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Integrating the Refugee Crisis into Your Curriculum

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Diversity and inclusivity. These are two core values at the heart of learning, both inside and outside of the classroom. They are also at the core of San Domenico School's mission—to uphold the values of study, reflection, service, and community.

My son is a 6th grader at [San Domenico School](#) , an independent school in northern California founded by Dominican nuns in 1850. One of the school's missions is to inspire "students to develop character and integrity and to apply academic knowledge to the challenges of the times in order to create a better world." This task is more important now than ever, and finding innovative ways for students to engage in current issues involving diversity is critical.

As the education director for the **Global Oneness Project**, I connected with the San Domenico middle school history team—Annika Osborn, Natasha McKeown, and Joanna Mueller—to share one of our recent films, [Welcome to Canada](#) , and related teacher resources. This short film highlights a young Syrian refugee, Mohammed Alsaleh, who was granted asylum in Canada. Mohammed now works to help resettle newly arrived refugees. *Welcome to Canada*, and its companion lesson plan, "[A Refugee's Story](#),"  encourages students to explore the impact of immigration as well as the themes of cultural displacement, human rights, and resilience.

The history team screened *Welcome to Canada* and discussed its relevance with regard to global events: the conflict in Syria, the refugee crisis throughout the

world, and the President's recent executive order blocking immigration from six specific nations, including Syria. They decided the film would be age-appropriate for the 7th graders, as the curriculum concentrates on the history of Islam. How might this film be used as a valuable teaching tool? I explored this question with 7th grade history teacher **Natasha McKeown**.

How are you integrating this film into your current curriculum?

Learning about the [Islamic Empire](#) is one of the California standards for social studies in 7th grade. Each year, students have more questions about Islam and how it relates to current events than they do about any other culture or time period we study. This year, I decided to turn the unit into a larger project, using the film [Welcome to Canada](#) to better understand the current debate over refugees, especially those coming from Muslim-majority countries, like Syria.

How did students respond to the film?

The film was very impactful. Students were genuinely saddened to learn what the [refugees had suffered through in Syria](#). They watched the film just days after the women's marches across the United States and the world and many were really "shocked that the government in Syria attacked the people just for protesting." Students also commented on how the story gave a human face to the refugee problem, something they could connect with beyond a number. However, they were surprised to find that the process was so long and difficult and that families were often split up. Some students commented about how inspiring the movie was. They were impressed by the fact that someone could face so many hardships and "turn that into a reason to help others."

What project will students create?

The students have been challenged to create a Public Service Announcement (PSA) about Islam that they will ultimately present to their peers and their parents. Their first goal was to [understand the causes of Islamophobia](#) in the United States and how it is negatively impacting Muslims. They are currently learning about the religion, culture, and history of Islam. In three weeks, they will present their final projects through which they educate their audience about the positive aspects of the religion and history of Islam that many might not be aware of.

In what ways did the film impact your students' thinking?

From a teaching point of view, the film really helped the students see why there is a need for our PSA project. For many of them, their motivation in presenting their final project is now to raise awareness of the situation of many refugees and to encourage people to open their hearts and neighborhoods to those coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds. As one student group directly wrote in their project-planning document after watching the documentary, "We would like our audience to know about the hardships the Muslim refugees have to go through to escape the war

and terror in their home countries. Also, we would like them to know that not all Muslim refugees are terrorists. They are just people looking for safety and a home.”

Films are multi-sensory communication tools and have the power to reach the heart. The medium can provide a human face to the challenging issues of our time. They can transport students to other cultures, providing entry points to compelling conversations and meaningful projects. Annika Osborn, 6th grade history teacher, said that [Welcome to Canada](#) can “help students empathize and understand the immigrant situation, how the Muslim community is being singled out and discriminated against.” If we can engage students with the issues of immigration and the [refugee crisis](#) through the heart, we can teach not only facts and history, but empathy—one of the most valuable skills for our future. These students are our global leaders of tomorrow.

To teach this lesson in your classroom visit [PBS LearningMedia](#) to view the documentary [Welcome to Canada](#) and download the lesson plan, “[A Refugee’s Story](#).”

To access a variety of films, lesson plans, and resources from Global Oneness Project visit their collection in [PBS LearningMedia](#) or their migration resources on [GlobalOnenessProject.org](#).

Cleary Vaughan-Lee is a mother of two middle school students and the Education Director at the Global Oneness Project, an online multimedia platform which offers free multicultural stories and accompanying curricula. The Project’s films and lessons have been featured on The New York Times, National Geographic, PBS Learning Media, and the Smithsonian. Follow her: [@cvaughanlee](#)

Natasha McKeown currently teaches World History in the Middle School at San Domenico and is also the Director of High School Advising. She has gained much first-hand experience and knowledge of many of the countries and cultures about which she teaches, having spent many years working, volunteering and traveling abroad. Follow her [@McQNhistory](#).



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