

Dwelling in Positivity: using creative practices to help separated migrant children to thrive during Covid-19.

Introduction

In this second working paper from our project, *Supporting separated migrant children to thrive during Covid 19*, funded by ESRC under its ‘responses to Covid’ call, we are going to focus on stage two of the project, the creative intervention. We will describe: the rationale for including a creative intervention; how the intervention was set up and managed; the challenges we faced; and the benefits it brought. The entire project was designed to be conducted online, and this included the creative intervention. We title the paper, ‘Dwelling in positivity’ as it is our aim to highlight the benefits of the intervention to the young people, and also the researchers, and to reflect on lessons learnt from the project so far.

Context

As has been well documented, 2-3,000 separated migrant children arrive in the UK each year (Eurostat, 2020). While the numbers have reduced during the Covid pandemic, they have not stopped. Indeed, current developments, as the imminent humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2021) may lead to increasing numbers of children on the move, including separated minors. In Scotland, there are approximately 150 children, who fit the definition provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1997):

Separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

When they arrive in Scotland, separated migrant children are looked after by local authorities, accommodated by social services, usually under s25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, and provided with support under national and international obligations. They should also be referred to the Scottish Guardianship Service, which provides independent help and advocacy. The support and expertise for working with separated children varies across

Scotland as arrivals are generally located in urban areas and rural areas may not always be as well-resourced (Rigby et al 2018).

Separated children are a diverse group, and previous research highlights that many young people's personal strengths, skills and the connections they forge with social networks and services enable them to build their lives and thrive in the UK (see Ganassin and Johnstone Young, 2020). The pandemic created disruptions to young people's connections with the people, places and organisations that make up these support systems, including their education. Therefore, our intervention aimed to provide both educational and social opportunities as well as the chance to create an artefact as a positive outcome of lockdown.

Learning English

For most migrant children, whether they are separated or not, learning English is a top priority. Strong English language skills allow them access to both education and work, should they be granted leave to remain. While their applications are being processed, and even when leave to remain has been granted, local authorities in Scotland provide classes in English for speakers of other languages (from here, ESOL) in colleges of further education and other institutions, which English language tutors report are enthusiastically well attended by the young people (see [Working Paper 1](#)). However, once the pandemic took hold, most learning in the UK, including Scotland, went online. Not only were fewer hours of input provided by the institutions (and input is a central factor in language acquisition (e.g. Gass, 1997)), informal opportunities to develop language skills, in, for example, café chat and extra curricula activities, came to a halt. As a result, for extended stretches of time, young people had reduced access to quality English language classes and few opportunities to develop informal language skills. Central to our research design, therefore, was the opportunity for young people to work on their English in an informal setting (e.g. Chik, 2020), to develop their basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) (Cummins, 1997).

We also wanted to give the young people an opportunity to do something creative because of the benefits of creative practice to mental health. To this we now turn.

Creative Practices

Young people who migrate to the UK from countries in the ‘Global South’ (see Pennycook and Makoni, 2020, for a discussion of the term) may have experienced trauma. Some are fleeing from war or persecution and others from family issues or poverty, to name but a few causes of migration (Hanson and Oliver-Smith, 2019). All have made an often harrowing trip across continents in hazardous conditions, and most separated migrant children have made the journey unaccompanied by an adult care-giver. The asylum process can induce further stress once they are in the UK and some can suffer from mental health conditions resulting from their experiences. Medical support is available and some receive clinical interventions. However, it is also the case that many young people manage their experiences well, adapting quickly and enthusiastically to their new environments. Recent research suggests that most young people have a complex response to their migration, experiencing trauma and other negative symptoms at the same time as displaying resilience and positivity to those with whom they interact. As Bilotta and Denov (2018) state, young people are often *‘resourceful and determined in particular aspects of their lives, while simultaneously being vulnerable in others’* (p. 1576).

Nonetheless, the pandemic was almost certainly an added cause of stress for these young people. Away from family and friends, and confined, like everyone, to their homes (often supported accommodation or residential care), the young people reported in interviews in stage 1 of our project that, like many young people in Scotland, they were ‘bored’ and ‘lonely’.

Creative practice has been shown to reduce stress (Zimmerman and Manglesdorf, 2020), develop positive outlooks (Quaglietti, 2020) and counteract trauma (Desmond, Kindsvatter, Stahl and Smith, 2015). We therefore hoped that our creative intervention would provide additional support to young people to thrive linguistically, socially and emotionally during the pandemic.

Setting up the creative intervention

Given the imperative to outline a research design in research applications, we needed to plan in advance how we thought a creative intervention would work in an online space in conditions made uncertain by the global pandemic and the new- to all- ways of working

remotely. We also had to consider how we would integrate language learning into the activities as there was little previous research to guide us. Inevitably, the original design altered somewhat as the intervention proceeded, but the focus on providing young people with the opportunity to work on a project of their choosing over 4-6 weeks (6 x 1 hour sessions) with a bone fide artist, alone or in small groups, and with English language support, remained.

Recruitment

The young people were recruited through the [Scottish Guardianship Service](#) (SGS), which issued an open call and then explained to individuals what they would be doing should they join the creative intervention. Twelve had already taken part in stage 1 of the project (see [Working Paper 1](#)) and a further two joined through this route. They were given an information sheet about the project and consent form, which was translated into Arabic, Sorani Kurdish and Vietnamese for those who needed it. Ethical issues were explained orally, with a translator where needed, and we asked permission for the sessions to be audio recorded, and for the artefacts they produced to be available for others to see on the project website, as long as individuals could not be identified from the work.

Members of the research team had an existing relationship with the [Hands Up Project](#) (HUP), a charity which specialises in promoting language learning through online storytelling and drama. We approached HUP to be project partners and asked if they could broaden their creative focus from remote theatre and storytelling to include painting/drawing, photography and rap, which we knew from preliminary discussions with SGS to be attractive to the separated young people. They did so, engaging Malak Mattar (artist/painter), Paulina Czyż (photographer), Carl Guifo Guifo (rapper) and Katrice Horsley (storyteller).

Project preparation

We were aware that technology poverty had been affecting educational access across the UK (see Coleman, 2021); this was also the case for a number of our young people who had thus far been accessing online lessons on their phones. We therefore purchased and distributed

tablets to all the young people. We then held training sessions for the young people to show them how to use the tablets.

To ensure the young people were able to choose whether to do drawing, storytelling, rap or photography (or indeed a combination of different activities if feasible), we held three introductory workshops, hosted by HUP, over three weeks. The young people took part in ‘tester sessions’ of remote theatre, storytelling, art, photography and rap activities. At the end, they opted for one or two activities they wished to pursue, and the team put them in small groups of two to four which were expected to meet weekly over four to six weeks.

HUP also recruited volunteer ESOL teachers with experience of online teaching to work alongside the artists and the young people and provide language support. Four ESOL tutors agreed to take part. Because the intervention was happening online, the HUP team was able to recruit artists and teachers from outside the UK, namely, Brazil, Palestine, Spain and Sweden.

To ensure safeguarding protocols were secure, the research team all applied for enhanced safeguarding certificates, called a PVG (Protection of Vulnerable Groups) in Scotland. We ensured that at least one member of the research team was present in all meetings between artists, young people and ESOL tutors. The entire project team met online on the 23rd of February to discuss how the project would be organised, individual responsibilities in terms of working ethically with young people, and what we hoped young people would get out of the creative intervention. We also explained about the linguistic ethnography, the approach we were taking to researching the intervention, and the role of the research team in safeguarding.

These discussions led to the creative intervention being organised in the following way:

Session	Session Focus	Participants
Introductory Workshop (2 hours)	‘Getting to know you session’. Introduction to remote theatre skills, art/drawing and hello to all the artists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people (11) • HUP (2) • Research Team (4) • ESOL tutors (4) • Rap artist • Photography artist

Workshop (2 hours)	‘Getting to know you session’. Introduction to rap and photography.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people (13) • HUP (2) • Research Team (4) • ESOL tutors (4) • Storytellers (2) • Artist (1)
Workshop (2 hours)	‘Getting to know you session’. Introduction to remote story telling with two different story tellers using different techniques.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people (5) • HUP (2) • Research Team (4) • ESOL tutors (4) • Storytellers (2) • Artist (1)
Rap (6 hours overall)	Rap lexicon, playing with words and ideas, writing lyrics, understanding beat/flow, combining words with music, learning about key figures in the rap world, practising performance skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research Team (1) • Young people (initially 2, later 1) • HUP (1)
Photography (6 hours overall, for each young person but split into two different sessions because of numbers and timings)	Rules of composition, different techniques for taking pictures, special effects, documenting Covid lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people (6) • HUP (1) • Research Team (3) • ESOL tutors (2) • Photography artist
Story telling	Storytelling rules/techniques for the most effective way of self-expression and grasping the listeners’ attention (vocabulary, intonation/tone, rhythm). Developing the narrative. Practising telling stories.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research Team/ ESOL (1) • Young people (2) • Storyteller
Art – drawing	Drawing techniques, including reflecting on memories through drawing, how to draw faces and then self-portraits. Explored themes around emotions, memories, hopes and expressing your perspective through drawing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people (4) • Research Team (1) • Artist (painter)

We used Zoom for all activities because the young people, artists, ESOL tutors and artists were all familiar with the platform. The confidentiality settings on Zoom also made it particularly suitable for hosting the intervention: it has a function that permits the audio recording to be downloaded without video, and names of participants do not appear on the screen, both of which were central to safeguarding practices.

Researching the creative intervention

Our aim was to take a linguistic ethnographic approach to research the intervention.

Linguistic ethnography is:

an interpretive approach which studies the local and immediate actions of actors from their point of view and considers how these interactions are embedded in wider social contexts and structures. (Copland and Creese, 2015, p.13)

Linguistic ethnographers collect and analyse both linguistic and ethnographic data for this purpose (for full descriptions, see Copland and Creese, 2015, and Tusting, 2019). Therefore, researchers observed all the meetings between young people and artists, taking fieldnotes and participating in the sessions to various degrees, as is common in ethnographic work (see Copland, 2018). They also audio recorded the sessions, storing the data on the secure University of Stirling's Microsoft Sharepoint site, in line with University of Stirling ethical procedures for storing research data.

Given that the study was a group ethnography (see Creese and Blackledge, 2015) it was important that the researchers shared an understanding of the aims of the fieldwork and the potential roles of the observer. To this end, the research team held online meetings and developed both a basic protocol and a set of guiding questions to help them to look through similar lenses at the unfolding activities. These were:

1. How do artists and young people work together to produce an artefact/artefacts?
2. What Covid experiences are discussed and in what ways?
3. How does the online platform help or hinder the development of artefacts?
4. In what ways is young people's English language development supported by the intervention?

About half-way through the intervention, the team met to share and discuss their fieldnotes. Although there were differences in style and length, the team felt that they shared enough detail about how the sessions unfolded with an emphasis on how the artists, young people and ESOL tutors worked together, to make a coherent data set.

Fieldnotes were written up as soon as possible after the observations and also stored on the Sharepoint. At the conclusion of the intervention, the team had collated 45 fieldnotes of 35 sessions taken over five and a half months.

The creative intervention in practice

We did not expect the intervention to go smoothly as there were so many factors involved, for example: the number of people; the different time zones in which we all lived; the vagaries of the internet; and the pressures and demands on young people, including the need to attend appointments with services at short notice. However, the logistics of arranging over thirty sessions over four and a half months was even more challenging than we had imagined. The aim was to hold each session – photography, art, storytelling or rap - at the same time each week, with 5 sessions weekly (photography comprised two groups). However, if either an artist or the young people did not attend (for whatever reason) sessions had to be rescheduled. Furthermore, the intervention took place during Ramadan. Some young people were too tired to attend afternoon sessions; others did not wish to attend an activity that could be considered inappropriate during a holy time. The most distressing and disruptive challenge was the bombing of Palestine during May 2021. One of our artists – Malak Mattar – was there during the bombings and understandably unable to participate. As well as trying to keep in touch with her and worrying about her safety, we had to cancel the drawing and painting sessions (although they were rescheduled for the summer of 2021) and redirect the young people to a different activity. A complicating factor was because of safeguarding, only the Scottish Guardianship service held the emails/phone numbers of the young people and so all communications had to go through its representative. Although completely understandable due to ethical considerations, this did not make communication - especially concerning last minutes changes - either straightforward, or easy. All these changes and disruptions generated tens of emails on some days, which was untenable for all parties involved: we resolved this issue by publishing a daily note in which all changes were listed and potential problems posed.

Despite the complications, the intervention proceeded, mostly as planned, and succeeded, better than imagined. Young people produced photographic exhibits, recorded their travel stories, created and recorded a sophisticated rap and made beautiful drawings. We

are currently working on creating a digital archive of the work that will be available to see on our [website](#).

The challenges

As well as the logistical issues described above, the creative intervention also caused other challenges. The first was in identifying participants. Recruitment of young people was done through the Scottish Guardianship Service, but it was only able to contact young people who were still in contact with it or were known to it, which may have meant that recent arrivals were not given the opportunity to participate. It was also noticeable that the young people who took part were mostly already engaged in the activities the Guardianship set up; there were many others who maybe did not join the project because they lacked confidence or understanding of what the creative intervention might be.

Working with the young people online was also challenging. Internet quality was often poor, which resulted in the usual screen freezing, voice distortion and occasional disconnection. This extract from our fieldnotes explains what happened and how the participants coped:

The artist's wifi is weak and her voice keeps fading in and out. Luckily there is a really good ESOL tutor in the session and she takes over and starts explaining things in short, clear sentences, and diverts the young people's attention.

Either the young people or the artist had sometimes to turn off the video link in order to maintain the meeting, not ideal in a creative intervention. It was also difficult on occasion for artists and researchers to read the mood of the young people because of the barrier created by meeting online.

A challenge we had not anticipated was the different working practices of the groups involved. The young people were often late to sessions and sometimes did not attend. Some of the artists took an extremely relaxed approach, on one occasion hosting the meeting from a park and on another, lying on a sofa. Often the sessions were organic, with no discernible organisation. In contrast, both the ESOL tutors and the researchers expected the intervention to resemble a 'class', with a structure, clear aims and a recognisable participation structures (Martin Jones and Heller, 2001). A further practices issue was working out how to ensure

young people understood what to do. Some of the artists were not used to working with people using English as a second language and struggled - especially initially - to modify their communication accordingly. For the ESOL tutors, it was sometimes difficult to know when they should be intervening so they could support young people without interrupting the flow of the session.

There is no doubt that the intervention took a great deal of 'person' time. In addition to the organisational work, each session of one hour actually 'cost' three hours, one each for the artist, ESOL tutor and researcher. While we believe the intervention was successful (we will report on this in future papers), it could be considered costly as a creative activity model. Larger groups of young people obviously make the intervention more cost effective; however, working online, in a second language, on creative activities can only be done well with small groups, in our view.

Finally, it was important to accommodate young people's choices so that they committed to the intervention. However, the expertise of the Hands Up Project is remote theatre, which none of the young people opted for, despite thoroughly enjoying the introductory session. On the other hand, large numbers opted for photography, although we only had one artist with this expertise. After some negotiation we accommodated the choices. Later in the intervention, one young person dropped out of the rap sessions, we think because they perceived it as too challenging. However, during the rap sessions they had attended, a strong rapport was developed with one of the ESOL tutors, who was based in Brazil. They discovered they shared a mutual interest in astronomy, and so they continued to meet online (with a researcher) to discuss their interest and to develop the young person's English skills.

The artefacts

By the end of the creative intervention, the young people had produced and recorded two travel and arrival stories, one rap and five collections of photographs (more than 70 images in total) and were continuing to work on developing their drawing techniques, all through working online. The artefacts young people have produced and agreed to share are currently being curated and will form a gallery in the near future on our website.

Dwelling in positivity: the affordances of the creative intervention

Although we have yet to evaluate the project formally, data from the linguistic ethnography suggest there have been a number of affordances from the creative intervention.

The first is in learning English. Our fieldnotes are full of references to English language teaching opportunities, such as this:

HOT (pseudonym) has one of the lower levels of English when the project begins. She only arrived a few months ago - she's waiting for a place at college, and because of lockdown she's had few opportunities to meet other people. She is very determined though. At a meeting with an interpreter present, I ask if she wants the interpreter to be there at the workshops but she says she wants to persevere, she sees it as a good challenge. She says she understands everything, but it can be hard to find the right words to say what she means. As she learns more words related to photography, she starts to express herself more. She also smiles and laughs more frequently.

And this:

Lots of extended speaking turns for Humble and Thanh and lots of extended listening too. And we inputted with vocabulary, which I hope was helpful.

At the end of the storytelling sessions, one young person stated:

I am able to tell my story and also communicate with any British person now.

Which suggests that that the project had been more successful than we had hoped, at least for this young person.

In [Working Paper 1](#) we discussed the importance of connectivity to the young people, particularly during the pandemic. This intervention provided opportunities for them to connect to each other, to the artists, ESOL tutors, researchers and even on occasion to translators, who met with some young people who were only just beginning to learn English:

The Guardianship Service arranges a session with an interpreter for one young person in between workshops, so she can ask questions. When we all join the call, the young person and interpreter recognise each other. They laugh and greet each other warmly. It turns out he acted as interpreter for one of her first meetings after she'd

arrived in the country - he asks how she is doing, what she is up to. He said he remembers she is very bright, a quick learner - I agree, and she smiles.

It was particularly gratifying for the research team to see how the intervention brought young people together who might not have otherwise met. For example, in the storytelling activities, young men from The Gambia and Vietnam discovered they shared similar stories about leaving their home countries with many common elements. By the end of the intervention, they were gently teasing each other, praising each other's stories and confident in each other's presence. This behaviour brings to mind Neal et al.'s (2013) work on the convivial turn, which, according to Harris (2016):

encompasses many modes of being together rather than simply implying perpetually positive fellow feeling, and it captures spontaneous and transient forms of togetherness in contrast to more formal configurations such as community. (p. 501)

We will be exploring our data in relation to this definition of conviviality as we go forward with our analysis.

Finally, an important outcome from the intervention has been the creativity of young people during the project, which as research has shown, is linked to have positive effects on mental health (e.g. Desmond et al. 2015). One researcher noted in her fieldnotes:

Carl asked MC Shamp to perform – ‘can’t have no shy rappers’! MC Shamp wasn’t shy. He did his rap and then his hook. I was a bit gobsmacked at the quality. Of course there were some odd things and phrasings but the rap really told a story. What is more, it used the motif of the bridge introduced last week by Nyx.

And another focused on how the young people's creativity may make them look at the world differently:

From week to week you saw amazing pictures on the screen but most of all, you could see young people's ability to use their surroundings in the most imaginative and creative way - a window frame became a canvas and the bottom of a drinking glass a filter through which to create an optical illusion. I often wondered whether taking part in such activities transformed the way they looked at the spaces from then on. For example, windows may have felt like a barrier to the outside world when we were

all living under restrictions, did using them as a canvas transform them into windows to something else?

In stage 3 of the project, we will be catching up with the young people for their thoughts on the intervention and how they believe it supported them during the pandemic.

Conclusion

This working paper reports on how the creative intervention in our project was organised and how it played out. It also introduces some initial findings and some productive avenues to explore further. As we write it, we feel like empty nesters: we miss the young people, the artists and ESOL tutors and the creativity. Mostly we miss the interactions, the coming together of disparate souls, who, were it not for the intervention, might never have met. Although we hope to interview some of the young people for the next stage in the project, we wonder if we will lose contact with others, and wish them well for their future lives in Scotland. We hope they were able to dwell in positivity for even a short time during the project and have gained something meaningful from joining in, be it improved English, a more positive outlook, new friends or a feeling of belonging. We, the researchers, had the unique opportunity to leave our academic comfort zone by collaborating with artists and others from different professional backgrounds. We also managed to catch a glimpse of the lives of the young people, and witness how they developed their artistic sides – we hope that, through this contact, we gained an understanding of what the pandemic was like for them, and we will do them justice in our future papers.

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