

Resource 9

Teacher in role - the campaign for children's rights

The aim of this in role improvisation is to give pupils the opportunity to discuss the conditions many children endured in 1843. The teacher is in role as someone campaigning for better conditions for children and for the creation of universal education.

The last major child labour legislation - The Althorp Act - had been passed in 1833 but enforcement was sporadic and child labour continued. There followed many attempts to introduce new legislation offering children better protection but these failed to pass in parliament. A report was commissioned in 1840 which provides many verbatim accounts from working children. We have set this moment in the drama in 1843 after evidence in the report on child labour has been gathered and before the next major piece of legislation will be passed in 1844.

This role play aims to help pupils understand this very different period in history and help them articulate their thoughts and feelings about children's rights.

This outline script gives suggestions for you to get started. The more research you do about prevailing attitudes at the time will help to flesh out this in-role improvisation. Remember you can come out of role at any point to discuss the issues that have been raised by your improvisation and identify where you might want to do further research.

Start by outlining why you are holding the meeting. You could say something like:

We welcome you to this meeting today where we are calling for changes to the laws around child labour. At present child labour laws after the Althorp Act of 1833 limit children aged 9 to 12 to no more than 48 hours per week. And prevent children under the age of nine working in the mills.

But we know that companies are still employing much younger children and there are very few inspectors who are checking up on the hundreds of mills and mines across the country. The owners know they can get away with still employing young children.

We know that it suits the mill and mine owners to use children, who are physically smaller and nimble-fingered, to do jobs that adults find difficult.

But children should not be allowed to work. They should be allowed a childhood to play and learn and grow.

Many of the parents and guardians we know live in terrible poverty and rely on the children's wages to keep their heads above water and avoid the workhouse. But there must be a different solution.

The Royal Commission report into Child Labour tells of the terrible conditions children still endure. Particularly in the coal mines, where there is less regulation. *[You could read accounts from the report - see **Resource 3**]*

The Althorp Act was also meant to make sure that children who work also attend school regularly. Many children still don't have access to an education, or if they do it is only one day a week at a Ragged School or one provided by the church.

Go on to ask questions of the children in role:

We want to hear from any of our audience who have experience of working in our factories, mines or cotton mills.

What are your thoughts?

Is there anyone here who has experience that they can tell us about?

What are / were conditions like?

Why did you need to work?

What kinds of jobs did you do?

What were conditions like? What were the dangers and how did you cope with the work?

Did your parents or carers consider sending you to school instead?

Do you still work in the mills or mines?

Where do you work now?

What are conditions like in your new employment?

Can you tell me about children in your family who still work in the mills and the mines?

What are your concerns for them?

Why do they need to work?

Would they like to go to school if they have the opportunity?

Introduce other perspectives:

[You could ask another teacher or TA to take on the role of someone who doesn't think the laws should be changed. Or, as the person leading the meeting, you could voice some of the opposition's arguments]

What is the point of those children going to school? They need to prepare for work. Their future is in the mines and the mills. They don't need to learn to read and write.

Finish the meeting by summing up the contributions to the debate and outlining what you will be demanding in the next legislation. Ask the meeting what else people could be called on to do to make a difference:

We call on parliament for legislation to make provision for education for all children, not just those whose families can afford it. Legislation that will:

- limit the age at which children can start work
- limit the hours a 9-year-old and above child can work to 10 hours a day
- provide schooling for all children.

When you have completed the meeting come out of role and discuss the changes that have been made to legislation in relation to child labour and education. For example:

The 1844 Factory Act states that:

- children aged 9 to 13 must work no more than 9 hours without a lunch break
- dangerous machinery must be fenced off
- accidental death must be reported and investigated.

1874 Factories Act:

- It is only in 1874 - thirty years later - that the hours are reduced to 10 per day
- The minimum age of working is raised from 9 to 10.

1878 Factory and Workshop Act:

- Requires all children aged 5 to 14 to attend school
- Children aged 10 to 14 can only work if they also attend school six half-days a week.

1880

- School is made compulsory for children aged 5 to 10. Later the leaving age is raised to 13.

1901 Factory and Workshop Act:

- The minimum working age is raised to 12.