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### **‘Should we accept Syrian refugees?’ Developing Year 8 students’ understandings of place with reference to the European refugee crisis**

**Christopher Ellis**

(PGCE Secondary Geography, 2015-2016)

email: [chris.ellis100@gmail.com](mailto:chris.ellis100@gmail.com)

#### **Abstract**

*This paper describes an attempt to develop Year 8 students’ understandings of place over a short lesson sequence about the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East. Conceptually, it aimed to move students beyond a static view of place - as manifested in populist anti-immigration stances - and towards a relational understanding of place informed by the theories of Doreen Massey (2004). Students’ thinking was tracked across five lessons framed around an enquiry question: ‘should the UK accept Syrian refugees?’ The paper documents how students’ understandings developed in multiple, complex, and at times contradictory ways. This is important as pedagogical research on migration – in education studies generally and school-based geography in particular – is severely lacking. Moreover, the shift in some students’ views from anti-refugee to pro-refugee demonstrates the potential of geography teaching to engage with controversial issues and guard young people against indoctrination.*

# **‘Should we accept Syrian refugees?’**

## **Developing Year 8 students’ understandings of place with reference to the European refugee crisis**

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### **Introduction**

This paper describes a project that attempted to develop secondary school students’ understandings of place over a short lesson sequence about the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe and the Middle East. Conceptually, the aim was to move students beyond a hermetically sealed view of place, as manifested in populist anti-immigration stances, and towards a relational understanding of place that acknowledges the complexity of the crisis and the interconnectedness of near and far places (Massey, 2004). In order to assess this, students’ thinking was tracked across five lessons framed around an enquiry question: ‘should the UK accept Syrian refugees?’ The project was conducted with a Year 8 class in a large academy school with a predominantly white and affluent catchment on the rural fringe of Cambridge. The five lessons formed the migration component of a scheme of work on population.

This topic is important for a number of reasons, all related to recent curricular changes as driven by the Department for Education (DfE). First, it responds to the DfE’s keenness to see educators apply theoretical developments in university geography to secondary school teaching (Rawling, 2015, p.165). Second, the topic responds to the demands of the updated 2014 National Curriculum for Key Stage 3, which explicitly references population, place, locational knowledge and the Middle East under its Migration section (Department for Education, 2013). Third, it contributes to the Global Learning Programme, which encourages young people to think critically about global issues. Finally, the topic recognises wider debate within subject associations on the declining credibility of school geography as a way of understanding and analysing contemporary and controversial issues. The Geographical Association (GA) and Royal Geographical Society (RGS) perceive the recent drive for curricular change as a politicised “erosion of geography” bent on returning the discipline to its traditional, knowledge-based form (Hopkin, 2013, p.60). In this context, the present work hopes to make a case for an analytical, contemporary and relevant school geography.

## **Research Questions**

The project was structured around five research questions:

1. How can enquiry-based learning move students towards more nuanced understandings of the interconnectedness of far and near places?

This question explores the pedagogical and theoretical focus of the investigation. As such it will be answered in the following section, which outlines the literature that is pertinent to this research. Specifically, it discusses the advantages and challenges of enquiry-based learning; how enquiry relates to issues of misconception and representation; and how the application of enquiry-based learning can shift students' understandings of place away from self/other orientalist mentalities and towards more nuanced understandings of place based on Massey's (2004) ideas of connection. The section also discusses three empirical articles about migration in education research. Together, the theoretical and empirical literature is used to plan a sequence of five lessons interspersed with data collection strategies, as outlined in the Methodology section.

2. What are students' initial understandings of the European refugee crisis, and what geographies underpin these?

This question explores students' initial understandings of the topic. This is necessary in order to track developments in their understanding through the enquiry sequence. Though students were not expected to have specific knowledge of the refugee crisis, it was assumed they would have some general ideas to contribute, sourced from Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) school teaching or from informal learning in the home. Concept maps and written work are analysed with reference to the hermetically-sealed and relational theories of place in the Findings section.

3. To what extent did students' understandings of the European refugee crisis develop over the enquiry sequence?

This question considers all data collected through the enquiry sequence to consider the degree to which, and the ways in which, students' understandings of the European refugee crisis developed across the enquiry sequence. Using initial understandings as a reference point, the written and oral contributions, homework and end-of-sequence responses of a purposeful sample of students are discussed to gauge the degree to which progress was made.

4. How did enquiry-based learning support students' understandings of the European refugee crisis, and the concept of migration more widely?
5. How should geography teachers negotiate the balance between values awareness and values transmission in the teaching of controversial and contemporary issues?

These two questions reflect on the methodology and findings of the research to critically consider their successes and limitations. As such they will be answered in the Discussion section of this paper. The first draws upon my experiences of writing and teaching the lesson sequence to discuss the practical and conceptual challenges of using enquiry to teach about migration. This is particularly important given the current lack of research on migration issues in geography education. The second question will offer more general insights into the challenges of teaching controversial and contemporary issues at secondary level. Notably, the enquiry sequence brought to the surface the difficulties of teaching a geography that is contemporary, relevant, and value neutral at the same time.

## **Literature Review: Enquiry, place, and migration research**

This section reviews the literature that is pertinent to this research. It is split into four subsections. The first outlines the pedagogical and theoretical focus; the second explores the concept of place; the third reviews migration research in education studies generally; and the fourth examines migration research in geography teaching specifically. The section closes with a summary answer to the first question of this investigation: *How can enquiry-based learning move students towards more nuanced understandings of the interconnectedness of far and near places?*

### **Pedagogical and theoretical focus**

This project adopts an enquiry-based approach to learning. Enquiry, according to Roberts (2013a), refers to a range of approaches in which “students are actively engaged in investigating questions and issues” (p.50). It encourages a questioning attitude, develops students’ understanding of a range of data and sources of evidence, prompts them to justify their positions using evidence, challenges misconceptions, and fosters their critical thinking skills. The subject of the enquiry – the European refugee crisis – is a controversial issue. This is principally because there are different views on what should be done about it (Roberts, 2013b, p.115). Controversial issues are worthy of study in

geography as they allow students to understand the complexity and connectedness of the world, grasp the influence of past decisions on the geographies of the present, and guard against indoctrination through critical thinking (ibid., pp.116-17). In sum, there are huge advantages to teaching migration through the lens of an enquiry focused on a controversial issue. Theoretically, my enquiry is inspired by geographical concepts which Jackson (2006) describes as the “grammar” (p.199) of the discipline: space and place, connection, and relational thinking. I elaborate my understanding and application of these terms in the following subsection.

### **A ‘Doreen Massey’ view of place**

This project is inspired by Massey’s (2004) theorisation of place as a ‘relational’ concept. A hugely influential cultural and feminist geographer, Massey understands places such as nations, regions or cities as fluid rather than fixed entities that are constantly being made and remade through the nature and range of connections they forge with other places. Places, in her view, are “internally complex, essentially unboundable in any absolute sense, and inevitably historically changing” (p.1). As such she rejects a simplistic account of place as a static container of one people, culture, language, economy or political system, bound neatly within a territory and sealed with a border. This static view of place, she argues, is based on “foundational essentialisms” such as “assumptions of authenticity” and “pre-given identities” (p.2). Moreover, it produces a geographical imaginary that focuses on the “near rather than the far” and imagines “exotic and incommensurable others in distant lands” (p.12).

According to Massey (2004), these two concepts of place have contrasting implications for the question of political responsibility. She describes the static view of place as a ‘Russian doll geography’, whereby the responsibilities of nations are inward-looking: “there is a kind of accepted understanding that we care first for, and have our first responsibilities towards, those nearest in” (p.9). The static view is politically powerful because it makes a simple appeal to “the security of a grounded identity”, imagines a “stranger within the gates”, and is founded on ultimately nationalist ideas of belonging (pp.2-3). However, in Massey’s relational view of place, nations have political responsibilities that reach well beyond their physical territories to encompass a range of other places to which they are connected through unequal relations of power. Nations form their identities through these connections to other places. The political responsibility of nations therefore extends beyond their territories to include places to which they are connected, and through which they

define themselves. In Massey's words, "We are responsible to areas beyond the bounds of place not because of what we have done, but because of what we are" (ibid., p.25).

This project is influenced by Massey's (2004) ideas. According to my knowledge, no research has been completed in geography education to apply her significant contributions to geographical thought in a classroom environment. I attempt this by adapting her theories of place to the teaching of migration in school geography. My enquiry question prompts students to make a decision about whether to accept Syrian refugees into the UK. Applying Massey to this context, anti-refugee positions will be understood to reflect a static view of place. This logic limits, or even eliminates, the UK's political responsibility for people beyond its borders. By contrast, more nuanced and sympathetic positions on the refugee crisis will be understood to reflect a relational view of place, which extends the UK's political responsibilities beyond its national territory to incorporate distant others. It is valid to apply Massey's ideas to the concept of migration. Indeed, she (briefly) discusses migration as an empirical example of the relational construction of place. In a short passage, she takes London's past and present of migration – its cultural diversity, cosmopolitan workforce and "internal mixity" (ibid., p.23) – as evidence for its interconnectedness with other places.

### **Research on migration in education studies**

Very little research appears to have been produced within education studies about the process, experiences and perceptions of migration. This subsection reviews the works accessible at the time of writing. Devine (2015) provides a personal reflection about the responsibility of educators to meet the learning needs of refugee children in the context of the present European refugee crisis. Like Massey (2004), she argues that developed countries should derive a sense of responsibility for the present crisis from their own migrant histories. She sees hypocrisy in the way they "so piously deny access to the new wave of immigrant/refugees" in spite of their own constitution through migration (Devine, 2015, p.1375). Moreover, she contends that migrant children possess huge academic potential due to the strength of their bonds with family and complexity of their life experiences. In her words, they have "an awesome start to an educational future" (ibid., p.1375). She goes on to argue that the prejudices and fears that populations in developed nations express towards migrants makes their arrival, integration and education all the more necessary.

What Devine (2015) does not explicitly suggest, however, is that the education of migrants could be accompanied by a re-education of the populations that host them - those who are confronted with the reality of distant others. Notably, these countries could explore their own complex migrant histories as a way of exposing the contradictions of anti-immigrant rhetoric, as she appears to imply in her reflection. I bring this idea forward into the design of my lesson sequence. A short reflection piece, Devine's (2015) work is not underpinned by theory and does not draw upon empirical research. This said, her thoughts may be corroborated by Arndt (2015), a related article from the same journal issue.

Inspired by Edward Said's theory of orientalism, Arndt (2015) approaches the European refugee crisis from an identity perspective, arguing that refugees are 'transnational'. This is because refugees disturb the simplistic, static narrative of nations as the containers of 'authentic' people rooted in territory. It is also for this very reason that they stir strong emotions amongst national populations. Arndt accounts for the bordering practices of anti-immigration policies – “fences, stun grenades, pepper spray and tear gas” – as “acts of extreme Othering” (ibid., p.1378). According to Said, 'othering' is the process whereby social groups construct their identities with reference to perceived ideas of difference from other groups. These ideas are produced by, and maintain, unequal relations of power. This project follows Arndt (ibid.) in applying the vocabulary of 'othering' to the process of migration and the present refugee crisis. The findings consider the degree to which students express, and can be moved beyond, orientalist mentalities over the lesson sequence.

To my knowledge, the only example of school-based research on migrant children is provided by Spitieri (2013). He attempts to examine whether the prejudices of low-ability Maltese teenagers could change towards asylum seekers who had joined their school. He justifies this choice of sample on the grounds that low-ability children are known to express some of the most sceptical attitudes towards migrants and immigration (ibid., p.47). He documents the shifting attitudes of the Maltese children towards African asylum-seeking classmates over the course of an academic year. However, from the way it is reported, the range of methods used – before-and-after focus groups, video screenings, informal conversations, observations and a parents' evening – appears unsystematic and confusing, and the sample of children involved is unclear (ibid., p.48). Though his methodology and findings appear muddled, two useful points may be taken from this work and brought into the present project. First, he concludes by underlining the significance of empathy in

his students' shifting stances on migration and asylum. Notably, their attitudes became more sympathetic over time as they developed empathy for their classmates' plight. As such, empathy-building strategies will be built into my lesson sequence as a technique for developing a 'Doreen Massey' sense of connection between my students and refugees from Syria. Second, Spitieri's (2013) work brings into focus the need for rigorous empirical research in a clearly understudied area in pedagogical research.

### **Research on migration in geography teaching**

Unfortunately, there also appears to be very little research on the teaching of migration in school geography. Bolton (2008) provides a largely descriptive account of an enquiry-based lesson sequence about Polish migration to the UK. He narrates step-by-step the process by which he wrote the sequence. The author, a Local Authority educational consultant, intends his article as a resource to stimulate creative thinking in the teaching of migration topics. Though modest in purpose, the article provides some useful ideas which I will incorporate into my own lesson planning in the following chapter. First, in a nod to the 2007 National Curriculum and GA manifesto *A Different View*, he brings spatial vocabulary to the fore in his lesson planning. Second, he humanises the migration process through the backstories and motivations of real people, which fosters empathy. Third, he underlines the importance of using evidence when discussing migration from any perspective. Finally, he demonstrates the effectiveness of written plenary and questionnaire tasks to track learning (ibid., p.131).

In a similar article Minton (2008) reports briefly on a sequence of Year 8 lessons about immigration, which she had designed to challenge student misconceptions about immigration to the UK. In agreement with other sources discussed in this chapter, she notes that most of the students' negative views were underpinned by a prejudiced "'us' and 'them' attitude" of authentic Brits versus foreigners (p.109). Crucially, she argues that a correct teaching of the vocabulary of migration (economic migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, etc) "goes some way to challenge negative and in some cases discriminatory views" (ibid.). As such I will attempt to make clear the basic vocabulary of migration early in the lesson sequence.



## **Summary**

The project described in this paper adopts an enquiry-based approach to a controversial issue – namely, the Syrian refugee crisis. It was hoped that enquiry would achieve three goals in this context. First, to shift students away from crudely anti-immigrant views based on predominant misconceptions, representations, and a self/other orientalist mentality. Second, to use empirical evidence to move them towards more nuanced understandings of the crisis. Third, to foster students' senses of connection to, and therefore political responsibility towards, refugees from distant places. The degree to which students were able (or even needed) to make this transition is documented with reference to Massey's (2004) contrasting theories of static and relational place. This enquiry contributes to the very small body of existing literature on children's perceptions of migration in the school environment. As the following section makes clear, the project borrows a number of ideas from the present literature and incorporates them into lesson planning.

## **Methodology**

This section has three purposes. First, it outlines and justifies the project's methodological approach as a case study. Second, it provides an overview of the lesson sequence. In particular, it highlights my attempts to embed key issues and concepts from the literature into five consecutive lessons. Third, it describes and justifies the data collection methods deployed throughout the sequence, and explains their relevance to my second, third, fourth and fifth research questions.

### **Case study approach**

The project adopted a case study approach. Yin (2003) defines a case study as "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.13). Using this definition, the project is a case study in two senses.

First, it studies the contemporary phenomenon of migration in the real-life context of the European refugee crisis. The crisis is therefore a case study of migration in action. The specific purpose of this case is to develop students' conceptual understandings of place. Taylor (2013) argues that case studies are important when it is difficult to separate phenomena from the contexts in which they occur. Echoing Massey (2004), she argues "we cannot make proper sense of an instance if it is

divorced from its context within a web of interrelationships” (Taylor, 2013, p.103). The project aims to move students towards an understanding of the complex web of spatial and temporal interrelationships that define the European refugee crisis. If they are able to demonstrate this, then they will be considered to have developed a ‘Doreen Massey’ sense of place. Second, the project studies a specific class of Year 8 students as a case study of migration teaching. In this sense, the phenomenon in question is migration teaching and learning, while the real-life context consists of my particular class in the school and myself as classroom practitioner. The school has a mixed but largely middle-class catchment. My Year 8 class was predominantly white British, with four students of non-white or mixed ethnicity and no speakers of English as an additional language.

Case studies are routinely criticised as providing limited validity due to their relatively uncontrolled nature, and limited generalizability due to their focus on a single case (Demetriou, 2013, p.259). However, such criticisms are not relevant to the present study. First, the purpose of the case is to reveal, not control for, the complexity of the studied phenomena. Second, the case study approach does not claim to be representative of a wider population beyond that studied. I do not, therefore, present the results of this study with purportedly ‘representative’ graphs or figures, and I refrain from making hyperbolic concluding statements about the worth of my study. More modestly, I expose and attempt to explain trends and anomalies as they emerge from the data in a qualitative way, and consider their possible relevance to my own future teaching practice. Demetriou (ibid.,) notes that case studies do still generalise – but to a theory, not a wider population. Cases are selected to represent dimensions of a chosen theory. The question of whether I have chosen a valid theory to explore my case – is Massey (2004) right? – will be considered in the Discussion section.

### **The lesson sequence**

The lesson sequence was taught at the start of a new unit on migration. Before the sequence began, students were taught one initial lesson about the migration concept. This was intended to equip them with the basic vocabulary they would need (e.g. push/pull; different kinds of migrant) to then be able to think and talk about the European refugee crisis. The first lesson in the sequence was entitled ‘Are we a nation of migrants?’. The purpose was to move students away from a possible misconception of migration as a process that distant others ‘do’ to the UK externally, as per an orientalist mentality and Massey’s (2004, p.2) “stranger within the gates”. Rather, students were challenged to think of migration as a process which has defined, and continues to define, the UK as

a place and people. This lesson theme was inspired by Devine's (2015) critique of the current refugee crisis discussed in the last chapter. Specifically, students examined graphical and numerical sources about the UK's past and present of immigration and emigration. The idea was to move them towards a relational understanding of place as they learnt how migration has connected, and continues to connect, the UK to locations around the globe. It was hoped that students would bring this understanding of place forward to the learning that would follow about the European refugee crisis.

Lesson 2 introduced the refugee crisis, with a key focus on its representation in the media. This lesson had two purposes. First, inspired by Bolton (2008), students were to learn the importance of founding any viewpoint on a controversial issue in empirical evidence. Second, moving beyond this, they were to learn how to think critically about evidence. Specifically, they used grids of inference to evaluate media sources that represented the crisis in sympathetic and unsympathetic ways. As Roberts (2013a) highlights, critical thinking is central to the enquiry-based pedagogy. Lesson 3, entitled 'What is it like to be a Syrian refugee?', used empathy as a device for developing students' sense of connection to Syrian refugees. It used real-life mobile phone footage to document four stages of a child refugee's journey, from war-torn Syria to the Jungle refugee camp in Calais. Following Spitieri (2013), it was hoped that empathy would be key in shifting students' attitudes about migrants, fostering their sense of connection between near and distant places.

Lesson 4 – the penultimate in the sequence – consisted of a debate in which students discussed their varied answers to the enquiry question, 'Should we accept Syrian refugees?'. They were to apply all learning through the sequence to debate different positions as a model UK Parliament. To prepare, and to consolidate their own views before the discussion, they were set homework to further research arguments for and against the UK accepting Syrian refugees. A final lesson was set as cover work in which students wrote a letter to their MP outlining and explaining their closing positions. Combined with a debrief questionnaire, the lesson provided plenary data for analysing their views at the end of the sequence.

### **Data collection and analysis**

This study uses several methods in 'triangulation' in order to reveal multiple aspects of students' understanding of the European refugee crisis. Triangulation is a multi-method research strategy designed to increase confidence in conclusions about a phenomenon by studying it from different

viewpoints (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p.141). It is a way of "cross-checking data" from multiple sources (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003, p.78) with the aim of searching for regularities. Triangulation is compatible with the case study research design. Given that triangulation is said to increase the validity of research findings, its implementation in a case therefore addresses one of the main criticisms aimed at the case study approach (Demetriou, 2013, p.259). Data for the second research question, probing students' initial understandings of the refugee crisis, was collected using a concept map at the start of the lesson sequence. Concept maps allow access to the perceptions and thought processes of those under study, as well as the organisation of their thinking (Wilson & Fox, 2013, p.122). These concept maps were triangulated with a short written response to the enquiry question. This was to collect students' initial views. They were prompted to write freely and assured that there was no right or wrong answer.

Data in the form of book work, activity responses and verbal contributions were triangulated to answer the third research question. I assess the degree to which students' understandings of the refugee crisis developed over the sequence by focusing on end-of-sequence data, including a letter-writing task, closing concept map and debrief questionnaire. Moreover, this picture of students' learning at the end of the sequence is compared with their starting positions. The findings are structured around themes that emerged from the data through 'open coding' analysis. This is "the assigning of interpretive tags to text (or other material) based on categories or themes that are relevant to the research" (Cope, 2010, p.440). Open coding is an unstructured and unsystematic analytical technique, but it is appropriate to this study given its aim to build an overall and in-depth picture of the understandings of a single-class sample of Year 8 students. Codes that emerged included changes in view (in terms of a change in position on a 'for/against refugees' continuum); developments of view (in terms of a deepening understanding); empathy; use of evidence; critical thinking; and crucially, signs of static and relational understandings of place.

The work of twenty-eight students was examined to generate the following results and discussion. Students' data was very broadly analysed according to three attainment categories – higher, middle, and lower. These were defined partly according to progress figures extracted from the class datasheet - which follows the school's system of 'levels' - and partly through my own knowledge of the relative strengths of my pupils, with whom I had worked since January. According to the levels system, description is considered a lower attainment skill (L4), explanation a middling skill (L5), and comparison a higher skill (L5).

## **Ethical considerations**

Before proceeding with data collection, an ethics form and risk assessment were completed and approved by the Faculty of Education. This included a signed agreement to abide by the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research as outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011). Verbal consent was obtained from my Faculty and school mentors following discussions of my draft research proposal and specific lesson plans. My Professional Studies mentor provided formal approval in the school. Students were informed at the start of the lesson sequence that the proceeding classes would form part of a university project. However, it was made clear that their identities would be fully anonymised throughout. Further, each student was free to request the removal of any personal contribution – whether verbal or written – from the write-up.

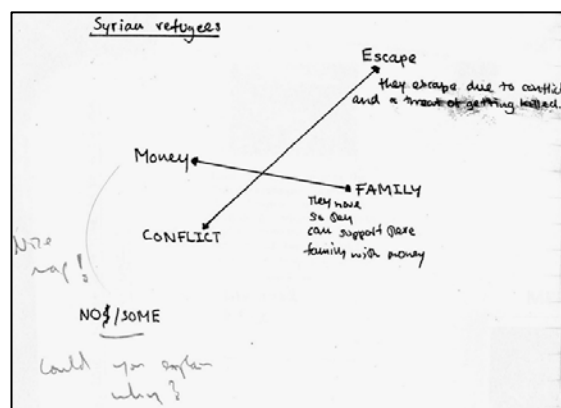
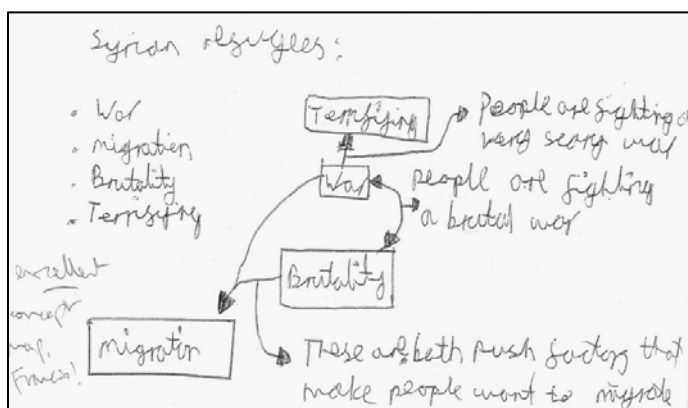
## **Findings**

This section presents the main findings of the project. The first subsection examines data from the beginning of the enquiry sequence to answer the second research question: *What are students' initial understandings of the European refugee crisis, and what geographies underpin these?* The second subsection builds upon this by assessing students' progress throughout the enquiry sequence in relation to their starting positions. As such, it will answer the third research question: *To what extent did students' understandings of the European refugee crisis develop over the enquiry sequence?* Each subsection reports the trends that emerged from an unstructured and open-ended analysis of twenty-eight students' work. They will be discussed very broadly in terms of high, middling and low ability groupings.

### **What are students' initial understandings of the European refugee crisis, and what geographies underpin these?**

Students expressed a range of understandings of the European refugee crisis in their opening concept maps. Most identified the crisis as a real-life example of migration, while many correctly stated 'war' as the primary reason for the refugees' existence. Most students - of higher and middling attainment in particular - demonstrated signs of empathy for the refugees' plight through words such as 'brave', 'inhumanity', 'force', 'no food', 'brutality' and 'struggle'. Most concept maps were quite superficial across the ability range, expressing a spoke structure (Kinchin & Hay,

2000, p.47) - students related ideas to the core concept but could not trace connections between their ideas. However, this was expected as students were likely drawing upon informal learning sources to complete the task. Many students of lower attainment struggled to complete a concept map at all – either a sign of their lacking knowledge or my failure to model the task clearly. This said, some of the higher attaining students produced impressive concept maps which applied key migration vocabulary from the initial lesson to explain their key word choices (Figure 1; ‘push/pull’). Another high attaining student attempted to explain the refugee crisis using his knowledge of the different types of migration (Figure 2; forced migration (‘conflict-escape’) and economic migration (‘money-family’)). While he was not entirely correct - economic migration is not relevant to the case study - it was encouraging to see evidence of chain-structure conceptual thinking so early in the sequence (ibid., p.47).



**Figures 1 and 2: chain-structure thinking in initial concept maps by higher attaining students.**

Students expressed a range of positions in their short-answer written responses to the question, ‘Should the UK accept Syrian refugees?’. Interestingly, most students of lower attainment, and some of middling attainment, expressed unsympathetic views. Their comments reflect the “foundational essentialisms” and “assumptions of authenticity” that define a static view of place (Massey, 2004, p.9). For example, one student justified an anti-immigrant position with an erroneous understanding of current affairs; another perceived refugees as an external threat to a neatly parceled UK economy; and another imagined a simply parasitic group:

There's a high risk that one will be a terrorist. A similar thing happened in Paris, and there was also a danger of it happening in Brussels. If we let them in they could randomly attack anywhere in the UK. [Middle attainment student]

They will take jobs that people from the UK actually need so then that will result in an argument and then there will be more people claiming [sic] benefits from the government which is bad. [Middle attainment]

They take houses and money. [Lower attainment]

Consistent with Spitieri (2013), the lower attaining students most frequently expressed anti-immigrant views. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the static view of place is conceptually simplistic and therefore most easily understood. The students above would also appear to imagine Massey's (2004, p.3) "stranger within the gates" and a threatening Islamic other (Arndt, 2015). The following subsection will discuss the degree to which these students' views could be successfully challenged and developed through the sequence.

Most students of higher attainment, and some of middling attainment, were more sympathetic towards Syrian refugees. These were manifested in views that the UK should accept Syrian refugees unreservedly, or accept some with conditions attached. A handful demonstrated a 'Doreen Massey' relational understanding of place from the outset. Below, the first student demonstrates an awareness of the interconnectedness of social and economic issues in different places; the second believes the UK should accept some political responsibility as the member of an international community; and the third argues the UK should help due to its economic advantage relative to other countries such as Syria:

By solving their problems we can solve ours by helping the economy. [Middle attainment]

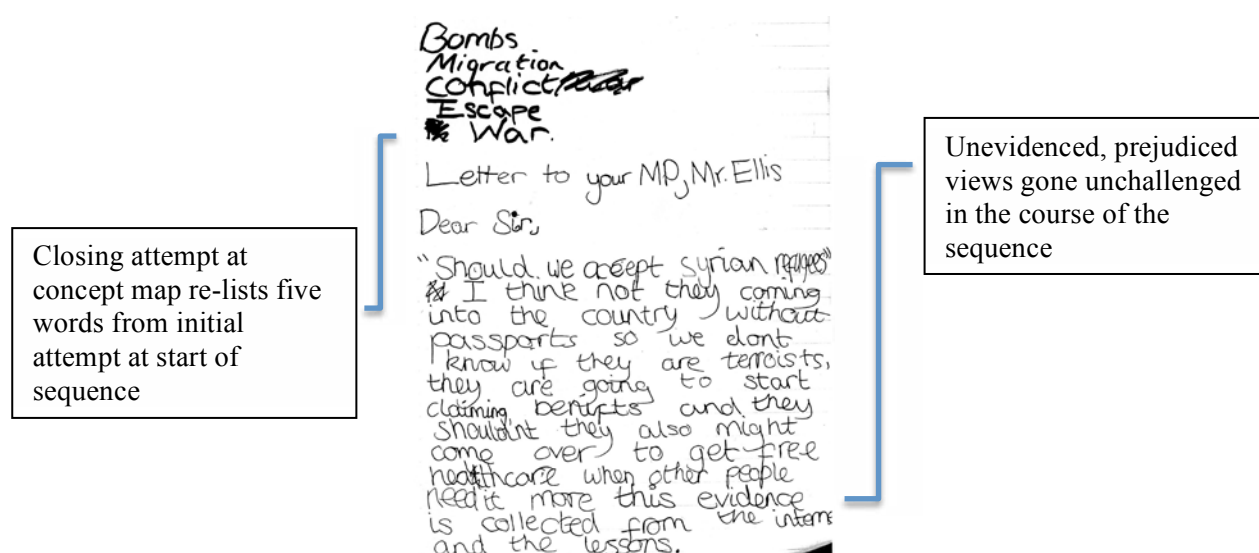
We should take only a certain number, but since other countries are taking them in the UK must too. [Higher attainment]

We have more resources as a rich country, so we should help. [Higher attainment]

Most of the higher attainment students, however, could not quite explain their positions beyond simple empathy for their plight: "They have nowhere to go, no money, no house, no food"; "We should help the desperate people in need"; "they are human beings like us". The subsection below will discuss the degree to which the highest attaining students were able to move beyond empathy to justify their views with evidence and deeper conceptual understanding.

## To what extent did students' understandings of the European refugee crisis develop over the enquiry sequence?

Students who commenced the enquiry sequence with anti-refugee positions – most of lower attainment and some of middling attainment – ended it in varied ways. Four lower attaining students remained firmly anti-refugee without having developed that position. Their closing concept maps were direct copies of their initial attempts, while their plenary letters reinforced some of the prejudiced views they had expressed vocally in the debate lesson (Figure 3). Indeed, one such student's views became entrenched further through the erroneous use of statistics in the debate (“there is over 1 million refugees in Germany alone”), a point that other groups did not challenge.



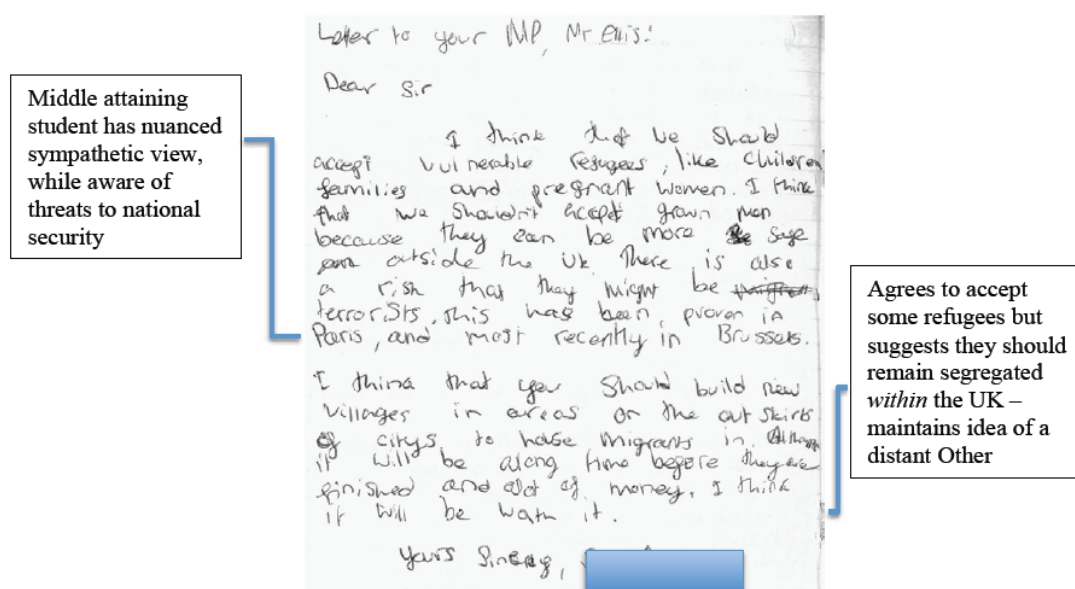
**Figure 3: closing position of a lower attaining student.**

(I discuss possible reasons for the underdevelopment of such views in the Discussion section.)

While most students of lower attainment did not change their anti-immigrant views, one such student demonstrated nonetheless that he had developed an awareness of the refugees. Indeed, in his closing questionnaire he noted that “I still think they shouldn’t come to the UK but they have gone through a lot to get here”. This raises the question of whether my students have to adopt a pro-refugee position in order to demonstrate they have learnt something about the issue. Further, is it possible for students to believe the UK has limited political responsibility for Syrian refugees, and yet still grasp the complex, relational nature of place? The complicated relationship between political positions and Massey’s (2004) theories of place, and the wider debate about disseminating normalised or pluralistic views in education, will be discussed in the following section.



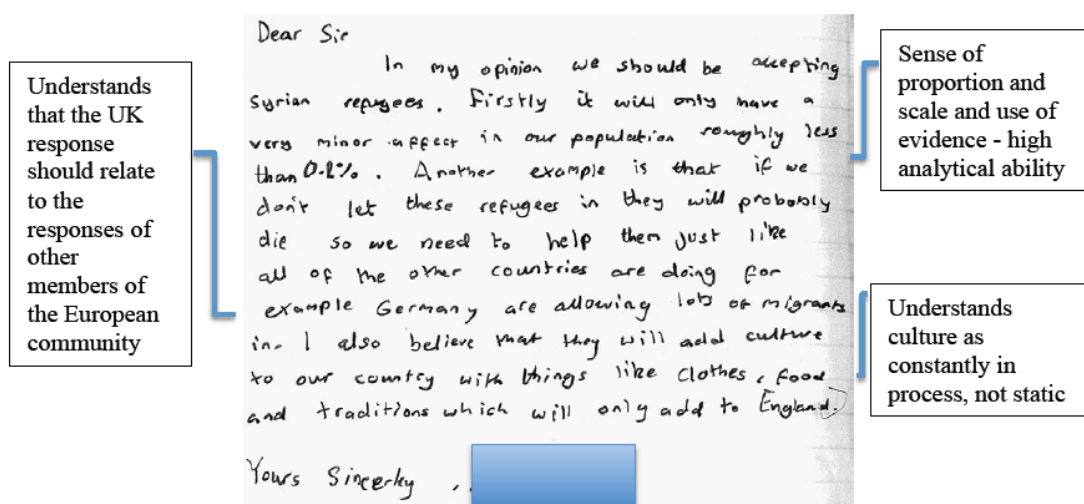
Middle attaining students were more receptive to the lesson sequence, with views that shifted in multiple ways. Most had initially sympathetic views, which developed with evidence from lesson content and personal research. Middle attaining students with initially unsympathetic views tended to become more sympathetic. Most interestingly, however, these students appeared to retain static views of place despite changing their debating positions. For example, one student changed his view from negative to positive due to the emotive impact of Lesson 3, but he retained an orientalist view of refugees as a distant other in his closing letter: “Yes, we should accept some but keep them in a camp in the UK so they don’t cause any trouble”. This well-meaning student appears to propose the establishment of a new Jungle refugee camp this side of the Channel! Another middle attaining student developed a more nuanced, sympathetic view, but with similar orientalist undertones (Figure 4). Unconvinced by the statistics revealing the UK’s immigrant history in Lesson 1, he had noted that “whites are still by far the largest group and the migration of other ethnicities is very recent”. Strangely, then, these students appear to adopt a static view of place while at the same time believing that the UK should accept some refugees. This runs contrary to Massey’s (2004) account of place, whereby a static view should correspond to a diminished sense of political responsibility.



**Figure 4: orientalist views in the work of a student who supports migration with concessions.**

(Note the second paragraph in particular.)

Most students of higher attainment started the sequence with more sympathetic views towards Syrian refugees, and had mostly not changed these views by the end. However, the vast majority did show signs of having developed them by citing evidence collected from lesson content and personal research. Encouragingly, three higher attaining students who had not demonstrated a relational understanding of place at the beginning of the sequence could do so by the end, forging conceptual links between the UK, Europe and the refugees. For example, one student moved from a sympathetic position defined by vague empathy (“they’re human beings like us”) towards an application of statistics, a sense of scale, a continental sense of political responsibility shared with a European partner, and an understanding of culture as constantly in process (Figure 5). All these points reflect a relational view of place (Massey, 2004). However, in the course of the sequence very few students mentioned the UK’s own immigrant history as a justification for accepting Syrian refugees. This seemed surprising, especially given the mixed ethnicity of six students in the class. The Discussion section will reflect upon this in more detail.



**Figure 5: evidence of relational understandings of place.**

While higher and middle attaining students generally held sympathetic views on Syrian refugees and did not change their positions, there were two key anomalies. First, the initially unsympathetic views of one higher student had developed into a nuanced, sympathetic position by the end of the sequence. He had responded particularly well to Lesson 2, which examined the representation of the refugee crisis in the media. He produced an excellent grid of inference, grasping the concept of

representation and applying critical thinking to the sources (Figure 6). These skills were pivotal in shifting his view towards a sympathetic stance, as evidenced by his closing questionnaire response:

There is a lot of sympathetic evidence to say why we should accept the Syrian refugees. This evidence is more convincing than unsympathetic evidence. For example, I didn't know that such a small percentage of the UK's population are refugees. To start with I only knew unsympathetic evidence but slowly my view has changed.

[Questionnaire; higher attaining student]

Critical thinking – higher attaining student aware of negative representation of the crisis; questions evidence for this view

Are there any questions you could ask?

When can you infer (work out) from this?

What does the source definitely tell us?

Why do they want to come to the UK?

How many are there?

What does the source definitely tell us?

it says that lots of people are coming at once.

It shows that migration is a bad thing.

Are there any questions you could ask?

What can you infer (work out) from this?

This is sympathetic because the man is holding a dead baby.

Why are the migrants risking their lives to come to the UK?

it shows that the route the migrants take are dangerous because people are dying.

Are there any questions you could ask?

When can you infer (work out) from this?

That the police are being cruel to migrants by spraying pepper spray at them and grabbing them.

Why are they attacking the migrants?

What does the source definitely tell us?

Are there any questions you could ask?

What can you infer (work out) from this?

This is sympathetic because it is saying that the migrants are being treated cruelly and something should happen about it.

What does the source definitely tell us?

the guardian

A refugee crisis for the world

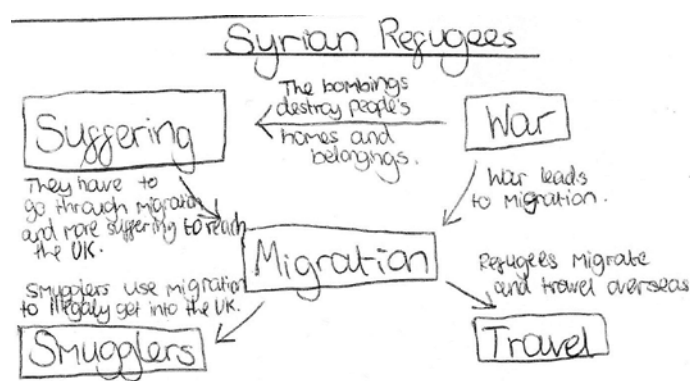
**Figure 6: grids of inference were pivotal in shifting some students' views.**

Second, a higher attaining student expressed a firm anti-immigrant view that did not change throughout the sequence. It did develop, however, as he applied personal research about current charity and government spending on refugees to argue that helping refugees carried an economic cost. These two anomalies – a drastic change in one able student's views and the immovable views of another – raise the question of parental influence:

The UK government has committed over £2 billion in aid to help the people of Syria. UNICEF committed £8.5 million funding the refugees' education and safety. On a good level we should be sympathetic. But not too sympathetic. If you are too sympathetic businesses and the government will be broke! All this luxury for the refugees.

[Debate; higher attaining student]

Students' closing concept maps were varied. Most had not improved in depth or quality over their first attempts, while several were direct copies (e.g. Figure 3). Notable exceptions, such as Figure 7, synthesised multiple aspects of learning through the sequence, including reasons for Syrian migration, specific detail about the refugees' journey, and an emotive understanding. The Discussion section below considers possible reasons for the varying quality of the concept maps.



**Figure 7: evidence of learning through the sequence in a closing concept map**

## Summary

My class of twenty-eight Year 8 pupils related to the enquiry sequence in multiple, complex, and at times contradictory ways. This said, I have attempted to highlight the broadest trends and the most interesting exceptions that emerged from a qualitative and unsystematic analysis of the entire class' work. Most students of lower attainment commenced the sequence with anti-immigrant views founded in a static view of place. By the end of the sequence these views had mostly not changed, but some had developed. Students of higher attainment tended to be more sympathetic towards refugees from the outset, and retained these positions at the end of the sequence. These students were able to use evidence to develop their views, while several demonstrated signs of a relational view of place in their reasoning. The relationship between these trends and exceptions and my own classroom practice is discussed below.

## **Discussion**

This short section draws upon my experiences of writing and teaching the lesson sequence to discuss the practical and conceptual challenges of using enquiry to teach about migration. It evaluates the project, considers the degree to which my classroom practice supported students' learning, and in so doing attempts to answer the fourth and fifth research questions.

### **How did enquiry-based learning support students' understandings of the European refugee crisis, and the concept of migration more widely?**

Students were very highly engaged throughout the enquiry sequence. Indeed, it was encouraging to witness just how invested children can be in contemporary issues when given the space to voice, debate and justify their views. Focusing an enquiry question around a current issue, which related to their lives as young British citizens, gave students a 'need to know' (Roberts, 2013a), created a lively debate, and made them curious to seek further answers. This was clearly indicated by the range of responses to the second question on the closing questionnaire, which invited students to mention anything they would still like to know about the refugee crisis. The most popular requests were for more detail about the Syrian conflict itself (the reasons behind it, how long it has lasted, and its prospects for the future); the perspectives of other European countries involved in the crisis; and more about the lives of Syrian refugees as they cross the continent ("How do they get food and water?"). Indeed, one higher attaining student's response ("Why do they have to have papers forged when they are fleeing from conflict?") demonstrates the potential of enquiry-based learning to support very high-level thinking.

Empathy building was a clearly successful strategy for developing students' learning about the refugee crisis. When asked in the closing questionnaire about their learning, the most common response across the attainment range mentioned the hardships faced by refugees in their journey to cross Europe. This indicated the particular success of Lesson 3, in which they completed emotive maps (Figure 8) based on real-life footage of the journey. My practices of teaching empathy were therefore successful in fostering students' sense of connection between far and near places. Indeed, those who changed their positions on the refugees from unsympathetic to sympathetic cited empathetic reasons for doing so. More broadly, this reveals the importance of teaching controversial issues in order to guard young people against indoctrination (Roberts, 2013b).

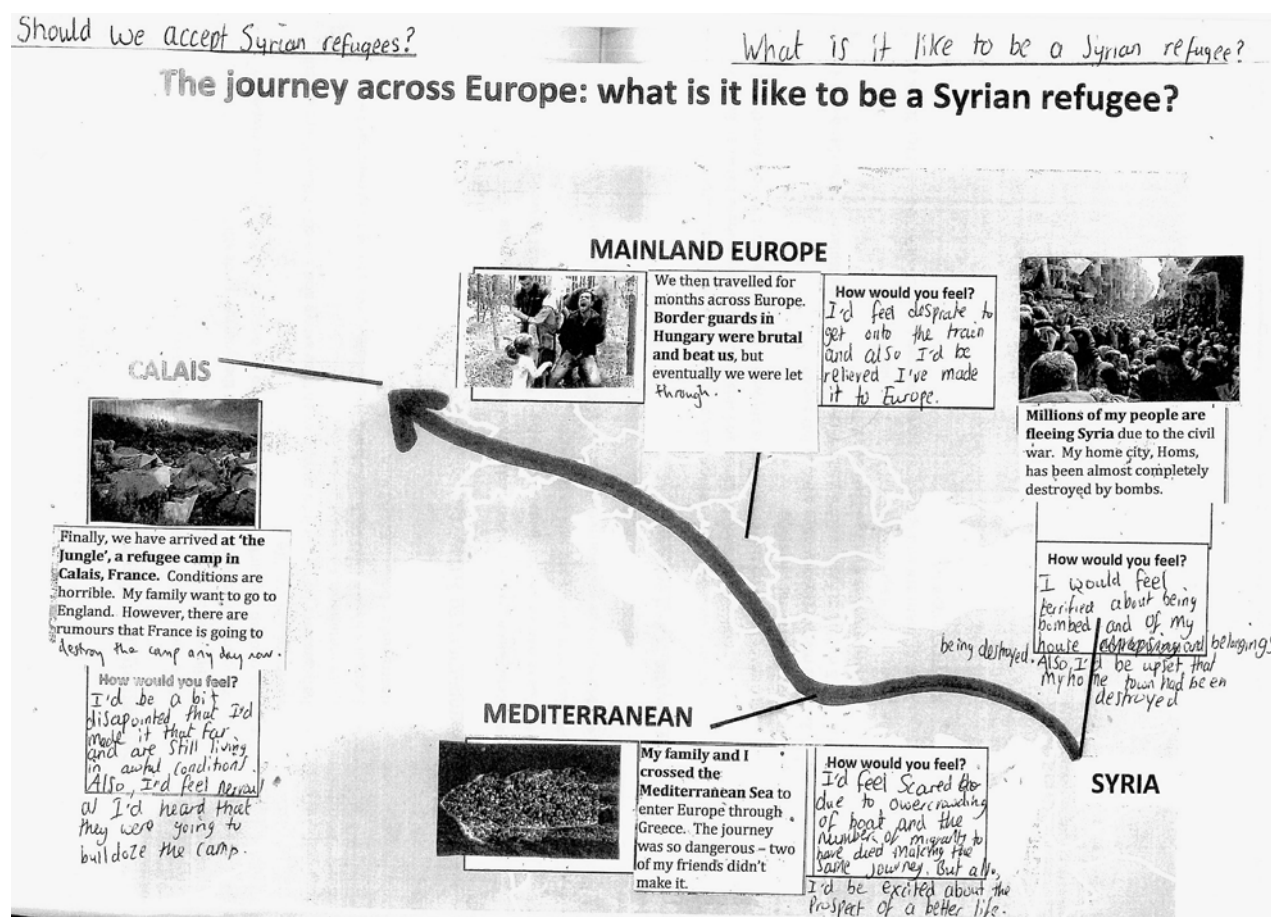


Figure 8: many students developed empathy for Syrian refugees during the enquiry.

However, there were a number of ways in which I could have better applied the enquiry approach to support and deepen their learning. First, many students struggled to complete concept maps, both at the start and end of the lesson sequence. In Lesson 1, I modelled the principle of concept mapping using an unrelated case study ('British people in Spain'), before asking students to then complete one about Syrian refugees using their own ideas. This jump in focus appeared to confuse many students and on reflection I did not sufficiently explain the purpose of the task. Further, the end-of-sequence concept maps were completed in a cover lesson. Though I had explained the concept mapping principle to the cover teacher, the poor quality of most closing maps led me to speculate that students were insufficiently supported by the unfamiliar teacher and may have put in less effort as a result. Barring a handful of exceptions (e.g. Figure 7), it is doubtful that the concept maps have provided valid data about the students' learning.

Curiously, over the course of the lesson sequence some of the most unsympathetic views towards refugees were expressed by students not of white British origin. I had expected these individuals – mixed race, Irish traveller, and Eastern European – to be more sympathetic towards the refugees given the embeddedness of migration within their own family histories. Clearly, therefore, the enquiry sequence had missed an opportunity to deepen students' understanding of migration through engaging their own life experiences somehow. Perhaps the sequence could have been improved with an activity to scale down learning from Lesson 1, about the UK's migration history as a nation, to the personal level of the students. Self-reflection may have deepened their understandings of the crisis and moved an even greater number towards sympathetic views.

Though most students developed their understanding of the refugee crisis, and many demonstrated Massey's (2004) relational view of place, very few students drew upon migration vocabulary in explaining their views at any stage of the sequence. Notably, they rarely drew upon concepts such as push and pull factors, nor the distinctions between economic and forced migration, asylum seeker or refugee. For example, in the end-of-sequence letter-writing activity one middle attaining student conflated economic and forced migration while trying to understand why the refugees existed. As such, he believed refugees should be treated as economic migrants:

I think that the UK should accept Syrian refugees because there are a lot of gaps in the market in the UK and if they have any skill in this then we should accept them and if necessary give them training in their skill or even in English so they can work here. However, if they are going to come here and not work then we shouldn't accept them as they'll drain resources.

[Middle attaining student]

Clearly, I had failed to embed migration concepts throughout the lesson sequence, and this impeded students' learning about the refugee crisis. This was also reflected in the questionnaire, in which just one student felt they had learnt about the reasons behind it. Guiltily, as a trainee teacher I had consciously shied away from this issue – partly due to time constraints within the lesson sequence, but perhaps mainly due to ambiguities about the meaning of the term 'refugee'. Liberal media sources follow the definition of the United Nations – broadly, a migrant who has been forced to leave a place where their safety cannot be guaranteed. However, geography teaching in the school of my study appeared to define refugees more specifically as forced migrants with a legal status, having applied for, and successfully been granted, permission to stay in a host country. According to this second definition, the displaced victims of the Syrian conflict cannot be considered 'refugees' before a successful application for asylum. In this school, therefore, it may have been

misleading to refer to the current crisis as a ‘refugee crisis’ at all! To improve my migration teaching in future, I will need to clarify (to both myself and students) the essential distinctions between terms such as ‘migrant’, ‘asylum seeker’, and ‘refugee’. Their overlapping and multiple meanings were a source of frustration while planning the lessons.

### **How should geography teachers negotiate the balance between values awareness and values transmission in the teaching of controversial and contemporary issues?**

The present research is formed around a ‘Doreen Massey’ view of place – a progressive theory within human geography. This being the case, in the course of writing and delivering the lesson sequence I found myself thinking about the relationship between geographical concepts and political positions. I was pushing students to abandon simplistic, static, anti-immigration positions (which are essentially right-leaning, politically speaking) and encouraging them to consider more nuanced views that accepted the constantly changing and relational nature of place (an ultimately left-leaning position). In so doing, was I tacitly transmitting political values to my students? According to Massey (2004), a relational view of place entails accepting greater political responsibility beyond territorial borders. Was my teaching therefore biased towards views that were accepting of Syrian refugees? Was I presenting this way of thinking as more praiseworthy or ‘correct’ than other ways? Moreover, did my own (left-leaning) personal politics influence my (left-leaning) choice of geographical theory to superimpose on this project in the first place?

Aware of this tension, I minimised my own interventions in student discussions while teaching – especially during the debate lesson. This was my attempt to make students *aware* of different perspectives on refugee migration, while stopping short of transmitting my own. This ‘hands off’ strategy was not entirely successful, however, as the debate broke down. Energy levels in the room at times went too high and hyperbolic statements from the students - especially the anti-immigrant group - went unchallenged (I chose not to intervene). Failing to anticipate how invested the students would be in the issue, I had sorted students into debate groups according to their personally held beliefs on the enquiry question (pro-, anti-, and middle ground). This may have been a mistake. Perhaps the debate would have run more smoothly, and learning been greater, if I had assigned debating positions to students according to what they *did not* currently believe. This could have opened up greater possibility for students of all attainment levels and debate positions to deepen



their own thinking through self-reflection – especially the lower attaining students with prejudiced and unevidenced views (Figure 3).

What is the most effective way of ensuring that school geography remains focused on values awareness in the teaching of controversial issues? The answer may lie in achieving a balance between factual knowledge and conceptual understanding. I have suggested above that students' understandings of migration concepts had not been sufficiently developed by the end of the sequence. Though most had gathered plenty of evidence to justify their views on refugees, they appeared to struggle for concepts to hang this evidence on to. As a result, the debate too frequently involved an irresolvable trading of facts and figures as each side threw their numbers around. A discussion more clearly structured around concepts would have been more mature, less energetic, and have deepened geographical learning. Moreover, it would have better promoted an awareness rather than transmission of political values. As Uhlenwinkel (2014) puts it:

the ability to think geographically cannot be reached through factual knowledge alone... In order to think geographically students need conceptual understanding, which, in turn, must be based in factual knowledge to save it from being pure imagination.

(Uhlenwinkel, 2014, p.28)

## **Conclusion**

The project described in this paper attempted to develop a Year 8 group's understanding of place through a lesson sequence structured around the enquiry question: *Should we accept Syrian refugees?* This was necessary for a number of reasons related to recent curricular change. Moreover, the severe lack of pedagogical research on migration - in education studies generally and school-based geography in particular – gave further justification to the study. This said, the few studies that do exist informed multiple aspects of the research design. Conceptually, the project aimed to move students beyond a static view of place, as manifested in populist anti-immigration stances, and towards a relational view of place as per Massey (2004). To this end, the results produced a relatively messy, and at times contradictory, picture of students' learning. Very broadly, students of lower attainment commenced the sequence with static, anti-immigrant views and mostly failed to move beyond these. Meanwhile, students of higher attainment tended to be more sympathetic to refugees from the outset, maintained these views, and demonstrated some evidence of a relational understanding of place. Empathy and representation were found to be two

particularly successful strategies in promoting students' learning about the European refugee crisis, while the change in some students' views from unsympathetic to sympathetic more widely demonstrates the importance of teaching controversial issues in school geography to guard young people against indoctrination. Having reflected on the lesson sequence, I would improve my future teaching on migration in two ways. First, a clearer emphasis throughout on migration concepts would likely move a greater number of students towards critical thinking and away from hyperbolic views; and second, engaging students' own life experiences may deepen understanding of these concepts. Achieving a balance between conceptual understanding and factual knowledge could be key to value-neutral geography teaching.

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