

Resilience: inspiration from Iranian asylum seekers



The situation of asylum seekers is very controversial in the UK at the moment. As a teacher and school, we have to be careful not to influence our pupils politically or with our own personal opinions. However, it is our role to educate our pupils beyond the curriculum and to encourage them to be aware of wider issues in society. With this in mind I wanted to give an assembly for Lower 5 upwards about how I have been inspired, educated, frustrated and indignant through getting to know a group of Iranian asylum seekers.

It started in December 2019 when 11 asylum seekers from Iran turned up at the coffee shop where I volunteer at Wetherby Methodist Church. They had been forced out of a hotel in Leeds as protests and violence against them had made it unsafe and they had to be moved. I have lived in various countries and have always been grateful when people have welcomed me into their lives and homes. Getting to know people from different cultures and backgrounds is incredibly enriching. So my husband and I invited them to our house for a meal and it has been a privilege ever since to become their friend and support where possible. I told our pupils about how inspired I have been, witnessing the resilience they have shown having to go through the immigration system, not knowing where and when they would be moved, living on £37.50 a week, being separated from their partners and children still in Iran.

Mehdi had to flee Iran after being imprisoned and tortured for taking part in a student protest (he didn't even know what for, he just went because a friend asked him). He managed to reach the UK but was stuck in the immigration system for 9 years before finally being granted leave to remain in 2021.

There was a happy ending for all of my Iranian friends as they were granted asylum, their families have joined them and now they are working in different parts of the UK. As I explained to the pupils, this is a great example of how you can overcome difficulties with the right attitude, not giving up and, even if you are not naturally proactive, you can find the right support to help you: a lesson in resilience for us all.

High School & Sixth Form

My second point was to educate our pupils about some misinformation surrounding the debate about asylum seekers. We should all get our facts right:

- seeking refuge in a safe country is a fundamental human right (Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 14)
- asylum seekers are not allowed to work
- 75 % of all asylum claims are granted after the first hearing, more after appeals. They are therefore legitimate claims
- very few asylum seekers are able to reach the UK legally as, by definition, they are fleeing their own country and cannot access a visa or other entry requirements
- the UN Refugee agency are “profoundly concerned” about the UK government’s new illegal Migration bill as it effectively “amounts to an asylum ban”.

Finally, I urged our pupils to think about the world beyond their everyday life and asked them two questions: What do you care about? What makes you indignant and angry?

If they feel strongly about something, they can do something about it and I hope that we can form a social action group as a platform to support their views and concerns. This started when I invited them to come to the library at lunchtime and find out more about petitions relating to a variety of issues. Above are some pupils signing an Amnesty International petition about women’s rights in Afghanistan.

Mrs Fiona Wilson

<https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/627779>



Petition: Increase staffing to reduce waiting times for Asylum seeker claims

We want the Government to increase staffing for processing asylum applications to shorten waiting times for refugees. Shortening waiting times should mean less is spent supporting asylum seekers for accommodation and subsistence.

petition.parliament.uk



Stand with women & girls in Afghanistan

Afghan women & girls are full of courage. It's time to act alongside them. Join me in taking action to demand the UK government consult and listen to women's organisations in Afghanistan + provide safe passage for Afghan women & girls seeking asylum

www.amnesty.org.uk