

Class act

Armed child



Summary

Photographs of children carrying weapons, apparently part of armies or informal militias, are common. They are used by news organisations and aid agencies as vivid and compelling images. They illustrate the extent of violence and militarisation in some parts of the world.

Yet the pictures are usually no more than dramatic snapshots. Viewers are seldom told the stories that lie behind them. Answers to essential questions – such as who are they, and what is happening – are left to the imagination. From a distance, imaginations may come up with interpretations that are not accurate or close to reality.

This lesson plan tries to put that right, by examining one set of photographs. What is

happening is slowly unfolded. At each stage students are invited to think about and comment on their changed understanding or perspective.

No prior knowledge is needed. It is a lesson in looking, questioning and thinking. All that is needed is provided.

It can be used in any classroom or education setting, but has been particularly developed for use with students outside the mainstream – in referral units, young offender institutions or other specialist provision.

The photographs were taken by Eric Kanalstein. We are grateful for his kind permission to use them in this format and for educational purposes.

Age group

The lesson is suitable for students aged 11-16.

Learning outcomes

- > To help students practise skills of observing and interpreting, and explore how information about context and background can alter a view.
- > To encourage students to see the value of discovering the human stories behind images.
- > To enable students to think through what is necessary to negotiate change successfully – specifically looking at when a conflict ends and what those caught up in it might need to readjust to everyday life.

Phase 1

Begin by asking students to look at a single photograph. Use the powerpoint presentation to display it digitally.



Ask students for their first instinctive response. Encourage them to say whatever they think. That could be their emotional reaction to the weapons, or their thoughts about the person pictured.

Invite and gather ideas, without commenting.

If discussion is slow, prompt with questions:

The young man is smiling. Can students imagine why? How old do they think he is? Where might he be going? Where might he have come from? He seems to be posing for the camera. Why might that be? What is he likely to be thinking?

Talk about the objects that are visible. Who might need or want to be armed in such a way? Behind the subject appears to be a shop. What might be going through the shopkeepers' minds?

Finally, try to agree a single descriptive word – an adjective – that students think sums up the picture.

It could be:

powerful, scary, sad, dangerous, weird, threatening, cheeky, cheerful, desperate, horrifying, disturbing, hard...

...whatever the group comes up with.

Try to get a single word that all the group agrees with. If not, settle on two or more alternatives.

Phase 2

Now split the group into two to do a quick task. If circumstances make this a problem, get the group to do both activities, starting with A.

Task A for the first group is:

To describe only what they can see in the photo. Ask them not to interpret or guess what is going on. They should just say, quite neutrally, what they can see.

They might approach it by describing the picture to someone who couldn't see it. Could someone, say on the other end of a phone line, sketch the picture based on what they hear? What detail would they need?

Point out that the exercise is like making a police statement or a witness giving evidence in court. You must say only what you saw, not what you think might have been happening or why.



Then bring the two groups together and ask them to share their findings. Each can comment on the other's views and pursue points of disagreement.

Try to summarise the group's thoughts and assessments of the photo. See if it matches what was said in phase 1. What information do students need to form a clearer idea of the situation in the photo?

If appropriate, use the opportunity to talk about the reasons for being objective and learning to describe things without interpreting them. Why do the police and courts want descriptions not interpretation?

Encourage students to be as accurate and precise as they can. So don't just say, he's carrying a gun. What kind of a gun – is it a rifle, an automatic assault weapon? Are those bullets round his neck, or something else?

Task B for the second group is:

To agree what they would do if they were the police or other authority who saw the young man in the photograph. What action would they take, and why? Should he be stopped? How? Ask them to say what help the police might need. What force might they use?

At some point, especially if discussion gets bogged down, show more photos, included in the powerpoint:

Optional activities

For groups that are comfortable with writing exercises, either of the tasks could be set as written work.

Also consider actually doing the exercise in task A, of asking someone who cannot see the photograph to sketch it out based on a student's description. As homework, students could find someone who hasn't seen it. The idea would be to see how accurately and meaningfully the student can convey the scene. Discuss the results.

Phase 3

Tell the group that you have more information about the picture. It is based on what the photographer said. You could just read out the following, pausing occasionally for conversation and to check understanding.

You cannot tell from these images, but it was a very crowded scene. There were hundreds of other fighters. The place is a town called Buchanan, on the coast of Liberia, a country in west Africa.

The boy pictured may well have been a fighter. But not any longer. At the time of the picture, in April 2004, he and many others were handing over their weapons. It was part of a United Nations programme to disarm all warring parties in a long civil war which ended by peace treaty the previous year.

"They were still in a strange fighting mood", says Eric Kanalstein, the photographer. "They were very proud of the weapons they were carrying. This boy was smiling, mainly because I was paying so much attention to him. He was extremely proud of how heavily armed he is. He had a large automatic weapon, strings of ammunition around his chest, and grenades on his belt. This all gave him a sense of extreme power."

There were soldiers of all ages, both male and female. Some were as young as seven years old. The photographs were taken quite early in the morning, on the first day of the disarmament process in the city of Buchanan.

The image captures some strange contrasts. The photographer says the boy's age and his smile, give a sense of warmth about him, despite the weapons. Viewers are drawn into the image before they have had chance to absorb the horror it represents.

Discuss what students make of that. Has any of it changed their views? Discuss how and why.

Remind students what action they said they would take if they were the police or other

authority (in task B of phase 2). Would they revise that now? How?

Talk about what might have happened next. What would a young man like that want or need once he had handed in those weapons? Assuming he had been a fighter in the civil war, how would he begin to live life again in peacetime?

Discuss how the fighting might have disrupted the young man's life. List things he might have missed - going to school, learning a family trade or other skills. How will his relationships with friends and family have been affected? What might he think of them now – and what might they think of him?

Explore what he might have gained from his time with the fighting forces. Might he have greater confidence, status, skills and knowledge? Is he likely to have made lasting friendships? How worthwhile are those gains likely to be in the future?

Invite students to imagine what the young man might be looking forward to. Although Liberia is a very different place from the UK, people's hopes and aspirations throughout the world are remarkably similar. Assume that he wanted a job, secure income, friends to hang around with, meaningful relationships, a place to live and a chance to learn and explore new things. What challenges might he face in achieving these?

Ask students to make a list of what they think could be useful to this young man, and the other young ex-fighters. Use a whiteboard or flipchart to record them.

Then compare with the help the fighters actually received, as described by the photographer:

After the weapons were taken away by the UN military component, the fighters were interviewed and asked questions concerning the duration of the time they fought, their rank, where they fought, and so on.

They were taken to disarmament camps, where they would stay for a week. There they

were taught basic vocational skills such as carpentry, welding, or sewing.

They were provided with three meals a day.

They had access to medical treatment and psychiatric counselling if required.

When they left the rehabilitation camp they were given some cash, some equipment such as cooking pots, kettles and lanterns. They also had foodstuffs, including rice and oils.

Compare the lists. Did students cover most things? What did they miss? What was on their list that wasn't provided by the United Nations? What might explain the omissions or differences?

Further exploration

Here are some ideas for building on this project, if it turns out to have interested students.

- > Explore what people need when they leave any place. This could be practical and directly relevant to the students' own lives, drawing on their own experience or of those they know well. Or it could be more imaginative, a task in thinking through how people might feel. Either way, instances such as leaving care, or leaving an institution such as hospital, prison, university or a marriage could be fruitful.
- > Look at child soldier pictures from other organisations – news media or aid agencies. Ask students what they are there for. What effect do they have? What might the intention have been? Invite students to contact the organisations for more information about the backgrounds and context of pictures they publish. What conclusions do students draw if the organisations cannot say much?
- > It is several years since the photographs in Liberia were taken – in April 2004. Invite students to trace possible routes of what might have happened to the young man. Might he be with his family? Learnt a trade and got a job? Discuss too the different life choices facing students now. Do they know where they will be in four years' time? What will influence their life choices?

Optional activity

Military people sometimes point out that it is a relatively straightforward thing to win a war. But winning the peace is far more complex and difficult. Discuss what "winning the peace" means. How does a society and the people in it go from a state of warfare to normality?

And finally, go back to the adjective that students agreed summed up the picture in phase 1. Have they had their choice confirmed? Or would they change it? If so, to what?

Curriculum links

England

Key stage 3 and 4 Citizenship

- > **1f** the work of community-based, national and international voluntary groups
- > **1g** the importance of resolving conflict fairly
- > **2a** think about topical political, spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues, problems and events by analysing information and its sources, including ICT-based sources
- > **2b** justify orally and in writing a personal opinion about such issues, problems or events
- > **2c** contribute to group and exploratory class discussions, and take part in debates
- > **3a** use their imagination to consider other people's experiences and be able to think about, express and explain views that are not their own

Northern Ireland

Key stage 3 and 4 Local and Global Citizenship

- > Diversity and Inclusion – investigate how and why conflict, including prejudice, stereotyping, sectarianism and racism may arise in the community. Investigate ways of managing conflict and promoting community relations, reconciliation
- > Human Rights and Social Responsibility – investigate why it is important to uphold human rights standards in modern democratic societies, including meeting basic needs, protecting individuals, groups of people
- > Human Rights and Social Responsibility – investigate the principles of social responsibility and the role of individuals, society and government in promoting these, for example, in relation to addressing the issues raised across the key concepts
- > Equality and Social Justice – explore the work of inter-governmental, governmental and non governmental organisations (NGO) which aim to promote equality and social justice, for example, the work of the United Nations, the Equality Commission for N. Ireland, local and global development agencies etc.
- > Research and manage information to investigate citizenship issues, including number and statistics where appropriate, using the internet, newspapers, television, texts and ICT based sources
- > Investigate citizenship issues, explore problems, undertake action projects, make informed decisions

Scotland

Education for citizenship

- > Contemporary local and global issues, paying regard to available evidence, and to a range of ideas and interpretations of their significance
- > Opportunities for individuals and voluntary groups to bring about social and environmental change, and the values on which such endeavours are based
- > People's material and spiritual needs and wants and the implications of these for issues such as environmental sustainability and social justice
- > The causes of conflict and possible approaches to resolving it, recognising that controversy is normal in society and sometimes has beneficial effects
- > Contribute to discussions and debate in ways that are assertive and, at the same time, attentive to and respectful of others' contributions
- > Develop informed and reasoned opinions about political, economic, social and environmental issues
- > Respond in imaginative ways to social, moral and political dilemmas and challenges

Wales

Key stage 3 PSE

- > Social aspect – understand cultural differences and recognise expressions of prejudice and stereotyping.
- > Community aspect – understand the nature of local, national and international communities with reference to cultural diversity, justice, law and order and interdependence.
- > Have respect for themselves and others.
- > Critically evaluate others' viewpoints and messages from the media.
- > Empathise with others' experiences and feelings.

Key stage 4 PSE

- > Social aspect – recognise and know how to challenge expressions of prejudice and stereotyping.
- > Community aspect – have a developing global awareness of contemporary issues and events including human rights and sustainable development.
- > Appreciate, reflect on and critically evaluate another person's point of view.

This class act is part of the humanitarian education programme produced by the British Red Cross. Teachers and other educators are free to use it, copy it and circulate it for their work. Please always include this notice and the contact details below.

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