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The Boy Who Speaks in Numbers is a darkly satiric account of childhood in times of war. Set in Sri Lanka, the events it narrates could equally happen elsewhere — in all places where human deaths are reduced to numbers and guns do not differentiate between adults and children. The book can be well used to initiate discussions on the horror as well as pity of war, the plight of civilians caught between warring groups, and most important the cruel fate that awaits young people separated from their families and loved ones.

To ease the reader into a text that is disturbing as well as deeply humane, a set of planned activities can prove useful. Adults working with young people, including educators in community forums, student groups and in the classroom may do the following:

TALK ABOUT

- War and conflict in contemporary times, and **encourage young people to review world news over the last month and identify areas of current conflict** — in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. Ask them to address the following questions:
 - a) Is the conflict within countries or between two countries?
 - b) Is it clear who is fighting whom?
 - c) What reasons are offered for the conflicts having erupted.
 - d) Are there people or groups in any of these countries or places that are opposed to war?
- **Images of war, including photographs, video footage, illustrations and art.** Get them to ask questions about images to do with war and violence: which images speak to us? Which images make us turn away? **Are there images that are unusual and which tell us things we don't usually connect with war?** If so, what are they?
- The conflict in Sri Lanka, especially **who is fighting whom** and how it all started and ended. Follow this up with a **discussion on writings about conflict**, especially those featuring young people and children.
- **The Diary of Anne Frank** — which some young people are likely to have read — and **on what children experience** and how they express their fear or anxiety or happiness in such situations.
- The illustrations in the novel and **get children to 'read' these images;** never mind if they have not read the novel.
- *The Boy Who Speaks in Numbers* as a book about **conflict viewed through the eyes of a child with autism**, or a child that is differently abled. Why has the author chosen to make such a child his chief character? Does a differently abled child see **things that many of us fail to notice?** If so, what could these be, in a situation of war and violence?



ACTIVITY

Once readers are familiar with the book, you can offer them a set of exercises that will help them grasp its content better.

- Make a list of all the **phrases used in the book** to describe and assign roles to the many characters, such as Constantly Complaining Cow, Important Aunty, Mad Uncle and so on. **Why has the author used these names rather than actual ones?** Are there other books where authors have done this? What effect is created or achieved by this way of naming characters?
- Compile **all references to numbers** in the book, and discuss what they tell us about war, violence and death.
- Does the novel make evident who is fighting whom? Identify sentences and paragraphs that refer to **different sides** in the war — and discuss what distinguishes one from the other.
- Identify **5 features of life in refugee camps** as described in the novel. Go on to read the **UN Convention on refugee rights** and discuss what rights are being respected / violated.

Look over the use of illustrations in the book: if you are to illustrate the book, which sections would you choose to illustrate and why?