Title of paper: Developing digital language self-portraits with young refugees: multilingual identity, belonging and translocal connections

Refugee children and families often speak more than one language and may have multiply-located senses of self and translocal emotional connections which may vary between generations. Given the current context of 'superdiversity' and increasingly hostile political and media climate for refugees and migrants in the UK, it is important to provide space for the expression of young people's own narratives and representations of their identity. This paper seeks to address the following research questions: How are young people’s and adults’ sense of self and belonging shaped by multilingualism and translocal emotional connections? How are caring relations stretched across space?

In addressing these questions, the paper discusses emerging findings from innovative participatory research with UK-born young people from African refugee backgrounds and recently arrived young Syrian refugees as part of a larger exploratory project on forced migration, care and family relations, funded by the University of Reading. The research adapted Busch's (2012) linguistic repertoire and Farmer and Cepin's (2016) digital body mapping approach to language portraits. The use of ipads enabled young people to create digital self-portraits to express their embodied feelings about speaking different languages and about their identity and belonging. Many young people used a national flag and colours to symbolise particular languages and their connections to different countries, as previous approaches to language portraits have also found (Busch, 2012; Coffey, 2015). Alongside Farmer and Cepin (2016), I argue, however, that the use of digital art/collage software with an actual photograph of their own bodies enabled participants to create a digital self-portrait that expressed more about their own identity and sense of belonging than is usually the case in conventional language portrait approaches that use a generic body outline.

A sharp contrast was apparent in the significance of the English language to UK-born and recently arrived young refugees. Recently arrived Syrian young men whose first language was Arabic proudly adorned their heads and most of their bodies with the Union Jack flag and English, which they were learning and which they saw as key to their imagined futures. In contrast, two UK-born Somali young women associated their heads/faces with Arabic and Somali, reflecting both their own sense of identification and processes of racialised othering. One young woman did not know where to fit the British flag and finally placed it on her feet, writing the caption 'Barely British'. Although some participants of Zimbabwean heritage only spoke English, they represented other aspects of their identity through their images, such as learning sign language, and through the titles they chose. The paper also draws on wider discussions about language barriers in accessing support in the UK with refugee women and young people’s roles as carers and ‘language brokers’ for their parents. It discusses findings from participatory mapping exercises with adults and young people about their personal communities and translocal connections, showing the importance of understanding complex caring relationships and multiply-located senses of belonging among refugees in settlement countries.

References
