



A Scoping Review of the Role of Sensory and Narrative Processes in the Wellbeing and Belonging of Young Refugees

Anna Gilleard¹ · Luise V. Marino² · Tracey Smith³ · David Turgoose⁴

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Abstract

Previous research has highlighted the potential value of narrative therapeutic approaches and multisensory engagement with child and adolescent refugees. A scoping review was conducted to explore the role of narrative and sensory processes in young refugees' sense of belonging, social integration and wellbeing. Database searching identified 307 records, of which 15 were included in the final review. Thematic analysis of the synthesised data found 11 sub-themes and 4 overarching themes relating to the ways in which narrative and sensory approaches support refugee wellbeing and belonging: (1) positive and reparative social connections, (2) connections to cultural identity, (3) wellbeing and communication, and (4) youth empowerment. Narrative and sensory approaches may promote wellbeing, identity development and positive connections to new host cultures and communities for refugee youth and so may be usefully integrated into future therapeutic interventions across clinical, educational and social care settings. Future research should explore the individual experience of child identity and belonging, specifically amongst younger refugee groups.

Keywords Refugee, Mental health, Children, Belonging · Migration · Narratives · Senses · Wellbeing

Highlights

- Sensory and narrative approaches are of therapeutic benefit to refugee youth.
- Young refugees engage in sensory and narrative processes as part of everyday social interactions in a way that appears to foster connections to past and present cultures and communities.
- These processes may be successfully embedded into supportive interventions to support refugee wellbeing, belonging, identity, and positive social connections.

Globally, there are estimated to be approximately 47 million refugee children and young people fleeing conflict, violence, and persecution (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2024). Children are deeply

embedded in the social systems that are thrown into disarray and eroded through conflict (Bennouna et al., 2020). As a result, they will likely have complex psychosocial needs requiring attention (Frounfelker et al., 2020; Hodes & Vostanis, 2019). This paper adopts the United Nations 1951 Convention's definition of "refugee" to encompass all those who have been forcibly displaced due to conflict or persecution (UNHCR, 2011).

✉ Anna Gilleard
Umagi@leeds.ac.uk

¹ University of Leeds, Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, Leeds Institute of Health Sciences, Leeds, UK

² Research and Development, South West Yorkshire Partnership Foundation Trust, Fieldhead Hospital, Wakefield, UK

³ Chief Psychological Professions Officer, South West Yorkshire Partnership Foundation Trust, Leeds, UK

⁴ Clinical Psychology Programme, Leeds Institute of Health Sciences, School of Medicine, Leeds, UK

Narrative Processes

Narrative processes focus on how individuals make sense of their lives through evaluating the past and anticipating the future (Arvanitis & Yelland, 2021). Narrative theories argue that as individuals, and in groups, we construct stories (narratives) through these processes of sense-making

(Riessman, 2008). The social context is regarded to be critical to narrative construction, as we view our position in the world in relation to others around us (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019; Draper et al., 2024). Narratives can also be created by groups to generate shared ways of interpreting the world. In doing so, we foster social connections, shared identities and belonging. Therefore, narratives tell us about the individual and shared ways through which people interpret, claim identities and experience the social worlds they occupy (Riessman, 2008).

Previous research suggests that the ways through which young people make sense of the conflict they have escaped play a significant role in their mental health outcomes (Bennouna et al., 2020). Children who are able to generate a cohesive narrative about what happened may be better able to recover from the trauma experienced and adapt to post-resettlement life (Arvanitis & Yelland, 2021; Draper et al., 2024). Making sense of the past may support children's developing identity and sense of safety (Lock, 2016). The dislocation, uprooting and insecurity of forced migration disrupts formative childhood experiences of education, social development, and the experience of a secure base (Fantino & Colak, 2001; Lord & Muñoz, 2023). Given this, narrative processes may be important in refugee youth resettlement and psychosocial adjustment (Warsaw, 2019).

Narrative processes are used in psychological therapies to help individuals develop positive and de-stigmatising stories that bring to light personal strength, individuality, coping and resilience and so may be viewed to have 'therapeutic' value (Mohammad & Samarah, 2024). These can provide the opportunity for young refugees to re-script their lives and, in a sense, integrate the past (previous home) with the present (new home) (Rysst, 2016).

There remains a question of the extent to which this psychological integration of past and present parallels the process of social integration in young refugees. Social integration in this context refers to the process of forming shared positive connections, a sense of citizenship, and of belonging to one's local community (Ager & Strang, 2008). Social integration is regarded as an expected part of cultural adaptation ('acculturation') and is considered important for overall wellbeing (Oudshoorn et al., 2020). Wellbeing in this sense is considered to be a holistic indicator of psychosocial welfare which includes resources, health, connectedness and the need to belong (Haswell, 2023; Maslow, 1962). Social integration can facilitate prosocial relational experiences and help build social networks (Ager & Strang, 2008). This introduces the possibility for positive new discourses to be constructed both for the refugees themselves and the wider community, which could in turn reduce negative attitudes that threaten children's sense of belonging and inclusion (Mitchell et al., 2020). From a psychological perspective, it may be equally important for young

refugees to maintain connections with home culture(s) (Pieloch et al., 2016).

Sensory Processes

Sensory processes relate to the ways through which humans interact with the external environment via sense-based perception (Ayres & Robbins, 2005). The main senses are vision, sound, taste, smell, touch, proprioception, vestibular and the system of internal organ sensation; interoception (Ayres & Robbins, 2005). Narrative and sensory processes may work in parallel: narrative processing integrates key aspects of our subjective worlds, while sensory processing integrates the external with the internal world. Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that stories are often told through multiple sensory processes (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019).

Multisensory processing is also involved in the development of self-concept; where humans learn about who they are in the world through embodied experiences of the self (Scheller & Sui, 2022; Serino, 2019). Storytelling with toys, art materials and play artefacts has been used therapeutically to strengthen social connections and bonding amongst children (Creegan & Cuthbert, 2014). Play itself engages a range of sensory modalities and is known to be conducive to refugee wellbeing, as a fundamental part of child psycho-social development (Allport et al., 2019).

Complicated Personal Narratives

There are complexities in the histories of young refugees' lives which mean they may experience belonging to complicated social networks (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019). For example, belonging to a persecuted minority, identification with a militia or terrorist group, consignment as a child soldier or belonging to a distraught and divided community (Creegan & Cuthbert, 2014; Rutter, 2003). In this sense, belonging may not always be experienced as positive but instead be connected to necessity, survival, exclusion or shame (McIntyre, 2024).

The relative social positions that children have come from will also influence these ascriptions of belonging (Vitus, 2022). Coming from a family with a relatively high social positioning can make a young person's heritage a positive resource. Strongly maintained family ties that are supportive and nurturing may provide a secure base and a positive family script from which to experience belonging and wellbeing (Haswell, 2023). However, for other refugee children, uncertain and contested futures will pose ongoing difficulties that make the relationship to 'home' and where they 'belong' complex, ambiguous and painful (Arvanitis & Yelland, 2021). Consequently, children's capacities to

choose who they are and where they belong will be shaped by the social circumstances that they continue to move through (Chase, 2020).

The Present Review

Engaging in narrative construction and multi-sensory creative expression may support refugee children through these challenges (Goodman & Dent, 2019; Warshaw, 2019). No current review exists that brings together these processes with this population. It would therefore be useful to consolidate knowledge on narrative and sensory processes in young refugees, and appraise whether they may aid wellbeing, belonging and social integration. This may help guide the types of support provided to refugee youth across education, clinical and social care settings, including the design of future therapeutic interventions and efforts to foster social integration.

Methods

A scoping review was chosen as it is well-suited to synthesising research from across a range of methodological approaches and academic disciplines. This review aimed to address the following two research questions:

- (1) What is known about the role of narrative and sensory processes with young refugees?
- (2) How might such approaches affect belonging, social integration and wellbeing?

Search Strategy

A preliminary search using Google Scholar and PsycINFO confirmed there were no existing published reviews on the topic and identified key papers. Key terms and subject headings were generated using a SPIDER framework (Cooke et al., 2012). These defined how the three evaluation outcomes are conceptualised in the literature. The SPIDER framework identified the Sample (child and adolescent refugees), Phenomena of Interest (sensory and narrative processes), Evaluation (wellbeing outcomes, including belonging and social integration) and Research type (all designs including qualitative, quantitative, mixed, intervention, observation, and naturalistic studies) (Table 1).

Peer-reviewed studies and doctoral theses were searched in the following Ovid databases: Social Science, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health literature (CINAHL), PsycInfo, Embase and MEDLINE. Searches were conducted in August–September 2024.

Study Selection

Title and abstract screening, and later full text screening were completed predominantly by one author (AG) in consultation with the research team. Duplicates were deleted and full text articles were assessed for inclusion, this used the SPIDER framework to apply the following inclusion criteria: (1) any study design; (2) English language; (3) child and adolescent refugees (0–18 yrs); (4) included narrative or sensory processes; (5) evaluated wellbeing, belonging or social integration. No publication date range was specified in the search. Systematic reviews were not included, but references of relevant reviews were hand-searched for any backward citations that may fulfil the inclusion criteria. Articles were excluded for being: (1) non-English language; (2) unrelated to forcibly displaced, refugee or asylum-seeking youth (e.g. migrants, adults over 19 yrs); (3) not containing sensory or narrative processes; (4) not containing wellbeing, belonging or social integration outcomes.

Following the removal of duplicate records, 307 titles and abstracts were screened for inclusion. Full texts of 58 articles were reviewed against the SPIDER criteria and subsequently 15 studies (dated 2003–2024) were included in the final review. Figure 1 documents the review process using a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, modified to incorporate the ‘retrieval’ of papers into those ‘assessed’ for eligibility (Moher et al., 2009).

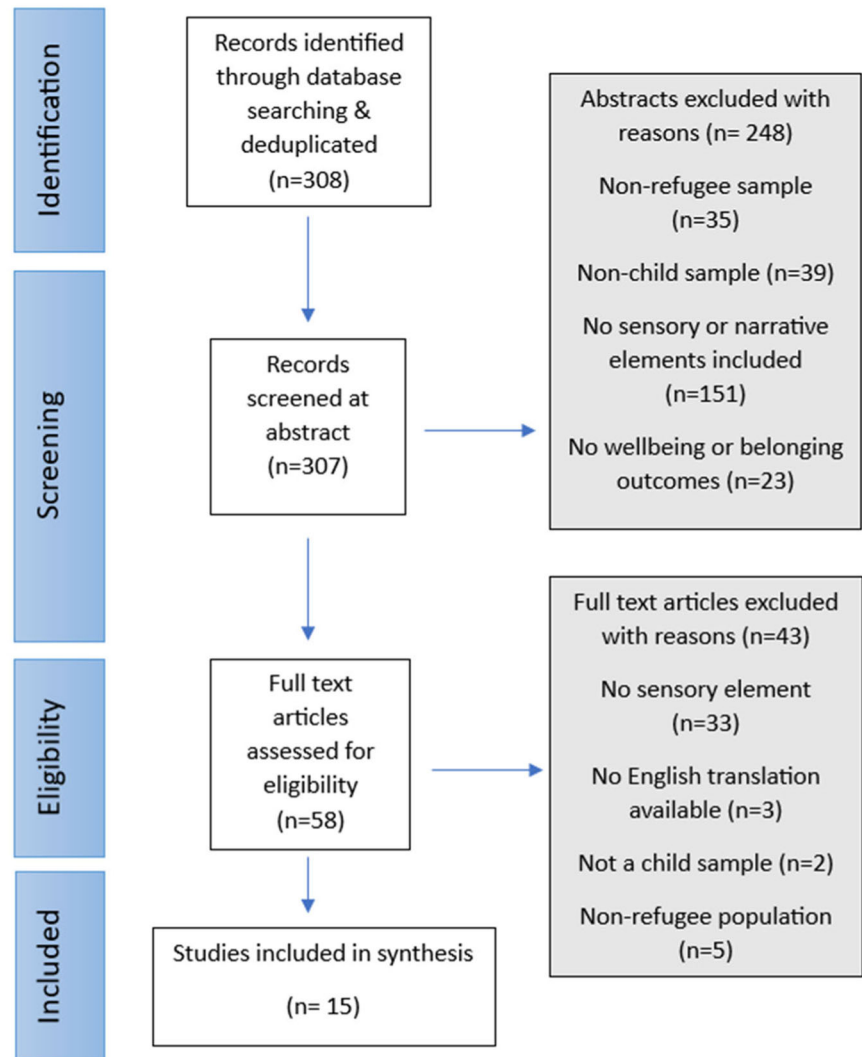
Data Synthesis

Data was extracted pertaining to the study design, aim, participants, location, key findings and evidence gaps related to the phenomena of interest. The review employed a thematic analysis to report common themes in the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Pollock et al., 2023). Data extraction and thematic analysis was performed in Microsoft Excel. Thematic analysis intended to capture the descriptive aspects, methodology and key findings of the included studies. A four-stage coding process was employed to code data into sub-themes and overarching themes to develop a conceptual framework:

Stage 1 – an initial sample of raw codes pertaining to the phenomena and evaluation of interest were open-coded by two researchers (AG and LVM). *Stage 2* – codes were turned into subordinate categories and an initial framework was compiled (AG and LVM). Disagreement between themes was resolved with a third researcher (DT). *Stage 3* – the best-fit framework guided categorization of all categories from the data into sub-themes (AG) with further refinement (LVM and DT). *Stage 4* – overarching themes were

Table 1 Search strategy

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Sample: | Unaccompanied minor*, refugee youth, refugee children*, refugee young*, child migrant*, young migrant*, asylum seek* child AND |
| Phenomenon of Interest 1: | (Sensory stor*, sensory experience*, senses, sensory memor*, smell*, taste*, touch, sound*, music, image*, song* OR |
| Phenomenon of Interest 2: | Intervention 2: Storytelling, narrative*, story, stories, “tree of life”, “river* of experience”) AND |
| Evaluation: | Social integration, social connection, belonging, connection, mental health, well?being, social inclusion, home |

Fig. 1 A modified PRISMA flowchart based on the reporting guidelines for study selection (Moher et al. 2009)

identified. The sub-themes were counted in order to identify and balance the respective weighting within each overarching theme. There was considerable overlap in the rich data around sensory components of studied interventions and wellbeing outcomes. Overarching themes were used to develop a conceptual framework.

Results

Study Characteristics

The 15 included studies considered (a) sensory and narrative processes ($n = 2$) or (b) sensory processes alone ($n = 13$), and how these processes affect belonging, social

integration and wellbeing. Wellbeing was defined in a broad sense, including: mental health outcomes, social integration, agency, identity and belonging (Dhillon et al. 2020; Heynen et al. 2022; Beauregard et al. 2024). Sensory processes were largely described in terms of creative arts methods, some of which also contained embedded narrative principles (Quinlan et al. 2016; Beauregard et al. 2017; Kevers et al. 2022). The review included $n = 9$ qualitative studies (Beauregard et al., 2017; Bujorbarua, 2020; Dhillon et al., 2020; Enge & Stige, 2022; Heynen et al., 2022; Marsh & Dieckmann, 2017; Norton & Sliep, 2019; Phillips, 2021; Rousseau et al., 2003), $n = 4$ quantitative studies (Gerber et al., 2014; Kevers et al., 2022; Meyer DeMott et al., 2017; Quinlan et al., 2016), $n = 2$ mixed methods studies (Grasser et al., 2019; Kwon & Lee, 2018). The studies came from a range of countries, all published between 2003–2024. Of the qualitative studies, $n = 2$ were ethnographies (Marsh & Dieckmann 2017; Dhillon et al. 2020) and $n = 1$ was a participatory action study (Norton & Sliep, 2019). Several were focused or single-site case studies within a larger (multi-case) project (Rousseau et al. 2003; Enge & Stige 2022). Sample sizes ranged from $n = 1$ (Beauregard et al., 2024), $n = 145$ (Meyer DeMott et al., 2017), to two fully participating schools. Samples ranged in age from approximately 5–18 yrs (Table 2).

Refugee Youth Narrative and Sensory Processes

From 45 initial codes, thematic analysis identified 11 sub-themes and 4 overarching themes in the reviewed literature on the role of narrative and sensory approaches and their relationship to wellbeing outcomes. These themes were compiled into a conceptual framework describing how narrative or sensory approaches may affect the wellbeing, social integration and belonging of young refugees (Fig. 2).

Positive and Reparative Social Connections

Social Safety & Security

Peer support and a sense of connectedness was fostered through joint music activity and dance (Dhillon et al., 2020; Gerber et al., 2014; Heynen et al., 2022). Dhillon et al. (2020) described how mutual respect and shared attention was created by music groups. In Heynen et al. (2022) observed social connection and belonging through the mutual discovery of each other's talents, sharing of stories and supporting the contributions of others. The authors reported that this kind of shared musical engagement increased young refugees' sense of the overall classroom climate, suggesting that children of the local and newly arriving communities shared aspects of their identities

through music in a way that supported belonging for all (Heynen et al., 2022).

Bridging Social Divides

Opportunities to make cross-cultural connections may be more available using non-verbal forms of expression. It was observed that children instinctively brought in music from home in playground peer interactions (Marsh, 2017). Songs acted as a vehicle for social participation; welcoming and celebrating music across nationalities. This was reported as a de-shaming experience that fostered acculturation through mutual learning and enjoyment of what may otherwise be unfamiliar or feared new cultures (Marsh, 2017). The studied interventions most often took place in schools; widely reported to be a safe setting in which to engage children (Quinlan et al., 2016). Schooling may provide the routine and structure critical for establishing safety during resettlement (Ehnholt & Yule 2006; Arvanitis & Yelland 2021).

Creative Expression as Empowerment

Being Child-Led

Narratives may be expressed across multiple creative and sense-based mediums. These were either led entirely by the child or were prompted by the adult in the case of younger children (Beauregard et al., 2024). Although many studies pre-assigned the task and mediums, the children often took over the lead in directing attention to their preferred modes of expression.

Increasing Children's Agency

Studies described the critical role that choice and agency had in the process of creative, multi-sensory and narrative expression. Authors spoke of the opportunities brought about by having multiple modes of expression in terms of children and youth being able to determine how and when to express themselves. For example, deciding when to join in with a group song or contribute to a developing story children became more creative and spontaneous in their participation, making use of dance movements, vocalisations and drama play (Meyer DeMott et al., 2017; Bujorbarua 2020). This appeared to break through language barriers and traditional didactic means of engagement, which may be beneficial when working with linguistically diverse youth in schools and community settings (Bujorbarua 2020; Heynen et al., 2022). Creative, narrative methods such as poetry enabled youth to experience shared agency and collective strength following hardships they had faced (Norton & Sliep, 2019).

Table 2 Characteristics of the included studies (n = 15)

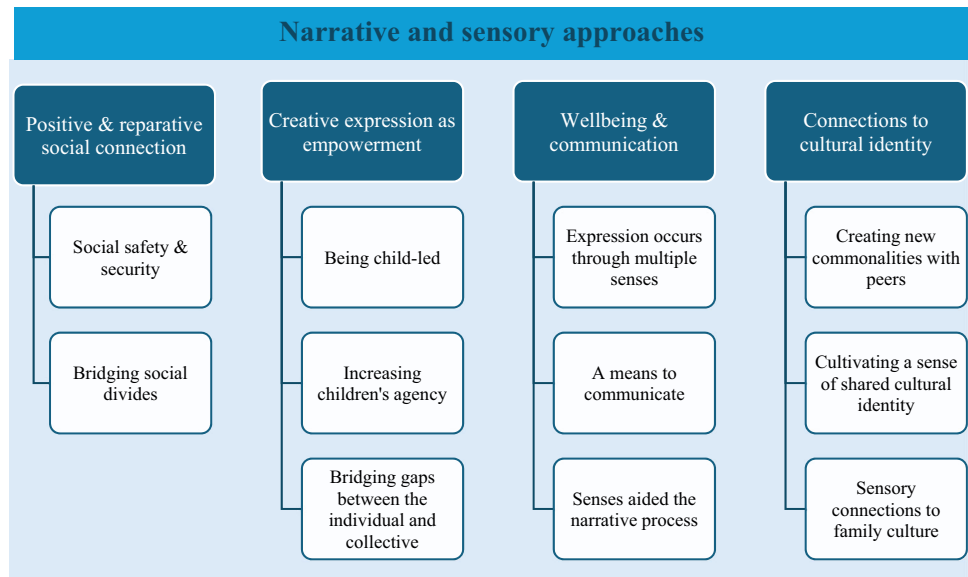
| Authors, year, country | Study aim | Study design | Participants | Narrative or Sensory element: | Key findings |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|--|--|---|
| Dhillon et al. (2020), Canada | To look at the use of physical movement to foster creativity & social connections | Ethnographic observational study of a school-based community arts programme | N = 17 refugees (mixed genders, n.s.) Age: 11–18 yrs Countries of origin: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Congo, Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Haiti, Iraq, Somalia, Syria | Sensory element: Auditory, vestibular (Music, dance) | Dancing & body movement increased social connections & acculturation amongst young refugees |
| Beauregard et al. (2024), Canada | To assess how one refugee child engaged in mixed expressive arts & whether this fostered empowerment, agency & wellbeing | Single case observation study of a child enrolled in a school-based creative arts multi-methods programme | N = 1 female Age: 7 yrs Country of origin: Syria | Sensory element: Tactile, auditory, visual (storytelling, play, puppets, drawings) Narrative elements: Storytelling | The introduction of puppets helped the participant to express feelings, describe & make meaning as personal narratives were explored. Creative participatory arts supported wellbeing. Evidence of increased self-control later in the programme. |
| Bujorbarua (2020), USA | To explore refugee children's story-making & wellbeing through movement & dance | Intervention study of movement and dance-based community centre workshops | N = 2 refugees (1 male, 1 female) <5 years on arrival Age: 7 yrs, 11 yrs Country of origin: Iraq | Sensory element: Visual, vestibular, auditory, tactile | Increased joy, communication skills, emotional regulation, self-esteem, self-awareness. Movement promoted peer connections & self-expression. Children engaged multiple sensory modes of expression in the workshops. |
| Heynen et al. (2022), Netherlands | To assess the implementation & perceived effects of a school-based music therapy intervention on social connection, affect | Intervention study of a music therapy programme | N = 108 refugees (gender n.s.) Age: 6–17 yrs Countries of origin: Syria, Iran, Eritrea & other countries n.s. | Sensory element: Auditory (music) | Music therapy group reduced negative affect, strengthened a sense of connectedness & belonging in teachers' reports. Observed a sense of solidarity, inclusivity and preservation of cultural identity in the music therapy group. |
| Gerber et al. (2014), Kosovo | To assess a community-based music programme on the mental health of youth in postconflict Kosovo. | Intervention study of a school-based music programme | N = 74 forcibly displaced (32 females, 42 males) Age: 8–18 yrs Country of origin: Albania | Sensory element: Auditory (music) | Children in the music programme showed fewer mood & cognitive difficulties & PTSD symptoms at 1 yr follow-up than those who did not participate. Social support and sense of communal unity generated in the programme. |
| Grasser et al. (2019), USA | To assess dance movement therapy to reduce mental health difficulties (stress & trauma symptoms) in the community group | Intervention study of a dance/movement therapy group | N = 16 refugees (8 females, 8 males) Age: 7–14 yrs Average 2 yrs after arrival Country of origin: Syria | Sensory element: Vestibular, tactile (dance) | Positive mental health effects. Dance increased group cohesion & expression. Dance was reported to be a culturally acceptable & inclusive method of engaging refugee young people. |
| Quinlan et al. (2016), Australia | To evaluate a school-based creative arts therapy for young refugees in terms of psychological wellbeing | Intervention study of a creative arts group programme | N = 42 refugees (mixed genders, n.s.) Age: average 15 yrs, range n.s. 4–11 mths after arrival Countries of origin: across Middle East, Africa & Asia | Sensory element: Mixed senses | Reduced behavioural difficulties & psychological distress (HSCL-25, SDQ). Schools provided a safe setting. |
| Rousseau et al. (2003), Canada | To investigate the use of storytelling & creative expression as therapeutic tools for recently arrived immigrant & refugee children | Intervention study of storytelling & creative expression workshops | N = 40 refugees Age: Two age groups 6–7 yrs (n = 19), 11–12 yrs (n = 21) | Sensory element: Auditory (spoken stories) Narrative elements: Storytelling, myths | Young refugees use a wide variety of mythic referents. These help children better represent the gaps between home & school, past & present. This creates the possibility of hybridizing their worlds. Myths provided identity connections between inner reality & social world. |
| Kwon & Lee (2018), South Korea | To investigate the role of play & mixed creative methods in psychological recovery, wellbeing and healing | Intervention study of play therapy using mixed creative methods | N = 4 female refugees Age: 8–9 yrs Country of origin: North Korea | Sensory element: Tactile (play) | Play fostered emotional expression, wellbeing & reduced internalizing & externalizing difficulties. |

Table 2 (continued)

| Authors, year, country | Study aim | Study design | Participants | Narrative or Sensory element: | Key findings |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|---|--|--|
| Engle & Stige (2022), Norway | To explore how participation in music therapy can contribute to refugee children's social wellbeing & peer community experience | Intervention study of four children in a wider schools-based music therapy programme | N = 4 refugees (2 females, 2 males) Age: 8–12 yrs 6mths - 4 yrs after arrival Country of origin: n.s. | Sensory element: Auditory (music) | Participants showed social participation through the sharing & mutual enjoyment of music Collaboration was a key element of music therapy but did present some challenges Pop songs created shared cultural capital Colouring was conducive to wellbeing, increased self-expression & reduced stress in qualitative reports Reflection & distraction helped this process |
| Phillips (2021), UK | To explore the role of visual arts projects for refugee wellbeing | Observation study of participants in a visual arts project – (colouring mandalas & freeform drawing) | N = 8 refugees of mixed ages (child & adult) & backgrounds. Arabic & Farsi-speakers. Countries of origin: Multiple countries n.s., included Iran | Sensory element: Visual (art, drawing) | |
| Norton & Sliep (2019), South Africa | To assess the utility of using narrative participatory action research with refugee young people | Participatory action research of creative expression & poetry workshops | N = 21 refugees (mixed genders, n.s.) Age: average 14 yrs, range n.s. Countries of origin: Multiple countries n.s., included Democratic Republic of Congo | Sensory element: Auditory (poetry) Narrative element: shared meaning & dialogue | Poetry helped reveal the shared narrative Poetry was reported to be a vehicle for social reparative dialogues, social connection, co-constructing meaning, shared agency & strength, following adversity |
| Meyer DeMott et al. (2017), Norway | To examine whether expressive arts interventions can alleviate trauma symptoms & increase wellbeing indicators | Intervention study of an expressive arts programme | N = 145 unaccompanied asylum-seeking males Age: 15–18 yrs 3–6 weeks after arrival. Countries of origin: Afghanistan, Somalia, Iran, Western Sahara, Palestine, Algeria | Sensory element: Mixed senses | Trauma symptoms (PTSS) & psychological distress (HSCL-25A) reduced, whilst life satisfaction & sense of control increased for the intervention group Intervention effects developed gradually over the study period Arts helped boys reconstruct meaning, develop social connections |
| Marsh & Dieckmann (2017), Australia | To investigate how musical play can support connections to cultural identity, participation & social inclusion | Ethnographic observation study of playground & school-based singing | N = 63 refugees & non-refugee pupils (closely observed out of 1 full primary school) Age: Primary school ages, n.s. Countries of origin: Majority Iraq (26%), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Afghanistan, Sudan, Sierra Leone, DRC, Nigeria, Uganda, Liberia, Iran, East Timor & Myanmar | Sensory element: Auditory (music, singing) | Singing facilitated social participation & integration Musical play creates a place where refugee young people can belong, form connections between host & home cultures |
| Kevers et al. (2022), Belgium | To assess how creative expression may support child mental health & classroom social relationships | Intervention study (Randomized Cluster Trial) of a creative expression programme | N = 120 migrants 47% refugees, 53% immigrants (1–3 rd gen) Age: 8–12 yrs <1 yr to 10 yrs after arrival. Countries of origin: Syria, Afghanistan | Sensory element: Mixed senses | Refugee children showed more reduction in PTSD symptoms compared with nonrefugee immigrant children 11% of the intervention group moved from clinical to subclinical PTSD symptom levels Expressive group improved classroom climate Classroom climate improved for children in the group. |

n.s. "not specified"

Fig. 2 Conceptual framework of emergent themes of the ways through which narrative and sensory approaches can promote belonging and wellbeing for young refugees



Bridging Gaps Between the Individual and Collective

Identity emerged as a key indicator of positive psychological change brought about by the creative interventions in four of the studies. In some cases, this was individually held, such as positive identity expression through music and arts (Meyer DeMott et al. 2017; Enge & Stige 2022). In other studies, this was framed in terms of a collective identity, either realised or co-constructed with other young refugees in a way that could be transformational (Marsh & Dieckmann, 2017; Norton & Sliep, 2019).

Wellbeing and Communication

Expression Occurs Through Multiple Senses

The studies reported that sensory and narrative approaches brought about positive changes across a range of wellbeing indicators. Creative multi-sensory interventions were found to reduce psychological difficulties such as PTSD, stress, negative emotions and behavioural difficulties (Gerber et al., 2014; Grasser et al., 2019; Heynen et al., 2022; Quinlan et al., 2016). As well as reducing distress, sensory and narrative approaches were found to increase additional positive outcomes (Kevers et al. 2022; Beauregard et al. 2024). Dance increased positive emotional expression, whilst mixed expressive arts appeared to improve children's levels of empathy, life satisfaction and hope for the future (Meyer DeMott et al. 2017; Kwon & Lee 2018; Bujorbarua 2020).

A Means to Communicate

Communication capacities were expanded by the introduction of multiple modalities for expression. For

example, puppets in a creative expression workshop enhanced children's comfort, engagement and self-expression (Beauregard et al., 2024). Multiple sensory modalities were reported to support children's generation of spontaneous, free and creative expression (Bujorbarua, 2020). This further supported child confidence and expression of personal strengths (Meyer DeMott et al., 2017).

Senses Aided the Narrative Process

The creative arts methods described in the studies featured several sensory elements that aided the narrative process. Vision featured in visual arts such as drawing/painting ($n = 8$ studies) and digital art such as photography and film ($n = 2$). Auditory processes featured in music ($n = 7$), storytelling ($n = 6$) and poetry methods ($n = 2$). Vestibular processes featured in dance methods ($n = 5$) and drama ($n = 4$). Tactile elements featured in play-based methods ($n = 3$), puppetry/toys ($n = 2$) and sculpting/building with Play-Doh, fabrics and sand ($n = 2$). Five studies engaged multiple sensory modalities in mixed expressive arts interventions ($n = 5$).

Multiple sensory modalities were also used to complement or expand the narrative capacities of young refugees; to communicate feelings and gain a sense of control over their experiences (Beauregard et al., 2024). For example, constructing an imagined scene in a story through different senses, creating a memory "patchwork" of one's life or drawing part of a story (Rousseau et al. 2003; Kevers et al. 2022). This suggests children may engage with multiple sensory modalities to positively connect to important parts of their lives and place in the world (Mitchell et al., 2020).

Connections to Cultural Identity

Creating New Commonalities With Peers

Sensory and narrative approaches provided a means to connect to children's family culture and the culture of their host country. Multi-sensory mediums were described as useful cultural brokers. For example, sharing the music, games and foods from one's home culture, and in turn enjoying the cultural totems of the host community (Meyer DeMott et al., 2017).

Cultivating a Sense of Shared Cultural Identity

Music created cultural and linguistic bridges in school playgrounds. Popular songs of the host community were sung collectively, some of which were already known to the refugee pupils despite the new language (Marsh & Dieckmann, 2017). The reciprocity made possible through song may serve as a form of cultural capital (Enge & Stige, 2022). Creating commonality can help young refugees to connect and feel belonging in their new social world. Songs, games and play appeared to be key means for young children to do this (Kwon & Lee, 2018; Rousseau et al., 2003).

Sensory Connections to Family Culture

Multi-media arts enabled refugee children to connect to aspects of their family and past home cultures. Cultural referents were explicitly targeted in the studied interventions or were observed through a range of sensory processes, including myths, drawing, craft, dancing, singing, puppetry and play (Beauregard et al., 2024; Heynen et al., 2022).

Discussion

The results of this scoping review suggest there are at least four ways narrative and sensory processes may improve the wellbeing of young refugees: (a) through positive and reparative social connections, (b) creative expression as empowerment, (c) wellbeing and communication and (d) connections to cultural identity. The reviewed literature described how narratives may be expressed across multiple creative and sense-based mediums (Beauregard et al., 2024). Most frequently employed were visual sensory modalities as a means of narrative storytelling; for example, in drawing, painting, photography and drama (Beauregard et al., 2024; Bujorbarua, 2020; Phillips, 2021). This is reflected in wider neuropsychological literature that typically focuses on vision, a sensory system that develops later than other senses (Hutmacher, 2019). As a distal sense, it becomes more important when we actively explore and

interact with the environment, in contrast with proximal senses such as touch and smell which communicate immediately "mum is here" or "I am safe". Young refugees may therefore be better able to connect to foundational early life experiences of care, attachment and belonging through visual input (Cowie & Mitchell, 2021).

The use of smell and taste as a sensory process were less well described. Although these were not an explicit focus of the intervention, Kwon & Lee (2018) noted that these senses were activated through food play. Children demonstrated care for each other through creating and sharing mock foods with Play-Doh. This has been observed more widely in trauma-affected children, who might express care needs through play enactments (Hyder, 2005). Given that sensory information is strongly connected to emotional memory, it would be fair to suggest that, for some young refugees, connecting to these smell and taste-based memories in the present may help connect to the positive feelings of the past – of family, belonging, soothing and home (Akhtar, 2011; Wallace & Lewis, 2020).

Creating Agency and Choice

The review highlighted the significance of child choice and agency in determining when and how to express themselves. Providing multiple sensory mediums expands the range of communication possible, whereas relying on verbal and host language alone limits young refugees' communication (Ayob & Omidire, 2021). The majority of refugee youth come from homes where little or none of the national language is spoken (Rutter, 2006). Involving children's native language, or other non-verbal creative mediums, will increase inclusion for children from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in education, health and social activities (Radjack et al., 2020).

Creating opportunities for children to exercise choice and preference may be critical in the success of efforts to promote peer belonging, social cohesion and integration for young refugees (Wallace & Lewis 2020; Sevón et al. 2023). This may be particularly important for this group of children whose voices are systematically marginalized in wider public and political spheres (Norton & Sliep 2019; Frounfelker et al. 2020). Children who have experienced forced migration may be cast in a state of in-betweenness, with less choice over who and to what they can belong (Maine et al., 2021). Having freedom to communicate through multi-sensory means may help children to reappraise issues of migration and transcultural identity in a way that transforms children from *done to* to *doing* (Alfano et al., 2018). Choice and agency may support children to construct their own identities and subjectivity, independent of those that are proscribed by wider society (Chase, 2020).

Sensory and Narrative Connections to Culture

Narrative approaches revealed the gaps between home and school, for example in the distinct characters and myths described in children's stories (Rousseau et al., 2003). This reveals the dual and often competing cultural identities with which young refugees must contend. Yet it also highlights the use of narrative tools and sensory processes in cultivating a sense of bicultural identity. Haswell (2023) describes how, in the context of refugee resettlement, encountering the social world through the senses can foster a sense of belonging. This occurs through restoration in the present, maintaining links with the past and shaping hopes for the future. Children use visual and verbal storytelling to describe relics, tokens and representations of the different cultures that they have lived through, including those of their new country. Engaging in embodied multisensory interactions with peers may help youth feel they belong to multiple cultures, and subsequently generate feelings of positive affect, fulfillment and a sense of continuity in the life narrative (Haswell, 2023).

Belonging and Identity

Belonging enables children to perceive the world as stable, controllable and located in the physical place that they inhabit (Erwin et al., 2024). Belonging emerged in the reviewed literature as an important dimension of the way child refugees build social and community networks, through peers and school but also in the new local communities. Wider literature supports the role that belonging plays in mediating refugee health and wellbeing outcomes, in particular belonging to peers and school (Draper et al., 2024; McIntyre, 2024).

Children seek social bonds through embodied practices of inclusion that are in turn responded to by others in the shared environment (Maine et al., 2021). Experiencing one's own culture as included and simultaneously being included in the local culture, either in school or in other social spaces, may be reparative against insider/outsider divides that permeate social discourses about refugee status, citizenship and ethnicity (Erwin et al., 2024). A refugee child, straddling (at least) two cultural worlds, can perform and experience belonging through these forms of social inclusion. This highlights the multiplicitous nature of belonging. Where one belongs is in constant negotiation; particularly at moments of migration (Geng et al., 2012; Haswell, 2023). Belonging is important, not just for children's subjective wellbeing, but also as a feature of social organization (Mitchell et al., 2020; Oudshoorn et al., 2020). Co-constructing shared identities in exile can aid social cohesion and restitution (Maine et al., 2021). New concepts of citizenship may emerge in a way that is protective and

reparative, for both local and arriving communities (Mitchell et al. 2020; Erwin et al. 2024).

Multisensory and narrative approaches may enable children to navigate newly intersecting identities, perhaps developing a sense of "I can belong both to there and here". Indeed, belonging to either past or present place is better than perhaps the greatest risk to any young person, of not belonging anywhere (Jones et al., 2020). It might be argued that belonging is a kind of prerequisite for positive identity development (Maine et al., 2021). For young refugees, belonging can help repair some of the psychological dislocation and migratory "cleavages" in children's identity narratives created by forced migration (Radjack et al., 2020).

At the same time, it is important to hold in mind the contribution of not just personal histories but also of broader socio-cultural factors shaping refugee youth narratives (Chen & Schweitzer, 2019). The availability and relative weighting of different group and place memberships will vary between young people. Attention to this nuance and complexity will support youth agency in constructing personal narratives (Warshaw, 2019).

Limitations

The reviewed literature reported a wide range of methodologies of varying qualities. The included studies were mostly descriptive in nature and lacked analytic detail. Many openly reported the benefits of studied multi-sensory and narrative approaches but did not speak to the challenges or obstacles that these approaches face and so neglected the necessary critical analysis. In the quantitative studies, bias was under-reported and little effort was made to resolve bias when it had been acknowledged (Turner et al., 2013).

A further possible limitation was the broad scope of outcomes reviewed. Wellbeing was operationalized in a variety of ways, from clinical outcomes to more abstract constructs such as identity and agency, whilst belonging and social integration were more clearly defined. Yet wellbeing received comparatively less weighting in the results and hence may deserve an independent review in future.

All but one study looked at group outcomes and so personal meanings and narratives were somewhat lost. Samples were often small, for example the close case studies of one or a few child refugees. This was somewhat compensated by a rich case record, however the lack of demographic detail and consistent reporting of individual factors (length of residence, age, resettlement context) makes it hard to understand what is important to different groups of young refugees and runs the risk of further homogenizing the refugee experience (Chase et al., 2020). Younger children are often less visible in research and instead adults are relied upon to give their stories, as was found in the present review. Given the fundamental role that

belonging plays in early years, the study of child belonging and identity needs to be more inclusive of the voice of younger children's voices (Erwin et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Our review identified four overarching-themes relating to how narrative and sensory approaches may support young refugee wellbeing and belonging: (a) supporting wellbeing and communication, (b) creative expression as empowerment, (c) positive and reparative social connections, and (d) connections to cultural identity. Wellbeing was described as a composite psychological construct encompassing belonging and identity, both of which were supported by narratives and sensory approaches and were connected to wider psychosocial outcomes (Rysst 2016; Enge & Stige 2022). Children's connections to cultural identity and belonging emerged as important directions for further study (Marsh & Dieckmann, 2017; Meyer DeMott et al., 2017). In particular, the intersection between belonging to past and present cultural identities, and how these may have changed as a result of migration (Rousseau et al. 2003; Beauregard et al. 2017; Marsh 2017). Children are always 'becoming' and young refugees will continue to explore facets of who they are and where they belong through multiple sensory and narrative means in their new and emerging social spheres. The personal rather than group experience of moving between cultural and geographic contexts, specifically amongst younger children, will be an important focus in future study of refugee belonging and wellbeing (Erwin et al., 2024). Creative and participatory methods are likely to support the meaningful inclusion of refugee youth in research (Chase et al., 2020). This is important given the context of developmental and linguistic barriers to children's meaningful participation in research, as well as in wider, political and civic life (Wallace & Lewis 2020; Sevón et al. 2023).

The results highlight the value of creative, multi-sensory interventions for young refugees, particularly in school settings. The potential of these approaches to foster social connections between refugee and nonrefugee groups points towards their utility for clinical, education and social care practice. This may help improve relations between existing and migrating communities and increase experiences of social connectedness, wellbeing and belonging for all children and young people.

Positionality Statement

The authors are all of a White British background, three female and one male; all working and residing in the UK. The authors wish to disclose that none have themselves experienced forced migration or displacement. The differences in terms of ethnicity, socio-economic status and

geographical context between the authors and children of study are important to acknowledge as significant power differentials are created by this. Although this lived experience is not shared with participants, the authors do however, have a range of clinical experience working with refugee and asylum-seeking communities in paediatric healthcare and clinical psychology which has motivated this research. This research hopes to raise issues of concern and opportunities for creative, child-centred and inclusive support for this group of marginalised youth. From an internationalist and humanist perspective, the authors advocate an ethics of inclusion, welcome, and safety for all forcibly migrating children and young people worldwide.

Data Availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Author Contributions All authors contributed to developing the search strategy and contributed to discussions on debated papers for inclusion. AG performed the screening, data extraction and thematic analysis. Consolidating the minor and major emergent themes and developing the conceptual framework was jointly carried out by AG and LM. LM also contributed to the scoping review proposal and write-up.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest Two of the authors work for Urban House as part of SWFT NHS Foundation Trust (LM and TS). One author (LM) is linked with Migration Yorkshire and all authors have clinical and academic interest in the field of mental health and wellbeing of the child and adolescent refugees. Aside from this, there are no further competing interests to declare.

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