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# Serendipity during the pandemic: Taking a community-partnered study about young, forced migrants online[1]


## Jessica Ball, Debra Torok, Suwannimit Foundation, Saw Phoe Khwar Lay, Spring Song, M. Htang Dim

**Jessica Ball**, MPH, PhD, is a professor of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, Canada. She has worked as a researcher and consultant for international organizations, governments, and community organizations in Asia, North America, and Africa to develop and reform policies affecting the well-being of children, youth and families, and to strengthen local capacity to implement policies. Jessica has published over 140 peer reviewed journal articles, chapters, and three books. Her achievements have been recognized by numerous national and international awards.

Jessica leads a multi-sited, community-partnered research program on the experiences of forced migrant youth. The research has generated and evaluated a new method called Storyboard Peers, combining individual self-reflection, visual expression, and narrative accounts of migration related experiences and peer support. The method is effective for youth-centred data collection and for providing psychosocial support for migrant youth as they re-build their identity, belonging and resilience.

**Debra Torok** is a doctoral candidate in Clinical-Lifespan Psychology at the University of Victoria, Canada. She has her MSc in Clinical Psychology from the University of Victoria. As part of the Youth Migration Project research team, Debra's research focuses on experiences of forced migrant youth residing in transit in Malaysia and along the Thai-Myanmar border.

**Suwannimit Foundation** is a migrant-led, migrant-serving, non-profit organization based in Mae Sot, Thailand. Its mission is to enhance social and health services to vulnerable children and families living along the border between Thailand and Myanmar (particularly those in Tak province). It supports the operational capacity and programming impact of its partners and promotes access to services provided by the government of Thailand (www.suwannimit.org). The Suwannimit Foundation partnered with investigators at the University of Victoria to conduct research aimed at understanding the views and experiences of forced migrant youth. A main activity was piloting, evaluating and training others in the use of an innovative, peer-mediated, storyboard narrative method, called Storyboard Peers, to support displaced and refugee youth to generate psychosocial support for one another in contexts where there are few or no mental health or wellness services.

**Saw Phoe Khwar Lay** was forced to migrate from Myanmar to Thailand when he was 12 years old, as a result of civil war. He completed high school in a migrants school, a Graduate Education Diploma in Chiang Mai and majored in education and psychology post-secondary studies at Asia Pacific University. He currently works with the Suwannimit Foundation as a health program specialist.



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## Abstract

*This research update describes the transformation of a partnership project between a university-based team in Canada and a migrant-serving community organization in Thailand occasioned by the pandemic. Travel restrictions preventing the Canada-based team from carrying out project activities directly with young, forced migrants provided the impetus to explore an entirely online collaboration over 18 months. This shift flattened what would likely have been a hierarchical role structure, with the Canada-based team members positioned as experts and primary actors in conducting the project. The partners deliberated together about the cultural fit, desirability, feasibility and potential variations of the novel Peer Mediated Story Board Narrative method, which is intended both as a means of data collection and an intervention for migrant youth needing psychosocial support. In consultation with the Canada-based team, the Thailand-based partners undertook participant recruitment and piloted the method with diverse groups of migrant youth living in Myanmar and Thailand, using creative approaches including conducting the method online with groups of youth using smart phones. The serendipitous benefit of moving the partnership online highlights the potential for a more probing, mutually interdependent, less costly collaboration in which partners enter into an ethical space between partners' worlds. In this space, assumptions, core constructs, and methodological fidelity can be challenged, new understandings can be forged and, in the case of this project, a sustainable approach to psychosocial support for forced migrant youth can be co-created.*

## Introduction

This research note reports on an unanticipated transformation of a community-engaged research study between a Canada-based team and local partners in Thailand. Our study used an innovative, Peer-Mediated Story-Board Narrative (PMSN) method to both explore the experiences of young, forced migrants and to provide psychosocial support. During a presentation of this study at a recent conference organized by the University of Victoria and the University Crete (Ball, 2021), participants expressed surprise that the study had progressed despite the pandemic. This inspired us to describe the process of transitioning the project online and to identify the serendipitous benefits arising from those unexpected circumstances.

A brief project description appeared in the 2020 issue of *Migration, Mobility, and Displacement* (Ball, 2020). Briefly, this ongoing multi-sited project in Malaysia and Thailand explores the use of an arts-based method to hear from migrant youth about

how they perceived and responded to their experiences of migration due to armed conflict and persecution. The project explores the potential for researchers, practitioners, and youth to gain insight about youths' experiences in transit (i.e., temporarily resident in a country where they are seeking asylum), particularly those that are salient, problematic or helpful in diverse circumstances; that is, what is it about forced migration that is most interesting, concerning, and important to forced migrant youth themselves? A goal is to shift from solely investigator or theory-driven constructs and lines of inquiry to those generated by youth themselves, recognizing that these may overlap. In the PMSN method, individual youth are gathered into groups of about five peers, and each is given materials to create a large poster or 'Storyboard' depicting how their migration journey affected their sense of self, belonging, and future aspirations. The group is then convened for one, or sometimes several sessions, when youth offer to show and explain what is depicted on their Storyboard. During peer-mediation, peers ask questions, make comments, provide encouragements, or reflect on aspects that strike them. A trained group facilitator organizes the process and assists as needed. The youth's individual Storyboard Narratives serve as one form of data collection, and the peer mediation, or sharing of individual youth's accounts in small peer groups, serve as another form of data collection. Data collection in Malaysia was completed before the pandemic, involving a Canada-based team travelling to Kuala Lumpur to recruit 55 participants and facilitate the small group process in migrant-serving schools and community organizations. An example of this work is reported by Torok and Ball (2021).

## Taking the project online

The Thailand-sited part of this program of research received primary funding in March 2020, just as the world was facing pandemic-related travel restrictions. The partner for this part of the research is Suwannimit Foundation, a migrant-serving, non-government organization (NGO) based in Mae Sot near the Thailand-Myanmar border. When the study was conceived and the partnership was confirmed, the study plan called for project team members from the University of Victoria in Canada to travel twice to Thailand during 2020 to lead small groups of forced migrant youth in the PMSN, partly to collect narrative data about migrant youths' experiences, and partly to assess the potential of the PMSN to generate needed psychosocial support for forced migrant youth in a context where counselling and specialist services are not available. Additional goals were to collaborate with the community partner on the creation of a training manual for the PMSN, and to deliver two workshops to introduce the PMSN method to practitioners at local NGOs, migrant learning centres, and refugee camps.

While collaboration with the Thai partner was planned, the original project plan clearly positioned the Canada-based team in the role of teaching about the PMSN method, directing recruitment of youth who met the study criteria, and facilitating the PMSN small groups. The Thai partner and their associates were positioned as the beneficiary of the training, and as assistants in practical tasks such as event planning, translation, and transcription. The Canada-based team planned to obtain feedback from the Thai

partner on a draft procedures manual, to learn about their service delivery needs and goals, and to assess whether the PMSN was fitting and feasible as a medium for insight-generation and psychosocial support for forced migrant youth. However, it was anticipated that the Canada-based team would be sharing their expertise more than the Thai-based team would be sharing theirs, reflecting a very limited form of partnership typical of many collaborations between partners in the global north and global south and between university and community partners. As governments, universities, and funding agencies halted international travel, the Canadian and Thai partners were faced with a choice to either postpone the project until after the pandemic or find an alternative way to conduct it. In March 2020, we began a new kind of journey in partnered research that transformed and improved the project, by moving our collaboration online.

## Interrogating key concepts

As our project got underway in March 2020, the Canada- and Thai-based team members began meeting online for about 90 minutes a session, approximately every three weeks. The primary Thai partner, Suwannimit Foundation, welcomed three practitioners from other local organizations working with forced migrant youth to join these sessions. The Canada-based team had created a draft manual for using the PMSN, and our meetings began by discussing its content as a way of familiarizing everyone with the method. Initial comments by Thai-based partners focused on concrete details about how to deliver the PMSN. These quickly gave way to questions about the meaning of core concepts that the Canada-based team intended as focal points for migrant youth to organize their visual Storyboards and subsequent Story-Board Narratives. Experience in Malaysia had shown that youth were more able to start on their Storyboards if they were given a few key concepts (or outcomes) to reflect upon, rather than a completely open-ended task. Youth were asked how their migration experience affected their identity, sense of belonging, and future aspirations. For the Canada-Thai collaboration, these organizing concepts, initially intended as helpful starting points for self-reflection, have been a focal point of debate and some consternation.

A shared understanding of the meaning and relevance of 'future aspirations' was quickly established. The Thai-based team members frequently conduct life skills workshops with migrant youth in which goal-setting and future planning is often a focus. In contrast, while everyone shared an understanding of the abstract meanings of identity and belonging, the Thai partners explained that these notions are not endemic and that most migrant youth were not likely to understand them beyond their most concrete manifestations; for example, one's identity is stated on an identity card, and one's belonging is known in terms of membership in a family, organized group, or place of residence in a particular boarding house, refugee camp, or other social setting. They explained that Thai and Myanmar cultures do not foster self-searching or self-disclosure about an individual's place in the world or how one sees oneself, apart from the way one

is formally defined in society and the roles one occupies in relation to others. We began to discuss the extent, nature, and sources of such cultural differences.

As we established that the initial organizing concepts were not readily understood in an abstract way in Thai or Myanmar cultures, the Canada-based team encouraged the Thai-based team to identify other concepts or organizing questions that were important to them and that were likely to resonate with migrant youth from Myanmar. However, as our meetings continued and our discussions deepened over the course of many online meetings, the Thai-based team became more intrigued with these concepts and more determined to find ways to explain them to prospective PMSN participants. The Canada-based team navigated tensions associated with desires to avoid imposing concepts that were not readily understood or fitting for the research context, while also supporting the Thai-based team with using the initially suggested core concepts to the extent they found them useful.

***Sharing Storyboards***. Parallel with these discussions, each of the team members created their own Storyboard and presented their Storyboard Narrative during our online sessions. Presenting our Storyboards over the course of an hour online was often a novel, searching and emotional experience for the storyteller. During each Storyboard Narrative, team members practiced peer mediation. This generated useful clarifications and tips for the PMSN manual. We practiced peer group facilitation, including how to establish consent, group consensus about privacy, respect, communication etiquette and safety. Experiencing the method ourselves and exposing ourselves far beyond our professional roles during our online meetings forged relationships of understanding and trust. This stage of our partner engagement also allowed for deeper engagement with the core concepts of identity and belonging, and showcased how the PMSN can facilitate self-insight, psychosocial support, and meaningful data.

## Closed versus open-ended procedures

The open-ended nature of the PMSN method was novel for the Thai-based team. The considerable repository of research about migrants in Thailand, shows investigators' preference for structured questionnaires or interviews rather than open-ended procedures such as phenomenological interviews, storytelling, or arts-based methods. The Thai-based team was well-practiced in delivering workshops for migrant youth that asked them to anchor their personal characteristics in provided images such as a particular kind of animal or flower, and to consolidate their life history and depict steps towards their life goals in the form of a timeline. In contrast, using the PMSN, youth are given a blank poster paper or board, basic craft materials, and three or four stimulus questions, and asked to express how their migration journey has affected them using any imagery they wish and, ideally, taking as long as they wish. The open-handed approach to our partnership combined with our relatively unstructured, open-ended PMSN method might have been a first for Thai-based team members but it was well received. The partners invested significantly in thinking about how and with whom the method

could be well suited and useful, and building their skills and confidence in using the method over an 18-month period.

The focus of the PMSN method on inviting youths' personal reflections and insight about how they had responded psychologically to forced migration was challenging in ways the Canada-based team had not anticipated, given how readily the idea of personal Storyboards and sharing personal stories of migration had been received by forced migrant youth in Malaysia. In an earlier phase of the research (Torok & Ball, 2021), forced migrant youth in Malaysia had taken their Story-Boards home to work on them, and had used a wide variety of provided and independently resourced materials to illustrate their experiences. They eagerly shared their stories in small peer groups that met several times and asked if they could continue working on their Storyboards after the project concluded. Most of these youth were from the Middle East and East Africa, whereas migrant youth recruited in Thailand were from Myanmar. The Thai-based team anticipated that an open-ended, arts-based approach aimed at self-insight and self-disclosure would likely challenge migrant youth who had grown up in Myanmar and Thailand. The partners doubted that the psychological concepts of identity, home and belonging would be understood by most youth, explaining that the Thailand and Myanmar school systems do not encourage psychological exploration of the self. They opined that although the psychological exploration required to complete a Storyboard seemed desirable, the youth may not be able to generate sufficient content. They were concerned that youth would be reticent to draw anything freehand, since they were only used to copying provided images. Moreover, for practical reasons, they doubted they could meet with the same group of youth more than once. Finally, they expressed concern that an open-ended process with the potential for youth to plumb the depths of their often traumatizing migration experiences could elicit highly emotional content that the team in Mae Sot felt ill-prepared to handle, noting as well that there is no counselling service or other kind of social service support in the vicinity.

## Adapting the method

Responding to these concerns, building team skills for using the method, and adapting the procedure to fit the Thai context has been a journey taken over 18 months. The university-based team welcomed adaptation of the method in ways that were psychologically safe, culturally resonant, and practically feasible. Encouraged by this flexibility, the Thai-based team at Suwannimit Foundation has used the method cautiously, mostly in one-time workshop sessions lasting several hours, with youth from the same organization (e.g., the same school or boarding house) and therefore known to each other. They begin with ice-breaker activities, followed by presentation and explanation of each core concept (identity, belonging, future aspirations) which they ask the youth to write about before thinking about how they will depict their response on their Storyboard. In some gatherings, the team has asked the youth to prepare a timeline of their life, from before they migrated to the present, as a way to organize life events to represent visually on their Storyboard. This structured, supported approach has prevented highly emotional

disclosures by participants, while offering an opportunity for youth to take stock of their life trajectories, key events they see as formative and sources of strength or support in their lives. As well, youth have been able to see, hear, and respond to the migration stories of their peers in ways they may not have heard previously. Previous experience with this method has shown that the peer group context and peer mediation process can enhance youths' empathy for their peers and their sense of being seen and heard in ways that may increase psychosocial support (Torok & Ball, 2021). We also all agreed to refrain from referring to the PMSN procedure as 'arts-based' because of the connotative meaning of art as requiring fine art skills which most youth would protest they do not possess.

In contrast, two of our online meeting participants associated with migrant-serving organizations aligned with Suwannimit Foundation have used the method quite differently. In one instance, the team member gathered a group of migrant Burmese Muslim girls who were experiencing ongoing challenges with their migrant status and family life. As part of informed consent, the girls understood that participation meant that they would meet at least four times together and would be expected not only to share their own story but to listen and engage in peer mediation for other group members' stories. The girls completed the PMSN method over five sessions and asked if they could continue to meet together to continue to benefit from the strong psychosocial support generated by their project participation. The team member concluded that the method has provided a structured way for these girls to share deeply about traumatic events in their lives and ongoing struggles and had provided the non-profit organization a way to assess whether any of these girls were in immediate danger.

Another team member in our online meetings piloted the method online, with five migrant girls, unknown to one another, living in different places in Thailand and one in Myanmar. The project provided funding for each girl to top up their smart phone data plan, enabling them to keep their video on for the duration of four three-hour sessions. During the sessions, the girls shared their Storyboard narrative and engaged very actively in peer mediation. After each session, the Thai-based facilitator and the Canada-based team had a two-hour online debriefing session. This provided support for the facilitator and provided the Canada-based team with insights about youth migration experiences and about another way that the PMSN method can work. These girls also asked if they could continue to meet, and the facilitator has planned for at least one follow-up session. As well, the girls are going to meet with a newly formed group of younger, mixed gender migrant youth, to continue elaborating their own migration reflections and insights, and to hear the stories of migrant peers.

These varied adaptations of the PMSN procedure confirmed the readiness of the Thai-based partners to finding culturally fitting, emotionally manageable, practical approaches to using the method. All of the adaptations fulfill the agreed upon purpose of the grant-funded partnership project. For all of the iterations of the PMSN, the Thai-based team members have provided the Canada-based team with a photograph of

each youth's Storyboard and either a summary or transcript of each youth's Storyboard Narrative, as well as the content of peer mediation.

For the Canada-based team, taking the project online and engaging in a more thoroughly participatory process than we had initially planned has meant being willing to let go of control over precisely how the PMSN method is conducted. For investigators who value fidelity to a prescribed data collection method or manualized counselling intervention, this lack of control could be perturbing. Yet this partnership seems to be doing precisely what was intended – supporting Thai-based migrant serving organizations to find fitting solutions to unmet psychosocial support needs of migrant youth.

## Authentic participatory research within our zones of proximal development

Suwannimit Foundation and the other organizations involved in our project have experience with research teams from North America, Europe and Australia. Asked how our partnership work has compared with these prior engagements, the Suwannimit Foundation director expressed that typically research teams visiting Mae Sot tell Foundation staff what to do and their role is to collect data and hand it over to the visiting research team. In comparison, Thai team members have expressed that our partnership has involved more sustained communication and more reciprocal learning, with all team members encouraged to ask questions, give feedback and make suggestions. When discussing descriptors for the project, the director suggested we refer to it as 'participatory action.' Currently, the Thai-team members are continuing to try out the method in various ways with diverse groups of forced migrant youth to further explore the method's potential and to strengthen their capacity to use it after the project has concluded.

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development comes to mind as a way to understand how both the Thai and Canadian partners intuitively scaffold information about how the project fits and is working within our respective professional lives. In doing so, the partners maintain authentic engagement without imagining we are joining one another's' worlds, challenge each other just a tolerable amount, and incrementally build mutual understanding. While our online meetings are mainly work-focused, they always offer a chance to learn something new and to exchange news about how the pandemic common to all of us has affected our work on opposite sides of the Pacific.

Language proficiencies are another way that information is scaffolded. The Canada-based team members are effectively monolingual in English, while the Thai-based team members are multilingual, typically in Thai, Myanmar, Karen and English. The Canada-based team members typically simplify explanations to ensure comprehensibility for the Thai partners, while the Thai partners clearly have much more they could say if not for the Canadian partners' limited language capacity. Meeting each other in the ethical space that no one owns between knowledge and linguistic systems requires

an intentional give and take and a strong will to succeed in order to achieve mutually valued outcomes.

***You'll never believe what happened……*** has been a mantra of Jessica Ball's three decade program of community-engaged research. In the research reported here, we again found that a community-engaged collaboration among partners from different cultures and nations took a surprising turn right out of the gate as pandemic restrictions closed many doors.

We are discovering that our project is part of a cultural shift within community-based research (CBR), brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, exploring how to forge meaningful partnerships online (see Hall et al., 2020 for review). CBR scholars similarly tasked with transitioning from in-person to virtual collaborations have reported that doing so has allowed for greater input from partners and enhanced flexibility with the research process (Marzi, 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). However, scholars also describe challenges particularly in lower resourced contexts, where stable access to internet and familiarity with technological devices may vary and limit the depth of the social relationships formed (Masri & Masannat, 2020; Strong et al., 2020). Forthcoming reports from our research will contribute to this burgeoning literature, expanding on the benefits, challenges, and tensions associated with forging international partnerships online.

As we approach the last few months of our partnership, we view our collaboration as advancing new pathways to a richer, mutually transformative engagement than our original project map had forecasted, and a better outcome in the form of a sustainable, locally fitting method to help meet the psychosocial support needs of forced migrant youth.

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