Making a place for refugee education: routes towards meaningful inclusion for refugee teenagers in 'new-normal' England.

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Introduction

This chapter contributes to debates about reshaping education for teenage refugee and asylum-seekers in a post-pandemic world, arguing that meaningful inclusive models of education for all are vital in any reconceptualization of society. COVID-19 has seen social and material inequalities magnified and inevitably refugee and asylum-seeking children have experienced the effects of this. I draw on a theoretical model for the inclusion of refugees in education which has been shaped by educational practitioners (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021). Kholi's theory of 'resumption of ordinary life' (2011, 2014), and Fraser's 'participatory parity' (2003) underpin the model. Across the globe, 'ordinary life' for refugee teenagers during lockdowns changed, as it did for all young people. Most markedly 'participatory parity' became dependent upon material and human resources that marginalized groups, such as refugees, have limited access to.

In what follows, I draw upon my observations of the ways in which educators and artists work with young new arrivals in an English city. These examples were drawn from a range of research projects during a 4-year period in which I took an ethnographically motivated position within the research; moving between the roles of participant, observer and interviewer at different points within the projects.

The chapter describes a bespoke post-16 provision for refugees which operationalised the theorized model, and then discusses how the experiences of the practitioners and young people were affected by life after lockdown in England. I argue for consideration of an approach where young peoples' new contexts, the cities and towns they find themselves in, can be utilised as curriculum through place-making methods. I illustrate ways in which cultural and community spaces offer purposeful educational opportunities which allow new arrivals a sense of safety and the beginnings of social

belonging potentially contributing towards present and future inclusion and participation as cultural citizens in their new society.

This feels like the right time to explore more socially-just inclusive models of education as we experience our 'new-normal' and what societies value is being reconceptualised. During the pandemic, the cessation of ordinary lives for many might lead to greater empathy for refugee children who, as Kohli observes, at the point of becoming forced migrants and refugees, 'experience the death of everyday life' (2014, 86). Kohli describes how they have given up their past for a future elsewhere and that they seek ways to bring things from their past into these new futures. These can be cultural artefacts or memories of people, places or activities. Whilst the prospect of national citizenship is some way off for new arrivals because of complex and often hostile immigration policies, the notion of cultural citizenship can be a tangible reality (UNESCO, 2012).

> As he moves round the art gallery, Sheshy uses his phone to take photographs of the artwork. I notice him moving right up close to the exhibits and taking photographs of aspects of the piece. He also is spending time with the pieces that attract him. He seems to be absorbing them. He is particularly attracted a time lapse video the artist made of the process of creating drawings. I ask if I can see what he is photographing and as we talk, he shows me photographs of his own drawings on his phone. One is of a young woman which he calls 'The Eritrean girl' explaining she is wearing her hair and jewellery in a typical Eritrean manner. The other is of a mother cradling her child.
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> As part of the exhibition, people are asked to write on a wall and complete the sentence 'I am…' Sheshy writes 'I am happy to be here.'

Sheshy, aged 16, visited an art gallery in his new city, one of the first 'in person' activities that his educational provider could organise as England moved through the stages of social distancing post-lockdown whilst COVID-19 was still pausing ordinary life. This was an important trip for Sheshy and the rest of the group as it marked the resumption of activities to help them connect to and feel part of their new place. But this post-lockdown trip had the by now familiar markers of life during COVID-19: no other visitors to the gallery because of social distancing measures, hand sanitisers on the walls of the exhibition, mask wearing – thus making it difficult for the young people to hear and

follow the instructions and explanations of the gallery guide. The mask covered the guide's facial expressions, something which this group of young people with varying skills in English language relied on to aid their understanding of the spoken word. Masks, hand sanitisers, isolated (both in the sense of infrequent, and in the sense of limited social contact) experiences of face-to-face interactions had all become the everyday in the 'new-normal' English landscape.

Throughout this opening I have been using terms which pre COVID-19 would have had limited usage: 'in-person', 'face to face', 'social distancing', 'new-normal'. Our language evolves to reflect our everyday experiences – our ordinary lives. In what follows I draw on the concept of ordinary life in introducing the theoretical underpinning for the model of inclusive education for refugees and asylum-seekers. This theoretical basis which is described more fully elsewhere (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021 and McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021) brings two theories together which, when combined, have utility for considering a future-focused inclusive approach to refugee education, more necessary in the new-normal which we are configuring. The first of these is Kohli's 'resumption of ordinary life'. Kohli argues that the reality for many children who have left their homes because of forced migration is that their search for an ordinary existence continues, despite reaching their resettlement context. He conceptualises their forced migration experiences as transitions through 'safety', 'belonging' and 'success' as the children move within and across spatial, temporal and maturational dimensions of change (2011, 2014). Kohli's theory of resumption of ordinary life informed my earlier empirical work to establish a normative operational basis for judging policies and practices for refugee education (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021). In this work, experienced practitioners redefined the concepts of 'safety', 'belonging' and 'success' in relation to education for new arrivals (*ibid*). The second theory, Fraser's 'participatory parity' is based on the premise that social conditions need to be achieved so that all members of society can participate and interact as peers (2003). Fraser's three components of recognition, redistribution and representation are lenses through which to identify barriers to equitable access and inclusion for refugee children in education. Fraser establishes a normative moral basis against which policies and practices can be

measured. Mobilising the two theories to work together forms the basis for a model of inclusive education for refugee and asylum-seeking students (McIntyre and Neuhaus, 2021).

Key to achieving a sense of safety, belonging and success is engaging newly arrived young people in meaningful activities where they can contribute to society using their strengths and talents (Kohli, 2011). In many cases this involves activities that foster a sense of belonginess (Massey, 2005), helping the young people feel a greater connection to their new place and the communities within that place. It is through this sense of belonginess and connection that newly arrived young people can begin to engage with others within that place and thus begin to achieve aspects of 'participatory parity' (Fraser, 2003).

In the second half of the chapter, I describe how the inclusive model has been enacted in a bespoke educational provision for new arrivals pre-, during and post-lockdown. First, I share Sebhat's story to contextualise the realities for many young new arrivals in England who find it difficult to access full time post-16 education to showcase the need for the bespoke provision. Then I move to describe how arts and cultural activity can become acts of place-making for new arrivals such as Sebhat.

Sebhat, a 17-year-old Eritrean, had been waiting ten months for a school or college place, with nothing else to do, he simply stayed in his room in semi-independent accommodation. He had trouble sleeping and suffered with recurring headaches and was later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) linked to experiences he had encountered on his solo journey across Libya before reaching Europe. When Sebhat did leave his room, he went to church, to a local refugee charity's youth group's weekly meeting, and to the local library where he tried to work on his understanding of the English alphabet. Eventually he was offered 7 hours (of ESOL/Employability skills/ICT) a week at college. He was finding it difficult to make connections with the others in the shared house who were much older than him. He said he was feeling lonely and spent much of his time isolated from others. He was hopeful that he would be able to access more hours at college in the next academic year. However, a few months later, he ran away to London to be with two other Eritrean boys he had befriended whilst in the Jungle at Calais. In effect he made himself homeless and extremely vulnerable until a charity in London took care of him. Sebhat's experiences reflect national concerns about both social isolation and a lack of appropriately funded education provision for new arrivals, a particularly vulnerable group of young people, especially those with no family support or network. I maintained contact with him once he moved to London. When the pandemic hit, Sebhat found himself even more isolated and scared.

(Expanded from original text in McIntyre and Abrams, 2021, 101)

Sebhat's experiences were echoed in conversations I had with young people who arrived in the city following the increase in forced migration into and across Europe from 2015. Like Sebhat, many were waiting for a place at a post-16 education provision. For social contact with others, they mainly relied on the support of the Tuesday evening youth group run by a local charity. The youth group depended on short term funding for the weekly social activities which comprised arts and crafts, pool, table tennis – scenes common to any youth group but here aimed at teenagers from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds. Occasionally external bodies received funding for short-term projects with the youth group.

In the next section of the chapter, I describe two short term externally funded arts-based projects that involved people from the refugee youth group. My intention is to draw out the potential of placemaking for new arrivals through the arts. In so doing, I draw on previous work with Susan Jones where we analysed the ways in which a group of teenagers in a marginalised community engaged in arts-based place-making activities which helped them *connect to* resources around their town and also *to connect* narratives of people and place in collaborative creative making of meanings (Jones and McIntyre, 2014).

Placemaking in the city through the arts

The first activity was a film-making project as part of a wider initiative called Journeys to Justice (https://journeytojustice.org.uk/). Two young local filmmakers worked with a small group of teenagers from the refugee youth group. Some of the group had recently arrived and had little spoken English, as the group comprised people from all over the world there was little common language to aid communication. The filmmakers who were only a few years older than the young participants wanted to help them to get to know parts of the city. They met the young people each day in the city square by one of the statues – a well-established meeting place for teenagers. This immediately inducted the new arrivals into this local habit. From there, they walked to an arts space they had booked for the project. Over the period of the filmmaking, this became a social space for the young people. The issue of creating dialogue with a limited common language was overcome because the young people shared a love of the TV character, Mr Bean and they quickly decided to make silent films. The film makers walked with the group around the city introducing them to popular places where other teenagers in the city hang out. The young people used these as locations in their films. The resulting short films were shown as part of the Journeys to Justice exhibition in an iconic city cultural institution. The young people were invited to the premier of the showing and mingled with audiences of other films that were on show.

The second project was led by Ruth, the educational officer in an art gallery. Ruth was keen to encourage members of refugee communities to feel that they could visit the gallery which had been difficult to access until a tram line from the city centre was built which went around the back of the gallery. Ruth was particularly keen to engage young people at the refugee youth project. She began by inviting the young people into the gallery and inviting them to choose any exhibit which resonated with them and draw whatever came to mind. Some stayed for a good ninety minutes in front of the same painting quietly sketching.

[insert Figure 1: Sketching at Lakeside]

Ruth engaged a young artist, again little older than the teenagers themselves to work with them on a collaborative piece. During a walk around the university lake, they saw some disused rowing boats which they decided to repurpose for an exhibit. They stripped and repainted the boat and turned it into large planter to attract the attention of the passengers on the tram. The artist taught them spray painting techniques and encouraged them to design their own slogans for the side of the boat to send messages to the commuters. She demonstrated how art could be used to convey political messages showing them the work of Ai Wei Wei amongst others thinking this would interest them. But they individually chose slogans which paid no reference to their identity as refugees but were about humane messages of care for each other and the planet. They voted on their favourite slogan 'Don't stop thinking about our world' which was sprayed on their newly created sail of the boat so that passengers on the tram could see it. Ruth entered them for their Bronze Arts Award which entailed them exhibiting their work and teaching the arts techniques to members of the public. The project ended with a celebration event where the young people were awarded their certificates – the first recognition of their skills since entering the country. Within the English context, recognition of skills and merits within education is manifest in certification. The Arts Award symbolizes a small but significant step towards entry into the normative mode of recognition (and hence beginnings of participatory parity) within the new arrivals' new place.

Pedagogical processes involved in working with arts is well documented. These two projects showcase the affordances of these for engaging creativity, voice and agency of young people - especially in their rejection of representation of their identity as 'refugee' in the Arts Award project. The power of these projects is rooted in their close focus on the young people in a specific place. This pedagogical approach also includes participatory and collaborative practice and the transformative potential of place-based pedagogies (Jones and McIntyre, 2014). The creative process of making the artefacts as well as the resultant artefacts themselves, have the potential to be place-making (Jones et al, 2013). For Comber 'the study of place affords complex opportunities for collective meaning making practices' which result in collaborative text production (2016, 101). This, she argues, 'can be a positive site for identity work, community building' (*ibid.*, 103). This is showcased in the Arts Award project; the young people were involved in a (re)creation of the place of the art gallery – repurposing the disused boat and creating a focal point for commuters to see on their journeys into the city – reminding them to think 'about our [intentionally shared possessive] world'.

The collaborations emerging from the projects led to powerful learning in several ways including opportunities where the young people could demonstrate their capacity to be 'subjects of action and responsibility' (Biesta 2013, 1). This agency was central to the Arts Award project. In their remaking of the boat and reclaiming of the elitist space of the art gallery for the passersby, they did more than connect to the site, they helped others to connect to their message in an act of what Comber (2016, 64) describes as 'reciprocal knowledge building'.

Now as the young people pass these locations for their films and the art gallery they can see how they fit into a story of their new place. This resonates with Creswell's articulation of place as a 'meaningful location' (Cresswell, 2004, 5), where meaning is derived from the 'interplay of people and the environment' (*ibid*, 11). In the case of the art gallery, they left their imprint which will be there for some time and represent new possibilities for the future. Through these two projects, the

young people gained a greater sense of their new city where they have been able to build emotional attachments to specific places within the city and to value what had previously been 'unknown' spaces (Tuan, 2003).

The arts activities were spaces of community, sociability and inclusion (McIntyre, 2016). There was a shared sense of purpose – all working together towards a shared outcome for a real audience and every voice was valued and heard. The artists recognized that each member of the group brought individual talents and skills which were equally recognized through the process of making the art and the artefacts themselves.

Placemaking underpins belonging at Fern College.

Comber and Nixon state that a place-based approach not only allows people to connect with that place and the people within it, but also empowers them as they realise that through these activities they can "make a positive difference to the world' (2014, 86). The films and boat exhibits, along with the process of creation, also represent new possibilities for the future. They are responsive to what the young people have brought to the process rather than being elitist artefacts and places – the young people have been changed by the places and have changed the places too. Arguably, the projects allowed the young people to connect to spaces in their new city – and in so doing they helped them encounter feelings of belonging but also safety and successes too.

I now turn to a specific place that was created to cater for young people arriving after the age of 16 in the same city, referred to by the pseudonym, 'Fern College' in McIntyre and Abrams (2021). I have followed the development of 'Fern' since its inception, observing the young people in their activities and meeting regularly with the teachers. I draw upon focus groups with the latter in what follows. 'Fern' is a unique full time post-16 education provision for newly arrived young people, initially funded by the English government's two-year controlling migration funding aimed at supporting positive outcomes for unaccompanied asylum seekers. The manager of Fern had been involved in previous projects with me and was aware of the theoretical framings of Kohli and Fraser and had an

active role in shaping these into practical realities for an inclusive model for teachers to utilise. She shared my concerns regarding opportunities available in the city to Sebhat and others. In her vision for 'Fern College' she drew on her understanding of the inclusive model and to develop the provision to ensure that as far as possible there was a fair distribution of resource to meet the needs of the young people, that the provision recognised and responded to their specific needs and assets and that it would be guided by representative voices from the refugee community or from those who worked closely with them. In these ways, the provision aimed to fulfil Fraser's tripartite conditions for achieving some sense of participatory parity or 'justice for all' (2003, 94). There was an understanding that there would be a need to design flexible programmes to accommodate young people arriving at any point in the academic year (a challenge for most traditional educational settings). An Advisory Board comprising expertise from education, children's mental health, refugee law and social care was established.

Thus, the provision was established to offset the barriers that prevent marginalised individuals like Sebhat from participating on a par (Fraser, 2007) with others in order to offer an inclusive educational experience for its young people. The full-time holistic provision offered a curriculum for building safety, belonging and succeeding with an academic programme enhanced by planned activities designed to foster relational, cultural and social learning (McIntyre and Abrams 2021, 103-4).

What emerged was a commitment to place-making activities, taking the young people to different community groups and helping them to feel a part of their new city. This involved a range of enrichment activities including trips to key places within the city and its surroundings, guided historical walks around the city, physical activities such as climbing, ice-skating at the Christmas market, archery and trips to the seaside and to forest school camps. The young people also went on work experience to various sites in the city. Additionally, there were activities where the young new arrivals created something, often in collaboration with others in their new place, through allotment

gardening, through cooking with community groups, through pottery, through woodcraft, through activities in the city's art galleries, museums and theatres. They designed artwork for the entrance of the provision to welcome visitors, they created poems (including one for Prince Harry when he visited). They were selected for a prestigious award by the local newspaper and 'Fern' and its students became known in the city. As James, one of the teachers observes, '*as we've tried to take them out into the city, we're trying to develop that sense that it is theirs as well. They're not a kind of visitor. It is their city*' (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021, 109).

By March 2020, the indicators were that the provision was a success in terms of educational outcomes and also and perhaps more importantly in terms of other indicators of wellbeing for the young people. The two-year funding was coming to an end and the City's Education officers and Fern's Advisory Board was actively seeking funding streams to allow the provision to continue to operate.

And then the country went into lockdown. The young people were told that they could not attend 'Fern' each day and to return home to their different accommodations dispersed across the city. Like other education providers the staff immediately worked to move their provision online. The practitioners were concerned about the mental health impact of enforced physical isolation on some students. It became clear that ordinary life had changed for these young people who had become used to daily contact with peers with similar experiences and teachers who were interested in how they were doing both in and out of the educational setting. The pandemic exacerbated already existing social and material inequalities (Ismail, S. et al, 2021). Social justice is felt most keenly when participatory parity is dependent upon material and human resources that marginalized groups, such as the students at Fern, have limited access to (Fraser, 2003). The Advisory group and teachers sourced laptops as most of the young people could only access a mobile phone. Eventually each student had access to a working computer and teachers began working with them in their virtual

classrooms whilst continuing to hand deliver work packs for those with no or limited internet access. Some sense of normalcy resumed - at least as far as the academic curriculum.

But there was clearly a felt-need to work more holistically with the young people. The teachers found creative solutions to ensure that safety, belonging and succeeding resumed for these young people. They phoned them individually each week. They established a WhatApp group which gradually saw the young people interacting with it and with one another as they overcame their shyness. The teachers celebrated birthdays on the app and the young people followed suit, they posted pictures of meals they had cooked, and the young people followed suit, they celebrated Eid, they explained VE day celebrations and posted pictures of these on the WhatsApp group. The teachers also made videos of themselves with personalised messages to the group encouraging them to stay positive and promising that they would be together again soon.

One of the things that triggered most responses from the young people was when the teachers started posting photographs from activities the young people had been involved in as part of the enrichment provision before COVID-19, with funny recollections of those place-making activities (cooking, trips to different places, pottery, music, drama, dance and the garden they had been creating). These memories clearly resonated within the group with one post generating over 100 comments.

In some ways, for those with reliable internet access, the technology helped achieve aspects of the holistic ambition of the safety, belonging and succeeding model. But what was most difficult was connecting beyond 'Fern' – connecting the young people to a wider community which was locked down. For those who arrived shortly before the lockdowns came into force, whilst they were beginning to get a sense of the community of 'Fern', they had no opportunity to get to know their new city. The teachers reflected that those who would have engaged with creative place-making activities found it hard to do so online. Anna, the manager of the provision tried to link some of the girls to an online community workshop, *'a really lovely art group remotely for women… So I was able to engage some of our young people with that. We had a couple of really arty girls. So that was one*

way in which we did it, but we weren't as good during that first lockdown in knowing how to do that'. They also tried to move beyond the academic curriculum in their online offer with limited success as Jacob, one of the teachers, observed, '*We were able to offer some extra stuff on Teams like there was a bit of music, a bit of art, but the active engagement wasn't as much*.' And as James commented this meant that the young new arrivals '*still have a strong anchor here (at Fern) but not beyond that.'*

After that first period of lockdown, the English government announced a partial relaxation of social distancing measures which meant that educational sites were allowed to open. The young people returned to 'Fern' and elements of their pre COVID-19 life resumed especially the academic programmes. However, staff were keen to prioritise resumption of the enrichment activities even if they couldn't involve locals working alongside the students as they had pre-COVID-19. But reconnecting to the wider community proved difficult as Anna observed, arriving and living in England during COVID-19 meant that, '*it's very hard for them to get a sense of [city] …at the moment*.'

During the period in England between the first and second lockdown there were strict guidelines on social distancing limiting numbers for outdoor gatherings. An exception was activities organised as part of an educational provision. So, in order to rebuild connections with the city, James recalled that they '*did a few walks around the city to start with*.' But this was not straightforward, as Anna explained:

> *'We were very conscious as well of being very visible. because there are so many of us. If we took them out anywhere it was like 'what are people going to think when there are 20 young people walking down the pavement - that is not really what we should be doing'. So, we made a pass, really. Just a very simple pass that said, you know, 'Out on School' business. I am a student at FERN this is the phone number you can phone to check in case anybody gets asked, by the police even.'*

So, whilst the teachers were keen to re-focus on activities which took the young people out into their community, they were having to confront aspects of regulation and surveillance that had for some young people been a regular feature of their pre-migration experiences. But for the teachers at Fern, it was important to help the new arrivals move beyond the disorientation of life in their new city during the pandemic, even if this was problematic.

Thus, as England began to further re-open and people talked of a 'new-normal', the teachers at 'Fern' made a conscious decision to focus on helping their students get a sense of connection and of belonging to their new city and its communities. They did this through taking advantage of opportunities to engage in place-making through sports and physical activity and through engaging with arts and cultural activities within the city - such as the post-lockdown trip to the art gallery described in the opening to this chapter.

Life in Covid-19's new normal England: recalibrating belonging and ordinariness

Fern college and others working with teenage new arrivals want to explicitly help them feel part of their new place - to begin to experience what it is to belong and feel ordinary. Educational contexts play a pivotal role in engendering a sense of belonging for new arrivals (Gifford et al., 2009). The complexity of the processes at play in developing belonging (Hiorth, 2019) take time and are underpinned by an individual's webs of connection (Stewart, 2019). Kohli observes that new arrivals need to be able to 'use their own talents and capacities to grow webs of belonging that hold them in place' (2011, 318). Teachers, like those at Fern, have a key role to play in helping the development of these webs of belonging. Arguably developing a sense of place and one's relationship to that place is essential to this process, especially:

> For children who may have moved away from family, friends, locations and a sense of entitlement to a home, the need to belong to someone, to somewhere, becomes a conscious goal, and the refurbishment of ordinary life takes on a precedence that is at times vivid and urgent.
>
> (Kohli, 2011, 315)

Making space for placemaking is even more important as we all make sense of our new-normal, as the pandemic leaves societies struggling to resume a sense of ordinariness. For young people newly arrived in locations across Europe at this time, it becomes even more important to consider how social isolation can be lessened and to consider how to help them 'to become full members of the social and cultural fabric of the city' (Pero et al, 2008, 62) and to be able to fully participate in society on a par with others in the city (Fraser, 2007). For teenage new arrivals, there is a need to consider how to enable them to build connections with their new place such that they can lead lives of meaningful engagement in their city as they become adult in these new places.

Making place for refugee education

At the time of writing, in England, we are gradually approaching resumption of some sense of ordinary life in wider society, and it would be a missed opportunity not to consider how societies and models of schooling could be reshaped rather than assuming a return to what was there before. As barriers to operationalising aspects of safety, belonging and succeeding for all students are identified, the lenses of redistribution, recognition and representation shed light on the causes or sources of these barriers (McIntyre and Abrams, 2021). Inevitably, localised experiences are shaped by national and global policy contexts. We need to:

Make place for policy: where the concepts of safety, belonging and succeeding, are foregrounded in policymaking.

Make place for talking about practice based on:

- an asset-based pedagogy which aims to enable all students to realise their potential contributions to society,

and

- schools should also be encouraged to adapt place-making and culturally responsive pedagogies in recognition of the needs of newly arrived pupils.

(adapted from McIntyre and Abrams, 2021, 170-171)

Making a place for refugee education therefore means that we need to find ways to allow young new arrivals to engage in place-making. Considering how arts institutions and arts practices engender a sense of social and cultural citizenship is key to this process. Sheshy on his trip around the art gallery finds in the 'new-normal' ordinariness of a trip to a gallery, the process of being in the arts space, and engaging with the art work, the very real potential for him to belong, to resume a sense of connection focusing on what he is able to do and what he potentially can contribute to that place.

[insert Figure 2: Image taken during visit to New Art Exchange, Phoebe Boswell HERE exhibition]

Consequently, he dissolves into place, he becomes *ordinary* in his love of the exhibition and his connection with the artist. The interactions with the place 'make him'- his identity shifts slightly as he sees himself reflected in the space and they develop a sense of him as a cultural citizen in that space; he 'remakes the place' - as he and his peers join in the artist's invitation to write on the walls, they *participate* as other visitors to the exhibition have done. Sheshy writes with pride '*I am happy to be here*.'

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