

THRIVE - Briefing paper 2

A story takes shape: online arts-based research with separated migrant children

This briefing paper builds on the previous project outputs, to report on the initial findings from arts-based workshops with young people for the ESRC funded project: *Supporting separated migrant children to thrive during Covid-19*.

The workshops had two main aims for young people:

1. Develop English language skills
2. Support mental health via creativity and connectivity

Through a range of artistic media, the workshops enabled us to explore with young people how they have managed during the Covid 19 and how the pandemic has impacted on their connectivity to networks, including peers and services. Twelve young people worked individually or in small groups on photography (with Paulina Czyż), drawing (with Malak Mattar), rap (with Carl Guifo Guifo/AMP Medley) and storytelling (with Katrice Horsley).

These workshops formed the 'creative intervention' stage of the project. In total 14 young people, aged between 15 and 18 years, had taken part in interviews with the researchers during the first stage of the project, after hearing about the project from our partners at the Scottish Guardianship Service (SGS) or via their college lecturer. Prior to the workshops, the Scottish Guardianship Service distributed tablets to all the young people. We then arranged three 'taster' sessions online, lasting around two hours each, where young people could meet seven different artists working with the [Hands Up Project](#) and have a chance to try out activities - remote theatre, storytelling, hip hop/rapping, photography and art (drawing). ESOL tutors provided support by explaining new vocabulary, writing out key words or sentences in the chat function and working with young people in small breakout rooms, for example to prepare a short rap or a mini story to act out together for the rest of the group.

The young people then chose an activity to take part in for around six weekly one-hour sessions. Below we reflect on some of the emerging themes from the analysis of the intervention data so far.

Time and timing

Once young people had chosen their activities, the logistical challenge began! Coordinating 12 young people, four artists, ESOL tutors and researchers working remotely and across three organisations was challenging, to say the least.

In the early stages, when social restrictions were at their tightest, nearly all young people attended at any opportunity. The novelty of trying out new activities gave way to young people starting to focus on their media of choice: taking photos or working on lyrics or stories in their own time as well as during the workshops.

As the weeks progressed, attendance became less predictable, although it varied widely among young people: from those who never missed a session to others who chose to attend two or three times. A range of factors seemed to influence turnout,

including digital fatigue; increased opportunities for in-person meetings (with services or peers) as restrictions eased; the period of Ramadan and the day-to-day emotional fluctuations of a group of teenagers.

In addition, sometimes artists were not available or had to change times, usually related to personal or other work commitments. Most distressingly, during the bombing of Gaza in May, one of our artists was necessarily focused on her and her family's survival, and the art workshops had to be postponed.

Accommodating everyone's needs, and particularly young people's choices and schedules, meant extending the workshops over a longer period than originally planned to ensure each workshop group was offered at least six hours. Even when the timing of workshops had been agreed with everyone involved, arrangements often felt somewhat tentative until people were actually together in the (virtual) room. One unexpected advantage of the changing numbers was that young people clearly enjoyed having more individual attention from the artists during the smaller sessions.

Surprise and serendipity

The notion of connectivity informed our original project plan, and we have seen new connections grow in unexpected directions. An interpreter and young person recognised each other from a previous meeting shortly after she arrived in the country and smiled and laughed as they caught up. One young person decided to withdraw from the creative workshops but continued to meet individually with an ESOL tutor, learning about everything from the history of hip hop to space and galaxies. An advantage of carrying out the workshops entirely online was the ability to grow connections across and beyond Scotland: our artists were based in London, Sweden and Palestine, while our partners were working from Glasgow and Edinburgh (Scottish Guardianship Service) and Spain, England and Brazil ([Hands Up Project](#)).

Online working also created suspense. During workshops, it was not always possible to gauge progress: even when cameras and microphones were on, we could not necessarily see the objects young people were setting up to photograph or the drawings they were working on. When young people held their artworks up to the camera (if they chose to share them), it was exciting to see the choices they had made and their own styles emerge: drawings of faces in one workshop ranged from realist black and white sketches to anime-style and cartoons. The rap sessions seemed particularly organic and for the first few weeks progress appeared slow at best. However, as we headed towards the recording, our fears disappeared as words, music and the hook came together.

Taking care and taking risks

Throughout all stages of this endeavour – from initial engagement of young people, to working out the logistics around young people's choice of activities, to the day-to-day communication about who was coming (or not coming) to which workshop, and what accommodations needed to be made around young people and artists – the connection with the Scottish Guardianship Service has been central. In line with our

aim to support mental health, it was important that these workshops were fun, engaging and voluntary for young people. Researchers, artists and ESOL tutors did not have access to young people's contact details; all communication with young people about and between workshops was via the SGS participation officer Stefan. He attended some workshops, especially in the early stages, but the researchers also updated him after each workshop, for example if a young person's words or demeanour suggested they were under stress, or when someone showed particular skill or interest in an activity. As Stefan was in touch with the young people regularly as part of SGS's other activities, he could 'check in' with them about any issues of concern (and pass on any concerns to the relevant Guardian if necessary) and also reinforce the praise and recognition of young people's efforts in the workshops.

As researchers, carrying out a project funded by public money, attendance felt like a key measure of whether the intervention was 'working'. But, as we have noted, young people's engagement with the project took different paths: some attended faithfully each week, others dipped in and out, or attended less frequently once other activities and commitments started up again. At times, this somewhat organic approach created anxiety for us as researchers, but the flexibility and choice allowed young people to shape their own involvement in and outcomes from the project. (Our project partners at SGS reflect further on the benefits for young people of this approach [here](#).)

Reflections so far

With a bit of tech, a lot of behind-the-scenes organisation and some luck, each workshop group found its own rhythm and young people's individual progress with language and their creative projects became more evident each week. As the workshops neared completion, we started asking young people to send their artefacts to Stefan. It was a joy to see their photographs, drawings, recorded stories and rap arrive in our inboxes.

Hot¹ produced a series of photographs with captions describing the mood or reflections the images invoked her for: empty streets contrasted with bright green open spaces. Humble and Thanh told their own stories about travel and arrival, their words conjuring up images of place, community and the surprises inherent in moving from one country to another – a very different type of 'story' from that demanded by the asylum process. Zelene and KB shared photographs of outdoor scenes that reflected an optimism as trips further afield became possible. MC Shamp impressed us all with his lyrics and hooks, and the focus he brought to recording his rap.

These and other artefacts will be displayed on the website, following a sneak preview during our [online conference in June](#). The art workshops, postponed from May, have now resumed with Malak leading three sessions on drawing throughout August. As summer draws to a close, and young people start to return to college and re-engage with other activities, we will interview four of the young people who participated to hear their reflections on taking part in the creative workshops and how things have changed since the initial interviews carried out in early 2021.

1. Young people chose artist names (pseudonyms) to accompany their work.

