat to the right, complete with blazing sun. Here the writing that goes with the picture, "the soisu kidoll the grudad" ("the soldiers killed the granddad"), does not fit with this idyllic scene at all.

Similarly, in Fig. 4, there is a contrast between intimate engagement with the subject matter and the ability of the child to sum up the moment in words. The picture is a colour evocation of Hassan explaining about the events behind his picture to the interpreter, a key moment in the story.

Miss Kate was sad because [so?] he made a new picture was smaller that was nice and clean and not red.

Figure 5 is a highly intricate depiction of the whole story in a series of finely drawn images. Above, a stick person fires a gun at another, who is clearly wounded,

Fig. 3 "The soldiers killed the granddad." (Scribed by the teacher)

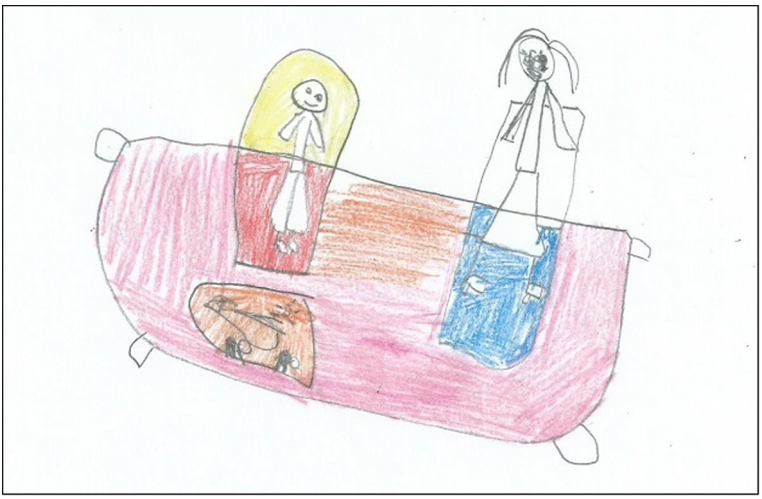

Fig. 4 "Miss Kate was sad Bcos he Made a new Picher was smler that was nise and clen and not red."

if not killed, and subsequently the family leave their house. Below, Hassan's school picture is shown on an easel, in three stages: painted, painted over, and repainted, this time in colour, with a yellow sun shining brightly in the corner. This child, although again unable to respond to the book adequately in writing, has assimilated all the aspects of the story and is able to reproduce it in pictorial form. In the process they have demonstrated complete understanding of the narrative and have embraced all aspects of the refugee experience as outlined in Hamilton and Moore's (2004) three stages.

The contrast in some cases between the clarity of the picture and the confusion of the words produced in Year 1 suggests a need to provide opportunities to respond in a variety of ways that best suit children's own preferred mode of expression and multimodal texts are the perfect stimulus. Evelyn Arizpe and Morag Styles' (2003) study included open-ended discussion, individual interviews and drawing in response to picturebooks, while Leland et al. (2013) suggest that multimodal responses to literature builds on every child's communication potential in making meaning of text. Children have clearly understood the story in great detail, shown in their pictures, and the care they have taken and vividness of their drawings in terms of colour, form and line demonstrate a dynamic relationship with the text.

Understanding the Refugee Experience in Year 3

Two samples of Izzy's work in Year 3 show an in-depth understanding of the refugee experience which one girl has built up over the three weeks spent studying *The Colour of Home*.

In Fig. 6 Izzy has skilfully reduced Hassan's story into six main points. She relates directly to Hassan's fear and deprivation, using highly evocative words such as "terrified", "speechless", "cramped", "frightened", and "famished" that

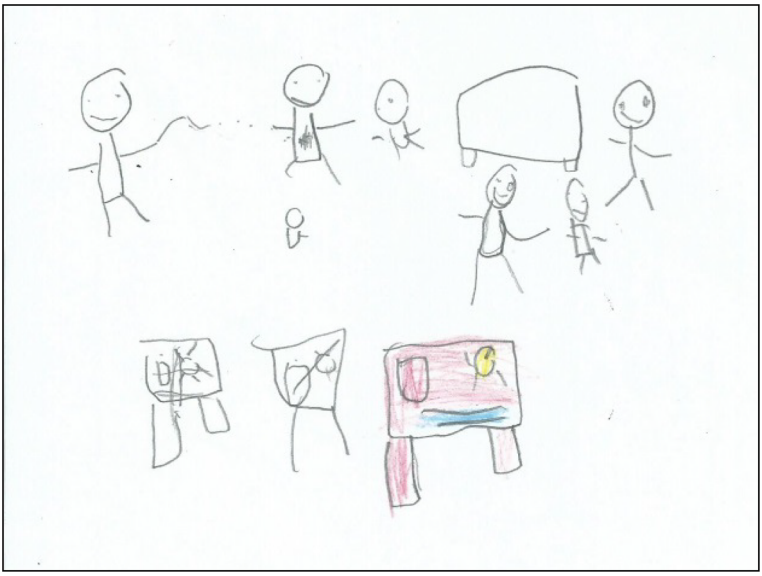

Fig. 5 "I O uncle The new picture."

suggest a deep level of empathy, ending on a positive note with "finally safe and over the moon". The extent to which *The Colour of Home* promotes critical literacy by "disrupting the commonplace" and interrogating different view points (Lewison et al., 2002) is clearly visible here.

In Fig. 7 Izzy produces a highly evocative diagram depicting the events of Hassan's life. These surround a silhouette shape of his head and shoulders with corresponding feelings inside: "sad, guilty, depressed, frightened, awful, horrified, confused, startled, heartbroken, petrified, heart wrenched, tearful, shocked, nervous." Such emotive vocabulary shows great compassion for the situation Hassan finds himself in (see Kidd and Castano, 2013). Both pieces of work suggest a deep and perceptive engagement with the refugee situation from a child who has not directly experienced it herself, but has enough knowledge, imagination, and some personal perspectives to demonstrate an impressive response.

Peliona speaks Albanian/Shqip and her country of origin is named as Kosovo. Although the Kosovan crisis happened before she was born, she is almost definitely from a refugee background, and demonstrates deep empathy with Hassan, a heightened sensitivity to the effects of violence, and possibly the wider socio-political significance of the text (Lewison et al., 2002). When asked to construct a story map for her book, Peliona's writing is descriptive, and her pictures are graphic (Fig. 8).

> Lola and her family was playing in the suddenly an army man came and killed her big brother. She ran behind a tree. She was terrified.
> My mum and dad was hiding behind the bushes and the man spotted her and she nearly died but I survived and her dad got run over and died under a tank

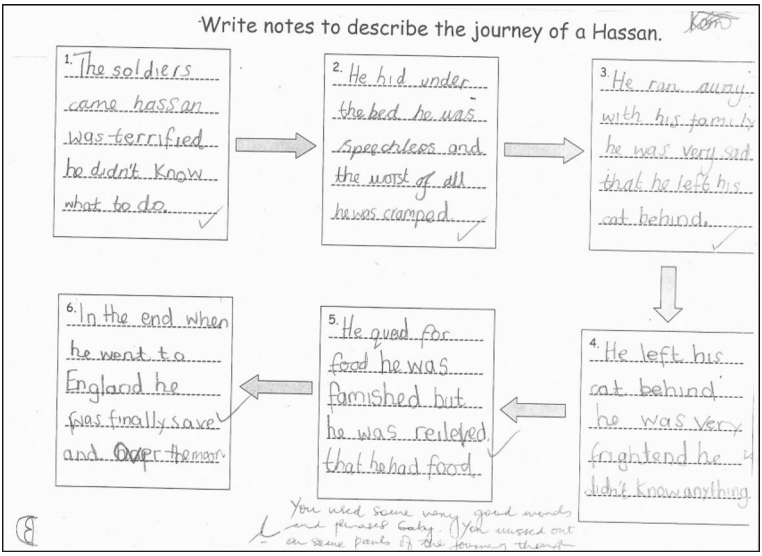

Fig. 6 Izzy's description of Hassan's journey

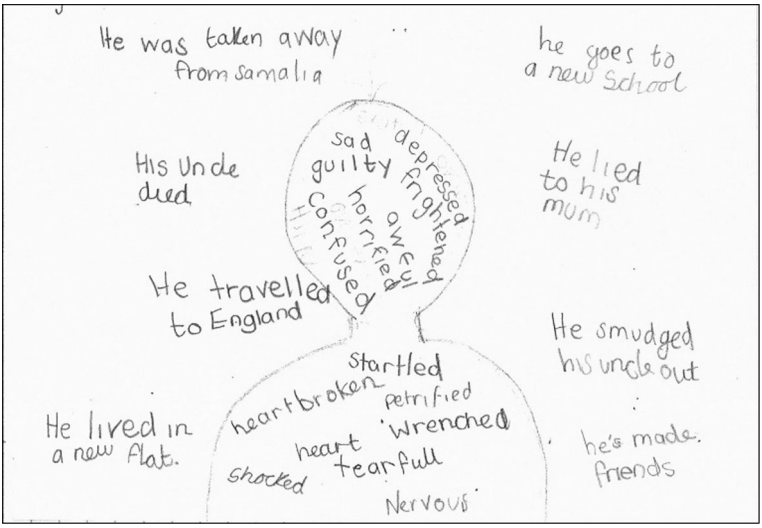

Fig. 7 Izzy's diagram showing Hassan's outer life and inner feelings

and we all cried but we had to run away from here or we all die so we got on a plane.

Edward Behrman (2006) notes that producing counter-texts from different viewpoints was an important part of critical literacy, as it "can serve to validate the thoughts, observations, and feelings of students" (ibid, p. 494). The vividness with which Peliona describes the scene suggests familiarity with the subject matter and

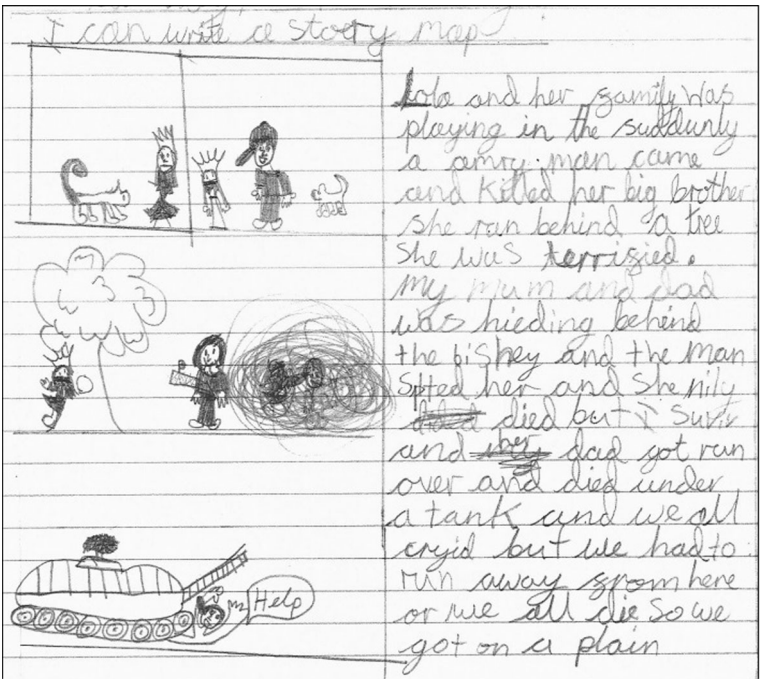

Fig. 8 Peliona's story map

her change from third person to first person narration is indicative of her complete involvement. The final image of a person crushed under a tank is chilling in its detail and adds further evidence that she finds resonance with the violence in Hassan's story, the "word" and her "world" colliding.

Mashad, from Afghanistan, had been in the UK for 4 years, and was therefore likely to be a refugee. Despite his limited level of English acquisition, he showed a good understanding of the story and a close identification with Hassan. In class discussion, Mashad mentioned that he didn't like the "war part", but in a small group with me, when asked which part he liked best, he remarked surprisingly:

> "I like the story (very animated) because when they smudge the picture and ruined it…and the bullets (said with gusto!) came and guns came… Because I like guns and I like blood…"

In an interview afterwards Mashad's teacher felt strongly that he had not been disturbed by the subject matter of *The Colour of Home*. This was backed up by my own impressions of his participation in class discussions, his enthusiasm to write about the book, as well as his comments in the more intimate situation of the group discussion where such a disclosure might have come out. However he clearly related the events in the book to his own experience when he arrived in the UK, showing that for him it was a "mirror" (Bishop, 1990) of his own lived experience.

> Mashad: "He can't talk English… He talk to the Somali translator, and the translator talk to the children… So Hassan can't talk… Yeah, … when first time when I came to London… I saw the clouds, grey and I saw my cousin…"

When asked to write a diary entry about his first day at school in the role of Hassan, my field notes recorded that Mashad had written two paragraphs, a lot for someone with limited English skills, perhaps due to his personal engagement with the text. He pointed out to me that "Hassan can talk, but the other children think he can't speak"; an insightful observation indeed.

Ahmed, who had arrived from Egypt around the time of the "Arab Spring", was well aware of the civil war in his country and had some very strong reactions, possibly due to close connections with people still in the country. He was enthusiastic about *The Colour of Home,* and seemed interested and motivated by the book, but in the group discussion his reaction was particularly extreme:

> "My favourite part is when he smudged out his uncle… I love the horrible bits! Because I'm a boy! Cool Stuff are horrible stuff for boys. I don't like the calm stuff in stories… I like the killing …"

However in the same interview as above Ahmed's teacher commented that he was proud of his homeland, despite its ongoing problems, and noticed a high level of awareness, obviously due to home influences. Clearly for him *The Colour of Home* had produced a unique reading "event" (Rosenblatt, 1938) based on past circumstances. Despite his relish of violence, the quote below demonstrated his understanding, both of his own position, and of the horror of war.

> "There's people firing all the places…at the moment. And one person fired a school, um, burned a school…and children died. I'm lucky that I'm …. I escaped before the war… and I wish the war stops before Eid comes because… people will die then…"

In contrast all girls showed sympathy for and sometimes strong empathy with Hassan's plight, whether they had experience of migration or were from second-generation migrant families. Some were disturbed by the subject matter, a clear demonstration of the "aesthetic" and emotional reaction that can be achieved by reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). Afterwards one girl said to me quietly:

> "Boys think war is good but it's not, because people get killed and they get evacuated to other countries."

This concurs with Martin Coles and Christine Hall's findings (2002) that reading patterns and practices are highly gendered, even from a very young age, and are particularly prey to peer pressure.

Reading *The Colour of Home* in the classroom obviously puts Somali children in the spotlight by virtue of the fact that it names the country on the first page. In Year 3 the two Somali children were also both second generation migrants (probably from a refugee background) and had never visited the country. Although she had read the book before, Asma was ambivalent about it being read in front of the whole class:

Asma: "No…Because it's embarrassing me… Because everyone just looks at me….. oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!"
JH: "But you like the book don't you?"
Asma: "I loved it….It's really interesting. I would read it again…I really understand what Hassan meant."

At another time she spoke to me animatedly about the book and how it connects directly with her family experience:

"He's upset now because the war in his country started and he was really frightened so he wrecked the picture. He wants to go back to his country. It's really sad, the war in Somalia, because they're giving children guns. My aunty ran away. She had to run all the way to London. Her feet really hurt. That must be hard."

This is an insightful comment, coming as it does from an 8-year old. Because of her family background, although born in the UK, she was able to relate directly to the situation in Somalia, and reflect on the impact that the book was having on her emotionally, an example of the "efferent" (a basic gathering of information and understanding of the content) and the "aesthetic" (an affective engagement with the text, through lived experience) reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) existing at the same time.

It took a long time for Kadiye to open up to me in an interview, being fairly inarticulate, and lacking much appropriate vocabulary to express himself. He displayed a very negative view of Somalia, having no relatives there, only in Kenya.

"They're a poor country, and there's not much people. It's not a nice country to… It's a dangerous country. It's not nice to go there."

Kadiye had ambivalent feelings about the text, "cause there are not many books that come from Somalia." Like Asma, he found it embarrassing because other children looked at him, but also stated: "every time I hear the story I like it." Rather than having it shared with the whole class in the Literacy hour, he said "I would read it by myself," but thought it a good idea that other children learn about Somalia.

Many Somali children in the UK only have second hand knowledge of the country, even though they would respond to it as familiar, as Somali parents, in common with most refugee communities, retain strong emotional ties to their place of origin (Kahin, 1997). Feyisa Demie et al. (2007) identified that inclusion of Somali language and cultural images in the curriculum was important for the raising of children's self-esteem and achievement and Teresa Kruizenga (2010) points out that Somali students, along with all others, should have opportunities to engage in learning and researching about their own identities.

Kathy Hall (1998) argues that readers need to be made aware of the fact that the text is a crafted object, which has ways of presenting 'reality'. During a class discussion where children were asked to consider the "constructedness" of the text (Fisher, 2008), Mashad displayed his interest in the book, by raising the question of the author's aims and motivation for writing. He was the only child to do so, but other children followed with suggestions:

"To make her famous."
"It might have happened to her before."
"Maybe she saw it in a TV programme and thought of something to write."

Afterwards outside the class a small group of girls surmise about the inspiration of the author:

"Maybe she had an uncle or dad who died and who was fighting in the war and one of his mates accidently shot him…To never forget about her dad."
"Maybe they did this story because some people are very sad about war and who died and who was part of the family and who died."
"To tell the people about what happened to Somalia that day."

Here we see the idea of reflecting the refugee situation for those who might have had similar direct experiences and/or a desire to communicate to others how people can be affected by war, linking back closely to Hoffman's original stated purpose in writing.

Conclusion

This small empirically based study found that teachers play a key role in filtering a text, such as *The Colour of Home*, through reading, questioning and discussion with children, overlaying the story with their own preconceptions and socio-political perspectives. "How discussions are structured reflects the beliefs and practices of the classroom teacher" (Galda et al., 2001). In terms of planning for engagement, Lorraine McDonald (2004) points out that reader response, bringing children's life experiences to the text, remains the dominant way of working for most teachers, whereas critical reading practices ask that the text is brought for judgement. The first position demands some departure from the reading, the second needs even more time to teach effectively.

Children's responses to *The Colour of Home* demonstrated that a simple dichotomy between refugee and non-refugee children, in considering their reactions, was a blunt and unworkable instrument. Children across all three classes, even as young as 5 or 6, demonstrated keen empathy with newcomers, such as refugees, to their class and an awareness of "social action" that they might take to welcome them and help them make friends. As many children in the classes had direct or family experience of moving to the UK, it seemed that there was good understanding of the migration experience across all age groups. However in some cases, in Year 3 in particular, those from a refugee background provided more contextual details in their response, gleaned perhaps from family stories.

Children also made insightful suggestions as to why the author might have written the book, an important component of "critical literacy". As discussed earlier, Bishop (1990) considers that books can be divided into texts as "windows" into the experience of others, "mirrors" which reflect the reader's experience, and this was clearly Mary Hoffman's dual purpose in writing *The Colour of Home*. For the few Somalis in the study the text was an important, though challenging,

reflection of their refugee community in the UK, as second generation onlookers. For these children and others in the study who might be refugees, Jane Gangi and Ellis Barowsky (2009) assert that the "windows" and "mirrors" paradigm is particularly useful in helping children suffering the effects of war, terrorism or disaster, as

> having access to such books helps children know the world has not forgotten them and may help decrease their feelings of isolation by providing a bond with others when they learn of those who have experienced similar circumstances (Gangi and Barowsky, 2009, p. 9).

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