

HISTORY TOPICS THROUGH DRAMA

Evacuees WW2 Drama lesson and follow up activities © Lorraine S Harrison

NB You will need use of a cleared space for the drama activity, but the other activities can take place in a classroom.

Preparatory writing activity for the drama

- **Background info and reading (fiction & non-fiction)** - Explain to the children that the forthcoming drama lesson and other activities will help them learn more about evacuees in the Second World War. Children will need some brief background on evacuees before the drama begins. Novels such as *Letters from The Lighthouse* by Emma Carroll and *Goodnight Mr Tom* by Michelle Magorian can be read alongside this work or referred to beforehand.
- **The Contract** - Ask the children if, during the drama, they will to take on the roles of children from a City school, who are to be evacuated to a place called Rington-on-Sea during the war.
- **Role cards** - Ask each child to write a role card for themselves. They should include details such as name, street, family information, any pets. Talk about games they may have played and ask them to choose a favourite game for their role.
- Talk about what things the evacuees were asked to pack in their small bags and what they were not allowed to take. Then ask the children to decide on one small item their role will take with them, to remind them of home. Provide a few possibilities such as a photo of a family member or a pet, a favourite book or toy belonging to them or to someone they love, an inexpensive item of jewellery given to them by the family etc. Each child can sketch their item on their role card or elsewhere and record why it is important to them.

DRAMA ACTIVITY

Building belief

- **Dramatic play** - Ask the children to imagine the hall is a playground in their city school. It had been partly destroyed by a bomb the week before, so they have to play games that are suited to a small area such as skipping, marbles, throwing a small ball to each other, spinning tops etc.
- Working in pairs or threes, ask each group to decide on a game to play that they can mime for the drama. Then ask children to take up a frozen position in the imaginary playground as if they were about to start their games.
- On the word *Action* from you, the playground will come alive. Children mime the games but can talk as if they were really there. They should do this until you stop it by the words *Freeze and relax*. Let this activity run for as long as the children are engaged or just a few minutes.
- **(Optional)** Ask half the class to demonstrate their games to the other half who try to guess what they are. Then swap over so the other half demonstrates.

- **Deepening the drama-** Explain that, on the word *Action* from yourself, every child should find a space on their own in the room. Explain that this space will represent their bedroom on the day they left home as an evacuee.
- Demonstrate how you would like them to mime lifting a small bag down from the top of a tall cupboard or wardrobe and then pack it with a few things, including the item that will remind them of home. Stress that they are to do this in silence as they are alone in their rooms. However, when they have packed their bags, they should make their way to the station, where they will meet their friends.
- Designate an area of the room to represent the station.
- Explain that when they get to the station they should talk to each other about what they have packed and what they are feeling as they wait for the train to take them away. When they have finished talking they should just stand and wait for the train. Warn them that you will stop the drama at some point during the talking, by saying the word *Freeze*.
- Let this activity continue for a few minutes to allow all children some opportunity to talk to someone else at the imaginary station. Stop as soon as a few begin to lose concentration.

Improvisation/ script writing

Arrange the children to sit on the floor in 4s (2 facing 2) as if they were in small compartments on the train. Arrange the compartments in 2 rows, to create an imaginary corridor separating the 2 rows. There should be enough space for you to walk between the rows. Groups in each row should sit back to back without touching each other, to give the illusion of a series of separate compartments. (Alternatively, this could be carried out back in the classroom using chairs)

- Tell the children that the drama will start again as if the evacuees were about an hour into the train journey. The evacuees have waved goodbye to their families and are now beginning to think and talk about what lies ahead.
- Explain that on the word *Action* the conversations on the train will come to life as the evacuees in each compartment talk to each other about what they are thinking and feeling.
- In preparation for these conversations, ask the children for some suggestions about what they might say as evacuees. Add some ideas of your own if necessary.
- Allow the children one minute in silence to decide what they will say when the drama comes to life. Ask them to keep this to themselves for now and fold their arms when they have thought of something.
- When most children are ready, bring the train to life. When most children have finished talking, stop the drama using the word *Freeze*.
- **Polished improvisation** - Invite the children to polish/ rework their conversations to make a short scene or a play. The scene should only last between 1-2 minutes.
- Give them following rules before they begin: ensure that everyone has a chance to speak / take turns in speaking / speak clearly and loud enough for others to hear/ avoid physical contact or bad language or anything that may upset others.
- Allow a few minutes for children to prepare their improvisations and give assistance where required.
- Conduct a final rehearsal with all groups talking simultaneously on a given signal of *Action*. Groups should fold arms and sit in silence until others have finished, but stop everyone after 2 minutes.
- **Spotlighting** - Explain that on the word *Action*, you will walk down the aisle between the imaginary compartments as if you were a railway guard listening in to the evacuees' conversations. As you stop and face each compartment in turn, that will be their signal to start to talk. Everyone else must remain silent unless it is their turn. Alternatively, ask groups to come to the front of the class to perform.
- **Scriptwriting** - These short 1-2 minute improvisations can be edited and written down as scripted pieces during a later lesson if appropriate.

Freeze-frame activity

Organise a freeze frame of the moment when one of the evacuees arrives at their new home. Use thought bubbles to bring out the feelings of all the people, including the billeting officer and the hosts.

The first page of *Goodnight Mr Tom* by Michelle Magorian provides a suitable moment for a freeze-frame.

Writing in role/ Mantle of the Expert

Ask the children to imagine they are now living with their new families and attending Rington school. Read the children the following letter from their school friends at City School.

It is dated 1940 and is addressed to

The new evacuees from City School, now attending Rington-on-Sea Elementary School

Dear all

We are all wondering how you are getting on with your new families in Rington-on-Sea. The bombing has got worse since you left here and some of our parents who did not want us to be evacuated are beginning to change their minds. We need to know what it is like to be evacuated, as we are not sure whether to ask our parents if we can be evacuated or not. We know that we could be sent anywhere and will probably not be billeted near you all, but if you tell us what it has been like for you so far, it will give us some idea. Please write back.

You can also help us settle some arguments about a few things.

Some children say they don't want to be evacuated because they will have to leave their pets behind, but others think you can take small pets with you. What is the rule?

We have been told that we can only take a small case if we are evacuated and that we may have to split up from our brothers and sisters. Some don't want to go if they can't be with their family, but surely the billeting officer will try to keep brothers and sisters together. Are you all with your families or have some been split up?

Some of us are afraid of being bullied at a new school, because we will speak with a different accent. Some of us are also worried about our poor clothes. Do the village school children laugh at you or call you names? Do the teachers pick on you or are they friendly?

Grown-ups tell us that it's really nice in the country and by the sea. They say you can see animals in the fields and play outside without any fear of bombs falling. It would be good to sleep in a proper bed again. We have had many nights sleeping in the shelters. One of our friends had to go to a room right underneath the public baths because their shelter was not safe. She cried all night for fear that a bomb would bring the swimming pool water down on them all.

What are your families like that you live with? We are scared that we may have to eat horrible things or, worse still, not be given enough to eat. What is the food like in the countryside?

Just one last thing we would all like to know and we hope it doesn't upset you.

Do you ever wonder what might happen if your old house here in the city gets bombed and you end up an orphan? Our teachers say that if we become orphans at least we will still be alive if we are evacuated to the countryside.

We just don't know what to think.

We don't know if we want to ask to be evacuated or not.

Please write back to help us and our parents decide what to do.

You can send your letters to Miss Hunt, the new headmistress at City School.

She is very strict but quite kind and has agreed to let us read your letters at school.

We hope to hear from you very soon.

Very best wishes

From your old friends left behind at the City school

- Out of role, discuss what questions are contained in the letter from the City school friends.
- In order to prepare for the responses to the letter, use historical resources to research some of the experiences of real life evacuees.
- Then ask the children to create some appropriate experiences for their role, based on the research. They should use this to write in role back to their friends. Children can write individual letters in reply or they can write in pairs. Alternatively, a letter can be produced during shared writing by groups or by the whole class.
- Place the letters in an envelope for Miss Hunt, addressed to the school in Rington-on-Sea. Then some time afterwards, write a letter as if it is from Miss Hunt or from one of the children, thanking them for their help. Give some idea of the proportion of those children who decided they wanted to be evacuated as a result of the letters. This may depend on what your children's letters say or you may want to decide for yourself what it would be.

Poetry/ reflection /display

Children may like to write short poems based on the items they took with them to remind them of home, when they were playing the parts of evacuees.

These can be displayed on the wall inside outlines of train carriages, under the heading Bags Full of Memories.

Reflection

- Talk about the fact that this has been imaginary and discuss how close they think the drama was to what it was really like – research real life letters to and from evacuees and other sources to inform the discussion.
- Discuss whether this kind of experience still happens today and if so where and why and how similar is it?