

Take a Stand: Learning About the Refugee Crisis through Persuasive Writing

8th Grade ELA

In this four-week thematic unit, students will be investigating the topic of refugees through the scope of persuasive writing. This topic is extremely important and relevant for students to learn about for a variety of reasons. Given the current social and political climate of the United States and globally, students need to be aware of who refugees are and how the topic may impact them. In conjunction with learning about refugees, students will have the opportunity to develop key traits such as empathy/acceptance and tolerance. At the conclusion of this unit students will know the following: 1) How to shape, give, and defend an argument by using various sources and including addressing a claim/counterclaim. 2) The importance of social activism in the context of the modern-day refugee crisis. 3) The importance of empathy and tolerance/acceptance of others. Additionally, students will be able to do the following at the conclusion of the unit: 1) How to adequately shape, give, and defend an argument by using various sources and including addressing a claim/counterclaim. 2) The importance of social activism in the context of the modern-day refugee crisis. 3) The importance of empathy and the tolerance and/or acceptance of others.

The book selected as the unit anchor text, *Refugee* by Alan Gratz, is a collection of stories that are fictionally based in three different time periods: the Holocaust of 1939, Cuban Raft Exodus of 1994, and the Syrian Civil War of 2011. These stories will help students to better understand who a refugee is and what causes a person to become a refugee: “A person who flees to a foreign country or power to escape danger or persecution” (“Refugee,” n.d.). The anchor text supports

the thematic unit by enabling students to follow each character through their different trials and tribulations in fleeing their native country. The time periods examined throughout the novel are also academically relatable to students. The journeys illustrated through the novel are relevant as well in that they provide context for an ongoing refugee crisis; a crisis that students are exposed to through the media and various academic and opinion texts. *Refugee* will help to create understanding and awareness of the crisis by “shedding light on a current and ongoing situation that not only comes to life in the book but also invites readers to feel empathy for the refugees in their own schools and communities” (Dawes et al., 2018). Ultimately, the anchor text will enable students to harness a social awareness and a tolerance as well as understanding of the plight of a refugee.

This unit will have several essential questions that are addressed throughout its lesson plan components. The essential questions are as follows: 1) What is the modern-day refugee crisis, and what can we learn from it? 2) How do the stories presented in *Refugee* contribute to our understanding of the modern-day refugee crisis? 3) How does our examining of various sources help us to better understand the refugee crisis? How do these sources enable us to see multiple perspectives on this issue? 4) What is social activism and why is it important? How can we promote social activism when it comes to the idea of refugees? 5) How does empathy impact our perspectives and understandings of refugees? Under these essential questions, the unit plan and its corresponding lessons contain activities that directly align to the questions, their standards, and help prepare students for their formative assessments as well as their final summative assessment. Additionally, these activities will be scaffolded for students. These scaffolds include modeling the activities and assignment expectations for students, utilizing

graphic organizers (e.g. Venn-Diagram) and other organizational frameworks to increase student comprehension, and using a variety of different refugee-centered activities.

In conjunction with the scaffolds set in place for helping students to reach the unit objectives, the teacher will use a variety of different strategies and resources to prepare students as well. Three key strategies that will be used at different points of the unit are chalk talks, a philosophical chairs discussion, and reading and analyzing visual texts. Each of these three strategies encourages the act of student collaboration and critical thinking, provides opportunities to explore and analyze the refugee crisis, and allows students to “begin to more fully recognize that the universal refugee experience has taken place throughout history and around the world” (Expeditionary Learning, 2014). Concerning the resources that will be utilized throughout the unit, many of these resources will be used in conjunction with the unit anchor text, *Refugee*. Resources will range from news articles, in-depth videos dealing with the topic of refugees, interactive activities that help students immerse themselves in the shoes of a refugee, etc. The resources are intentionally chosen for the medium in which they present students (i.e. visual texts/images, written texts; engaging walkthroughs).

Ultimately, each strategy and resource used throughout the thematic unit are thoughtfully and intentionally chosen, serving a specific purpose. The strategies aid in student growth and knowledge by using Bloom’s Taxonomy as the framework “for categorizing educational goals [and] the necessary precondition for putting these skills and abilities into practice” (Armstrong, n.d.). Each of the lessons within our unit will provide the framework and direction for students to put their skills and abilities into practice. Through the philosophical chairs, students will be practicing by analyzing and evaluating debate skills by taking a stance on the refugee crisis. As

they reflect and compose their own perspectives, they will be achieving higher levels of learning through Bloom's Taxonomy.

John Dewey has outlined the experiential learning process stating that we "learn from experience, and from books or the sayings of others only as they are related to experience, are not mere phrases" (Dewey, 1930). The images that students will be analyzing are not photos that they would have been normally exposed to. The experiences that are showcased throughout the images will give perspective on the refugee crisis. Students will be learning by analyzing the experiences that are portrayed through the visual texts. Students will reflect on their own thoughts and feelings towards the image, they will be constructing a narrative within the scope of social activism pertaining to empathy, acceptance, and tolerance of refugees.

There are two specific formative assessments that will be utilized within this thematic unit. The first formative assessment is the creation of a poem in which students exemplify their understanding of empathy in relation to the plight of a refugee by persuasively applying evidence from the anchor text and other various sources. The second formative assessment is the writing of two to three analytical paragraphs in which students reflect upon their individual experiences from participating in the close reading of visual texts that relate to the topic of refugees. These formative assessments connect to the goals of our unit in that they align with the North Carolina Extended Content Standards for English Language Arts (specifically, RL.8.3 – Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision; W.8.1 – Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence). Additionally, students are meeting the goals by examining at primary and secondary sources through a multimodal lens. Ultimately, these formative assessments will aid

the students in their understanding of refugees and the refugee crisis, as well as help them in understanding the meaning of the refugee plight.

The summative assessment for this thematic unit is a project-based learning assignment that helps to culminate the student's understanding and meaning of a refugee. This project consists of students creating a modern-day opinion piece for a newspaper. In this piece, students will be writing two editorial components. Students will be required to persuasively write to an audience about the different stances of the modern-day refugee crisis (i.e. students will write from a pro-refugee stance for one component and from an anti-refugee stance for the other). After completing the two editorials for differing sides, students will craft a separate conclusive take-away piece (one to two paragraphs) in which they discuss their personal position on the crisis as well as include two to three pieces of evidence in support of their stance. This assessment helps the student to develop empathy and awareness about being a refugee and the situations they go through.

Chances of opposition to this unit are high. Because of the current global political climate, students will have varying opinions in regard to refugees. In most cases, these opinions are formed from household environments and exposure to specific media sources. Students may reject wanting to share their thoughts and opinions. Or the opposite may happen where students are opinionated one way or the other. This can create a hostile classroom environment that should be monitored and controlled at all times. The images that students will be exposed to through the reading activity lesson are graphic in nature and students should be warned about their content. The material is school appropriate so it should not warrant a permission slip from parent/guardians, however, students should be warned that the nature of these images may make

them uncomfortable. If they feel uneasy about an image, they should choose another image to analyze.

A potential argument against this unit is that it should not be a focus within the classroom and that students will be unable to contribute to either side of the refugee crisis. This unit will expose students to a current global issue. The lessons will scaffold student learning by having them critically analyze and take a stance on the refugee crisis. The lasting benefit to these lessons will aid student empathy, acceptance, and tolerance with an understanding of the global concern around refugees. Because of the technological components of this lesson, there may be limitations with student involvement. Access to devices with the internet may be limited by the school and unavailable to students after school hours. We have dedicated an adequate amount of class time and been granted access to the computer lab in order for students to complete their assignments.

Overall, the lessons within this unit introduce chalk talks, philosophical chairs, and image analyses activities. These activities have been created to educate, inform, and take an evidence-based stance on social activism surrounding the refugee crisis. Because of the differing thoughts and opinions that students will bring into discussion, the teacher must retain a respectful classroom environment. This will be practiced through the chalk talk and philosophical chairs activities. Students will be able to listen to others opinions while formulating their own. These lessons have been built around a social issue that has and currently does affect our world. It is culturally relevant for students, even though they may believe that it doesn't affect them.

References

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