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# Teaching Empathy for a Better World

**Francesca Sanna**

My first picture book, *The Journey*, was published in 2016 (Flying Eye Books). It tells the story of a family and the journey they embark on when their home becomes unsafe. As I explain in a note at the end of the book, I was inspired by the many displaced families I spoke with at a refugee center in Italy. I spoke to numerous different families that travelled from many varied, faraway places to find a safe place. Part of my research even included historical documents about immigration from the early 1900s. I didn't want *The Journey* to be a specific account; I wanted it to convey the idea that everyone has the right to have a safe place to live. For this reason, in the book I give as little information as possible about where or when the story is set.

I began to work on *The Journey* because I am from Italy, where migrant

and refugee issues have been in the media for a significant part of my life. I've always found discussions about the topic to lack empathy. I believe empathy and understanding are of great importance when dealing with such a complex topic, especially when it includes so much human tragedy. Politicians and people in power too often focus on abstract statistics about the number of people and monetary costs, while rarely trying to understand what it actually means to be so desperate to leave everything behind and embark on these very risky journeys to reach our shores.

In recent years, as I left Italy to study abroad and, later, to work, my focus expanded to other parts of Europe and the rest of the world. It wasn't difficult to see that this lack of empathy was not an exclusively Italian propensity.

In the debate about immigration, it is often forgotten that the right to have a safe place to live is a human right—that human rights belong to everyone, and are not just for citizens of a certain country. In my opinion, empathy can truly help remind us of this reality, and empathy can shed light on the human dimension behind the plight of refugees.

Since the book has come out, I've had the pleasure of helping to facilitate, in conjunction with libraries and schools, discussions and workshops with children about these topics. I have been delighted to meet a supportive community of librarians and teachers who are committed to sharing this message of empathy and understanding.

During these workshops, readings and Q&A sessions, I started working on activities that outlined and explained the message of the book

and helped children connect with it. Empathy is quite a cryptic word for children, but working with it as an applied concept is always easier than expected.

Usually I start by asking them to think about the question “What if this was my story?” I then ask the children to draw a list of important things that they would bring with them if they had to undertake a difficult journey. I ask children to think about how the characters in *The Journey* feel, and ask them to write or draw the end of the story. (In the book the fate of the family remains a mystery.)

Every classroom is different. Many times, I have found myself talking in a classroom that includes kids whose relatives have immigrated. In some countries, I visited classrooms containing two or three children who had arrived as refugees. In other cases, I worked with classes where all the children had come from foreign countries and were required to spend half of their school time in so-called “integration classes” to learn the new language and about the new culture.

I was particularly inspired by these visits, as well as by the use of empathy to create an emotional tool to help share the experiences of children who had left their home country and were seeking a new life in a new place. Working with these children gave me insight into the very personal realities of families fleeing countries all over the world.

In the classes where everyone had come from different countries, we spoke about the main problems people in their situation have to face when they move to a new place: they don't understand what is happening around them; they are overwhelmed by all the new things at once; and they miss their old lives. This discussion helped to validate the students' feelings and work towards solutions.



In less diverse classrooms where only a few children had come from other countries and did not yet speak the language well, my approach was slightly different. First, I created connections by highlighting what the children have in common, despite their cultural or linguistic differences. I did this by asking them to write or draw a map of who they are by illustrating what they like and what they don't. When you see all the maps together side-by-side, you find so many common likes and dislikes! Sometimes I encourage students to work in pairs and ask each other questions about things they don't know about each other. Then each student uses the answers to build a written description or a portrait of the other. This exercise creates understanding of what we have in common rather than what we

don't, and focuses on how the other person might feel, and how we may have felt the same way in a similar situation. Universal sentiments that always appear are the feeling of being rejected by a group and the fear of not being accepted.

Over the past few years I have visited many schools and libraries in different countries and have spoken to numerous children about their lives and experiences. One question I often pose to children is "What was the scariest time in your life?" and one of the most popular answers is "the first day at school." The fear that students felt on their first day of school was something that became a uniting force in the classroom. It showed students that no matter where you come from or what your culture is, you are likely feeling the

same thing as someone completely different from you. Introducing a child to this concept of empathy, I believe, is the key to a united, globally conscious world.

With this in mind, I was inspired to work on another book, this time confronting what comes after a child has made it to a new home and is facing the challenges that must be overcome. My new picture book, *Me and My Fear* (Flying Eye Books 2018), features a young girl's new beginning in a new country and a new school. Having worked so closely with so many children in the same situation, I felt equipped to accurately represent not only the feelings of the displaced child but also the universal feelings felt by all children when confronted with new experiences. In the book "fear" is personified and easily identifiable. This concept of fear as an actual being helps children understand their feelings as tangible and changeable. I hope this new book helps impart the lessons that children have taught me about compassion and connection.

Teachers guide: <[www.amnesty.org.uk/files/exploring\\_the\\_journey\\_together.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/exploring_the_journey_together.pdf)>



**Francesca Sanna** is an Italian illustrator and graphic designer who moved to Switzerland to follow her dream to work as an illustrator. She graduated in 2015 from the Lucerne School of Art and Design with a Master of Design with focus on Illustration. *The Journey*, her first book, won the 2017 Ezra Jack Keats Book Award, The Society of Illustrators Gold Medal, and the 2017 Amnesty CILIP Honor, among others. It has received starred reviews from Publishers Weekly, Booklist, Kirkus Reviews, Shelf Awareness, School Library Journal, and The Horn Book.

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