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Rupture, loneliness and education: Experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking people

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Abstract

This paper explores the intrinsic links between rupture, loneliness, resilience and agency within the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking people, drawing on a wider study conducted in Scotland during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. The paper then posits education, in its diverse forms, as a potential anchor, providing a sense of structure, belonging and purpose, thus serving as a bulwark against the negative impacts of rupture and loneliness. The findings presented here are based on 51 semi-structured interviews with people at different stages of the asylum process or with refugee status, offering insights into how educational experiences, both formal and informal, can act as a crucial support system during times of uncertainty and crisis. This exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by refugee and asylum-seeking people, and the potential of education to foster resilience and integration within host communities.

Keywords

Refugee studies, narrative, phenomenology, loneliness, rupture

Introduction

> *'Although the experiences of refugee background students vary considerably, what they have in common is their escape from crisis areas because of persecution, war or violence'.* (Wilkinson and Kaukko, 2020: 75)

This paper presents selected findings of a wider study of refugee and asylum-seeking people[1] in lockdown (Vidal et al., 2023) – it focuses on one theme of the work: that of the role and perception of education in the lives of refugee and asylum-seeking people and how learning interfaces with experiences of rupture and loneliness. The wider study was a collaboration between Queen Margaret University

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researchers, the Scottish Government and the Chief Scientist Office in 2020 and 2021 – and involved interviewing asylum-seeking people and people with refugee status on their life experiences, especially within the context of COVID-19 lockdowns. A previous paper (Vidal et al., 2023) based on the wider study emphasised the role that rupture, liminality, resilience and agency played in the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking people in Scotland, especially during lockdown.

In this paper we explore the perceptions of learning held by the participants, against a context of rupture and loneliness in the host country (Coumans and Wark, 2024). Rupture and loneliness are both frequently cited biographical hallmarks of people forced to leave their homes and countries (Stewart, 2014). Based on these findings, we argue that education, in its diverse forms, acts as an anchor for refugee and asylum-seeking people to combat the symptoms of rupture, including loneliness – providing them with a crucial sense of hope and belonging.

Before sharing our methodology and findings, we below provide contextual summaries of rupture and loneliness, two of the central concepts explored in our paper.

Rupture

The refugee journey is by its very nature one of rupture with a psychological impact of this as repeated experience. As noted by Luci (2020: 262), 'Refugees' lives are marked by a rupture with their life environment'. The sense of rupture is embedded within an intersubjective context wherein 'severe emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which to be held and integrated' (Womersley, 2020, p. 721). It is the rupture away from all that has been familiar, to, in most cases, complete unfamiliarity. As Womersley states, such pain has no 'home' as the journey may be one of many subsequent ruptures – of space, place, community and connection. Having arrived in the receiving country the refugee experience is often one of forming fledgling ties, making tentative plans, establishing new routines, connecting with people and institutions – 'place-making' (Kerlaff, 2023) and learning, both formally and informally, how to best adjust to an entirely new country and often a new culture and environment.

While being aware of the well-founded critiques of adult education for refugee and asylum-seeking people (inter alia Morrice, 2021), formal and informal modes of this can facilitate a sense of continuity in an otherwise ruptured biography through the standard and spoken aim(s) of learning the receiving country language and upskilling or gaining new skills and qualifications.

Loneliness

Loneliness has been labelled a pandemic (Killeen, 1998), 'the Leprosy of the 21st Century' (The Economist, 2018); a public health problem (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018) an international public health issue (Gerst-Emerson and Jayawardhana, 2015) and a behavioural epidemic (Jeste et al., 2020). Research into loneliness has put forward evidence of strong associations with anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicide attempts across the lifespan (MHFS, 2017). There is heightened vulnerability to loneliness and its adverse psychological and physical effects amongst people living in poverty or with insecure immigration status (Entringer et al., 2021). It has been widely recognised that the trauma of leaving one's country, together with unfamiliarity with the welfare and systems of hosting countries is likely to result in refugee and asylum-seeking people feeling a sense of loneliness and psychological distress (Strijk et al., 2011). Other studies further suggest vulnerability to loneliness amongst marginalised groups (e.g., people with disabilities, ethnic/cultural minorities, the LGBTQ population) in many countries (DiJulio et al., 2018; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Rokach, 2019). The cyclical nature of exclusion and loneliness amongst discriminated and uprooted groups, and the interface of minority stress and loneliness

(Elmer et al., 2022), however, remain relatively underexplored.

Definitions and measures of loneliness have been charged with cultural and linguistic clumsiness and of inhibiting exposure of cultural context and heterogeneity (Van Staden and Coetzee, 2010). There are concerns that despite its complexity, 'empirically loneliness is presented as an unproblematic concept that is universally understood and experienced homogeneously' (Victor, 2021: 51). Calls have also been issued for loneliness to be measured differently, aiming for a better way *'to account for diverse intraindividual experiences and trajectories of loneliness'* (Akhter-Khan and Au, 2020: 1). Loneliness is complex (Yanguas et al., 2018), comprising a cluster of emotions (Bound Alberti, 2018) arising sometimes unpredictably from a multifaceted interplay of lived subjectivity in and with the social and material world. Subject areas such as loneliness which have high topical exposure in popular, political and academic imaginations present a challenge to researchers (Carin-Levy et al., 2024) and loneliness study should attend to this complexity and challenge through work that reveals the interplay of the experience with a range of human emotions as well as with the sociopolitical architecture that contributes to their defining.

A number of studies have noted how learning at all levels can be a lonely experience, but one that also offers the learner community, belonging and connection. However, Loneliness should not be viewed as an individual-level problem, but one embedded within, and shaped by, the broader socio-structural context (Sagan, 2023). There is a clear and important role for whole-of-community interventions that increase neighbourhood identification to tackle loneliness. (Fong et al., 2021). This broader social perspective on understanding loneliness is also highly relevant to our study, a point to which we return in the discussion.

Methodology

Our approach in this research was phenomenological, the aim being to gather lived experience and maintain a phenomenological sensibility (Finlay, 2014) – aiming not so much to focus specifically on *individual* lived experience, as is often the case with phenomenological enquiry, than to reveal the complex interplay of the experience of one phenomenon with a range of others in the social and material world.

Participant narratives were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted as conversations 'with a structure and a purpose' (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009: 327). These were held remotely due to lockdown restrictions at the time and were sensitively facilitated where necessary by interpreters. All interviews were then transcribed verbatim. Interviews of this nature are complex, requiring rapport to be developed carefully through sensitive communication – especially challenging in remote/telephone interviewing with interpreters and potential language distortion.

We adhered to IPA (Smith et al., 2009) principles, with its conceptual touchstones of ideography and hermeneutic phenomenology for the analysis. Our iterative reading led to coding and discussion of themes and their salience. Data for the original study came from 51 semi-structured interviews with people at different stages of the asylum process or with refugee status covering 14 Local Authority (LA) areas of Scotland. Interviews with refugee and asylum-seeking people provided an opportunity for respondents to share as much detail as they wished or in which they felt comfortable, about their day-to-day life just before and during the start of the pandemic.

This process however was not without limitations, particularly as all contact, including research interviews, occurred remotely and with the use of interpreters. In addition to technical issues, such as delays and disconnected calls, video and telephone interviewing poses a significant barrier to building rapport. Body language nuances may be missed and there is also the reduced ability to offer comfort or reassurance to the participant when discussing distressing topics, each aspect of which may be

compounded by cultural differences. Limitations were mitigated using 'deep listening' techniques (Pavlicevic and Impey, 2013) involving careful listening, probing and explicitly checking understandings of what participants were trying to convey whilst in dialogue with them. These methods ensured systematic examination of participants' stories in their own words and through their own interpretations of their experiences.

Our interviews purposefully asked people about their activities, hobbies and social relationships, as well as their mental health, wellbeing and experiences with navigating social isolation, lockdown and other pandemic restrictions. It was within this rich and highly personal context that narratives of education and the experiences of educational activity and learning opportunities emerged, along with the poignant interface of learning with experiences of loneliness and rupture.

Sampling and recruitment

For the purposes of the original study, we utilised available data from the UK and Scottish government websites and refugee organisations to build a sampling frame broken down by age, gender, location and status of applicants. This provided us with an overview of the expected demographics. For the final sample of the study, we aimed to select close to equal numbers for each group by status (asylum-seeking, refugee status granted after asylum process, and refugee status granted through resettlement programme), gender (women and men) and location (large urban, urban, small towns and rural).

Participants were recruited with support from the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC) and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). At the outset of this project, our team collaborated with the SRC on the design of a survey which was distributed to its networks over the summer of 2020 (Christie and Baillot, 2020). The survey questionnaire included a question asking respondents if they consented to being contacted to participate in further research conducted by a university research team. All those who consented (n = 129) were contacted via email or text depending on their preference as stated in the SRC survey.

COSLA offices were also approached for support in linking with potential interview participants. The COSLA Migration, Population and Diversity Team shared our written request for research support with each of the LAs. Of these, Dundee, South Lanarkshire, Highland, East Renfrewshire and Argyll and Bute responded with interest in the request to support our study and agreed to invite potentially interested refugee and asylum-seeker clients to interview with us.

Ethical considerations

All research tools, procedures and activities were reviewed and approved by the host university research ethics panel, including any arrangements necessary under COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Additional quality assurance and ethical issues were considered, largely concerning the consent process and language considerations, both of which were mitigated through close involvement with interpreters.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants of this study. A detailed verbal description was read to the participants by the researcher with the support of the interpreter at the start of each interview. All participants were notified of their right to decline participation or withdraw from the study at any stage without the need to provide an explanation. Assurance of their anonymity and confidentiality was explained and guaranteed both before and after each interview. Given that some of the issues discussed during the interview process were likely to be of a sensitive nature, contact details of an external network of support were provided to each participant.

Findings

In analysing the 51 interviews from our sample, we found that there were many accounts that

evidenced the myriad ways rupture was characteristic of the experiences of those who were seeking asylum or living with refugee status in Scotland. Participants described their experiences of rupture before, during and after displacement. For many, the COVID-19 experience and its associated lockdown measures represented further rupture, leading to interrupted education, increased loneliness, loss of motivation and other negative factors.

Learning interrupted

> *'We have been through a hard time. We have been through a war, and then [through] the process of seeking asylum and later of settlement in this country. It was quite a tough process, and until now we are still settling, and then the lockdown started. We haven't recovered from the settlement and then the lockdown started. We [had] started to settle, little by little, start to learn English, we started little by little to integrate in the country, to know the people in the host country, just everything, settling in the terms of health, in terms of language, in terms of financially and it had not happened yet when the lockdown started ... In terms of lockdown, instead of going forwards, we were going backwards in terms of language'. (Tahir,[2] resettled refugee person)*

The example above gives a small sense of the experience of rupture and the tentative steps taken by the participant to settle and achieve some continuity. It shows how interruptions to education represented another example of rupture in people's lives, hinting at the central role education plays in the lives of refugee people who are settling in Scotland and how it functions as an anchor point, one linked to wellbeing and aspirations.

The closure of education settings meant the removal of a key socialising anchor in people's lives. Even where remote access to learning was possible, for many this meant a stagnation in language development or other learning, as well as increased loneliness which could have a lasting negative impact, as the quotes below demonstrate.

> *'Before lockdown, I go to college [laughs], so I miss my friends in college as well, following that you know I do volunteering. I was doing a volunteering role so I go to the office you know to see some of my clients, assist them sort out their benefit and things like that - and because of lockdown it all ended'. (Sadiq, asylum-seeking person)*

> *'Before she (participant's wife) got here and obviously before the quarantine and stuff started, I had a lot planned for her obviously to just join to the college, spend a lot of time in the college, stuff like this but, this, or those things never happened because the colleges were all shut and a part of that I had planned that when she came, so that could find a few good family friends... But those colleges were closed, and even now [there is] just the long line and still waiting... it's just being stuck at home and the stress levels go up. The situation that we have it's even more hard to think about going back to lockdown. Sometimes I feel like if I could do something during the lockdown to help others, but it's quite a bit hard as well to volunteer with all of the organisations I know, it's a bit hard to do during that time. To get volunteering somewhere that's hard as well, it's not that easy. They don't give it to anyone'. (Mirza, resettled refugee person)*

Learning as connecting through language

Language development was a central concern of most people we spoke to. Participants themselves recognised its link with building important social connections, and lack of language development was characteristic of negative experiences of lockdown.

> *'...And the other issue we have as a migrant or…because, you know, the biggest barrier for us is language, so at the moment there is not many*

language classes. And even if you can't talk the language, you can learn the language through socialisation so you can go to the local supermarket, you know, talk with the people just to help your English. But at the moment, even there is not much opportunity, everybody locked at home, so nowhere to go and people are not happy not to socialise because of Coronavirus'. (Hassan, resettled refugee person)

'So we have recently been in Scotland, we are new here. We are still learning English so it kind of delayed our process of knowing the country and also of learning English. Also delayed the process of getting employment you know. I was wishing to learn English and to start the process of employment as soon as possible which in this case has also being getting delayed... I was taking English community classes. When they were face to face, this was very helpful and now everything is on the phone or online, and unfortunately I cannot understand a single word of what the teacher is saying.... At the moment, I have got my wife, at the moment she is very basic learning – it is very limited. She has very limited, basic words. So we are in Scotland for 4 years and 2 months now. This has kind of affected it. It will be five years in June 2021, and we will be entitled for applying for permanent residence. So we should be applying and the lockdown is making it very difficult to progress. But we have to do the language exam to get the permanent residence. And we are not ready to pass this exam because of the lockdown delays'. (Ahmad, resettled refugee person)

The latter quotation above points to the fragility or inaccessibility of some community organisations who acted as important informal education actors during lockdown, as well as general problems in accessing social and education opportunities digitally. Many organisations were not able to deliver services in the manner they had done previously as they were faced with lockdown measures. This may be linked to a myriad of factors, including not having sufficient funding or other resources to be able to adapt to an inclusive remote support model.

Learning, digital access/literacy and resilience

Digital skills and infrastructure were key to creating these positive education and social engagements and combatting the negative effects of isolation. Both access to data and the digital literacy which access ensured and enhanced were important in facilitating settlement and offering a sense of support and belonging. Because of refugee and asylum-seeking people's repeated experiences of displacement, their 'information landscapes' become 'fractured' and disconnected (Lloyd et al., 2017) – yet another example of rupture. This landscape then needs to be reconstructed as a reasonably robust information landscape that is core to establishing financial stability, social and emotional connections, networks, and other opportunities towards settlement:

'from my side, it was because of the financial problem. I didn't always have enough credit or financial means to get internet. One month I would have internet, the other one I might — don't. And third reason was because of my mental health situation, my psychological situation that sometimes… well, prevented me or directed me to get support from pastors'. (Samir, resettled refugee person)

'Because now, I think we are more connected by social media. No face to face, is okay. But one thing is if you don't have [data]. You are not connected. Yes, you are lonely, being by yourself [with] no connection'. (Valerie, asylum-seeking person)

'We are not allowed to open a bank account … maybe I can buy unlimited Wi-Fi because we need it, but I don't have a bank account and they don't accept cash. Money things are settled in cash and money things are made by online payment or by card, but when they open the shops after

lockdown, they don't accept cash, but we don't have a bank account. This is more stressful'. (Saranda, asylum-seeking person)

Even for many of those with ability to take opportunities to learn online, development was felt to have been held back due to lack of social and practical support that would otherwise be available in face-to-face contexts. These barriers were amplified for those with weaker prior English language ability.

'The only thing which I am now going to is the college, once a week, its usually on Fridays. My perspective, my understanding of the course is only 50% like very, very good high level of understanding but when I am at home it is really dropping down to 25%. I hope this won't be remaining the way it is, this is more my concern. Apart from that I have no idea what's going to happen, what could happen'. (Azim, resettled refugee person)

'Yes actually, it kind of, you know, has an impact on everybody, if I wanted to be honest, for just for the local people, 50%, but for us, 100% because we cannot speak the language. In terms of education, because as you know, English is not our mother tongue, so, before attending college or some other class with English, you could understand maybe 10 to 20% of discussion in the class. But at the moment everything is on zoom, so again, it is not very useful, and sometimes I don't understand anything, and my wife cannot understand at all'. (Baher, resettled refugee person)

However, there were also examples of people adapting to these online contexts, demonstrating resilience and the making of progress in the face of other challenges.

'It was quite hard at first because I had to get enrolled and when it's normal and you go to college you see people face-to-face, you know what you're doing but other than that you have to go backward and forward and to get enrolled it took me one month of three weeks to get enrolled and I didn't know what classes I'm in and all that which was really, really stressful for me because I didn't know the classes had already started and I didn't know which class to attend. So yeah it was a bit stressful and hard to get used to it but within one week it was fine and now it's going well'. (Ameena, asylum-seeking person)

'I and my wife both were very busy studying with going to the college and that time my wife was pregnant and expecting a baby, so she stopped. The face to face stopped and it's online now... In the beginning it was challenging – especially the first month, but as it went on, we got used to it'. (Omar, resettled refugee person)

'As I mentioned, you know, the first two months I had a chance, you know, just to be in the college. To be honest with you it was really useful. The online one is not bad, is still useful but is not as efficient, you know, as the face-to-face learning'. (Saleem, resettled refugee person)

Other structural barriers affecting learning: geography and gender

There were structural factors that for many meant a greater need for support beyond that available through family and friends, or even financial subsistence support. Geography, for example, presented a concrete barrier; one participant (Ashraf) in Ayrshire observed that there were limited education opportunities in places outside big urban centres, as others from Shetland and Orkney attested to. In addition, issues such as disability, compounded with geography, particularly in areas that are sparsely populated, and, significantly, are ethnically homogenous, can further hamper access to support and services such as education.

'So I just want to clarify it one point: we live in this island. I can't deny it is a lovely island, lovely people but there is not suitable services for us here. Just to give you an example, to get what my families need – Eastern bread and spices and halal meat – I have to travel about 3 hours to

Glasgow. Also I am a disabled person, I have a back issue – I have to use a walking stick just to go there and I don't have a car, and you can imagine what it is to travel for a few hours to another city. I tried from different organisations to move to another city and but up to now it is not successful...Yes actually at the moment, we are taking an hour a day and they came to country after me and they have more chance to learn English and for me there is no progress and also because of no social connection with local people, it isn't helping and even when some people do talk because of accent I can't understand. Overall, it has not helped us to develop our English... In general, very isolating. I was thinking of taking my life and I was seeing a psychologist and because in my religion it is not accepted and because of my kids and my family, I am not thinking about it. If I was single, there is no doubt, I would be happy to end my life. And also when my son is asking me I can't be able to give him what he wants, and this generation is on electronics, like iPad and things, and the government is helping but I cannot provide them with what they want because everything is quite basic, and I feel embarrassed'. (Malek, resettled refugee person)

While these geographical barriers appeared significant to some of those in our sample, it would be helpful to undertake research with a wider sample of people at different timepoints to understand better how time and place impact loneliness and the role of education for refugee and asylum-seeking people (Holbraad et al., 2019; Martzoukou and Burnett, 2018).

This study did not specifically explore the gendered experience of lockdown, although many other published studies reveal that women presented with higher levels of a range of psychological and physical symptoms (inter alia Kolakowsky-Hayner et al., 2021). However, narrative strands from women in our sample do suggest particular stresses were experienced by them during lockdown. These pointed to an additional important aspect of education – that of providing for women in particular, on whom most childcare and other caring responsibilities still tend to fall:

'So, it's been really tough. Especially that the children are always in the house. And I've got no family around me. We have been in the house just eating, sleeping and it's been very very tough... So two particular things that changed was that I can't go to the English classes anymore and to the women's group anymore. And that was like fun for me, to get out of the house and go those activities. And that's not [unclear]... Yes, they [the classes] are [now] online, but I've got a young child in the house and I used to take him/her to the nursery, and I could go to these activities but now I can't. But I try and go online... I have had a lot of stress and it also causes me a lot of forgetfulness, I can't register anything to the memory... Very low mood, very low mood'. (Saba, asylum-seeking person)

Overall, these examples, both positive and negative, demonstrate the central role that education plays in offering a sense of hope, continuity and anchoring, all important strands of overall wellbeing. By education, we underscore this need not be formal, and include the peripheral activity and communication of educational contexts; the routine it may afford; the power it has to recognise and validate learners; and to facilitate hope, agency and offer a sense of belonging. Each of these para-educational benefits has the potential to counterweight or even mend experiences of loneliness and rupture, complexly bound with lack of agency and hope – and the challenging circumstances characteristic of refugee experiences.

However, the examples also demonstrate the importance of ensuring the right kind of tailored support is available, accounting for structural issues such as general poverty and digital poverty (especially for asylum-seeking people); gendered experiences including significant childcare responsibilities; disability; family status; and geographical context.

Learning as community support

***Naima**: I am learning English. But it is not a college. It's a community class. The problem with community class is not like proper formula study. There is no like curriculum just to follow. So you know we got like two tutors. So every time at the day they decide what to talk about or what to discuss. There is no plan or curriculum to follow. So I feel its not very helpful of learning English. But in terms of socialization in the class, you know not just Syrian, from other nationalities as well. But mostly Iraqian, Syrian, which is the biggest refugee population in the country at the moment.*

While the above quotation demonstrates that some informal education services provided by organisations during COVID-19 Lockdown did not meet the needs of everyone in the sample, many participants recounted positive experiences with charities, churches and other actors outside formal education settings. These were seen as helping to build professional and language skills as well as offering important social opportunities to connect and engage with others.

> *'So… So, the difficulty was different. So, we had this like English class. Actually, was like a college, but was like a class, you know, community class. So just like a two big room. So, all the family were gathering there, we were just benefitting from, we were benefitting from the English class. We had our interpreter, if we had any issue in term of housing or repair… Anything, if we, if we had a letter, you know you know, to write on how to sort our issue. So, we could bring all to this community, and we could benefit, you know, from the people, from the interpreter there. And at the same time learn English. Unfortunately, this community activity at the moment is not available. Even when we have issue, we don't know where to turn. So, there is a number, you know, the council number. Usually we try to call, you know, just to sort out issue, but it just take a while, you know, for them to come back to us. So it not the same, you know, the…' (Kisan, resettled refugee person)*

> *'Just volunteering here and now, as my English is not good enough to…to go to the job offer. We take a lot of courses about that, about how can I write CV, how can I make interview, and now I am volunteering with two organisations at the church to improve my English, and to help me to get a job... it's like a course about 8 weeks to a month. They teach us about computing, about how to write CV, how to send emails, about that'. (Hafsa, asylum-seeking person)*

The holding function of informal/community learning and its 'hidden curriculum' should not be underestimated – this should also account for respecting –the role these services play in, for example, assuaging anxiety over such issues as those mentioned in the quote above about housing and repair. While it can often appear, in informal settings, that not much 'formal' learning is being done, participation in such sessions can often go a long way in helping people feel connected and less anxious.

Learning as anchor

As mentioned above in relation to community and informal learning, part of the holding function of such learning experiences is to help learners find a place, literally and symbolically, and offer an anchor. Narratives suggested that with the right support, people were able to use education as such an anchor. A symbolic or real point of belonging and connection, anchors provided a psychological buffer and helped restore or create hope in face of potential rupture and loneliness.

> *'Actually, at the same time — lockdown has changed everything for me, and at the same time it hasn't changed much for me because I have my psychological problems, my mental health problems coming from my main problem of not being able to see my kids. So during the lockdown it just added to that. What kept me going was my motivation to study. And being able to be enrolled in [local college] and studying English. At the same*

time, a lot of school, [location] school of English. Staying home the whole time has helped me in that, provided me the time required to study. But what I miss the most is being able to be with my family, with my kids, with my friends. But again, my goal kept motivating me towards… has kept me on the track'. (Samir, resettled refugee person)

'The main thing was gardening, I stayed planting food, vegetables, fruit. Never in my life had I done gardening. At the time, there was not much to do so I started gardening and I really loved it. We started growing tomato, parsley, olives and rocket and so much other vegetables. The kids also loved this idea and they started kind of enjoying gardening as well... As I mentioned in the beginning just to spend my time but then later I started searching on YouTube and learnt about it and kind of became an expert on this. This is in terms of the day I would do the gardening, and sometimes in the afternoon I went to my voluntary work and called the people I had been supporting and checked on in them to see if how they were doing, if they needed some help and if they needed some shopping then I could help them. Or if they needed to go to the hospital and then I would try to help them go there'. (Gafur, resettled refugee person)

'I got my daughter at the moment, she got a few subjects – chemistry, biology. Her dream is just to be a doctor - medicine course - so I am trying to support her mostly with biology and chemistry on academic side because this is as I said better problem with the language - you know, providing her, supplying her with some biological chemistry book in Arabic which is kind of similar. Because of the language barrier not to be we are going through some of the literature - could be Shakespeare the English one or the Arabic one which is al-Moutanabi, Khalil Gibran, I mean they are kind of very important in Arabic literature'. (Ihsana, resettled refugee person)

'So in every country, there is good thing and bad thing. But life is not stopping, it is good if we can change something for the good, to alter it. We can do something small even like your research to try and change something. I am in contact with different organisations, SRC, BRC, Netvoice which also supports refugees and asylum seekers. There is a saying in Sudan – you can't change things quickly, just you have to do it slowly. You have to build something brick by brick'. (Mabrok, asylum-seeking person)

Learning for agency

Even in descriptions of positive experiences where education was not as central, the related themes of hope and its relationship with agency *through* education emerged as a clear theme.

'The coping mechanism, is just like a wide range of them - so one of them is work keeping me busy, the other one is calling- I mean my work entails sending phone calls, calling people, and also perhaps signposting you know, to find to some research about where they can get support, you know so [unclear] about [unclear] help them with you know, mobile phone, internet access and things like that- so that has also helped me as well… then at one point, there was a bike club that was set up recently, that was last month, so you know, outdoor activity with social distance as well so, you know, grab your bike and ride there, you know ride around with other people... So, you know it helps, you know just to go out and meet other people, while still observing social distancing so that has actually helped reduce all the stress- and also one of my colleagues… Because of the stress and the pressure as well, that has also helped as well… and also yeah you know, I've had many you know, zoom meetings you know help as well cause we're having mental health awareness over the zoom as well, how to cope with the stress, how to cope with the anxiety'. (Sadiq, asylum-seeking person)

As the above example shows, the social dimension is key to facilitating hope and agency. This is something that, as other examples above shared show, was inherent in positive experiences of education during this lockdown period.

Discussion

This study took place during the turmoil of lockdown – an unprecedented experience tumultuous for most of us, and tragic for many. In hindsight it is easy to overlook or minimise the rupture it entailed for most people from our everyday life and routine, so pause must be given to imagine the rupture experienced by those in our study who had already gone through multiple experiences of rupture – from country, from home, from family and from their hoped-for life trajectory.

Thus, the words of our participants about learning, its meaning to them and the value attributed to it by them, take on a greater urgency. They demonstrate the role educational activity of all sorts plays in being one important component of the resettlement journey. This component is valued not 'just' as an activity via which to achieve learning the language of the receiving country, for example, although this is important in itself – but as one component providing a sense of routine and belonging and of moving towards a healing of rupture. In offering formal and informal ways to connect and be seen, learning activity can be part of a vital mesh that enables a person to move ahead and start anew, ushering in a fresh sense of hope, now established as a 'consequential component of subjective well-being' (Graham, 2024: 1). What emerges strongly is the way in which learning activity was couched in a broader experience of social connection and agency, and their correlation with that crucial sense of hope (Vidal et al., 2023). Connection, agency and hope are important elements in combating isolation and loneliness (Damousi, 2023) and fostering hope and combatting loneliness has been linked by a diverse international body of evidence to improved social and economic outcomes for individuals (Graham, 2024). Thus, the evidence presented by our findings stresses further the crucial role that education, in its diverse forms, has to play in important integration processes involving refugee and asylum-seeking people and others in their communities.

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt, now much revisited for her prophetic writings on loneliness (1958, 1973), warned that when people are cut off, ruptured, one might add, from human connection and a sense of a shared 'world', they experience a loss of world, a profound ontological uncertainty in which a sense of agency is diminished or absent, and collective action, which serves as a bulwark against loneliness, is stymied.

Later readings of Arendt's work by, for example, Lucas (2019) progress this view of loneliness as one of the failure to *appear as a self in the world*, highlighting the concept of ontological agency and arguing that the absence of agency is the very condition of loneliness: 'Repeated lack of appearance erodes the agent's sense of her own uniqueness and, thus, erodes her agency. The less she is perceived as a self by the world, the less she is able to appear as a self in the world. The associations of a world, which confirm the agent's uniqueness, protect her from loneliness' (p. 716, emphasis added). Arendt's own example of the human being repeatedly confronted with their own political invisibility is the refugee.

In Arendt's, then Lucas' construction, we gain agency through the power of recognition; through seeing and being seen, coalescing with what sociologist Michele Lamont (2023) would cast as '*mattering*' in her research into redefining worth in a divided world. It is precisely this scope for recognition and mattering that can occur through education. It is in the micro anchor points of mattering, in a language session; a church workshop; a basic exchange in a new language with a neighbour; a group cooking class – that the many shared exchanges, gestures of recognising, the tiny facial movements of validation and eye contact of seeing and being seen – begin to build a sense of finding a place in the world; anchoring one in a larger social and cultural mesh.

The power of education in the resettlement journey of refugee and asylum-seeking people then is not 'simply' as an opportunity to learn, upskill and/or be able to participate in the life of

their community, its democratic processes and advance eventual employment prospects, although all of these are vital – but as an important 'anchor' point in a precarity hallmarked by rupture. We argue that such an anchoring, offered by formal, informal and peripheral learning (that which takes place ad hoc, in social exchanges and transactions and which were muted or curtailed during C19 lockdowns) plays an important role in combatting loneliness and contributing to positive integration processes.

Conclusion

The experience of loneliness should be understood as one couched in 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1996/1927), with our sense of belonging and identity inextricably linked to the lives of others (Holland, 2022; Murthy, 2020). Loneliness, paradoxically, appears to be less about a lack of friends, and more about building a sense of belonging and connection, often through relatively small connections and 'anchor points' in which the person feels 'seen' – validated, in subtle ways. There is some evidence (Bolmsjö et al., 2019) that rather than more chit chat with many, what is desired is 'authentic' I-Thou communication (Buber, 1970) with a few. Rupture, accompanied by social or interpersonal 'absence', as described by Roberts and Krueger (2021) can be a potent mix for deep loneliness, weakening the anchor points in our life through which we may accrue feelings of value and validation. This study is one of a growing number that highlights the complexity of loneliness as a human experience (Schmidt, 2023) and how enmeshed that experience is, with social connection, agency, culture and socioeconomic structure.

To conclude, we extend our argument for the role of education in combatting loneliness in lives of rupture, by reiterating the broader philosophical theory of loneliness. This underscores the connection between being seen as a human being; healing rupture and addressing loneliness through connecting meaningfully with others; (re)gaining a sense of agency, both individual and collective; and extending outwards to playing a part in broader democratic processes. There are salient messages here for how we welcome refugee and asylum-seeking people through both micro and macro behaviours as embedded in our 'hospitableness' (Altinay, et al., 2023) and for the role of education as one component in a resettlement tapestry of provision and care.

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Notes

1. In this paper, we discuss experiences related to those from a refugee background – including those with refugee status, whom we generally refer to as 'refugee people', and those in the asylum process, whom we generally refer to as 'asylum-seeking people'. We also use the broad term 'refugee' as a descriptor when exploring the shared experiences of those with a refugee or asylum-seeking background. We take this terminological approach in recognition of the dangers of dehumanising language and of the hostile policies related to determining who qualifies as 'a refugee' (see Bradby et al., 2015).
2. Names of participants are pseudonyms.

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