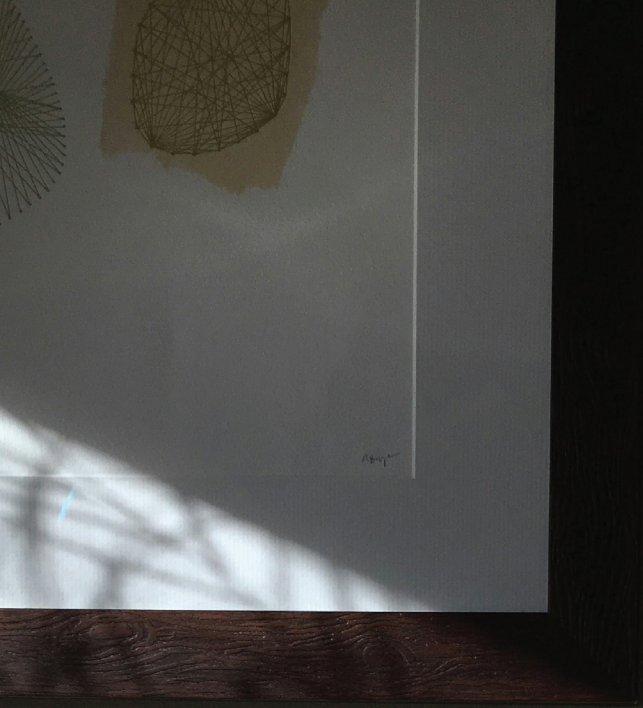

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Interprofessional Approach to Refugee Health

A Practical Guide for Interdisciplinary Health and Social Care Teams

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6. Promoting Interaction and Mutual Learning Between Local and Refugee Communities

Méabh Bonham Corcoran, Sarah Quinn and Frédérique Vallières

Introduction

This chapter explores the critical role of communities in facilitating the integration of refugees and asylum seekers into their host countries. The first section examines the benefits of community engagement for integration and social inclusion, with particular attention to the role of occupation. Readers are encouraged to reflect on these factors in relation to the populations they serve.

The second section presents a case study of a community garden in Ireland, which serves as a successful model for refugee and asylum seeker integration. The case study highlights the perspectives of committee members involved in the initiative, illustrating the processes and challenges of fostering inclusion. Additionally, it underscores the importance of mutual learning between refugee and local community members.

Although this chapter is framed within an occupational therapy perspective, the concepts discussed have broader relevance. Health and social care professionals across disciplines may find the insights valuable for enhancing their understanding and application of community-based integration strategies in their respective practice settings.

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Communities in the Integration Process

Arriving in the New Community

On arrival to the new host country, the focus of refugee health and integration centres is on meeting immediate needs such as health, housing, employment, and education. While these elements are important facets of the process of integration, the role of community and belonging to said community can often be over looked. Community support and community engagement are of critical importance in the process of integration, and it is through the interactions of refugees and local community members that a sense of belonging and place-making can be found, particularly when participating in community activities or groups (Ager & Strang 2008). This community engagement can increase overall wellbeing and quality of life by increasing feelings of social connectedness within an area (Ager & Strang 2008).

Despite the inclusion of community resources and development in policies surrounding migrant health and integration, the focus has remained on access to health, education, and employment. This has left the final pillar, community, reliant on public initiative and interest (Ager & Strang 2008; Daley 2009; National Social Inclusion Office 2017: 11). The resources available within a community for the newly arrived will vary between countries, cities, and towns, whether the resources are based in urban or rural areas, or if they are facilitated by local governments or local community initiatives. Community supports are often provided through a variety of organisations, ranging from non-governmental organisations, local community organisations, or initiatives such as: schools; libraries; community centres; churches; health centres; or primary care facilities linking in with community supports through programmes such as social prescribing or mother and baby groups, or government funded programmes aimed specifically at integrating refugees into the local community.

The use of community groups at any stage of the integration process can be seen as beneficial in promoting community ties and relationship building between locals and refugees. Communities have been cited as being a contributing factor in reducing the impact of ill health and disease within society, thus improving population health (Public

Health England 2015). MacQueen and colleagues (2001: 1929) defined community as "a group of people with diverse characteristics who are linked by social ties, share common perspectives, and engage in joint action in geographical locations or settings". Further, Scaffa and Reitz (2020: 29) describe community health as referring to "the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of a group of people who are linked together in some way, possibly through geographical proximity or shared interest". Strang and Ager (2010) emphasized the reciprocal nature of refugee integration, stressing the importance of both refugees' adaptation and host societies willingness to adapt institutions for successful integration.

The Role of Occupation

The role of community in developing a sense of connection, both to oneself and one's place in society, has been highlighted (Wilcock 2006). Further, active community engagement can lead to feelings of acceptance and contentment (Wilcock & Hocking 2015). In occupational therapy and occupational science literature, the importance of activity and occupation for the promotion of overall health and wellbeing has long been understood and linked to community health and wellbeing (Wilcock & Hocking 2015; Hocking & Wilcock 2020).

As human beings, we are seen to engage with our meaningful and purposeful occupations both on an individual and a collective level. Collective occupations are those that take place in and contribute to the meso-level of our social connections and relationships (Kantartzis 2017). Engaging with collective occupations can promote the making of shared meanings among communities, in addition to creating a safe space that fosters diversity and group cohesion (Hocking & Wilcock 2020). Despite evidence supporting community involvement as a means to increase social cohesion and inclusion among asylum seekers and refugees, many migrant programmes group these populations together as a community and do not promote integration into existing host communities or provide any support to bring these communities together (Darawsheh et al. 2022). To foster mutual support and integration there is a need for programmes that are attuned to the specific needs and strengths found in the local context, that consider the cultural backgrounds and

experiences of the refugee population, and that utilize the strengths and resources of both local and refugee communities to foster mutual support and interaction (Costigan et al. 2022).

The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) (2019: 13) focus on the role of social participation during integration and state that "social participation is about citizenship and human rights". Within occupational therapy and occupational science there is the theory of occupational justice, which addresses the right of all individuals to occupation as a means to promote and support overall health and wellbeing, specifically through the opportunity for choice and freedom in our meaningful and purposeful occupations that are either individual or collective in nature (Wilcock & Hocking 2015). Underlying these beliefs is the concept of equity, that as occupational beings we have the right to equitable access when participating and engaging in our daily occupations (Wilcock & Hocking 2015). WFOT (2014: 1) acknowledges that "human displacement has direct and indirect consequences on occupational opportunities necessary to address human needs, access human rights, and create and maintain health", thus creating situations of occupational injustice (WFOT 2019).

Occupational injustice is present when an individual or group is denied or deprived of the opportunity to engage or participate in their meaningful and purposeful occupations (Wilcock & Townsend 2000). There are five occupational injustices presented in the literature: occupational deprivation; occupational marginalisation; occupational alienation; occupational imbalance; and occupational apartheid (Durocher Gibson & Rappolt 2014). While each can be applicable to refugees, asylum seekers, and other forcibly displaced populations, occupational deprivation is often the most cited of these injustices. Occupational deprivation occurs when the right to choose our occupations has been restricted due to isolated locations, individual ability, or other circumstances outside of our control (Townsend & Wilcock 2004). Due to the nature of seeking asylum or refugee status, there are often many restrictions placed on these individuals that can result in a lack of occupational participation and engagement (Trimboli & Halliwell 2018).

Supporting the Integration Process

Occupation shapes an individual's everyday life through the processes of doing, being, belonging, and becoming. Through their chosen occupations, individuals contribute to the community and engage with others by participating in shared occupations (Wilcock & Townsend 2000). Occupational participation has been found to be essential to the processes of integration and resettlement (Whiteford 2005). Thornton and Spalding (2018) add that this engagement and participation in activities for those seeking asylum or refugee status often contributes to social cohesion by breaking down the language barriers that may be present within these communities. As individuals, we develop through participating in occupations that contribute to our health and social inclusion (Townsend & Wilcock 2004). Often occupational roles and routines are lost due to the processes of migration and restrictions present in the new host country, such as policies relating to employment or access to education (WFOT 2019). This loss can lead to asylum seekers and refugees feeling disconnected, unable to contribute to society as an occupational being, and experiencing a loss of a sense of self and identity (Morville & Erlandsson 2017). Abramovic and colleagues (2019: 707) discuss the importance of the "more-than-human" experiences that enable integration through connections to places or environments. An example of places fostering connection are community gardens. They can provide opportunities for inclusion and integration through creating a sense of belonging, purpose, and identity (Abramovic Turner & Hope 2019).

Strang and Quinn (2021) highlight the need for timely support during the initial stages of the integration process to lessen the risks of social isolation within community settings. Often, within these settings, relationships are built based on dependency and on one-sided sharing of the information and resources available, which can impact negatively on mental health and wellbeing (Strang & Quinn 2021). Examples such as the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy: 2024 demonstrate an evidence-based model to support policies that can work towards building trust, social connections, and integration between the refugee and the local community by promoting reciprocity and resource

exchange in migrant policies, thus enabling work that enhances social networks, lessens stress, and facilitates integration (Strang & Quinn 2021). Within the Irish context, community development initiatives and support for asylum seekers and refugees has been identified as an area that is lacking in resources (Foreman & Ní Raghallaigh 2020). Further, Foreman and Ní Raghallaigh (2020) acknowledge the fact that there are some supports in place, but often these are allocated to those availing of set protection schemes, which is a small percentage of those entering the country.

What is the Role of Community Groups?

Integration can also be a dynamic process, where communities can come together to identify and develop the resources needed and initiate local projects (Daley 2009). Communities that are well supported and have accessible resources for new entrants have the potential to provide timely support to isolated refugees and asylum seekers on arrival to prevent their further withdrawal from said communities and services and lessen their risk of developing or exacerbating mental health issues (Strang & Quinn 2021). However, there may be multiple groups present and active in an area with limited supports or resources. As a result, competition for these groups/resources can lead to the group focus shifting from that of the whole community to the interests of the individual group (Daley 2009). As such, support from government and availability of funding, resources, and supports are necessary for the success and sustainability of these groups.

Within healthcare, the client is often an individual availing of the profession's services; we do not often see groups of individuals or communities as a client. While this book seeks to support health and social care professionals in working with refugees and asylum seekers, this chapter aims also to highlight the importance of the community within the integration process and how the health and social care professional may support such communities. While health and social care professionals practise in community-based settings, the focus of intervention remains on the individual while still considering the contexts in which they reside and the people they engage with, such as fellow refugees, community members, or care providers (Scaffa &

Reitz 2020). The next section of this chapter will present a case study of an urban community garden that has included those with refugee experience as members over the past year. The case study discusses a community-centred initiative that was developed within, for, and by the community, with limited resources at conception to now receiving support and funding from various national and local authorities to continue their work and increase the reach of the garden. The concept of community-centred initiatives is one that health and social care professionals may consider in their area of practice, and they may also consider its application to their caseload. These initiatives classify the whole community as the client and look to address the needs of a community as per its members (Scaffa & Reitz 2020).

Community Garden Project: A Case Study

This case discusses a community garden based in Dublin, Ireland. The garden has been in situ for over 10 years and has been well established as a key resource and place of refuge for the local community from the beginning. The garden has continued to grow since its inception and now holds many annual community events and celebrations on site, alongside its regular opening hours throughout the week. The addition of an indoor space, owned by the local authorities, but available to book free of charge for garden events, has seen the range of activities offered here grow in the past two years. While gardening is the main activity, there are now also knitting groups, repair cafes, English, Irish, French, and Arabic language classes, and many other events taking place. This case explores the role of the garden in welcoming refugees from a newly opened reception centre, the inclusion of multicultural events within the gardens calendar, and the ongoing impacts of the mutual learning opportunities for both local and refugee community members.

Materials for this case study were obtained through observations, correspondence with a garden member who facilitated the English language groups, and a focus group with local residents. The focus group comprised both native Irish residents and migrants from non-forcibly displaced backgrounds who were members of the community garden committee. However, it is important to acknowledge that no participants identified as asylum seekers or refugees.

The purpose of this case study was to explore the impact of including asylum seekers and refugees from the perspective of local residents and to examine how the group approached this process. To deepen this research, insights from individuals with lived experience of seeking asylum or refugee status would be invaluable in understanding integration and inclusion more comprehensively. While this study contributes to our understanding of the topic, it also aims to inspire further exploration among readers.

Background to the Irish Context

Over the past decade, Ireland has seen a significant increase of those seeking asylum within its borders. This increase has resulted in many debates and discussions regarding the country's ability to accommodate these increasing numbers, while simultaneously demonstrating the minimal resources in place to do so, particularly in relation to the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees within the host community. The recent civil unrest and increased number of anti-migrant protests in Ireland have further highlighted the need for inclusive and safe spaces within communities that enable an informal process of integration. Ireland has seen a surge of community gardens opening across the country, with these often being described as inclusive and welcoming spaces for refugees and asylum seekers. However, to date there has been limited research to investigate the impact of community gardens and their role in supporting refugees and asylum seekers entering Ireland.

On arrival to Ireland, asylum seekers and refugees are required to apply for international protection at the point of entry (i.e., airport or seaport) or go to the International Protection Office (Sweeney 2023). The individual then has the right to remain in Ireland until the outcome of their application is decided. During this time, applicants may avail themselves of temporary services where their needs for accommodation, clothing, food, and healthcare services are met, in accordance with the EU reception conditions directive (Sweeney 2023). Those under the International Protection Accommodation Services receive an expense allowance of €38.80 per week per adult and €29.80 per week per child (Sweeney 2023). However, within the accommodation services there are restrictions placed on asylum seekers and refugees relating to their

ability to cook for themselves and their family, to have recreational spaces for socializing or play, and curfews are often implemented within the centres (Moran et al. 2019). This current system increases the risk for occupational injustice to be present within this population due to the lack of choice, freedom, and autonomy in their daily lives. As such, community spaces could be seen as having the potential to reduce these occupational injustices by providing recreational spaces and opportunities for developing social connections and a sense of belonging to the local area.

Context within the Garden

The garden is in an area of Dublin steeped in Irish history and owes its name to the surroundings and stories of the past. The area is now known for its thriving community garden and all the events that take place there. The garden is a volunteer-led initiative within this urban area; however, members view it as more than just an urban community space, but as a growing ecosystem that has flourished since opening in 2011. Prior to 2011, the area where the garden is now situated was a wasteland, surrounded by residential housing. A number of locals petitioned their local authorities to allow the space to be developed into a community garden and were eventually granted just over 300 square metres of land (about the area of a tennis court). Since then, the garden has now doubled in size and includes a hacienda and a walkway around the perimeter. Next to the garden, a dilapidated cottage was renovated and is available for use by the garden members and the local community for different events and groups, such as knitting classes, youth groups, and workshops.

The locals view the garden as more than just a place to grow vegetables, fruits, trees, and flowers; but as a space to foster a sense of community and belonging to the area. It serves as a haven and meeting place for many local groups and like-minded people who enjoy meeting, sharing, and growing with others in its nurturing environment. Members are asked to contribute a small annual fee of five euro per household if unemployed or ten euro if employed. For refugees and asylum seekers this fee does not apply, and a committee member assists those who are interested in joining to create a membership. The garden is run by

its committee members, who are elected annually, and it adheres to a constitution, rules, and code of conduct.

To keep the garden running and aid further development, the committee applies for various grants and holds fundraising events throughout the year, such as quiz nights and a cafe on their annual open day. The garden has been recognized locally and nationally through various community awards, environmental initiatives, and placemaking awards. It has been featured on both local and national news and television programmes, highlighting it as a model for successful community gardens that work for the community. The funding received by the garden from local and national government authorities spans the areas of integration and inclusion, sustainability and climate action, and enhancing inner city community spaces. This is testament to the diversity of the garden in how it is serving its community and demonstrating a standard of practice for other settings to start or develop their own community gardens.

Inclusion of Local Refugees and Asylum Seekers from a Local's Perspective

Late 2022 saw the opening of a direct provision centre within the locality of the community garden. The proposed opening of this centre incited unrest and anti-migrant protests among some of the residents living in the area. In response to this, a non-political community group was formed to support the refugees and asylum seekers moving into the area. This group organized donation drop-off points to gather much-needed supplies for the residents, held fundraising events, and organized language classes through an offshoot of their group.

At the beginning of 2023, members of the group, who are also members of the community garden, felt they would like to get involved and support the asylum seekers and refugees. This took the form of a gardening programme for English learners that took place once a week. The initial stages of the programme saw a strong interest and attendance rate from those living in the centre. The structure of the group was as follows: from 10.30am to 12pm gardening for English learners took place (this provided an informal class where participants engaged in conversational English rather than in a classroom-style setting); from

2pm to 3pm a woman-only workshop took place, which included activities such as singing, jewellery making, mindfulness, and painting; from 3pm to 5pm a crochet and knitting group was held in the cottage; and to finish the day from 5pm to 6pm a group of men attended an English class held in the cottage. The programme was very successful and many of its participants are still members of the garden to this day.

However, once the participants gained the right to work, they were less able to attend the programme on a weekly basis and the structure changed to a more simplified 'drop-in' style open space. This change in attendance again saw the garden adapt to the needs of its community, and there was an increase in events celebrating the different cultures and backgrounds of its members. Some of these were led by those with refugee experience, while others showcased Irish culture and history. As previously discussed in this chapter, many of the direct provision centres have limited cooking facilities, with the asylum seekers and refugees included in this case study only having access to limited cooking appliances (e.g., a kettle or a microwave). As such, the garden has hosted multiple 'potluck' events, where residents of the centre were invited into the homes and kitchens of local community members to cook a traditional dish from their country of origin. These dishes were then brought to the garden and shared with all who attended. A year on from the initial programme, many of those initial participants have continued to engage in various aspects of the garden, whether hosting a cultural event, using their skills (i.e., sewing or carpentry) at the repair cafes, or working in the garden during its dedicated gardening days.

Impact of Inclusion of Asylum Seekers and Refugees from a Local's Perspective

The garden has seen an increase in the events and activities on offer since the inclusion of asylum seekers and refugees. A focus group was held in May 2024 to discuss the impact and future of the community garden with committee members who identified as Irish residents and have been actively involved in engaging with refugees and asylum seekers coming to the garden. The focus group discussed how they felt the garden has grown since early 2023 with it now being split between gardening activities and the more social activities and groups taking

place. This caused disagreements as to the garden's future, but these have since been resolved. One committee member discussed this growth through shared knowledge and understanding and how this has shaped their view and perception of those joining the garden.

> So just around the exchange of knowledge, so I think that maybe you know there's a certain—this kind of thing that you know you're helping them, and you're sharing knowledge about Ireland and try and make them feel at home and all that kind of stuff. But at the same time there's information coming back, there's an exchange of knowledge. So, like even just small bits, like people will say to you oh, you know when we grow that in wherever it is, whether it's Eastern Europe or North Africa, this is what we do and why they do it.

The sharing of experiences and knowledge was discussed throughout the group and how it has shaped everyone's understanding of different cultures. Committee members felt that this shared learning contributed to a sense of belonging and connection within the community garden, with one member commenting on seeing asylum seekers and refugee members out in the local area asking after the garden and its members.

> They say "ah how are you and how's the garden", so it's a lovely neighbourhood feeling. And then I met another guy in—he's working now...give me a big hug... so they really were thankful for them for being part of the garden.

While other members have returned to the garden after a period of absence and were able to see the work that they had completed in use by garden members, contributing to feelings of pride and joy.

> Actually, one of them came back last week and he saw the glass house and his eyes were like full of spark you know, he was so proud.

Committee members also felt the impact was relevant to other garden members and helped with changing the beliefs and perspectives that local members had of those with a refugee or asylum-seeking background. This was felt both in their own personal experiences and through conversations with other members on their views and understanding of refugees' experiences.

> And then we were having a chat in the hacienda, and there was certainly a couple of people who definitely had views that you know some refugees who are more worthy than others. And I know that her attitude has completely changed, yes completely turned around now. So, it's good yeah that's what I'm saying. So, like and sometimes you don't have to have a big debate or discussion or an argument, all you have to do is to engage with people and learn about them, and then within six months or so she was saying "oh my God you won't believe what those people have to go through" so yeah.

Another member reflected on this further and discussed how it impacted on the general narrative of fear and resistance towards refugee and asylum seekers amongst the wider community.

> It's really important, I think you're right, because you get inundated with negative things about refugees or asylum seekers, but through the garden and through interacting normally it's just like your...if you walk in the street you're not scared, you're not like oh this person is dangerous, it's like oh I know this person. It's very different.

Overall, committee members reflected very positively on how the garden has grown and developed since the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers. On visiting the garden or attending any of the events throughout the year, one can see the diversity and pride present within its structures and members. Refugees and asylum seekers have only added to this by sharing their knowledge and culture, showing ingenuity and skill in identifying problems and providing solutions, such as building the greenhouse from recycled windows or the ability to move a sizable plant to a new location. Committee members further confirmed this sentiment during the focus group, stating;

> it's like we have a problem they ha- are the solutions for the garden... yeah they've been a huge asset overall, somebody who's come through the asylum system.

What is the Future for the Garden?

The committee expressed the wish for the garden to continue to develop and adapt to the community's needs in the future. The committee continues to apply for grants and funding to support this development, however this is a point of frustration and uncertainty as local authorities

continue to send mixed messages as to how long the garden will remain in its current format.

> There's a real disconnect between what the policies are saying at the top and what's actually happening on the ground.

While more support from local authorities and government may ensure the viability of the garden, this may also pose issues with regulations being imposed and the space becoming more like a recreational park rather than a community garden. The current structure of the garden allows for an informal type of involvement, members can come and go as they please within the opening hours and either contribute to the garden or just enjoy the space as it is, an oasis within the city. The addition of the renovated cottage on-site, and recent developments within zoning for the area, have given hope for the future of the garden itself and its place within the community.

> Currently zoned as green, which means the local area office want to keep this space recreational. They've put a lot of money into the cottage, which isn't ours, it's a community facility for everybody and that bodes well for the garden surviving. I think they like the garden.

The importance of ownership of the garden and member contributions was considered a key factor for the garden's future. This is reflected in the recent addition of working groups focusing on different areas of the garden, which is felt to give members a sense of ownership without requiring them to be on the committee, and encourages more members to join. Membership is one of the main concerns for the sustainability of the community garden, with committee members discussing the different groups contributing to this, particularly asylum seekers and refugees volunteering their time while awaiting their work permits. Many of those that began with the weekly programme are still valued members of the community garden and continue to encourage other refugees and asylum seekers in the centre to come to the various events or just to garden and enjoy the space. In summary, this community garden can be seen to illustrate the benefits of community groups and their role in promoting mutual learning and integration between the local and refugee communities on arrival to the new host country.

Putting Learning into Practice

For health and social care professionals working with those with refugee experience, it is important to understand the supports and resources available within the community. It is recommended that health and social care professionals develop and foster relationships with community organisations and services in their locality to maintain up-to-date information and knowledge of their availability and to better serve those accessing their services. It is important to be able to signpost these supports so that people with refugee experience learn who they can contact for assistance with issues or problems they may be having. The support available to people with refugee experience will vary greatly between countries, but also even across different localities within the same country. Consequently, health and social care professionals need to ensure that they have a good understanding and awareness of the different organisations in their localities and keep up to date with changes in these and the services they provide.

To implement the learning gained from this chapter, the reader is first asked to reflect on the following in relation to their practice area:

1. Can you identify relevant organisations or sources of support that are available in your local community for new entrants?
2. Can you give a brief summary as to why each may be useful to someone with refugee experience?

If it is felt that this task is difficult to complete, or that perhaps the reader may be aware of the organisations available but are not clear about what services they provide or how to access them, then this has identified a gap in our knowledge. While as health and social care professionals we cannot be expected to know of all the potential services available, understanding the key ones relevant to your client group/service users would be beneficial to your practice. As such, the reader is now asked to complete the following exercise in relation to their current practice and caseload:

1. Identify two or three organisations/community groups/ programmes that may be useful for those with refugee experience.

2. Investigate what process you would need to follow to refer someone in your care to them or to access the group/service.
3. Reflect on what support is needed from the health and social care professional perspective: is this something that the individual can attend alone, or will they require support/check ins throughout? How does this fit within your caseload?

Lastly, the reader is asked to consider their own place in promoting interaction and mutual learning between the local and refugee community: what is the health and social care professional's role, what do we need to do/understand/be aware of to best serve these communities and what learning can we gain? Consider how you can better connect with community organisations in your locality:

1. How might you make use of these links to enhance the everyday life of those with refugee experience?
2. Reflect on your practice context. Is there a way that you might connect with another professional and, together with the person from a refugee community, use these supports to promote their sense of inclusion and participatory citizenship?
3. What can you all learn from one another?

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