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Educational provision for newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers aged 15–16

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ABSTRACT

Local Authorities in England are rarely able to find a school place for newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers when the young person arrives in their locality aged 15–16. Criticisms regarding this exclusionary practice are plentiful; that said, it has been argued the dominance of debate regarding access to mainstream education for pupils aged 15–16 obfuscates critical analysis of the educational needs of this group. Focussed on a bespoke Local Authority educational offer for fewer than twenty newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers aged 15–16, this paper analyses the essence of this offer in relation to social inclusion. Analysed in relation to the category, structure and level/function of the young people's social inclusion, this paper draws on interview and focus group data to shine a light on the efficacious elements of the offer which point to ways forward for mainstream schools.

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Unaccompanied sanctuary seekers in England: education policy and practice

The numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in England are relatively small in comparison to other European countries (Ott and O'Higgins 2019). That said, between 2013 and 2018 the figure has risen by 130% and has continued to rise until 2019 when it reached a peak, dropping during the COVID-19 pandemic by 3% in 2020 (DfE 2021a) and a further 20% in 2021 (DfE 2021b). Currently in England there are approximately 4000 looked after children who are officially titled as 'unaccompanied asylum seeking children' (UASC), 92% of which are male (DfE 2021b). The English definition for UASC is 'children under 18, who have applied for asylum in their own right and are separated from both parents and/or any other responsible adult' (DfE 2019, 8). As the term 'unaccompanied asylum seeker' can be used pejoratively, this paper favours phrases such as 'unaccompanied sanctuary seeking children' and 'unaccompanied sanctuary seeker'.

Responding to the increasing numbers of unaccompanied sanctuary seeking children and the pressures felt by a small number of local areas, the United Kingdom (UK) government introduced the National Transfer Scheme in July 2016. Based on the formula

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that no local area (referred to in England as a Local Authority) will have more than 0.07% of its total child population as unaccompanied sanctuary seekers, the National Transfer Scheme seeks to facilitate the ‘fairer distribution’ of unaccompanied sanctuary seekers across Local Authorities. As such, some Local Authorities which may not previously have supported many unaccompanied sanctuary seekers have needed to develop their offer for this group of young people (Ott and O’Higgins 2019).

Based on their age and status, unaccompanied sanctuary seekers are usually placed in the care of the Local Authority and provided with support under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. As stated by the Department for Education and the Home Office (2017, 9) ‘an unaccompanied child is entitled to the same local authority support as any other looked after child’. Furthermore, ‘in the case of an emergency placement, the authority that looks after the child should secure a suitable new education placement within twenty school days’ (DfE 2018, 11).

Based on data gathered through freedom of information requests, UNICEF reported that in 2018:

Not one region of the UK has met the twenty-day target for accessing education for all of the UASC in their care. The most significant delays occur at the secondary and further education levels, where up to a quarter of children have had to wait over three months for a school or college place. (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018, 9)

When analysed further, delays accessing secondary education are described as predominantly affecting children aged 14–16 (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018). Age 14–16 being the age when children in the UK are working towards/taking nationally recognised exams which are commonly used as the entry criteria for admission into further education/training. This is also the age at which most unaccompanied sanctuary seekers enter the country (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018); in 2021 only 13% of unaccompanied sanctuary seekers were under 16 years of age in England (DfE 2021b). The main barrier cited by UNICEF to admitting young sanctuary seekers into schools concerns the negative impact their inclusion will have on schools’ results profile (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018). This situation occurs despite Secondary Accountability Measures (DfE 2020) stating that schools can request the removal of results for pupils aged between 14 and 16 who have recently arrived from non-English speaking countries. Challenges accessing UK secondary schools affect both unaccompanied sanctuary seekers, and young sanctuary seekers who are with their families; however the difficulties are different for each group (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018). Although outside the scope of this research, it has been argued to be an even slower process for young sanctuary seekers with their families to gain a UK secondary school place. One reason for this being that unaccompanied sanctuary seekers are supported by social workers who navigate the school admissions process on their behalf, while the parents of children seeking sanctuary in the UK do not benefit from this support (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018). It is the additional factor of being a child without family in the UK and thus looked after by the local authority, that means this group of young people are prioritised by the ‘twenty school days’ target for accessing education (DfE 2018).

Referring to the challenge of placing newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers aged 15–16 into the age relevant school cohort (Year 11), one professional said:

We had a lad here last year who arrived in the UK in April desperate to go to school, and this is off-the-scale unacceptable, he was 16, so should have been in Year 11, and there was no school in Birmingham who wanted a GCSE¹ aged child who didn't speak a word of English, in April of Year 11. (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018, 28)

In another research report, a Virtual School Headteacher explains 'we have alternative providers who provide Year 11 education. Very rarely do Year 11s go into mainstream [schools]' (Ott and O'Higgins 2019, 566).

Unpicking the nuances of the challenge from the perspective of four Headteachers, McIntyre and Hall (2020) found Headteachers were frustrated by the delays in admitting sanctuary seekers but described dominant narratives concerning 'hard to place' students. Addressing the discourse of young sanctuary seekers as 'problems' (McIntyre, Neuhaus and Blennow 2020), one Headteacher questioned the perception, explaining that young people coming from another country where there is conflict are not necessarily 'hard to place' but do automatically get labelled as such. Another Headteacher who attended their locality's Fair Access Panel described the juxtaposition of pleasure versus having a 'heavy heart' – pleasure knowing he has been able to offer support to a student aged 15–16, versus the impact to their school outcomes of accommodating this young person.

To address the 'twenty school days' target for accessing education (DfE 2018) and in response to the problems presented above, Gladwell and Chetwynd (2018, 22) note that a small number of Local Authorities have developed 'innovative interim provision' for unaccompanied sanctuary seekers awaiting mainstream school places. This provision often comprises of programmes specifically designed for arrivals new to England and combines intensive English, Maths and Information-Technology with life-skills relevant to living in Britain (Ott and O'Higgins 2019); for example, information about respectful behaviour; legal issues concerning sex and consent, drugs/alcohol substance misuse (Oxfordshire Virtual School 2021). The 'innovative' nature of such provision should however not go unquestioned. For example, research points to the exclusionary practice of some 'introductory classes' which construct 'newly arrived students as deviant from the mainstream' (Torbjørnsen Hilt 2017, 599) and for the young person embody a sense of 'being temporally out of line' (Nilsson Folke 2017, 93); Migliarini, Stinson, and D'Alessio (2019) cautioning against 'so called' inclusion which segregates migrant children. Ott and O'Higgins (2019) argue however, that interim bespoke education programmes could be viewed as an important part of the Local Authority offer, for they enable the taking of swift action to meet the educational needs of this group. This 'innovative work' (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018, 22) potentially becoming obfuscated by the dominance of debate concerning both the legislation and the immediate challenge of providing access to fulltime education for young sanctuary seekers (Ott and O'Higgins 2019).

Bespoke provision for unaccompanied sanctuary seekers

Almost all educational offers for unaccompanied sanctuary seekers (bespoke, mainstream schooling or other) include as a minimum, a focus on English language support (Ott and O'Higgins 2019). Unaccompanied sanctuary seekers and teachers describing the prioritisation of learning the language of the host country as the primary requirement above all others (Fuller 2020). It is beyond the scope of this

paper to analyse the pedagogy of teaching English as an additional language; however, in connection with the young people's strong desire to learn the language of the host country it is relevant to mention the context for language learning. Describing learning a new language in school as decontextualised, Pastoor (2008) analyses this kind of learning as 'difficult to grasp for students with limited second language proficiency' (Pastoor 2008, 150). Referring to 'bridging capital' and resilience building, Pastoor (2017) stresses the importance of young sanctuary seekers learning language through diverse contexts such as, participation in sport, volunteering, and other community projects.

The broader bespoke curriculum offer, generally covering topics like sex education and life skills, also often functions as the portal into a mainstream setting (Ott and O'Higgins 2019). Notably there is a paucity of research that explores bespoke provision in relation to broader curriculum topics such as sport/cultural activity. Analysed in relation to social inclusion (Simplican et al. 2015) this omission is significant, for these are elements of the ecological pathway to community participation. Drawing from a wider range of literature than that focussed on bespoke education, participation in sport/culture is recognised as relevant to young sanctuary seekers, arguably supporting their general sense of well-being (Spaaij and Schaillee 2020) and confidence (Shepherd 2014; Opfermann 2020).

Starting first with sport, research has shown the efficacy of engaging young sanctuary seekers in sporting activities includes: having fun and making new friends; developing supportive relationships with adults from the local community; learning about teamwork and leadership; improved communication and language skills; and a sense of belonging to a wider community (Kruger 2018; Pinka, Mahoney and Saunders 2020). Whilst the literature does stress the capacity of sport to facilitate social inclusion, it also draws attention to the barriers to participation in sport for those seeking sanctuary. The main barriers identified are: unfamiliar/negative sporting environments, lack of knowledge about participation opportunities, cost, transport, language, culture and ethnicity (Fox and Paradies 2020; Spaaij and Schaillee 2020). The literature tends to analyse sports clubs as elite; rather than focussing on community development, the formality of club structures (high fees and the rigidity of training commitments) potentially prohibiting the inclusion of people with uncertain migration status (Jeanes, Connor, Alfrey 2015). In addition to which, Jeanes, Connor and Alfrey (2015) point to barriers concerning racist comments made in competitive games and the lack of effort by coaches to learn the names of young people from diverse backgrounds as also limiting inclusion in sport. By contrast Jeanes, Connor and Alfrey (2015) describe casual drop-in sporting opportunities, located within young people's communities as better attended. However, 'turn-up and play' sessions for newly arrived communities are often only available for a fixed period, such as a twelve-week programme.

Regarding culture, the efficacy of theatre and drama for newly arrived sanctuary seekers is defined in the research literature as: building self-esteem; supporting the expression of emotions; supporting skills/confidence in speaking English and developing new skills/talents (drawing, miming, and storytelling); a space for collaboration where friendship, social interaction, team building, and agency are developed (Shepherd 2014; Wynne 2020). Challenges with the application of Boal's (2002) dialogic approaches to drama and theatre as a method to analyse young people's oppressive social realities have been highlighted (Opfermann 2020; Wynne 2020). Wynne (2020) and Opfermann

(2020) pointing through their research to limitations regarding Boal's dialogic method when working with young people who are beginning to learn English as an additional language. Drama/theatre as a method with newly arrived sanctuary seekers has however enabled young people to develop and resist challenges encountered through movement from one country to the host country, and address transitions associated with adolescence (Shepherd 2014). Theatre as a method has also enabled this group to express hope and ownership of stories and learn about the culture of the host country (Opfermann 2020). Opfermann (2020) pointing to the significance of watching a comedy performance as particularly supportive of fostering cultural competence.

Like all educational offers (bespoke or otherwise), curriculum choices should be understood as serving a purpose and educational goal (be that socialisation, teaching particular forms of knowledge, helping young people realise their potential, etc.) (Egan 1997). Curriculum should be understood therefore as the representation of curriculum makers' perceptions of what they think young people need from education. Conceptualisations of newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers are however juxtaposed; for example, United Nations Rights of the Child (UNRC) guiding principles show an image of the child as vulnerable, traumatised and in need of protection but also at the same time as competent, autonomous, independent, resilient and agentic (Ang 2019). Thus, debates about curriculum and educational support for young sanctuary seekers need to be understood in relation to constructions of their identity. For example, when young sanctuary seekers are viewed as vulnerable and traumatised by their migration journey, the focus becomes teachers' understandings of unaccompanied sanctuary seekers' experiences, interventions from expert counsellors and therapists becoming a priority (e.g. McIntyre and Hall 2020). Referred to as the pathologising and medicalisation of refugees (Wernesjo 2012), Rutter (2006) has been critical of this focus arguing it occurs at the expense of broader concerns regarding unaccompanied sanctuary seekers' educational experiences. Both Rutter (2006) and Wernesjo (2012) point to the lack of research into unaccompanied sanctuary seekers structural conditions post-migration in the host country (i.e. poverty, isolation, social exclusion, racism and uncertain migration status) as troubling and problematic.

Methodology

This study adopts a case study approach which 'involves the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting' (Creswell 2013, 97); the case being a bespoke programme of education offered by an English Local Authority to unaccompanied sanctuary seekers age 15–16 arriving in the locality from January to July. The qualitative methods adopted for this research were focus groups and semi-structured interviews. In total, four focus groups were conducted. Two of the focus groups included the young people (five in total); for ethical reasons members of the Local Authority known to the young people joined both focus groups. The other two focus groups were with three Local Authority staff; all three staff took part in the first focus group, following which the researchers conducted a second follow-up focus group with the two staff who run the service day-to-day (Alicja and Zuzanna). The semi-structured interviews were conducted with three community partners: two from separate theatre organisations and one from the locality's professional football club.

The aim of the research was to uncover the essence of the Local Authority offer for newly arrived (January–July) sanctuary seekers aged 15–16 in the locality. The questions asked to all participants focussed on three broad themes: what is going well, what could be developed, and what would you like for the future. Only the focus group with Alicja and Zuzanna took on a different format, the purpose of this focus group being the clarification of specifics associated with the day-to-day running of the Local Authority offer and the opportunity to find out more about their perspectives on USST. It is acknowledged that the presence of Local Authority staff in the focus group with the young people may have influenced the young people's willingness to critique the offer openly and honestly. Alternative research designs were considered, such as conducting 1–1 interviews with each young person and having their foster parent present, or, conducting the focus group with adults present who are outside of the Local Authority and less well known to the young people. However, the ethical imperative had to take precedence over the research design, and thus it was deemed essential that the young people were (a) part of a group with other young people, and (b) accompanied by two adults whom they knew and trusted. Countering this challenge to some extent is the independence of the researchers/authors of this paper, both of whom work for a University not a local authority.

Offering a theoretically flexible approach to data analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic approach to analysis was adopted. As the research aim is broad, an inductive approach to data analysis was applied. Having completed the thematic analysis, Simplican et al.'s (2015) model for social inclusion was utilised to analyse emerging themes. Regarding the findings of this paper, the authors wish to point to the limitation of conducting small-scale qualitative research, in so much as the findings should be understood to be context specific reflecting each participant's personal viewpoint and thus not generalisable (Avarmidis and Norwich 2016).

Approval to conduct the research was given by a University ethics committee. The Local Authority in which this data was collected is not named and all participants are referred to by pseudonyms. The Local Authority service which developed the bespoke offer featured in this paper has a wider remit than supporting newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers, this includes supporting young people who are here in the UK with their family seeking sanctuary. However, in order to ensure attention is directed towards the obfuscation of discourse concerning the educational needs of young unaccompanied sanctuary seekers (Ott and O'Higgins 2019), the authors of this paper have named the service: the Unaccompanied Sanctuary Seekers' Team (USST). All participants were recruited purposively, the Local Authority acting as the gatekeeper to recruitment.

Conceptual framework: social inclusion

Social inclusion is a 'fundamental human right and intimately connected with the right to reside in a country' (Svoen, Dobson, and Tangen 2021); as a concept relating to those seeking sanctuary it is often referred to but undefined (e.g. Marsh and Dieckmann 2017; Guerra and Brindle 2018). This is perhaps unsurprising as it is argued to be largely unclear due to multiple and conflicting definitions in research and policy (Simplican et al. 2015). Simplican et al.'s (2015) own model of social inclusion highlights specific components of two overlapping domains: 'community participation' and 'interpersonal

relationships'. Described as mutually supportive of one another, the domains share components related to 'category' and 'structure'. The component of 'level' is also a feature of community participation; and the component of 'function' a feature of interpersonal relationships. Simplican et al. (2015) situates these domains in an ecological model that includes individual, interpersonal, organisational, community and socio-political factors. Cited by others over two-hundred-and-ninety times Simplican et al's (2015) model for social inclusion is defined in relation to people with intellectual disabilities. Like other academics researching sanctuary (Cavicchioli et al. 2020; Kalaf and Plante 2019), we have drawn on Simplican et al.'s (2015) construction of social inclusion because the defined characteristics identified in the model arguably pertain to both those with intellectual disabilities and those seeking sanctuary.

Category

Category in the domain of community participation refers to types of activity: 'education/employment'; 'leisure' (such as sport); 'cultural' and 'religious'; 'access to goods and services'; and 'political and civic'. In the interrelated domain of interpersonal relationships, category addresses the social networks people encounter through activity. For example encounters with, 'staff', 'friends', 'acquaintances' and 'family'. Addressing the nature of these relationships, Simplican et al. (2015) points to relationships facilitating both 'bridging' (the extension of a network) and/or 'bonding' (the building of a common bond or identity which increases trust, reciprocity and confidence).

Structure

Structure in the domain of community participation refers to 'segregated', 'semi-segregated' and 'integrated settings'. The interrelated domain of interpersonal relationships focusses on the structural elements associated with social inclusion: the 'length' and 'origin' of the relationship; the 'frequency' and 'location' of the contact; 'who initiates the contact'; 'reciprocity' in the relationship; and the 'intensity', 'formality' and complexity of the relationship. These relationships can also be evaluated in relation to: 'size', 'geographic dispersion, density' and 'homogeneity'.

Level and function

Level pertains to 'presence', 'encounter' and/or 'participation' in the community (presence possibly being an important precursor to participation). The function of these levels provides multiple kinds of social support, 'emotional' (care and trust), 'instrumental' (aid and services) and 'informational' (advice and suggestions). Level also pertains to the intensity of encounters, including 'encounters between strangers'; for example, day-to-day interactions in public spaces (i.e. park or coffee shop).

USST's bespoke offer

The bespoke offer provided by the Local Authority was developed in response to the challenge of placing newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers aged 15–16 into school

between January-July when the school system is heavily focussed on exams (Ott and O'Higgins 2019). Linked to the introduction of the National Transfer Scheme, the numbers of unaccompanied children aged 15–16 who were seeking sanctuary in the locality had risen since 2016, and in 2019 reached a peak of nineteen young people (seventeen boys and two girls). All nineteen young people were invited to take part in the research, the five young people interviewed were those who chose to participate.

Utilising the existing Local Authority team who support English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), USST established a bespoke educational offer for this group of young people. Run on a day-to-day basis by two staff (Alicja and Zuzanna) and overseen by the head of the service (Alexandre), USST have over the past two years developed the ESOL offer to include:

- (1) support to access other services;
- (2) support settling into the locality;
- (3) engagement with community partners through sport/culture;
- (4) access to Further Education;
- (5) continued support whilst attending Further Education.

The day-to-day term time offer is run Monday–Friday in the afternoon from a community centre local to the young people's residences. USST enrich this offer by drawing on partnerships with universal services (such as the police), targeted services (such as the Designated Nurse for Looked After Children) and referral services (such as social workers). USST also link with volunteer community partners within the locality: the professional football club, two theatre companies and an independent cinema/exhibition space. The primary focus of this article is the essence of the day-to-day offer and the role of the volunteer community partners in facilitating social inclusion as defined by Simplican et al. (2015).

Findings and analysis

The findings and analysis presented in the following sections are organised under the three main domains of Simplican et al.'s (2015) model for social inclusion: category, structure and level/function. While each domain of the model is discussed as a separate theme, it should be noted that all elements overlap, the whole being more than the sum of its parts.

Category

USST's core category is education, with links to other categories: sport, culture and access to goods/services. Run daily from the community centre by Alicja and Zuzanna, this physical base functions as a one-stop-shop, a trusted place where the young people come to learn, see their teachers, make friends and access bridges into other categories. Referring to their bond with USST staff, without exception all the young people interviewed spoke of their appreciation for Alicja and Zuzanna. As Jadil (a young person) says in his own words 'talk with me teacher, Alicja and Zuzanna make me happy'. When asked about their bond with the young people, whilst laughing Alicja says 'the

relationships build themselves, we have no choice!' Explaining in more detail, Alicja describes how she sees her role:

Helping them [the young people] find their feet. When they arrive they have nobody and then slowly they start building their lives. [...] So, we try to get them settled, so we see where they are at and build from there, because everybody comes from a different background, some of them have never been to school, some of them already know English, so it's a very individual approach. (Alicja, USST)

A personalised approach to education, that meets each young person at their point of entry (Furman 2019) evokes much that has been written about inclusive education over the past two decades. Drawing into closer focus the fundamentals at the heart of the USST approach, Alexandre talks about the importance of listening to the young people:

I am quite reluctant to use this term 'service users' because they are also our service designers - we share intellectual property with them ... every time when they say 'look this doesn't make sense', 'I really don't like', 'it's irrelevant' we stop doing it, because we're not ... we should never be comfortable in a position to tell people 'look this is good for you'. (Alexandre, Head of USST)

Bonding for USST is derived therefore from a responsiveness to the needs of the young people and working as partners with them, countering mistrust 'by keeping alive the possibility that these children, who have experienced the worst of the world, will be listened to as persons with distinct voices' (Veck and Wharton 2019, 13). Counteracting mistrust by listening can however at times be a challenge for USST; for example, while Jadil describes his happiness at talking with his teachers, he also describes the 'hell' of being moved under the National Transfer Scheme from one UK City to another. Reflecting on how he came to live in the City where this research was conducted, Jadil says:

No, I didn't choose it for myself. It was like some pushed me like, go there. Yeh, Yeh. I felt myself in hell. Till now I'm feeling myself in the hell, because it's not my favourite City. Like I don't like ... the City, like the City is not the type of city that I love, that I like I like to live. That make me difficult. (Jadil, young person)

Based on the formula that no Local Authority will have more than 0.07% of its total child population as an unaccompanied sanctuary seeker, the National Transfer Scheme means that unaccompanied young people can be moved from one UK city to another, before being settled in a new more permanent location. Jadil was resident in the city he liked for one week before being moved; responding to a question of choice, Jadil said:

Yeah, I don't like it when someone push me to do something. Maybe you don't like it as well? (Jadil, young person)

It is difficult to read Jadil's words and not be moved and wonder what could be improved for him. It is also worth noting that Jadil's experience is not an isolated one, USST knows of other young people in the City who describe similar accounts and feelings. As Alexandre (Head of USST) explains, whilst one week might sound like a short timeframe, if a young person builds bonds in that period, 'for that young person this is more than enough' to make any subsequent move feel very unsettling, and as Jadil

explained embodies emotional ‘hell’. Echoing the sentiments of Veck and Wharton (2019), Alexandre states:

I think very often we deprive ourselves of the most important tool we’ve got as educators, and that is actually listening. (Alexandre, Head of USST)

Whilst USST are unable to alter the national policy context in which they operate, they do ensure the bonds they build with the young people act as a bridge connecting them to community partners who share USST’s commitment to actively listening and working with the young people as partners. For example, as Jessica (Theatre Director) explained ‘we worked and re-imagined our model of working with the young people, based on co-production’. Applying Simplican et al.’s (2015) model of social inclusion, possibilities of shared learning between the young people and the theatre experts intensified the complexity of the relationship and built reciprocity through the co-creation of knowledge (Ledwith 2020). Co-created work which engages all in learning (students and teachers) providing challenge to the notion of ‘reciprocity’ as a form of conditional welcome subject to students being able to ‘do the work’ (Furman 2019).

Another bridging function of the USST team concerns access to, and continued support with FE. Recognising the young people’s shock at finding out they are not going to attend mainstream school and echoing a key message from the academic literature (Gladwell and Chetwynd 2018) Alexandre explains:

It is education before everything else that can help these young people rebuild their lives. To pick up those pieces that are scattered all over the place. (Alexandre, Head of USST)

This sentiment is further echoed by Alaz when he is asked what he’d like to do next:

Next? Err ... I like going to school, I am ready, next ... I am ready. I would like to go to school. I am ready for everything. I am ready. (Alaz, young person)

Although using the word ‘school’, Alaz is referring to his readiness and aspiration (following support from UTTS) to go to college.

Recognising the challenges of learning English in what Alexandre describes as the ‘dry classroom environment’, another key purpose of bridging with community partners concerns the contextualising of English language learning (Pastoor 2008). Aligned with Kruger (2018), USST, the football coaches and theatre groups all spoke about the English language practise/skills the young people engaged in by taking part in the broader bespoke offer, including going to the cinema. A merit of both the football and theatre sessions also being the nature of both mediums to draw on non-verbal strategies for communication. As Dozan explains from his perspective:

Football you don’t need language it’s only play and for the dancing, same only dance. (Dozan, young person)

This comment by Dozan is particularly significant, as it speaks to the success of meetings between the community partners and USST which addressed strategies to embed non-verbal communication.

Structure

The structural components of the USST offer (location, cost, entry point, and timing) are fundamentally important to the overall efficacy of the programme, for without a consideration of these elements the offer would fail at a basic level to be socially inclusive of the young people. Like the programmes researched by Fox and Paradies (2020), USST based its offer in locations within walking distance of the young people's residences (park, sports centre, city centre theatre or cinema). When the young people engaged in events outside the locality or with an additional cost (for example, watching a premiere league game at a football stadium and having a post-match meal, or going to the theatre/cinema) all costs were covered by USST or the community partners. Regarding immediacy of access, USST describe the importance of being able to include young people within a few days of their arrival in the locality and thus exceed expectations to meet the 'twenty school days' target for accessing education (DfE 2018). Drawing on Derrida's ethic of hospitality and welcoming, Furman (2019) refers to a kind of education as welcoming the young person who does not warn you of their coming. The immediacy of availability directly addressing the challenges associated with gaining access to a mainstream school place and avoiding additional barriers which can exist regarding intake dates to college for ESOL programmes (Ott and O'Higgins 2019).

The 'formality' and 'frequency' (Simplican et al. 2015) of the offer also appear to be factors facilitating the socially inclusive nature of the curriculum. Staffed everyday by Alicja and Zuzanna, USST operates an informal drop-in style structure which allows for those who have most recently arrived to attend every day and those who are at college to drop-in when they choose. Similarly, the football sessions are sustained throughout the year on an informal 'turn-up and play' basis, the informality argued to support the attendance of those with unsettled migration status (Jeanes, Connor and Alfrey 2015). The reliability and regularity of both parts of the programme meaning the young people always know where and when to find support or meet with a friendly welcoming group. The informality, reliability and regularity can also be interpreted as agentic for the young people, for while the offer is first made to them, they can choose when to 'initiate contact' (Simplican et al. 2015). The offer of community through an informal network holding significance for young sanctuary seekers who may feel isolated and marginalised at the very time they also want to develop their new 'hybrid' identities (Szenasi 2010). The informal community group structure also facilitating bridging-capital (Pastoor 2017); for example, as Alexandre explains, the young people who have been here for longer are far better placed than USST to give advice about where to get the best SIM card from, etc.

The informality of the offer also means the young people are welcome to ask Alicja and Zuzanna for help with other aspects of daily living such as filling in forms, advice on setting up a bank account, etc. Further illustrating the way young people's voices shape the service, the welcome is not conditional on the young person being recognisable as a student 'they are welcome period [...] with the understanding that they (the teacher) may never be able to identify some of them as students' (Furman 2019, 123). The young people's voices becoming part of a democratic process that makes the curriculum relevant, interesting and based on their expressed priorities (Tett 2010).

Level and function

The level of young people's experiences pertains fundamentally to their engagement in the community, be that at the level of presence, encounter or participation. Whereas the function of relationships refers to the emotional, instructional or informational nature of connection with others (Simplican et al. 2015). Starting first with 'level' of experience, the geographical structure of the offer is recognised as widening the spaces of belonging for the young people (Shepherd 2014; Opfermann 2020). This seems particularly relevant in relation to the theatre rehearsal rooms and independent cinema/exhibitions spaces which those interviewed described as places the young people might not otherwise have encountered. As Emma from the theatre group explains:

We gave them loads of opportunities, lots of taster workshops from writing to film, from music to dance, we took them on a tour round [locality-name] to show the cultural venues, we gave them little vouchers as well, [...] so they could go back at any point ... and feel part of the culture of the [locality-name] ... they started to make new friends and felt confident in walking through the doors of our cultural venues and felt welcome. (Emma, theatre based community partner)

Speaking to the significance of presence in the locality's cultural venues, the giving of vouchers to facilitate repeated visits addresses the structural component of 'initiation', supporting the young people's choice to be present at multiple sites, not just the community centre used by USST.

Regarding the function of the young people's engagement with all elements of the offer, the young people and the community partners emphasised the importance of doing something enjoyable and engaging emotionally by the simple act of having fun.

I feel very good when I was playing football and then, I play very good so, so that time I am really happy (Dozan, young person).

They just got to 'be', like other young people, and just play games, talk about music, have fun and have a laugh. (Jessica, Theatre Director, community partner)

Whilst 'having fun' may sound like an inconsequential outcome, it is a point of significance regularly referred to by young people in the sports and theatre literature (e.g. Spaaij and Schaillee 2020; Opfermann 2020). In both the categories of sport and culture, having fun also became a meaningful precursor to other learning. For example, through their cultural engagement the young people experienced a comedy show at the theatre when they opted to watch the performance of a live cabaret. Described as a cabaret show that 'champions dangerous, alternative, queer performance', the performance comically communicated information about the 'pre-existing culture they enter into' (Furman 2019). Comedy arguably being the 'most intimate and revealing means of communication' which can transcend cultural differences (Carr 2005, 3).

Regarding the playing of football, Evan (Community Engagement manager) articulates the way having fun playing football can lead to participation with different functions:

In the main it is a recreational programme, we want people to drop in, come and say hello, come and play, make some new friends, keep fit, and while we have got them there, we can start talking about, it maybe knife crime, it maybe racism, bullying, whatever it maybe we can start addressing current themes. (Evan, football community partner)



The broad function of the young people's participation in sport/culture, focused on friendship as well as the covering of informative topics like knife crime and sexuality, addresses those parts of the bespoke programme referred to by Ott and O'Higgins (2019) as life-skills relevant to living in Britain. The way these topics are introduced, not by the police but by community partners, does however speak to a different construction of the newly arrived sanctuary seeker (Wernesjo 2012), not as potential law breakers but as young people navigating life. The relevance of such discussion is highlighted by Jadil when he refers to choosing friends:

There are people, kind of people, type of young people that I don't like to make friend, they are ... I don't know on the kind of way that I never want to be in this way. Like people who smoke, like people who is like ... I dunno, like as a young people but he looks like homeless, you know, he is not thinking about his future I don't think he care of his self, do you know? (Jadil, young person)

The semi-segregated composite of the football group points however to the universal relevance of these topics to all young people growing up in England, and not just newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers. Targeted specifically at newly arrived sanctuary seekers, those attending the football are encouraged to bring friends with them to the session. As Evan explains, on a purely practical level you can have a better session (playing a round-robin event) when there are more people but more importantly it helps to create a friendly social atmosphere. All the young people attending for example are encouraged to socialise by sharing their favourite music with one another the semi-segregated composite of the group facilitating a cross-cultural experience:

You can clearly see the guys love music [...] so we encourage guys to get their phones out and play music and we are sharing cultural differences that way, you know their music and our music is all different, so we are sharing it. [...] The key thing is to facilitate the activities the young people like to have. (Evan, football community partner)

A challenge for USST concerns ways to include the young people in mainstream events and more specifically schooling. Attendance at football matches and theatre performances both facilitating mainstream community participation but the absence of a school place is as Alexandre says a missed opportunity for all. As Alexandre points out, every year in the locality schools have 'refugee week' – an event focussed on educating school pupils about the lives of those who are sanctuary seekers. Referring to the enrolling of unaccompanied young people in schools, Alexandre explains:

It's a unique opportunity for peer-to-peer support and learning, because these young people can actually provide their students [a school's population] with first-hand experience, learning from somebody who has a completely different cultural background, social background, language, experience of life and so on ... this is beneficial for SLT [the Senior Leadership Team], teachers, pupils and the school community. (Alexandre, Head of USST)

Aligned with constructions of the inclusive school, Alexandre evokes Veck and Wharton's (2019, 10) words regarding children being 'included for what they might actively contribute to the unfolding character of the school's culture', rather than a pathologised narrative of trauma and vulnerability (Wernesjo 2012). For as Alexandre says:

The title doesn't make them vulnerable, their status doesn't make them vulnerable but what does 'help' them to be vulnerable is the system. Because, when we consider the fact they

survived everything in their home country and then survived the journey to so called ‘safety’ and everything else, we are talking about extremely resilient young people. So, to refer to them by definition as ‘you are an unaccompanied asylum seeking child, therefore you are vulnerable’, it is a label, it is disrespecting, it is patronising and it’s not true. (Alexandre, Head of USST)

Conclusion

Addressing the obfuscation of discourse concerning the educational needs of young unaccompanied sanctuary seekers (Ott and O’Higgins 2019), this paper provides analysis of one Local Authority’s bespoke offer analysed in relation to Simplican et al.’s (2015) construction of social inclusion. Whilst the efficacy of the bespoke offer exceeds expectations regarding the ‘twenty school days’ target for accessing education (DfE 2018), it is also acknowledged that a limitation of this research derives from its ethical design. For whilst it is clear from Jadil’s comments that he felt able to speak critically about his UK experiences linked to the National Transfer Scheme, it is unclear the extent to which having Alicja and Zuzanna present during the focus groups affected the young people’s willingness to speak openly and honestly about the USST offer. It is also unclear the extent to which the young people may be exhibiting a form of ‘migratory indebtedness’, expressed as a ‘fragile obligation to demonstrate gratitude amidst observations and feelings of discontent and dissent’ (Iqbal, Omar, and Maghbouleh 2021, 25).

Based on the data gathered, it appears the immediately available one-stop-shop approach, which is built around the ethos of being the service the young people need it to be (regardless of prior experience or gender), speaks to a construction of education as hospitable and welcoming (Furman 2019). Underpinned by a curriculum focussed on learning English in a relevant context, community partnerships with the football club, theatre groups and independent cinema/exhibition space widens the places of belonging for the young people. Ways of learning, such as: co-constructing learning, discussion of relevant topics such as knife crime and bullying with role models from the community, peer-to-peer support and gaining help with day-to-day access to services, speaks to constructions of the young sanctuary seeker as agentic. Clearly aware of the arguments against pathologising young sanctuary seekers and constructing them as ‘vulnerable’, USST strives to build a meaningful bond with the young people which bridges their social inclusion into the community. Crucially the community partners with whom they work share this ethos and build on it through the medium of their own category (sport/culture). The significance of this co-ordinated community approach potentially advancing the theory of social inclusion, by drawing attention to the way strong value driven leadership, which includes a focus on practical support, facilitates engagement from community partners.

Structurally accessible through location and entry point, the offer tries to operate in all three domains (segregated, semi-segregated and mainstream) the essence of the programme functioning as the transition from segregated to mainstream education. Alexandre speaks however of missed opportunities for schools and like Veck and Wharton (2019) describes the active contributions that young sanctuary seekers would bring to the unfolding character of a school. A key challenge for USST concerns the building



of a bridge between the young people they support and the locality's mainstream school population. The semi-segregated nature of the football offer, specifically for young sanctuary seekers but open to anyone they would like to invite shines a beacon of light onto a bridge that leads to mainstream schools. Run on a Friday afternoon, civic minded young people from the school could volunteer to regularly attend the football sessions, the opportunity for having fun and learning mixing in an end of week recreational activity. Going much further, with the support of Headteachers (McIntyre and Hall 2020) a Local Authority service like USST could draw on its professional understanding of the essence of what works, analysed in this paper in relation to social inclusion (Simplican et al. 2015) to support schools with the development of their own offer for newly arrived unaccompanied sanctuary seekers aged 15–16. Collaborative work of this nature enabling mainstream schools to imagine and conceive their own offer which has at its heart: a breadth of categories (that include sport and culture), a socially inclusive structure, and varied levels of community engagement that have multiple functions. Hospitable and welcoming to the young person who does not warn them of their coming (Furman 2019), an offer such as this could address constructions of the unaccompanied sanctuary seeker as 'vulnerable' and provide opportunities for the whole school community to learn.

Note

1. The acronym GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education. GCSEs are exams taken by English children aged 15–16.

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