

# FACING THE OTHER: DEVELOPMENT EDUCATION AND 'ENCOUNTER' IN CONTEXTS OF MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT

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**Abstract:** Migration and displacement to the global North have increased in recent years, and a growing number of social programmes have attempted to organise 'encounter' between young newcomers and their peers at school. Drawing on qualitative research during a large European Union (EU)-funded project for migrant and refugee wellbeing in two English secondary schools, this article examines the impact of school-based interventions on young people's peer relationships in contexts of migration and displacement. It uses focus group data and ethnographic fieldnotes to foreground the perspectives of young people and professionals in the two English secondary schools. Taking the Levinasian view of encounter as inherently 'unorganisable', the article shows how school-based interventions can encourage self-definition and address migration-related stereotypes among young people, opening up (although never guaranteeing) possibilities for their encounter. At the same time, however, these interventions can reinforce alienating distinctions and overlook real inequalities shaping young people's peer relationships in contexts of migration and displacement. The article draws out implications for development education policy and practice in these settings.

**Key words:** Migration; Displacement; Encounter; Levinas; School-based Interventions; Belonging.

"I'm not a migrant!" – Kingsley, East London school

## Introduction

In the context of increasing migration and displacement to the global North, it has been suggested that school-based interventions can nurture a sense of belonging among young migrants and refugees and their new peers (Tyrer and Fazel, 2014; Pastoor, 2015; Fazel and Betancourt, 2018; Durbeej et al., 2021; Spaas et al., 2023). These interventions join a growing cohort of social

programmes which seek to harness the potential of intercultural ‘encounters’ to effect cultural change and transformation among young people from diverse backgrounds (Amin, 2002; Harris, 2016; Wilson, 2017). The notion of ‘organising’ encounter through school-based interventions raises important epistemological and ethical questions which have yet to be addressed by empirical research. Can encounter ever be organised? What are the effects of trying to do so through school-based interventions in contexts of migration and displacement? This article helps to fill this gap in the literature through qualitative research on a large EU-funded project for migrant and refugee wellbeing in two secondary schools in England. We draw on the work of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas to theorise ‘encounter’.

For Levinas (1985: 60), the sociality characterised by the ‘face-to-face’ encounter ‘cannot have the same structure as knowledge’. Levinas explains that in the face-to-face relation we are confronted with the absolute alterity and ‘otherness of the other’ (Ibid.: 77). In confronting this otherness, our own otherness and unique personhood is confirmed. Yet the desire for the ‘otherness of the other’ can never be satisfied through ‘knowledge’ because the face-to-face encounter is the ‘non-synthesizable par excellence’ (Ibid.). It evades representation. Beavers (1993: 3) notes that, in Levinasian terms, ‘The face of the Other resists my power to assimilate the Other into knowledge; it resists possession, which would have the net result of silencing the voice of the Other as Other’. Only in meeting the other in the vulnerability of the ‘face-to-face’ encounter can I fulfil my ethical responsibility to them and sanction the moral imperative to ‘welcome the stranger in your midst’. Beavers emphasises that this ethical dimension is spontaneous: it is ‘not predicated to this event from a pre-existing ethical base, it is the very emergence of ethics itself’ (Ibid.). Although encounter can only emerge organically between individuals, studies have argued that it can be encouraged in different ways, for example by dismantling stereotypes or challenging entrenched economic and political inequalities (Amin, 2002; Valentine, 2008; Butler, 2012). Because practising vulnerability requires self-confidence (Brown, 2017), ‘safe spaces’ may also be necessary in order ‘to offer an important site of respite and self-definition for marginalised groups’ (Wilson, 2017: 614). Wilson (Ibid.) emphasises, however, that the potential for encounter in these spaces is minimal because encounters are never ‘safe’. As hooks (1989:

19) confirms, the margin ‘is not a “safe” place. One is always at risk’. For encounters to happen, ‘something has to be left open’ (Wilson, 2017: 612).

This article is based on a case study of the ‘RefugeesWellSchool’ (RWS) project (2018-2022), an EU-funded project that examined the effectiveness of school-based interventions in promoting the wellbeing of migrant and refugee adolescents in six countries across Europe (Belgium, Finland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and England). Several interventions focused specifically on encouraging peer group belonging. These included the ‘Peer Integration and Enhancement Resource’ (PIER) programme, and a ‘Classroom Drama’ workshop, which were conducted in two secondary schools in England. The eight-week PIER intervention aimed to develop ‘empathy and understanding’ for migrants and refugees by exploring themes such as reasons for displacement, migrant and refugee journeys, the asylum-seeking process, and social challenges and opportunities in the host country. The programme also encouraged young people from both migrant and host backgrounds to reflect on their diverse and multiple identities and to consider their relationships with each other. The first author facilitated the PIER intervention in a majority White British school in Brighton & Hove with Year Eight students (aged twelve to thirteen).

The nine-week Classroom Drama programme aimed to encourage ‘positive interethnic relationships’ by engaging young people in theatrical expression relating to themes of migration, exclusion, pluriform identities, and cultural adaptation in host societies. Drama therapists implemented the Classroom Drama workshop with Year Eight and Year Nine students (aged twelve to fourteen) in an ethnically diverse school in East London. East London is characterised by ‘superdiversity’, a concept which denotes increased diversity not only between migrant groups but also within them in certain cities and countries (Vertovec, 2007; Crul, 2016).

We use focus group data and ethnographic observations from the RWS project to foreground the perspectives and experiences of young people and professionals (including school staff and drama therapists) who were involved in the two interventions. The following section details the research methodology;

we then present and discuss the research findings before considering implications for development education policy and practice in the conclusion.

## **Methodology**

The RWS project employed a mixed methods evaluation, conducting questionnaires and focus groups with young people and adults (including school staff and intervention facilitators) before ('T1') and after ('T2') the interventions. The aim of the evaluation at T1 was to gather information about young people's social and emotional wellbeing in each context. T2 aimed to evaluate the interventions and to understand contextual factors which might have influenced their effectiveness at each school. Pre- and post-intervention focus groups were conducted with a random sample from students who participated in the interventions. The focus groups were collaboratively designed by a qualitative cross-country team within the RWS project. In England, eight focus groups relating to the Classroom Drama intervention were conducted in the East London school: two with students and one with teachers at T1, and four with students and one with the drama therapists at T2. Nine focus groups relating to the PIER intervention were conducted in the school in Brighton & Hove: three with students and one with teachers at T1, and four with students and one with the school's English as an Additional Language (EAL) team at T2. The T2 focus groups at the Brighton & Hove school were conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020.

Questionnaires were conducted with both 'intervention' and 'control' student groups at each school. Although the questionnaire data is not used in this article, ethnographic observation by the first author during the quantitative evaluations in England gives insight into how young people reacted in different ways to the language used by the RWS project. The second round of questionnaires at the Brighton & Hove school had to be conducted online due to the COVID-19 'lockdown' in March 2020, meaning that it was not possible to observe young people's reactions to the project. Information sheets and consent forms were given to all research participants. These were translated into eighteen different languages. Parental consent was required for participants in the RWS evaluation who were below the age of thirteen. The information sheet provided participants with information about who to speak to should they feel

upset after having taken part in the research; it also informed participants that they could withdraw from the research at any stage in the process. Pseudonyms have been used to anonymise the names of all individuals in this article ('R' refers to 'respondent' in the focus group quotes). When describing young people's places of origin, we refer to regions (e.g. 'Northeast Africa'), rather than countries, in order to ensure their anonymity.

The article presents the findings in relation to each intervention and discusses their implications for development education policy and practice. Following Levinas, we understand encounter to involve self-confidence and setting aside stereotypes; we therefore examined the data to identify the impact of the interventions on young people's perceptions both of themselves, and of each other. We also understand encounter to be inherently 'unorganisable', and so examined how young people responded to the project's attempts to organise their encounter in different ways. We returned to the data many times during our analysis, following the iterative approach advocated by Braun and Clark (2006) in their guide to thematic analysis.

### **Stereotypes and self-definition**

The PIER programme attempted to challenge xenophobic media and political narratives by using illustrated, written, and animated stories to portray refugees' experiences of flight and resettlement. George, a member of the EAL team at the Brighton & Hove school, said that for British students during PIER, 'there was a lot of new learning for the kids, you know, hearing the facts and dispelling some of the myths'. As Eten (2017: 59) posits, development education programmes have 'an important role to play in diffusing the prejudice and stereotypes that hang around migrant communities in the North'. This was confirmed by a British student [R4] during a post-intervention focus group:

R2: We also looked at like, some refugees' stories, like how they got here.

R4: Yeah, that was really interesting, looking at different people's stories. Especially in the animations, they really helped you to understand what they went through.

Another British student commented, ‘Learning what it’s like, for me who’s lived in England all my life, to learn about somebody who’s come from...had to leave their country and come to another country to flee, that would have been quite hard to understand before, without the PIER sessions’. Some students at the Brighton & Hove school with personal or family histories of migration and displacement also appeared to identify with the programme’s content. Lila, who was from Central Asia, said: ‘I’m not a refugee, but I did move here because of how corrupt my country was, so... it was also very hard, so it also kind of was quite accurate’. George observed that although Aaden, a British student with parents from Northeast Africa, didn’t usually contribute much in ‘normal lessons’ and was ‘quite reticent in earlier [PIER] sessions’, he had ‘watched him get into it more and more’ as the sessions progressed. George added:

“I felt that he certainly identified with a lot of the issues that were coming up in the materials...at home, in the home language, he has been hearing the story of [Northeast African country] and he knows that the older people have probably had a lot of those similar experiences as new migrants”.

Annie, a European student with parents from North Africa, showed a keen interest in all the PIER activities despite her lack of English. George said that he was ‘impressed with her responses, because probably it touched on things that she’s heard about...people coming up through North Africa’. By giving recognition to their personal and family experiences of migration, the PIER intervention may have been ‘an important site of respite and self-definition’ (Wilson, 2017: 614) for these young people. Other newcomers, however, were more reluctant to signal their identification with the content of the PIER intervention. An EAL team member, Shaima, voiced her surprise at the lack of engagement from some newcomers:

“There’s a girl from [a Middle Eastern country], she wears the hijab and she’s very, very quiet. And she was just...I was very surprised at how little she engaged, because I’d say her story is definitely a very interesting

one. But again, you know, it's about how much you want to share and how much you want to share with a whole class”.

Shaima noted that younger students at the Brighton & Hove school tended to be ‘a little bit more cautious and a lot more reticent’ than older students, who might be more ‘able to express themselves about where they’re from and how they felt coming here’. This variability in engagement highlights the complex and contingent nature of identity. It indicates that development education projects must be sensitive to the nuances of recognition according to individual and context, and work to create ‘safe spaces’ where young people feel comfortable to share their experiences of migration and displacement if they wish to do so (Eten, 2017; Børsh et al., 2023).

The Classroom Drama workshop focused on young people’s own experiences of migration and settlement. Yet many of the students in East London saw the Classroom Drama workshop’s focus on these experiences as unnecessary and ‘unexciting’. As they reported during a post-intervention focus group:

R7: We talked about like, journeys. And like...

R6: Countries and journeys.

R7: Yeah.

R3: Yeah, like one of the questions was, one of the questions, you had to answer how you came here. Well, we all know how we came here!

R6: Yeah, there’s nothing...nothing exciting. Cos we were meant to do a drama play on how we came to another country. But there’s no excitement in this play. Like, we just took the plane, came here, done, it’s over, simple.

Migration studies have pointed out that in highly ethnically diverse contexts, migration is often seen as a commonplace, even ‘banal’ feature of everyday life (Sandercock, 2003; Berg and Sigona, 2013; Wessendorf, 2014a). The pre-

intervention questionnaire included a question about young people's migration status, but some students with personal histories of migration were unsure what 'migration' meant. As he completed the question, Martim, an African European student, raised his hand to ask, 'What does "migration" mean again, Miss?'. Bakewell (2008: 451) highlights the irrelevancy of policy categories to the lived experiences of migrants and refugees, noting that for many, 'such bureaucratic categories may have little day to day salience'.

During the same evaluation session, Kingsley (another African European newcomer) scoffed to his friend, 'I'm not a migrant! Do I look like a migrant?!'. Devereux (2017) suggests that challenging mainstream media constructions concerning migration should be a key priority for development education; Kingsley's scornful response to the RWS questionnaire demonstrates how development education can paradoxically reinforce, rather than challenge, stereotypes about the migrant or refugee. At the same time, his response points to young people's significant agency in rejecting dominant policy categories. As Watters (2008: 127) observes, 'the employment of specific discourses in relation to the social welfare of refugees is not a "one-way street" in which practices are simply imposed on populations'. Rather, people also 'do things' with categories that are imposed on them (Brubaker, 2002: 169).

### **Organising encounter?**

In one PIER session at the Brighton & Hove school, students watched clips from a British documentary, 'Educating Greater Manchester', in which Rani, a 12-year-old student from Syria, arrives at a school in Salford, northern England. Jack, a White British student, welcomes Rani to school, and the documentary follows their blossoming friendship. Students were asked questions about the video such as, 'How are Jack and Rani similar? How are they different?'. EAL teacher George reflected on the positive impact of the session on British students at the Brighton & Hove school:

"Perhaps because it was exactly the level those kids were, they were their age when that was filmed – they were Year 8 kids, they've been in school for a year and a half, they've got their peer groups, their buddies, they've got their little circles. And it was seeing Jack who welcomed the new



one...I think it engaged a lot of kids. Maybe they were thinking, ‘Hmm, you know, we’ve got kids like Rani arriving, and we’ve got kids around the edge, and who speaks to them?’”.

During the focus groups, several British students confirmed that participating in the PIER intervention had changed the way they related to newcomers:

R3: It changed it quite a lot, because you think if they’ve just come here, they’re from another country, then you know that they’ve probably gone through quite a lot to get here...

R1: Yeah, just like, instead of like, well I wouldn’t say judging, but instead of like, not going near them, or cos they’re new, it’s just like, I’d put myself in their shoes and see what it’s like for them to be new. And try to make them feel welcome and stuff.

This finding supports the ‘extended contact’ hypothesis, which posits that knowledge of friendship between the ‘in-group’ and the ‘out-group’ can reduce prejudice towards the ‘out-group’ (Wright et al., 1997; Cameron et al., 2006; Christ et al., 2014; Hewstone and Hughes, 2015). However, George suggested that instead of using video media, it might have been even more effective to invite an older student with a migration background to share their experiences with the class. This raises an important question about the role of video media in ‘encounter’. Ignatieff (1998: 10) points out that the effects of ‘televsual images’ on ‘moral relations between strangers’ have rarely been examined. According to Levinas (1985), responsibility to the other cannot be mediated through image or representation. Rather, in Levinas’ view, ‘Responsibility is always a matter of meeting face to face’ (Beavers, 1993: 8). While modelling encounter can be effective, there are also (as George suggests) limits to technological means; real moral transformation occurs only through the vulnerability and presence of encounter. Levinas (1985) emphasises that the unique and unrepresentable ‘face’ of the other is the ultimate confirmation of our inherent interdependence and mutual personhood.

Like the PIER programme, the Classroom Drama workshop aimed to encourage ‘positive interethnic relationships’, reflecting a wider academic and policy discourse which ‘tends to see ethnic and religious diversity as a challenge and portrays the enhancement of positive relationships between people of different backgrounds as one of the solutions’ (Wessendorf, 2014b: 18). In contrast to this discourse, the drama therapists noted that exposure to East London’s ‘superdiversity’ meant that many students already had significant intercultural capabilities:

R2: I think that the space is really important, really important for expressing adolescent issues which aren’t always processed. But I don’t think the focus being around creating empathy between people from different cultures was particularly...

R1: I think what happened a little bit, because [the borough] is superdiverse or whatever it’s called, they actually have a lot of solidarity and empathy with each other because they understand these issues.

As the drama therapists pointed out, regular engagement with ethnic difference in superdiverse contexts can generate intercultural capabilities including empathy and care for the other (Noble, 2009; Wise and Noble, 2016; Back and Sinha, 2018; Soye, 2024).

Young people at the East London school asserted the strength of their intercultural relationships when engaging with the RWS questionnaire, which included the questions: ‘How many friends do you have that are British?’, ‘How many friends do you have that are from your country of origin?’, and ‘How many friends do you have that are not from your country of origin and not from the UK?’. In response to the last question, several students wrote down excessive numbers such as ‘1000000000’. In this instance, the students draw on the ridiculous and the absurd to resist and subvert the RWS project’s attempt to categorise their relationships. Their use of the ludicrous indicates their awareness of friendship as involving the freedom ‘to construct the relationship free from cultural prescription’ (Blatterer, 2015: 6). It points to their implicit understanding that to try to ‘organise’ encounter involves a paradox, because ‘any attempt to

design out uncertainty and risk...is at once a move to eradicate the very possibility of encounter (and in line with Levinasian ethics, the very possibility for an ethical relation)' (Wilson, 2017: 613). Wilson (Ibid.) posits that social projects frequently 'demand knowability and furthermore, they often demand spectacular outcomes, for claims to small and incremental changes rarely catch the eye of funders'. Bryan and Mochizuki (2023) argue that neoliberalism's ongoing influence on educational policy and programming is compromising development education's radical, transformative agenda. Here we see how young people can shrewdly challenge this neoliberal paradigm through their own discursive practices.

While young people at the East London school were at ease with ethnic difference, the drama therapists reported that the social issues which emerged organically during the Classroom Drama workshop were generally in relation to neighbourhood violence:

R2: There was just a lot of general boys' stuff, like violence, gangs, death...they were interested in themes that had happened in the news...so I think that that needs to be a bit better reflected, especially if you're going to work with the Year 9s. The Year 8s are still a bit early for some of the darker themes, but the Year 9s are really in it.

R1: Year 8, I found, was more around friendships, maybe losing friends, bullying at school, things not to do. Whereas Year 9 it was street stuff – it was knives, it was gangs, it was threats of...one kid, he said sometimes he gets scared when he's walking home, it's around them all the time. And I think that was a real threat.

Research on urban sociabilities in superdiverse settings in the UK confirms that intercultural competences often coexist with precarity, including neighbourhood violence (Back, 1996; Wessendorf, 2014a; James, 2015; Soye, 2024). Rattansi (2012) suggests that in British post-immigration policy, the historical focus on 'multiculturalism' has often been a strategic distraction from issues of systemic inequality. The findings from the East London school indicate that development education projects must be careful not to make the same mistake through 'soft' approaches (Andreotti, 2006) which interpret young people's peer relationships

in culturalist, apolitical terms. To be meaningful, interventions must pay attention to the inequalities that shape possibilities for young people's encounter in particular contexts (Amin, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

This article highlights the value of research into young people's own experiences of, and responses to, development education projects in contexts of migration and displacement. Specifically, it shows how projects that are responsive to local conditions and subjectivities can challenge stereotypes and encourage self-definition among young people, opening up possibilities for (although never guaranteeing) encounter. At the same time, the article gives rare insight into the gap between the language used by development education projects and young people's own experiences, underscoring young people's agency in rejecting the policy categories that are imposed on them. In recognition of this agency, Haile, Meloni and Rezaie (2020: 28) suggest that individuals in displacement contexts should 'be able to decide when and how they want to be recognized under the refugee label, or decide not to be recognized under this label at all'.

The article adds to our understanding of the role of technology in modelling encounter by pointing to the limits of 'representation' and reinforcing the importance of meeting the other 'face-to-face'. It also demonstrates how development education projects which adopt apolitical, culturalist approaches can overlook the real inequalities impacting young people's peer relationships in contexts of migration and displacement. It follows that development education programmes must engage with situated social dynamics. Even after contextual understandings have been gathered, however, it is vital that the organisers of development education projects recognise that the 'unknowability' of encounter (in Levinasian terms) is intrinsic to its power. They must honestly assess the degree to which this unknowability is reflected in project evaluations and, more broadly, in the wider epistemological structures underpinning development education today.

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