THE ROLE AND IMPACT OF YOUNG PEOPLE SEEKING INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION AS GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATORS THROUGH PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: Drawing on Freire's (1970) work on critical pedagogy, this article considers how young people seeking international protection can take an active role as educators within the context of global citizenship education (GCE). It centres on a youth arts project called *Elevate Youth Arts* led by the Irish Refugee Council in partnership with Creativity and Change (Munster Technological University) and youth arts practitioners. During this project, sixteen young people from the Irish Refugee Council came together to co-create a performance on the theme of power and war. This article explores the importance of the voice of young people seeking international protection within GCE, particularly through performance. Performing arts have the capacity to engage audiences provoking both critical thinking and empathy. While people seeking international protection are often discussed in GCE literature, their role as educators is largely overlooked. Freire's (1970) anti-oppression approach supports learners to move from objects to agents of their own change. From this perspective, we argue that young people seeking international protection can play a meaningful role in GCE, provided it is through a supportive process that centres their wellbeing, long-term engagement, and creative expression.

Key words: Young People seeking international protection; Global Citizenship Education; Paulo Freire; Theatre for Change; Transformational Learning; Anti-oppression; Youth Participation.

Background and context

The asylum and migration landscape in Ireland has changed dramatically over the last few years. The war in Ukraine, the easing of COVID-19 travel restrictions and the finalising of Brexit have all led to significant increases in the number of people seeking international protection in Ireland. People seeking international protection are provided for by the state under a system known as 'Direct Provision' (DP), which was established in Ireland in 2000 in response to an increase in the number of protection applications and a shortage of accommodation (Ní Raghallaigh, Foreman and Feely, 2016) and to remove people seeking protection from the welfare system by providing for their basic needs (O'Reilly, 2018). In the 25 years since its inception, Direct Provision has been thoroughly researched, examined and criticised (see for example Fanning and Veale, 2004; Arnold, 2012; Uchechuku Ogbu, Brady and Kinlen, 2014; Atkins, 2015; Moran et al., 2019; O'Riordan and Fitzgibbon, 2020; Dunbar et al. 2020; Murphy, Keogh and Higgins, 2018; Conlon, 2014; Meany Sartori and Nwanze, 2021).

What comes through overwhelmingly in the literature and research on Direct Provision is the system's toxic, traumatic and depressing effects on people seeking protection (Hewson, 2022), which has spurred numerous protests and complaints over the years. Direct Provision is managed by the International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) located within the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. The most recent IPAS statistics show that there are 32,725 people living in DP (DCEDIY, 2025) and as of September 2024, 5,068 of these were young people aged 18-25 (DCEDIY, 2024). The experiences of young people seeking international protection in Ireland are often overlooked in research, policy and practice with the focus usually being on children and unaccompanied minors or adults. Nevertheless, these young people face multiple intersecting challenges including family separation, isolation, access to education, information and services, and issues with their mental health and wellbeing. In addition to the experiences leading them to seek protection, many young people have further experienced intensely traumatic journeys to get to Ireland, including spending long periods of time without food and water, months of walking, and dangerous sea crossings. Upon arrival, they face challenging living conditions in the Direct Provision system, have very limited financial means and experience barriers to integration, inclusion and participation.

Through its youth work programme, the Irish Refugee Council (IRC) aims to provide spaces for these young people to come together, build a community, access resources, and have fun. Beginning in September 2023, the IRC collaborated with Creativity and Change, Munster Technological University and Kelvin Akpaloo from *Elevate Youth Arts*, an 18-month creative arts project which centred the voices and experiences of young people seeking international protection. Like all of the IRC's youth projects, *Elevate Youth Arts* was devised based on the learning and feedback from previous work with its youth group, and in conjunction with Chriszine Backhouse (MTU) and Kelvin Akpaloo, two GCE creative facilitators who had worked with the IRC youth group on various projects since 2020. *Elevate Youth Arts* brought together 16 young people from the IRC's youth group, three co-facilitators from the IRC's young leaders programme (Daniel Kamenyezi, Marwa Zamir and Nike-Monisola Awoyemi), two lead facilitators (Chriszine Backhouse and Kelvin Akpaloo) and two youth workers from the IRC (Natasha Muldoon and Aoife Dare). The 16 young people (eight male, eight female) who participated in the project were all in Ireland to seek international protection and came from a range of countries including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Somalia, Jordan, Namibia, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

All the participants were living in Direct Provision/IPAS accommodation and just over half the group were in Ireland alone, without the support of their family. The young people were all active members of the IRC's youth group and had been involved in at least one previous project. *Elevate Youth Arts* included various activities and outputs including preparatory workshops, creative facilitation training, a one week arts residential, two public performances, the establishment of a Youth Advisory Panel and a final showcase event.

Co-creating a performance on power and war

The process of developing the performance started with a one day taster session. During this session, the young people had the opportunity to try a variety of creative methods and to explore themes through open-ended questions and discussion. Through this process, the group decided their performance would focus on the themes of power and war. During the week-long residential, participants split into dance, theatre, and music groups, each co-creating work

with facilitators around the theme. While facilitators guided the process, the young people shaped the content. Each day ended with group sharings, followed by a youth advisory panel which reflected on the emerging meaning and explored how to weave the pieces into a unified whole. This process allowed for multiple perspectives and complexity of expression in response to the project themes.

Performance as a pedagogical tool

Concepts from Paulo Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy informed the collective-creation process, specifically problem-posing and conscientisation. The facilitators used creative methodologies to support the participants in exploring questions of power. For example, in the theatre group, participants created physical images to embody the power dynamics that underpin war and displacement. This process drew on an element of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed methodology of image theatre, which uses physical sculptures or 'frozen images' created by participants to explore social issues and power dynamics, and in which they use their bodies to represent experiences and emotional states as a form of social commentary. In supporting the participants to devise the collective creation performance, the facilitators put into practice Freire's (Ibid.: 52) critical pedagogy whereby 'they must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world'.

As a problem-posing method, the participant actors wanted to make visible the structural conditions that constrain the lives of young international protection applicants, to challenge Eurocentric notions of victimhood as an internal, decontextualised attribute ('that poor person'), and to evoke in the viewer a curiosity, a need to understand 'what am I being shown here'? It is pedagogical as the frozen sculptures destabilise taken for granted meanings, and through their visual uniqueness, disrupt normative, easy assumption-making. The young people then used these images to write spoken word poems, developing complex themes that included an analysis of privilege and inequality. Their sculptures and poems posed questions about making visible the humanity of those with little power, about hierarchies of victimhood, and fundamentally, about what does it mean to be human? The method invited the onlooker to really 'look' and 'see'.

In this way, the young actors became educators through performance, posed problems to the audience, avoiding simple solutions, and revealing the inequality within both war and displacement, promoting conscientisation. As one audience member said it was 'Very confronting of my chosen ignorance'. The audience member was able to see the ways in which they had previously looked away and was prompted to reflect more deeply on their own role within systems of oppression. The group's collective creative process allowed the participants to wrestle with two emerging forces: the unequal power dynamics in our world and the hope for a different future. As one audience member said, the theme of the performance was 'war and conflict but also slivers of light and hope through it'. Creativity has the capacity to hold this complexity by not forcing a binary response.

The performance

The performance struck a powerful balance between confronting injustice and inspiring hope. It began with an energetic dance accompanied by drums, immediately drawing in the audience. This transitioned into a wistful spoken word poem by project participant Sandile, titled *My Youthful Letter.* The poem described a boy conscripted into a 'fight he didn't choose, caught in a cycle he can't control'. In the poem, joyful memories of strawberry fields are replaced by the haunting image of a 'red blood pit', as he longs for lost innocence and freedom from war. As the poem ended, other performers entered singing *Rising Together*, an original song offering hope through collective strength with lines like 'In unity we find our voice'. This moment of solidarity gave way to two powerful spoken word pieces confronting inequality more directly.

In her spoken word piece titled *The Other Me*, Neo, one of the project participants, explores how birthplace shapes experience either as a space of possibility or a place of invisibility. Blessing's poem *I Am the Victim* followed, spoken from the perspective of an unreliable narrator who claims victimhood while clearly being an oppressor. Lines like 'give me the key, I will swallow it and set no one free' provoked deep reflection, sparking post-show discussion about complicity in injustice. Next came a choreographed dance to the song *In the Real World*, which imagines a world 'away from hatred and judgment' (Serra 2019). The dancers' fluid movements embodied this possibility of a world without

inequality, echoing Rob Hopkins' (2019) proposal that people need to first imagine change before they can enact change. This set the stage for *Dear Human*, a spoken word piece by project participant, Amina. Urging action and empathy, it built urgency with lines like:

> "Don't we see them calling out for us?
> Don't we see the hopelessness in their eyes?
> Don't we Humans?
> Don't we?"

It ended with a call for unity: 'If we stand together, we can make a difference'.

As the words lingered, performers returned to sing their original song, *Let's Change the World*. Rather than feeling hollow, these words carried weight after the poem, becoming a genuine call to action. The song led into a spirited dance to *Rise Up*, filling the theatre with energy. It was a joyful, defiant invitation to act – embodying Toni Cade Bambara's idea that 'the role of the artist is to make revolution irresistible' (Bambara and Henderson, 2017). The audience felt this message deeply, many rising to join the performers in an impromptu group dance. It was a joyful moment, but also a collective commitment to step up, and be part of the change. As one audience member said, 'We all have a role to play in dismantling structures of oppression'.

Audience response and impact

The interspersing of elements throughout the performance that revealed inequality, and inspired hope was an effective combination that led to a high level of audience engagement. At the performances at the Centre of Excellence for Climate Action and Sustainability (CECAS), Cork Midsummer Festival and the Creative Symposium, audience members were invited to complete a post-performance feedback survey and took part in post-show discussions. Across the three events, 42 people filled in a survey – eight at CECAS, 24 at Cork Midsummer Festival and 10 after the symposium. Of those who completed the survey, 94 percent reported deepened understanding of global justice issues after attending the performance and 93 percent said the performance had a 'high impact' of fostering empathy and understanding social issues.

An important theme for the audience was the power of art to build connection between audience and performers. This was apparent in the way that the engagement of the audience was entwined with the talent and authenticity of the performers. While not professional artists, the performers none-the-less achieved a high level of performance. The passion and personal connection to the performance resulted in an impactful show that built a strong rapport with the audience. One audience member said what stood out to them was 'the power of connection, how creativity and the arts can build understanding'. Another audience member said that 'the performance reminded me of the power of art to inspire and move'. Together, these responses highlight how the performers' genuine emotion and sincerity, combined with technical skill, created a meaningful experience that resonated with the audience.

These high levels of reported impact and connection are interesting to reflect on, given the demographic and experiential gap between the young performers and their audience. Young international protection applicants have lived lives defined by mobility across international borders, often accumulated traumatic experiences which then became stories told through words and bodies organised in space as visual metaphors. The audience was largely Irish, with most having no personal experience of the stories being portrayed. Yet the performance created an intersubjective space in which the experiences portrayed could be thought about collectively. Stern (2005) notes intersubjectivity is the capacity to share, know, and enter into the lived subjective experience of another. In entering into the storied world of international protection applicants, audience members noted an experiential sense of 'disruption' and of some assumptions being challenged. As such, the experience was developmental, resulting in a shift of perspective. One audience member recalled: 'It was challenging because it confronts us with our complacency'. Another audience member noted, 'It made me realise how easy it is to have notions of people seeking refuge when I live in comfort'.

A key developmental shift described by these audience members was that of being able to see their own positionality from the outside in, so to speak, of confronting inequality, and taking ownership of a positionality of comfort

versus that of being a person seeking refuge. As such, the performance opened up the possibility for audience members of being able to mentalise about the experience of the refuge seeker. Mentalisation is the capacity to think about one's own mind and that of others, and to interpret behaviours through the lens of mental states like thoughts, feelings, motivations. It is a crucial component in the development of social learning, empathy and in social interaction (Fonagy, Gergely and Jurist, 2018). Arguably, the performance created a contact zone between young people and their audience to support the emergence of xenosophia, a concept elaborated by Streib (2024: 154) as a 'positive, wisdom-generating process of relating' to that which is foreign, strange or unfamiliar. It is not simply tolerance, but a deeper engagement with others outside one's social group that can lead to wisdom and insight.

From object to subject: young people seeking international protection as GCE educators

Although arts-based engagement with vulnerable groups, including young people seeking international protection, have been studied, few articles explore their role as educators in developing global citizenship. A search through the *Policy and Practice* journal reveals over 60 articles that discuss refugees, but none of these articles explore the role that young people seeking international protection could play in educating others about these concepts. How could these young people contribute to educating others about the root causes of displacement? These young people have a lived experience that can directly engage people with issues in a way that promotes deeper compassion and action. This was reflected in our performance by audience members who commented: 'I'm really very moved seeing these young people. [It] makes everything I hear on the news very real' and 'who is telling the story matters'. When young people directly impacted by displacement share their story, it can connect with people in a compelling way.

The impact of this experience was not only felt by the audience members. When reflecting on the performance, the young people themselves strongly identified with this process. One young person highlighted how amazing it was to see audience members 'have emotional responses through our act' and that they were 'touched by our work'. Another young person reflected that 'there was a strong sense from the audience that they took the message that the group

was trying to give them' and that this exchange was her favourite part of the performance. The exchange of emotion with the audience was mentioned by another participant who said: 'I stared at the audience and I could feel, like, we were exchanging emotion. I was exchanging emotion with the audience…we understand each other, we are exchanging emotion together'. But the experience was not limited to emotion. The young people felt that the performance gave them a chance to raise awareness, be heard, and make change. One young person highlighted how the whole project had helped her to understand that she had a voice and she felt empowered to use it:

> "I realised that you can actually voice your opinion about how you feel about certain things, especially about social justice…there are, like, some people who are willing to hear us out and willing to give us the opportunity to voice out our struggles and everything. So for that I feel like it opened my mouth to actually kind of step up and speak up for myself".

Another young person pointed out the importance of the performance for raising awareness because 'a lot of people are also in the dark, or just don't see the seriousness or the urgency of the stuff that's going on around us'. She felt that it was important to find more ways of connecting with people to show them 'how serious everything is' and how young people 'have a voice' and have the power to 'change stuff that's happening around [them]'.

Considerations for future practice

While it is clear that young people seeking international protection can have a significant impact as GCE educators, it is incumbent upon anyone working with this cohort of young people to pay careful attention and consideration to practical and ethical considerations. Expecting young people with lived experience of displacement to share their stories as a way of educating the public and building empathy is potentially ethically problematic, and needs careful and ongoing reflective practice. Eve Tuck (2009) critiques the use of 'damage-centred research' in social science. Damage-centred research is research that focuses only on people's narratives of hardship and pain. In damage-centred research, pain and loss are documented in order to obtain particular political or material gains. Tuck

(Ibid.: 416) argues for a shift to desire-based frameworks, which are concerned with 'understanding complexity, contradiction and the self-determination of lived-lives'.

Expecting or asking young people, who have experienced forced displacement, loss and trauma, to 'educate' the public risks reifying a damage-focused narrative and putting the responsibility of changing minds and opinions on the shoulders of the very people who are impacted most by the issues being discussed. However, this is not to say that young people with lived experience should not be positioned as GCE educators; we are, in fact, arguing the opposite. Telling stories in their own voice, that is the stories *they* want to tell, can be empowering, even an act of resistance to passively featuring in other people's stories. But we are saying that certain safeguards need to be in place to ensure this is done in an ethical way.

Creative and arts-based methods of sharing personal stories allow young people with lived experience of displacement to take ownership of both the content of the story and how it is shared. Young people can choose to fictionalise their narratives; they can choose to share personal stories or create art based on a cause about which they feel strongly. Creative methods lend themselves to this flexibility and allow young people to control the narrative by putting distance between themselves and the piece, or performance, if necessary. In the Elevate youth project, the young people chose to fictionalise their characters, and to include a sense of hopefulness alongside their portrayals of the pain of injustice, which was a protective factor for them as performers.

As well as providing narrative control, creativity also allows people to connect deeply with each other through the collaborative process and collective act of performance. This process supported the emotional well-being of the participants and led to deepening friendships, something crucial to young people who have been displaced from their communities and are often isolated. One participant said 'before I joined, like, the group, right, I wouldn't say I was sad, but I was sad in a sense (*because)* I never had no friends'. The creative process facilitated the depth of these connections: 'I had really strong bonds with the friends that I was with because I got to know them on a creative level'. The project

gave the participants a sense of belonging: 'it has also allowed me to connect with others who probably have similar concerns and passions by just creating a sense of a strong community and support'.

Some of the processes we put in place to foster this sense of community included: co-creation of a group contract; opening and closing circles each day that allowed participants to share how they are feeling; small group feedback sessions; fun evening activities where the group could relax together; and the provision of nutritious food that the group were able to help choose. We drew from the resource 'Catch the fire' to establish a positive group dynamic that emphasised co-leadership and collaboration with the young people (Vera and Speigel, 2013). Through these processes, the participants were able to connect with each other on an emotional level, which promoted well-being:

> "I guess it kind of opened up my heart a bit. Not that it was fully closed. But... things weren't going through... Yeah, there was like a safeguard on it where I would feel things. But then, in the project it's like that wall was kind of taken down, and it allowed me to again connect and feel deeper".

This openness to emotional expression continued after the project: 'I discovered poetry... now I tend to write a lot about how I'm feeling... I'm voicing my opinion'.

Performance involves the creation of an intersubjective, dialogical space between performers and audience, as argued earlier. Great care was taken to ensure, as far as possible, that the audience was one that was positively receptive to the performers and their message. Ireland has experienced a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment as is the case elsewhere in Europe. A hostile or negative audience response could be a risk factor for young international protection applicants' wellbeing. Venues were chosen with care, and advertising for the public performances was done through trusted organisations' social media. Overall, the project had a positive impact on the emotional well-being of the participants, with 75 percent reporting good or very good emotional well-being at the end of the project, with the remaining participants saying they were

'neutral'. This is an encouraging outcome considering the difficult life circumstances facing these young people.

Using creative methods in this way leads to another salient point – the role of creative facilitators and facilitation. Creative facilitation in *Elevate Youth Arts* was led by two experienced facilitators, GCE educators and youth arts practitioners – Chriszine Backhouse and Kelvin Akpaloo. The Irish Refugee Council youth project had worked with both these facilitators prior to this project, completing many workshops and youth arts projects together since 2020. What this meant is that there was a pre-existing level of trust and understanding between all the partners, and between the facilitators and participants. A further point in relation to facilitation was the inclusion of three youth co-facilitators in the facilitation team. These young people were members of the IRC's young leaders' group and had all undertaken some youth arts training prior to the project starting. During the residential, they were in charge of various aspects of facilitation with one of them being the lead facilitator of the singing group. As young people who had come through the IRC's youth project, joined the young leaders programme and were now in paid youth facilitation roles, they acted not only as role models for the participants but were also key to the success of the project.

The importance of long-term engagement with young people seeking international protection cannot be overstated, particularly when it comes to ensuring that their involvement in projects like this and their experience as GCE educators is not tokenistic. The IRC's youth work programme has been running for nine years. During this time, we have implemented many short-term youth arts projects, often in partnership with Chriszine and Kelvin. All of the young people who participated in *Elevate* had previously been involved in at least one other project with us; many of them had worked with the facilitators before and relationships already existed. Although *Elevate* was a standalone project, the young people continue to participate in the IRC's youth group and some of them have also joined Young Voices of Africa, a group run by Kelvin Akpaloo. Providing opportunities for long-term engagement, putting in the work to build relationships and trust, and ensuring that young people can take on a

leadership role in projects must all be prioritised if we want to encourage and position young people to take on active roles in global citizenship education.

Conclusion: towards a more inclusive GCE

Elevate Youth Arts demonstrates the transformative potential of positioning young people seeking international protection as educators and active participants in global citizenship education. Through methods rooted in Freirean pedagogy, the project supported young people to explore the complex issues of war, inequality, and power, and to share their creativity in ways that fostered empathy, mentalisation and critical reflection among audiences. Artistically, finding a balance between revealing injustice and inspiring hope has resulted in an 'irresistable' call to action. The audience feedback highlights how performance can deepen engagement with people and concepts outside of one's social group, leading to understanding that goes beyond tolerance.

Crucially, the project's ethical approach – built on long-term relationships, youth co-facilitation, and creative control – ensured that participants' maintained agency over their stories and safety, avoiding exploitative dynamics. This project underscores the importance of sustained, trust-based engagement that centres youth voice and leadership in shaping how young people who are seeking international protection can contribute to GCE. Global citizenship educators can actively include young people with lived experience of displacement as educators and collaborators. Creative processes that emphasise belonging and connection can support the well-being of the young people, ensuring they are benefitting from their role as GCE educators. By embracing creative, ethical, and youth-led approaches, GCE can better promote justice, empathy, and social transformation making global citizenship education truly inclusive and impactful.

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