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### JOURNAL ARTICLE

**Original citation:**

Hughes, Gillian and Kaur, Pinder (2014) *Young men from refugee communities score goals for their future using the Team of Life*. *Context*, (134). pp. 25-31.

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# Young men from refugee communities score goals for their future, using the team-of-life

Gillian Hughes and Pinder Kaur

## “ I would like to be known ”

(The words of a young man who had come to the UK as an unaccompanied asylum seeker from Afghanistan)

The experience of being a child or young person with a refugee or asylum-seeking status can be extremely challenging. They often arrive in the UK with a history of trauma, which can have a profound impact on their developing identity and ability to cope (Valentine *et al.*, 2009). Even without this, refugee children face the demanding tasks of learning a new language and culture, settling into school, working out how to fit in and gain social acceptance with their peers, and integrating this new life into the identity they have developed in their homeland. They have to learn to manage racism in the school playground, and live with the negative stereotypes about refugees propagated in the mainstream media, where they are portrayed as a burden on the state with little to contribute to society (Bauböck *et al.*, 1996). We will be describing our work with children and families at all stages of the asylum process, but will use the term ‘refugee’ as shorthand to include anyone forcibly displaced from their homeland, regardless of their legal status in the UK.

Refugee young people become expert at juggling these multiple and emerging identities, living out different versions of themselves in different contexts; but the contradictions and challenges to their identity can also take its toll on emotional wellbeing. As research shows, they are more likely to develop emotional difficulties and peer problems than their British-born counterparts (Goodman, 2001), or attract diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (Fazel *et al.*, 2005). Schools often describe these young people as “*disruptive*”, as having “*behavioural problems*” and “*not reaching their academic potential*”. Education data for the London borough of Camden where our service, the Tavistock Child and Family Refugee Service, is located shows that

children from refugee communities have some of the highest rates of exclusion from school, poorest attendance and lowest levels of attainment (Camden Education Service, 2012). Many teenagers are drawn into gangs. A study carried out by the Centre for Social Justice (2009) showed that a third of young people killed in London each year are either refugees or newly-arrived migrants. So, although many of them are very resilient, too many fall through the net.

When we meet these young people, they frequently have low self-esteem, have lost a feeling of pride in their cultural identities, and racism has made them feel ashamed about their heritage. We hear stories of how they attempt to conceal their identities from their peers at school in efforts to fit in with the dominant culture, and avoid the pain of rejection.

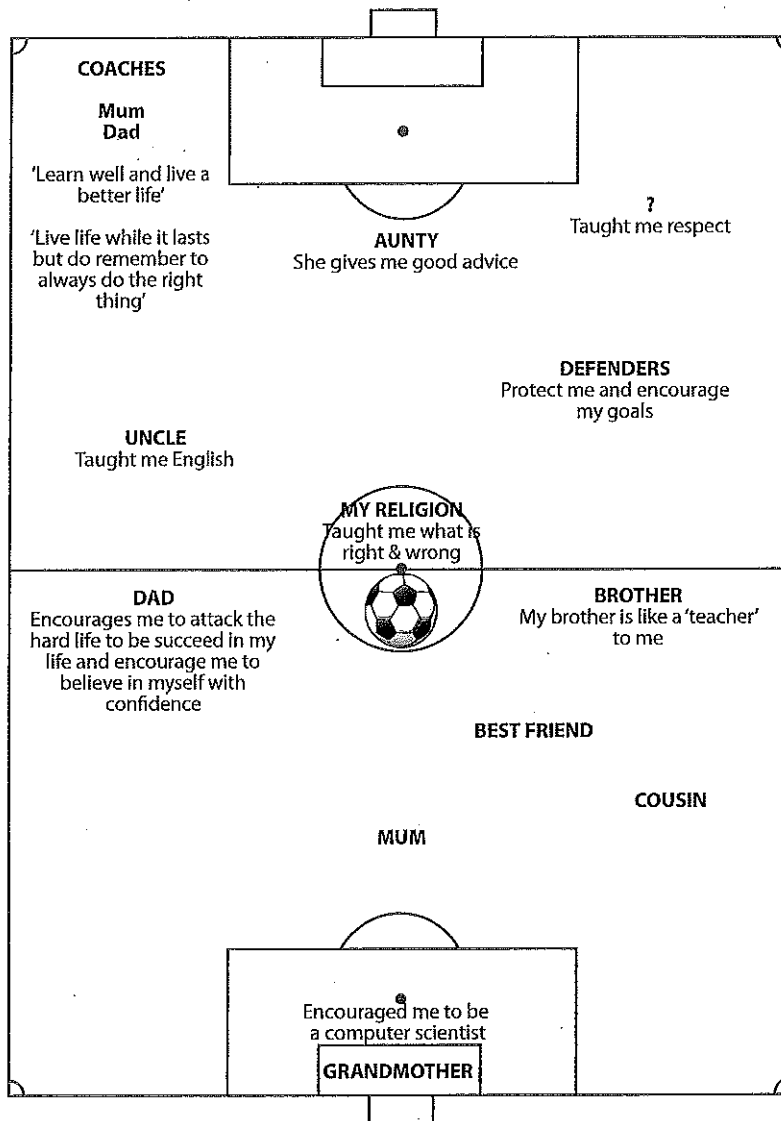
In the refugee service, we have therefore become increasingly interested in approaches that help young people appreciate and celebrate positive aspects of their cultural heritage, and view this as a resource to help them counter the multiple negative discourses circulating. Narrative practices, developed by Michael White and his colleagues (White, 2007; White & Morgan, 2006; White & Epston, 1990), have offered creative ways of doing this. White described how people experience distress when living within the shadow of stories about themselves that do not fit with their values for living, and limit the ways they can live their life (2007). For example, if there is a story that refugee boys will be disruptive in school, teachers are more likely to attend to incidents that confirm this view and, in turn, this often invites responses from refugee children that fit with this view. He proposes that therapeutic conversations can help people identify stories they would prefer to

have told about them, and their personal values that shape these. This process enables people to have a greater sense of agency in their lives.

We have been drawing on these ideas in a number of ways in our service, particularly using the, the ‘tree of life’. This is a narrative method developed by Nazelo Ncube (2006) to help young people in East and Southern Africa who have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. Ncube used the metaphor of a tree to invite children to map out their lives, tracing their cultural heritage through the roots; their current circumstances on the ground; their strengths and skills in the trunk of the tree; their hopes and dreams for the future in the branches; people who are supporting them in the leaves; and gifts they have been given in the fruits. This map offers children a safe base from which problems can be explored and solutions found, or, as White describes, “*an alternative territory of identity*” (2005).

We have run a number of tree-of-life groups in schools with young people and parents from refugee communities (e.g. Hughes, 2014), and the team has found this a powerful way of connecting young people with positive aspects of their identities, and finding non-stigmatising ways of talking about the problems in their lives. The groups have helped them develop pride, confidence, and motivation to work towards their desired futures. This approach has also been successfully used with other communities in London: for example with African Caribbean men in the ‘Trailblazer’ project (Byrne *et al.*, 2010) and with women living with HIV (Iliopoulou *et al.*, 2009).

We reflected on the fact that, by running our tree-of-life projects in schools, we were working in an environment that many participating children connected



**Supporters/people who cheer me on:**

'Learn well and live a better life'

'Live life while it lasts but do remember to always do the do right thing'

**Tackling Skills:**

- Even though bullies might carry on it's better to ignore them
- Don't show fear
- Don't aggravate people by starting anything
- Go to the nearest public place
- Learn from people around you

**What my team say about me:**

- A - thinks I'm a nice person. Friendly
- L - thinks I'm respectful and polite
- G - thinks I'm a thinker
- P - Good team work. Listening to others
- J - Play football with a smile on face! Enjoy myself!

**Shabur** (not his real name)

**Figure 1:** Team of life sheet

with failure. We therefore considered locating our groups in contexts that might more easily facilitate the emergence of empowering stories. We were inspired by a group of young men who we met from Mosslands school in The Wirral, who told us about a project they had been involved in with Liverpool Football Club using the 'team of life' (Denborough, 2012). This is similar to the tree-of-life but, instead, uses the metaphor of football. Like many we work with, these boys had felt they were failing in school and in their life generally, and the project had helped them connect with stories of pride, teamwork, success and hopes for the future. Football offered rich meanings about personal and collective values, and their passion for the game had

become channelled into a passion for their life more generally. Their words can be heard on their website (Mosslands URL in references).

Excited by the prospect of a different approach with refugee young people, we contacted the community branch of Arsenal – our local football club, run by Jack Ironside and Samir Singh, who agreed to collaborate with us in running a two-day project combining football training with the team of life.

**The Arsenal team-of-life**

Four secondary schools in the London Borough of Camden selected young people from refugee communities who they thought would particularly benefit from

the project. In total, sixteen young men from the Somali, Congolese, and Kosovan communities, aged between 12 and 15, participated and six of these took part in both of the two-day projects. This took place at the Arsenal Emirates stadium, and the programme was interspersed with a behind-the-scenes tour, a visit to the Arsenal museum, football training and a variety of team-based activities. The programme was divided into several parts, as follows:

**Developing team sheets**

We began with a discussion about what people liked or loved about football, and from whom they learnt this, how this connected with attitudes to football within their culture and families, and how this

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related to things they valued in other parts of their life. In this way, they began to make connections between their love of football, their families and communities, and what was important to them. For example, one young person said he loved the excitement of going to matches with his cousins and cheering their team on together. This reminded him of how important his extended family were to him and how this was valued within his (Somali) community.

The young men were then asked to map out their own teams-of-life on large sheets of paper. Teams could be made up of family members, teachers, friends, people who are with them now, people they have known in the past and whose influence continues to sustain them, or even people they have never personally known but who have provided them with inspiration. They were asked to identify what roles these played in their lives; whether helping them to 'score goals' and achieve successes; or helping defend their goals; or cheering them from the sidelines. They were invited to choose a motto for their team that was a guiding principle for them in their lives. The facilitators used narrative questioning to help them develop the preferred stories that began to emerge as they constructed their teams: for example, what people in their teams appreciated about them; who shared or recognised their motto; how this had come to be such an important value to them; and how members of their team were influenced by these values.

### Football training

We connected conversations that had taken place during the development of the team sheets to what we observed during the football training. Jack and Samir from the Arsenal community branch designed a training programme that focused on teamwork as well as skills development. We watched the skills young people used on the pitch (such as teamwork, determination, concern for the welfare of others) and commented on these throughout the training, giving encouragement and celebrating achievements as they witnessed them. Later, these skills and abilities were added to their team sheets.

### Sharing and elaborating preferred stories

We invited the young people to share their team sheets in small groups and asked others to add words of encouragement or say what

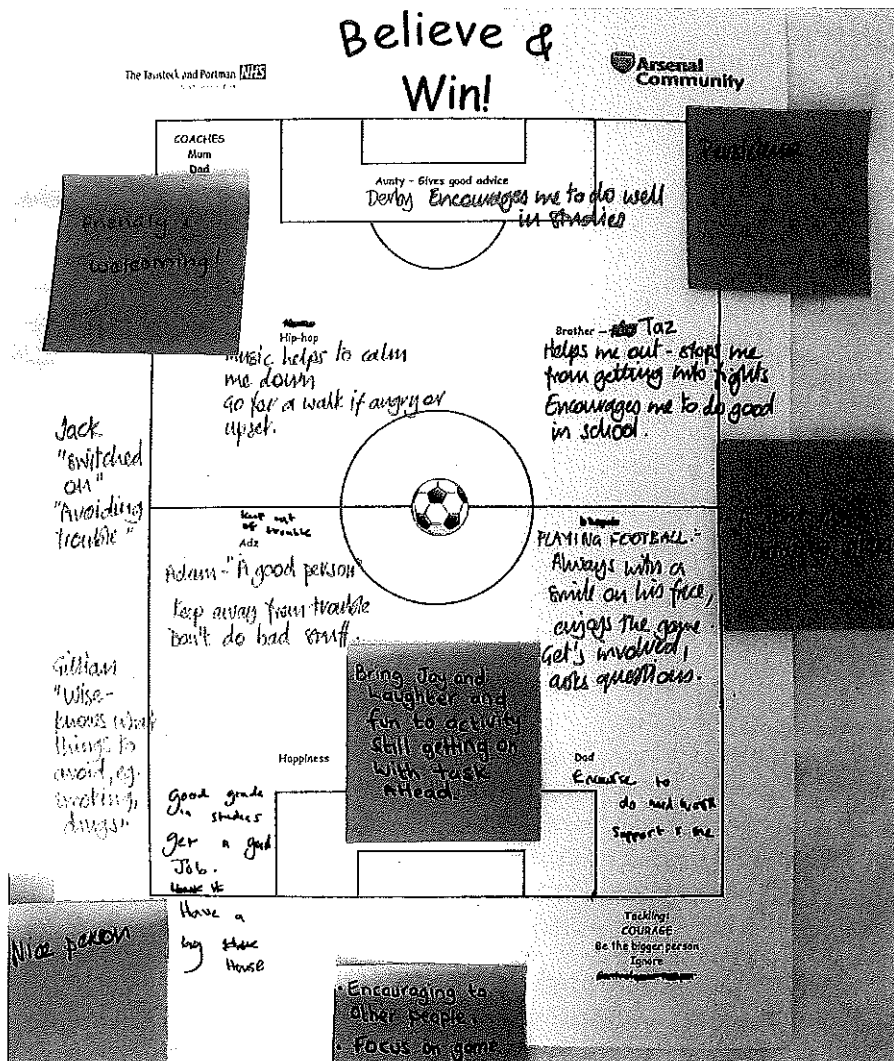


Figure 2: Example team sheet

they appreciated about their teammates. This was an important part of the re-telling and embedding of the young men's preferred identities. It was also part of a process of fostering an atmosphere of collaboration and appreciation over the two days.

### Identifying personal goals

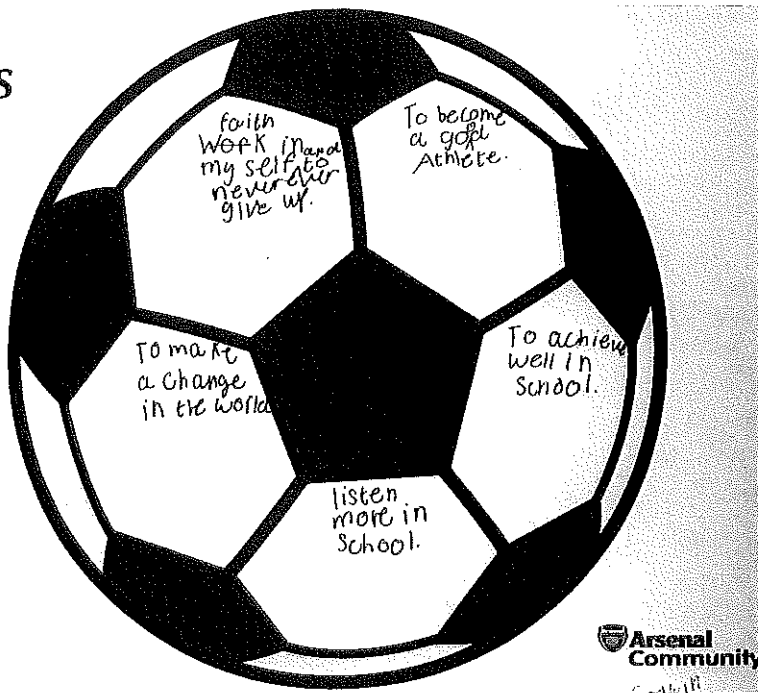
At this point, we began to draw out the hopes they had for their lives and their personal goals, building on strengths and abilities and the values contained in their mottos. Each person was given a goal sheet where they could record these (See Figure 3). Their goals were wide ranging, including such things as wanting to do well in school; to get particular jobs when they grew up; to be able to help others who had struggled as they had; and to become a professional footballer. It was wonderful to see how they seemed to grow in stature as they began to connect with their hopes and dreams for the future, and how these young people, many of whom were viewed as under-achievers, held such hopes for themselves.

By connecting with these hopes and values, we were also inviting them to view themselves as someone with something to contribute in life.

### Sharing problems and working on solutions together

Having created what Denborough (2012) describes as 'safe ground' for the young people to stand on in the first part (developing a clearer view of what their personal values were and what they felt proud of, as well as building trust and cooperation within the group), we were able to begin conversations about difficulties they faced in their lives. We talked about what it was like to be growing up in London, and what the particular challenges might be for someone from a refugee community. They shared their concerns about personal safety – what it was like living on a housing estate where they felt intimidated by groups of older boys, and how they felt vulnerable walking home from school. They also talked about

# GOALS



We then asked about the choices they had in how to respond to these challenges, and invited them to evaluate the effect of these different responses on their own lives. Throughout this discussion, we referred back to the things they had put on their team sheets, asking how their strengths and abilities acted as resources for them in dealing with these difficulties.

### Celebrations and certificates

At the end of the two days, we held a celebration of achievement for all those who had participated, to which family and friends were invited. The young people showed their team sheets to their families, and shared some of the positive stories that had emerged for them. They were awarded certificates and given medals from the Arsenal community. Using our observations throughout the two days and material from the team sheets, we personalised each certificate with comments about specific strengths, skills, values and hopes, how these had touched others over the two days, and

Figure 3: Goal sheet

their experiences of racist bullying at school, and how it was, living with the assumption from others that they would

fail. As some found the courage to talk, others joined in as they realised that they were not alone in these experiences.

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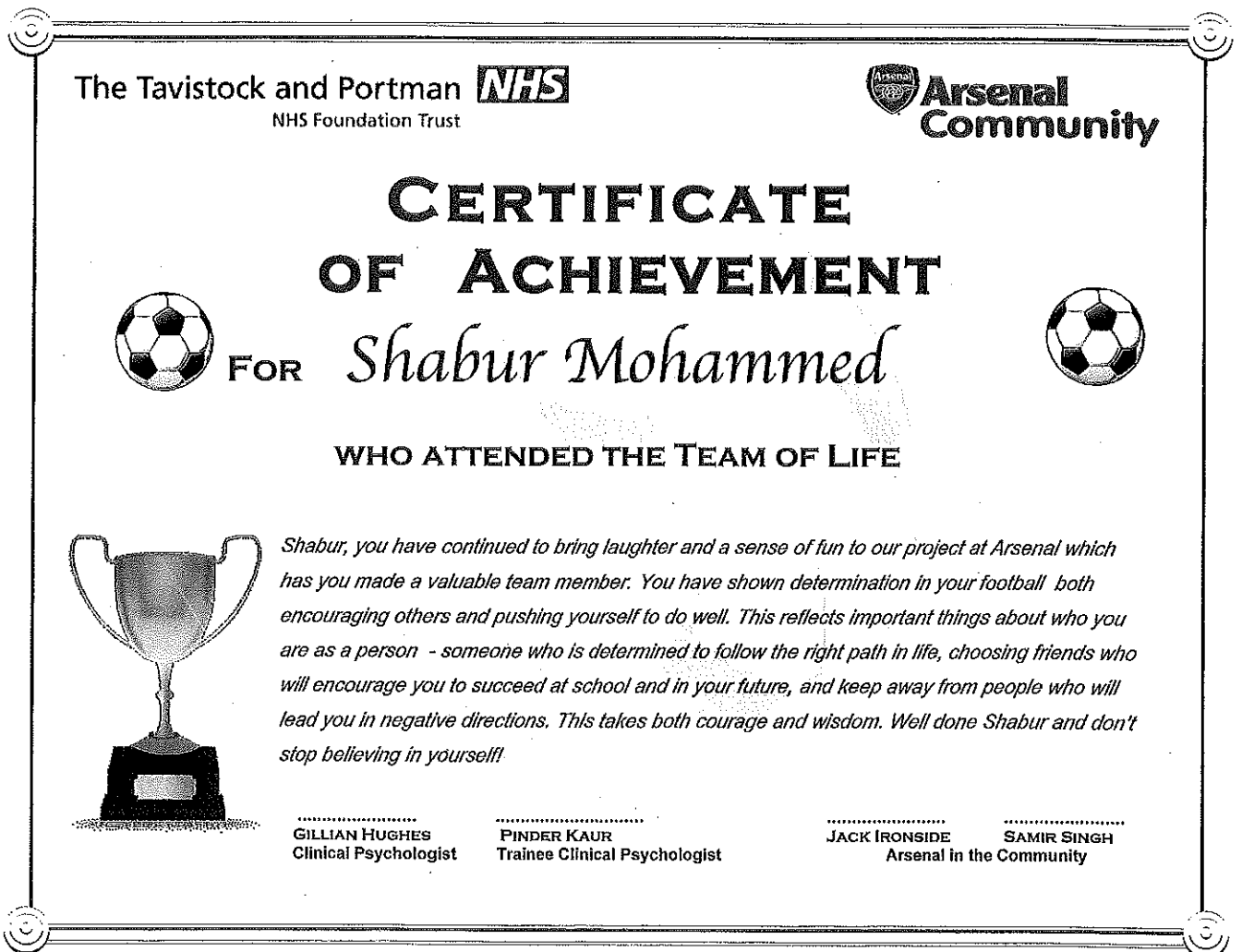


Figure 4: Certificate example (Shabur Mohammed is a fictitious name)

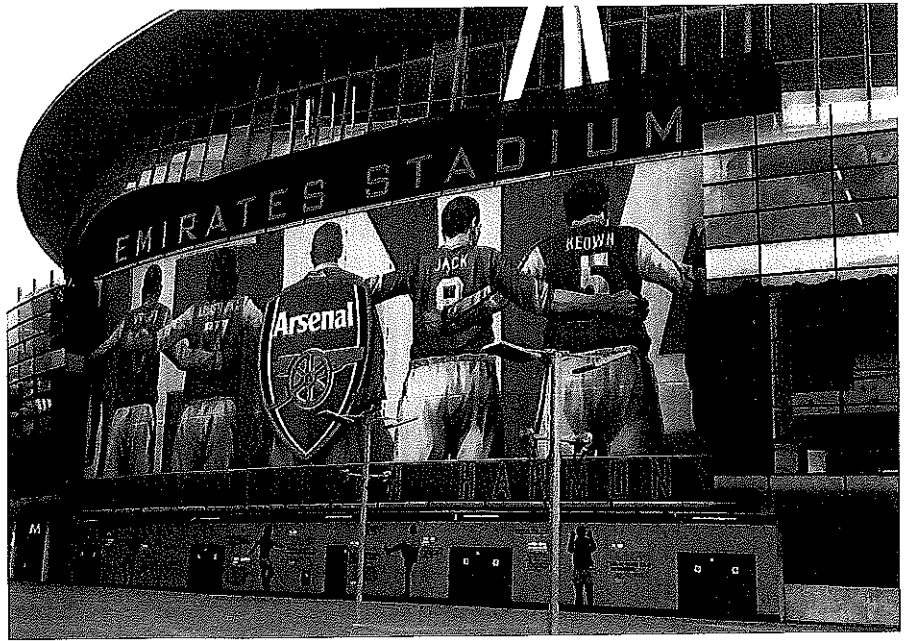
included words of encouragement. There was also a surprise guest, a former manager of Arsenal Football Club, Terry Neill, who joined the celebrations, taking great pride in listening to the young men's achievements and awarding them with their certificates. This celebration and re-telling of their stories was a moving experience and created greater definition for these accounts, embedding them in their relationships and opening possibilities for new ways of being for them in the future.

### Spreading the news

Throughout the project, photos and videos were taken to document the process. We used these to create team photo-boards for each young person to take home to show others what they and their teammates had achieved, and which could serve as an ongoing reminder of their abilities. Larger display boards were also made from the photos and given to schools to put up in their main reception-areas.

### Responses to the team-of-life project

To evaluate the responses to this project, we used both an adapted version of the Experience of Service questionnaire (CHI-ESQ; Astride-Stirling, 2002) at the end of each workshop, which included more open-ended questions, asking young people and



parents and carers about differences the workshop might have made to their lives and changes they might have noticed in how they see themselves and their child. These questions were elaborated during group discussions with both parents and carers and the young people, which were recorded and later transcribed.

The responses of the young men to the closed questions across both the two-day projects are summarised in the table below (16 respondents).

From the open questions discussed by parents and carers and the young people in groups, a number of themes emerged:

### Impact on identity and views of their self

The young men were asked to identify the skills and qualities they had noticed demonstrated by their team mates throughout the project, which allowed all of them to hear about themselves in positive ways and appreciate their valuable contribution to the team. They described their peers as "determined", "calm", "good at making people laugh", "excellent at languages", "caring towards others" and "hard working", which opened up a world of possibility for each of them about their futures. Hearing these skills and qualities

### Team of Life Experience of Service Questionnaire

#### Responses from young men:

	Certainly true	Partly true	Not true	Don't know
I feel that the people at the workshop listened to me	14	2		
It was easy to talk to the people at the workshop	15	1		
I was treated well and respected by the workshop leaders	16			
My views were taken seriously	11	3		2
I feel that the people running this workshop know how to help me feel better about my life	14	2		
I have been given enough explanation about the purpose of this workshop	12	4		
I had fun at this workshop	16			
I would recommend this workshop to a friend	13	2		1
Overall the help I received at the workshop was helpful	15	1		

#### Responses from parents:

	Certainly true	Partly true	Not true	Don't know
I have been given enough explanation about the purpose of this workshop	6			
If a child's friend needed similar help, I would recommend that he or she come to this workshop	6			
Overall the workshop was helpful	6			

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named, they could begin to believe they could do well at school, improve their football and reach their goals in education and life more generally. When asked if the workshop had changed their views about themselves and if so how, they said:

*"[The facilitators] made you work, but the work wasn't that hard. It was enjoyable. It made you feel like you are free to do anything. You can be yourself."*

*"It showed me what I can do. It showed me how I can act to other people."*

*"It made me feel like a better person."*

*"It made me feel like I have a better future. It made me feel more confident."*

*"It made me proud of myself."*

### **Pride and feeling special**

We saw the young men felt good about themselves. They took pride in teaching us as facilitators more about their heritage, telling us stories about events from their lives and sharing their skills on and off the football pitch. Acknowledging their efforts with certificates, medals and celebrations was an important part of this process and was reflected in their comments:

*"We know they care about us because they gave us certificates and medals. It was the best part."*

*"It made me proud of myself – we've got some certificates and have done work"*

*"The talk with Terry made us feel very special. We are unique. There is no one else like me."*

### **Emphasis on values**

When the young men were asked, *"What was the most helpful thing you learned from the workshop?"*, they said:

*"Keep morals, be friendly."*

*"Care about life."*

*"To always do the right thing and ignore bullies."*

*"To ignore bad things."*

Helping them identify their personal values was an important part of the narrative process, because these guiding principles (their 'team mottos') are the values that help steer them through life. Having traced the historical development of their values in the context of their families and culture, the young men could then envision behaviours that would support these values, such as working hard at school and staying out of trouble, and talk about how to put this into practice.

### **The setting**

CAMHS clinics are seen as stigmatising by families from refugee communities, who fear their children will be seen as 'mental', inviting particular responses and judgements from others. Moving out of the clinic seemed to remove this stigma, and the football setting invited pride and connections with achievement. It was an experience the young men wanted to share not hide, and were proud that photos of the event were displayed in their schools. In the group discussion, we asked what difference being at Arsenal Emirates stadium made to their experience. Responses included:

*"I feel proud of myself to be in the Emirates Stadium. It helped me improve what I should be."*

*"It was exciting to come here! It was a good experience – not just good, great!"*

Parents commented: *"It made his Easter holiday a perfect holiday"*.

They were excited about being invited to an iconic venue, and this generated a sense they were special and important. Although the project addressed emotional wellbeing, the focus on football made it safe to talk about with their friends.

### **A good experience – having fun whilst also learning**

All the participating young people had difficulty engaging with learning at school, so it was very important the project was fun and felt relevant to their lives. It was remarkable to see how hard they worked over the two days, and that we had their cooperation throughout. When asked *"What would you like to tell other people about this workshop?"* they replied:

*"It was amazing! A great experience."*

*"It was exciting to come here! It was a good experience – not just good, great! Excellent!"*

*"It was very nice and people were kind. Impossible to get bored."*

*"We talked about our lives and selves."*

*"It is really fun and it makes you feel happy."*

### **Parent's feedback**

Parents, carers and siblings were invited at the end to see the work the young men had completed and to participate in the awards ceremony. This sharing of success, or as Michael White describes, *"spreading the news"*, was a really important part of the process of embedding pride in the young men's preferred versions of their selves.

When asked for feedback, parents told us about the excitement they witnessed in their children, and how they shared their experiences when they got home with family and friends. They talked about how their children had grown in confidence and what they learnt:

*"How to become a true person, grow up and have confidence."*

*"He learned how to do the right thing and how to make self-confidence."*

*"It made him feel special and gave him more confidence."*

Also, how their children had been helped to develop hopes and dreams for the future:

*"Have a better view of what he sees ahead of himself and his future."*

### **Feedback from schools – spreading the news further**

Teachers were asked to comment on what, if any, changes they had observed in school for those who had participated. They noticed relationships had improved between the young people and school staff, as well as with their peers. They felt this was connected to an improvement in the children's self-esteem and increased confidence, and that the young men appeared more 'happy.' One school described how the project had enabled these young men to become 'visible' in the school community, by students noticing the displays and talking about the project, which invited further pride in the participants. Teachers felt this was an important part of building positive identities for the young people who had previously been viewed in negative ways.

*"They [the young men] all loved it, they felt like they belonged somewhere and all had something in common. We [staff at school] noticed how this made a difference to their behaviour, emotions and cognitive skills."*

### **Discussion**

We were so struck by the impact such a brief intervention had, that it invited us to reflect on the power of changing the setting of our work, coupling therapy with a sporting activity connected with pride and enjoyment, and using narrative practices to draw out stories of achievement and hope in the face of difficulties. By linking this to cultural heritage and social history, the young men were able to see their preferred identities as deeply rooted in who they were, which was sustained beyond the life of the



project and continued into their school and home lives.

Teachers at school noticed significant changes in the young men following the project, in their confidence, their learning, and their relationships with others; and one school described this change as an increased "sense of belonging". This was interesting because, although the teams of life invite people to connect with their own personal histories and communities, there was not a direct focus on increasing connectedness with school communities. It seemed, therefore, that the young people were able to live out their preferred identity in contexts beyond those discussed, and this enabled them to feel more comfortably integrated into their school environments. Given that young people have a tendency to conform to normative standards set by their peers in order to fit in, it was surprising that a closer connection with the young men's unique identities actually facilitated this sense of belonging.

As facilitators, we noticed they very rapidly began to take risks in talking about themselves, their experiences and about their future hopes. As Denborough (2008) describes, the process of identifying a person's cultural history and social networks, and how these have supported the development of that person's preferred identity, enables the development of a safe base on which they can stand. With this solid base, it becomes much more possible to explore the challenges that person has faced to their identity and the obstacles to their hopes for the future.

We noticed how the football training and group exercises facilitated confidence and connections with teammates, which helped foster a spirit of collaboration and trust. Also, the taking of physical risks on the pitch (such as tackling an older boy, or hugging team mates when a goal was scored) was translated to the work they subsequently did inside, where they were able to take more risks in sharing personal aspects of themselves.

We were aware the young men selected for the project were all viewed as struggling with the school environment in some way, and many of them were described as having 'behavioural problems'. However, our experience was, although we needed to limit our paper-and-pen-based activities, the young men all maintained concentration throughout and offered their total cooperation. This was clearly a mode of

learning that fitted better with them than the structure of the school environment, or even of traditional-therapy sessions.

As facilitators, we learnt a great deal from those who took part in this project, both in their direct feedback to us about how they were experiencing the two days, but also in our witnessing of the journeys they made – how they struggled with old stories of failure, and worked together to create more positive identities that gave them a voice, not only with each other, but also when they were back at school. As we continue to offer this project, the voices of the young men will be an important influence over how it evolves.

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Jack Ironside and Samir Singh from Arsenal Community for helping run the project at the Arsenal Emirates stadium and making this project possible. Thanks also to Jessica Walsh for leading the evaluation process, to Nsimire Bisimwa and David Amias for helping co-facilitate the workshops, and to Warsan Saleh for her ideas and support.

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