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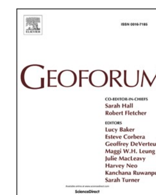

Simulating alternative internationals: Geopolitics role-playing in UK schools

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ABSTRACT

Simulation and role-play have a proven track record as pedagogic techniques to provide students with insights into geopolitics, diplomacy, and international relations. Since the first Model United Nations (MUN) in 1947, simulations have proliferated within secondary and tertiary educational settings. However, these activities overwhelmingly focus on recognised nation-states, neglecting polities that are not UN member states, but that are often acutely affected by conflict and human rights abuses. This paper is part of a broader project that is seeking to bring the realities and stories from such communities, territories, and peoples – a number of which have come together as the 'Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization' (UNPO) – to a wider audience. Loosely based on MUN simulations, the 'Model UNPO' exercise involves participants being assigned a UNPO member, researching that polity's context and rights claims, and coming together for a structured role-play debate. Drawing on participant observation of Model UNPO exercises with 16–18 year old students at thirteen UK secondary schools we examine how geopolitics can be taught and learned within school classroom settings, how young people make sense of geopolitics, and how they imagine and articulate alternative internationals. We assess what simulation exercises can offer to understandings of the intersection of young peoples' geopolitics and geographies of education. In doing so, we analyse how students draw on 'known worlds' and advocate for possible worlds through role-playing unrepresented diplomats, and examine the role of clause writing in the scripting of geopolitical imaginaries, and how role-playing forges empathy and solidarities. We conclude by making the case for foregrounding young people as critical and creative geopolitical thinkers.

1. Introduction

> *The twenty-four delegates are sat in small groups behind a semi-circle of desks. They're engaged in an animated debate about the ongoing impacts of colonialism – including by non-European states – in East Turkestan, Aceh, and Abkhazia. Attention then turns to the challenges of accessing development aid from an international community that does not recognise Somaliland's claims to independence. After a break during which there is animated 'corridor diplomacy', delegates move on to arguing over the wording of a clause about political autonomy, with the Ogadeni delegation stressing that self-determination is needed as a prerequisite.*
> *(observation notes, June 2022)*

This is a scene from an unassuming classroom in a state school in Bristol, UK, with a group of 16–17 year olds who were studying Geography as one of their school leaving qualifications (A-levels). The students were taking part in a 'Model Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)' simulation that their teacher had invited us to run. The exercise is loosely based on Model United Nations (MUN) simulations but, instead of students being assigned roles as state representatives and enacting UN meetings, they are designated roles as representatives of stateless nations, indigenous peoples, and minority communities. Before the class, the students had researched their assigned polity and prepared short speeches. They had then come together to simulate a debate of the UNPO's General Assembly, amending draft clauses on issues their communities faced, and producing and voting on a final resolution. Notably, this was a class of all white, English students who had no connection to the marginal and marginalised parts of the world that they were so passionately representing, debating, and negotiating for. In this paper, we use the example of

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Model UNPO exercises to examine how geopolitics can be taught and learned within school classroom settings, how young people make sense of geopolitics, and how they imagine and articulate alternative internationals. We explore the extent to which alternative internationals are understood by young people not as abstract imaginaries but as more just configurations of 'doing' geopolitics. More generally, we assess what simulation exercises can offer to our understandings of the intersection of geopolitics, geographies of education, and the politics of play.

This paper focuses specifically on how geopolitics is taught in the context of the UK GCE AS and A-level Geography curricula for England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Since the reformed A-level Geography curriculum for 16–18-year-olds was introduced for teaching in 2016, geopolitics and political geography is now taught in most British secondary schools (Department for Education, 2014). Under the 'Global Systems and Global Governance' section, Geography A-level students must study governance of the global commons, human rights and the geopolitics of intervention, or sovereignty and territorial integrity (Department for Education, 2014: 9).[2] This range of themes arguably partially addresses student interest in international politics, prompted by current world events (Kyndt, 2015). Indeed, A-level Geography has had something of a renaissance in the UK over the past decade or so with student numbers increasing from approximately 28,500 in 2010 to just under 35,000 in 2023 (RGS-IBG 2023; GA, 2022).

Discussion with teachers suggests teaching geopolitics in schools is challenging not only because the revised Geography A-level curriculum included new material (Rawling, 2016), but also because concepts like sovereignty and territorial integrity are somewhat abstract, and the topics are daunting in scale and scope. In discussing pedagogic approaches for this, Dodds argues that 'case studies, as all teachers recognise, are a great way to show how theory plays out in practice' (2016: 101). Simulation exercises further enhance engagement with case studies and ground abstract concepts by enabling students to role-play different stakeholders. As examples of both active and deep learning, simulations are 'particularly well suited to geographical pedagogy as they underscore the complex and multi-scalar nature of human–environment relations' (Schnurr et al., 2014: 401). Within secondary schools, simulations range from modelling river flows in classrooms using fabric and rocks (Fryer, 2002), to role-plays of public meeting on topics including development, infrastructure, and climate change (Roberts, 2013). In seeking to forge connections between political geography research and the school curriculum, we have developed Model UNPO teaching resources for classroom geopolitical simulation exercises (UNPO, 2023). This paper draws upon participant observation of thirteen Model UNPOs held in English secondary schools between June 2022 and September 2023.

Since the first MUN in 1947, simulations have proliferated within educational settings. We seek to address two gaps in the practice and the analysis of geopolitics simulation exercises. First, although incorporating an increasingly diverse range of supranational organisations, existing simulations focus almost exclusively on recognised nation-states. This not only overlooks stateless, minority, and indigenous communities that are often disproportionately affected by conflict and human rights abuses, but it also reinforces a state-based geopolitical imaginary. In contrast, Model UNPO exercises simulate negotiations from the perspective of communities denied a seat at most international fora but that experience acute political inequalities and injustices. This thereby brings to life important but often overlooked issues such as on the tension between territorial integrity and self-determination, and the realities of ongoing colonial situations. This, in turn, makes questions of justice and equity in the international realm relatable, and enables the imagining of alternative internationals. Second, whilst existing scholarship on simulations focuses primarily on exercises' pedagogic value and limitations, we instead turn attention to the insights these exercises provide into the geopolitical imaginaries of young people. In doing so we bring into dialogue work on geopolitical imaginations with scholarship on geographies of education, in particular work that interrogates schools as geopolitical sites. The paper proceeds as follows: we first briefly outline the history and context of international political simulations and literature from education studies that has assessed their pedagogical value, before outlining our engagement with literature on geographical imaginations and geographies of education. After discussing our methods we then present our findings from observations of Model UNPO exercises in English secondary schools, setting out how students draw on 'known worlds' and advocate for possible worlds through role-playing unrepresented diplomats. We then examine how new worlds are generated through clause writing and the role of empathy and forging solidarities. We conclude by making the case for foregrounding young people as critical and creative geopolitical thinkers.

2. Simulating the International

Across different educational settings, simulation and role-play exercises have been demonstrated to be valuable pedagogic tools when engaging students with geopolitics, diplomacy, and international relations (e.g. Haack, 2008). The first recorded examples of such simulations were a series of 'international assemblies' held at the University of Oxford in 1921 which modelled the League of Nations. The idea then spread, with the President of Oxford International Assembly travelling to Harvard in 1922, and the American International Assembly was set up in 1923 (Muldoon, 1995). After the United Nation's establishment in 1945, the first 'MUN' was held in 1947 in Swarthmore College, involving delegates from several colleges across the northeastern U.S. Subsequently, simulations have proliferated across the globe and expanded beyond the UN to include exercises modelling institutions such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, the European Union, and the Arab League.

Underpinning these simulations is the fostering of liberal internationalism. The international is foregrounded as a crucial scale of political action, the primacy of international law is underlined, cosmopolitanism, multilateralism and a global citizenship are promoted, and the exercises endorse international organisations, notably the UN (Hodder et al., 2015; Sluga and Clavin, 2017). Consequently, these classroom simulations play a normative role in shaping young people's political consciousness, presenting the UN as a site where global problems can and should be resolved. Although the UN's limitations and the need for reforms are sometimes included in the exercises, and some simulations have examined the complexities of negotiations between state and non-state actors, for example regarding the Millennium Development Goals (Crossley-Frolick, 2010), these exercises overwhelmingly accept the UN as a club of nation-states and assume states to be the primary geopolitical actor. As a result, a state-based geopolitical imaginary is reinforced and numerous communities that are often acutely affected by conflict, human rights abuses, and environmental injustices are entirely absent from such exercises, arguably limiting their utility in simulating urgent geopolitical issues.

In addressing this gap in the formulation of geopolitical simulations, and acknowledging the long-standing plurality of diplomatic actors (Riordan, 2003), we focus here on a simulation of geopolitics beyond the state. Yet this is not a fictitious exercise, as a parallel UN of unrepresented polities has existed for over 30 years. Established in 1991 in The Hague, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is a membership-based organisation which aims to empower the voices of unrepresented and marginalised peoples and facilitate their right to self-determination. The organisation's membership is global and includes minority communities, indigenous peoples, and de facto states. A

[2] These themes have been interpreted in various ways by different examination boards including through topics such as 'Superpowers' and 'Migration, Identity and Sovereignty' (Edexcel); 'Power and Borders' (OCR); and 'Global Governance: Change and Challenges' (WJEC).

common denominator across UNPO members is their denial of access to and/or equal representation on institutions of national or international governance: none have UN membership.

Just as the establishment of the MUN was largely student driven, so was the instigation of a Model UNPO: the first simulation was an ‘add on’ to a MUN run by students at the Catholic University of Sao Paolo in 2006.[3] Since 2014, Author 2 has run a simulated version of a ‘Model UNPO General Assembly’, as part of a final year geography undergraduate course. Having first participated in the activity as an undergraduate, Author 1 has worked with Author 2 to develop these materials for a range of audiences. Partnering with the UNPO and other minority youth organisations we have produced resource materials for running Model UNPO exercises with youth groups, secondary school students and primary school students (see RGS-IBG, 2024a; RGS-IBG, 2024b). In adapting the exercise for secondary school students, we sought to align the resources to the ‘Global Governance’ topic in A-level Geography and trialled the materials in three English secondary schools in 2018 and 2019. The exercise speaks to how Klaus Dodds, a member of the A-level Geography Content Advisory Board panel, envisaged global governance as ‘not reducible to the affairs of nation-states and the international system’ but rather as ‘a suite of actors, issues, sites and spaces, rules and regulations, as well as norms and values such as diplomacy’ (2016: 98). Model UNPO offers students a grounded perspective on the dynamics of interdependence and inequality that underpin global governance and exposes students to the role of non-state actors (Dodds, 2016; Saddington and McConnell, 2023). When developing these materials, we noted the value of conducting participant observation of A-level Geography classes to gain insights into how UK-based teenagers understand and imagine geopolitics.

In higher education, simulations have long been promoted as a technique to address dissatisfaction with traditional teaching methods and to develop students’ problem-solving skills (Walford, 1981), and within education studies attention has focused MUN simulations’ impact on learning, particularly within universities in the U.S. where the exercise is often integrated into the curriculum. Within this literature, several recurrent foci are apparent. First, most scholars seek to assess the pedagogical value of this active learning exercise, from evaluating the extent to which MUN is a means to achieve ‘deep’ learning in the context of undergraduate IR courses (Haack, 2008), to the impact of taking part in simulations on young peoples’ wider political participation and civil engagement (Levy, 2016), and supporting students in developing skills like public speaking and debating (Hammond and Douglas Albert, 2020; Coticchia et al., 2020). Second, the instructor’s role in the exercise has been analysed in terms of the pros and cons of teacher intervention for shaping the learning process (Schnurr et al., 2014), preventing misinterpretation (Wheeler, 2006) and ensuring the ‘game’ does not overwhelm the learning (McIntosh, 2001). Third, work has considered how engagement with MUN is shaped by gender, class, and political perspectives (Giovanello et al., 2013) and, in turn, how the exercise can reproduce particular power relations. For example, Rosenthal et al. (2001) found that young women take fewer speaking turns, and judge themselves less favourably than young men. Meanwhile Coughlin (2013) documents how, even in formally inclusive spaces, a series of gender stereotypes are expressed and reproduced through MUN. Finally, scholars have examined how far MUN exercises inculcate both an understanding of the complexities, dilemmas, and challenges of international politics (Schnurr et al., 2014; Starkey and Blake, 2001; Taylor, 2013; Coticchia et al., 2020), and ‘how it *feels* to be a decision-maker at the national and international level’ (McIntosh, 2001: 269, emphasis added). With students actively applying concepts and theories to real-world problems, simulations facilitate ‘living through’ the motivations, interactions, and challenges that diplomats often face (Crossly-Frolick 2010). Indeed, it is precisely such ‘living through’ that was encouraged by the then UNPO President Ledum Mitee (who succeeded Ken Saro-Wiwa as President of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People) in a message of solidarity sent to the 2006 Model UNPO organisers:

> [you have] ventured into the shadows of the world’s unrepresented… as you simulate the UNPO nations… what should be clear is … that these are real people engaged in enormous life threatening and indeed life consuming struggles. Their territories have come to represent some of the world’s trouble spots and freedom battlefronts not because, as critics are wont to posit, they are “troublemakers” bent on destroying the established world order, but because they are inevitably pitched in struggles against, but not limited to, population transfers and forced assimilation… and other violations of their rights.[4]

In what follows we build on this education studies literature, but also push beyond it. We do not seek to evaluate the pedagogic value of Model UNPO per se, but instead focus on the insights it provides into young people’s geopolitical imaginaries, and their ability to critically engage with ‘the shadows of the world’s unrepresented’.

3. Imagining the geopolitical in schools

Underpinning all simulations is a ‘reality gap’ between the exercise and its real-world counterpart (Muldoon, 1995; Kaufman, 1998). With imagination conventionally understood as ‘a location somewhere between the domains of the factual and fictional, the subjective and objective, the real and representational’ (Daniels, 2011: 182), simulations can thus offer insights into the appraisal and contestation of different geopolitical imaginations. Defined as a way of envisioning, comprehending and experiencing the world, the concept of *geographical* imagination has been a central focus across a range of geography subfields (e.g. Cosgrove, 2006; Gregory, 1994; Harvey, 1973; Lowenthal, 1961; Massey et al., 1999; Wright, 1947). In addition to simulations being sites where geographical imaginations are actively produced, we suggest that Model UNPO’s focus on marginal geopolitical actors brings to the fore two interrelated aspects of geographical – and specifically geopolitical – imagination. First, is the framing of both known and possible worlds (Daniels, 2011): our aim is to consider not only how secondary education is shaping geopolitical imaginaries but also how young people conceive of, and think *beyond*, the state-based system. Second, and relatedly, Model UNPO foregrounds the power relations that underpin the production of different geographical imaginations (Said, 1978), and the possibilities of geographical imagination as a subaltern resource (Gregory, 1994; Massey et al., 1999). Here there are resonances with Sharp’s work on geopolitics at the margins, as she argues that ‘these are not stories of internationalism from “below” or “outside”, but are geographies that have been recast from the margins, from and by people who have been differently entangled with networks of domination and resistance’ (2013: 27).

In seeking to understand the dynamics of young people’s geopolitical imaginations, we turn to literature on young people’s political geographies, geographies of education, and geographers’ work on play. Until relatively recently children’s geographers have lamented political geography’s lack of engagement with children and young people, but this has started to change, with a growing body of scholarship coalescing around several themes. This includes work that challenges assumptions that young people are disengaged and apathetic about political participation (e.g. O’Toole, 2003; Kallio and Häkli, 2011; Skelton, 2013), and work that focuses on young people’s political participation, including in school councils and youth councils (Percy-Smith, 2010; Wyness, 2003),

[3] Archives of the UNPO, NISE Antwerp: D17941(2/1), VEA85/04 File regarding VIII Modelo da Organizaçao das Naçoes Unidas (MONU). 2006.

[4] Archives of the UNPO, NISE Antwerp: D17941(2/1), VEA85/04 File regarding VIII Modelo da Organizaçao das Naçoes Unidas (MONU). 2006.

youth citizenship (Mills, 2013; Staeheli et al.,2013), and the everyday environments in which children and young people exercise political agency (Kallio and Häkli, 2013; Hopkins, 2007). Building on the latter, and bringing it into dialogue with feminist geopolitics, there is also a growing body of scholarship on how young people engage with and navigate geopolitics in their everyday lives (e.g. Katz, 2004). This includes work on activism (Bosco, 2010) and emotions such as fear and their wider concerns about 'global' issues (Pain et al., 2010), and spaces in which children engage, like families, playgrounds, and online chatrooms (Benwell and Hopkins, 2016; Hörschelmann, 2008; Ploszajska, 1996). This focus on young people's geopolitics not only brings to the fore young people's engagement with politics beyond the national scale but also highlights their geopolitical subjectivity. Thereby, it is part of wider, feminist-driven shifts within critical geopolitics scholarship towards both considering a 'range of actors hitherto not considered sufficiently "geopolitical"' (Dodds,Kuus and Sharp, 2013: 10), and turning attention to how geopolitical discourses are interpreted and engaged with.

Our research has points of intersection with these thematic areas: as discussed below, students engaging with Model UNPO demonstrate both empathetic political participation and cynicism regarding global governance, and they work through experiences and perceptions of geopolitics through the exercise. In particular, the simulation offers insights into how young people interpret foreign policy (Benwell and Hopkins, 2016) and 'engage with geopolitics in complex ways' (Skelton, 2013: 131). Our primary focus, however, is on *how* young people engage with and rework geopolitical imaginations. To address this, we seek to forge a dialogue with scholarship on the intersection of geographies of education and critical geopolitics.

Reflecting education's role as a key process in young people's political, and geopolitical, development there is a growing interest in the intertwined connections between educational practices and institutes, and geopolitics. In positioning 'schools as geopolitical sites and students as geopolitical subjects' (Nguyen, 2020: 2; Lizotte and Nguyen, 2020) this scholarship has turned attention to how education systems are embroiled in statecraft, nation-building, and broader geopolitical and security goals, and how children and teachers are, in some cases, challenging these practices (Pykett, 2009; Staeheli and Hammett, 2013; Mitchell, 2003; Driver and Maddrell, 1996; Benwell, 2016). Dialogue between this work on the geographies of education and feminist geopolitics has opened up questions of embodied geopolitics (Hyndman, 2004), 'how people differentially make sense of, remake, and contest prevailing geopolitical agendas' (Nguyen, 2020: 9), and how the representation of dominant geopolitical structures in schools can be contested (Laketa, 2016).

In focusing on classroom simulation exercises our research directly speaks to how political worldviews and geopolitical subjectivities are shaped by school curricula and teaching materials (Müller, 2011; Ide, 2016), and how students respond to and interpret different geopolitical imaginaries. However, where we diverge from existing literature is in focusing on an example of the classroom as a site not only where dominant geopolitical discourses are reinforced, (e.g. Nguyen, 2020; Dittmer, 2015; Müller, 2011), but as a site where alternative – and specifically non-state – internationals can be imagined. Indeed, there is a paucity of work on how internationalism in its various guises has been taught in school settings (for an exception see Brooks, 2015 on post World War I international student exchanges).

In seeking to analyse how geopolitical imaginaries are shaped through simulations it is instructive to consider the small body of geographical work on the intersection between play and geopolitics (Woodyer 2012) and, particularly, Dittmer's (2013, 2015) work on how this is articulated through MUN. Dittmer focuses on humour's role in how university-level MUN participants produce particular geopolitical imaginations and how the 'MUN assemblage' itself is 'emergent from the active participation of role players with material objects such as placards (for being identified/called on), laptops (for writing resolutions)' (2013: 495). Thus, he argues for a 'greater appreciation of playfulness as a mode of being in the geopolitical world' (2015: 909). Drawing on Woodyer's assertion that 'playing works through aspects of the mimicked activities that are somewhat mysterious; identities, social relationships and socio-material practices are played with as details are tweaked or wildly (re) imagined' (2012: 318), Dittmer makes a persuasive argument that, as highly coded games that are *also* spaces of improvisation, MUNs disrupt the spectrum of paidia (unstructured and improvisational) and ludus (formal and structured) play. Instead, Dittmer asserts the importance of recognising 'that individual enactments of a game can fall at various points on the spectrum… the specifics of games matter, not only in which game is played, but in how *individual* games unfold' (2015: 912). Considering this, we make the case for observing and analysing how Model UNPO plays out differently in various iterations of the simulation.

4. Using simulations to research young people's political geographies

The selection and justification of particular research methodologies has been debated within education geography and children's geographies, with both fields seeing a recent expansion of and experimentation with methods (Nguyen, 2020; Holloway, 2014). Meanwhile researchers working at the intersection of political and children's geographies have noted the necessity of developing research methodologies which engage with young people's conception of the political. For example, O'Toole argues that shifting from surveying young people about their attitude to political issues to undertaking more in-depth examinations of their political views 'we can begin to develop a much more nuanced understanding of the relationship between young people's conception of the political and their engagement and interest in politics' (2003: 87). Whilst interviews and focus groups would be useful in this regard, given the pressures on curriculum time and our desire to limit disruption to teaching (see Mills, 2012), we focused on participant observation to gain insights into how young people understand, explain, and perform key concepts within political geography with their peers in the classroom. Moreover, participant observation places a focus on listening to children's voices as independent knowing subjects whose perspectives and ideas constitute important contributions to geographical debates (Holloway, 2014), and has resonance with the wider engagement with ethnographic participant observation within political geography (e.g. Megoran, 2006).

Between June 2022 and September 2023, we ran and observed Model UNPO sessions in thirteen English secondary schools. Eleven schools were from the state sector, and two were independent (i.e. private) schools (see Table 1). Most of the schools visited are rated 'Good' but Ofsted but we also visited schools that were rated 'Inadequate', 'Requiring Improvement' and 'Outstanding'. Recruitment took place through the school mailing lists of our respective departments, the RGS-IBG mailing list, the 'Geography Southwest' teacher mailing list, social media, and word-of-mouth. Approximately 50 % of the schools that expressed interest were unable to participate due to industrial action, time-tabling constraints, or staffing issues. Indeed, several teachers, particularly from state schools, noted the challenges caused by the volume of material and squeeze on teaching time precisely because of the A-level reforms; challenges that were exacerbated by the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, whilst trying to visit a range of school types and locations (rural and urban areas, and with catchment areas reflecting a range of socio-economic profiles), we have necessarily taken an opportunist approach to the visits. Although the opening vignette reflected a class of all white students, visits in Birmingham and Wolverhampton consisted of more diverse classes with some simulations consisting of predominately students from BAME backgrounds such as Brook College. Some schools also invited A-Level Politics students to attend the session. In addition to observing the exercise with Year 12 (16–17 year old) and Year 13 (17–18) students, we also ran one session with Year 9 students (aged 13–14) at a school which had introduced

Table 1
Overview of schools visited.

Pseudonym	Area	Year Group	Number of Students	School Type	Ofsted Rating
St Faith's	Bristol	Year 12	24	State sixth Form College (16–18 years old)	Good
Wood School	Cambridgeshire	Year 12/13	20	State comprehensive secondary School (11–18 years old)	Good
Edgewood	Birmingham	Year 12	25	Independent Boys School	N/A
Trinity	Birmingham	Year 12	17	Independent Girls School	N/A
St Claire's	County Durham	Year 12/13	13	State sixth Form College	Requires Improvement
Green School	Hertfordshire	Year 12	13	State comprehensive secondary School	Good
Glen College	York	Year 12	20	State comprehensive secondary School	Outstanding
Bridge School	Hertfordshire	Year 12	41	State comprehensive secondary School	Good
Hill School	Gloucestershire	Year 9	12	State comprehensive secondary School	Inadequate
Long Academy	Cambridgeshire	Year 12/13	13	State comprehensive secondary School	Good
Brook College	Wolverhampton	Year 12	10	State comprehensive secondary School	Good
Field School	Oxfordshire	Year 12	19	State comprehensive secondary School	Good
Lake College	Cambridgeshire	Year 12	7	State comprehensive secondary School	Requires Improvement

ideas from the A-level 'Global Governance' topic into their Key Stage 3 Geography curriculum. It was notable that whilst these younger students were engaged with the wider topic, they struggled with the exercise's formal debate format. Indeed, across most of the schools, students lacked confidence in public speaking – a skill which this activity is intended to develop. Conversations with teachers after the activity suggested that students' soft skills, like debating, had declined following the pandemic; an observation is that supported by emerging education studies literature (e.g., Brennan et al., 2023).

Participant observation was conducted in classroom settings, with each exercise lasting approximately two hours. In some schools Author 1 took on the role of 'teacher' chairing the sessions and intervening in debates whilst in others they were an observer at the back of the room, running a plenary exercise after the simulation. Student interactions with the researcher were varied, with some groups initially quieter at the beginning of the simulation whilst others immediately embracing the task. A few teachers reported that classes were quieter than normal with an'outsider' in the classroom, however these groups grew in confidence as the simulation progressed. The researcher was present for some research lessons (see below) with this proving an opportunity to build rapport with students. Ethics approval was sought, and granted, by both researchers' universities. As the students were aged over 16 and the research was conducted in a school setting, students were treated as competent youths and able to consent to participating in the study (Skelton, 2008). After the exercise, teachers were asked to reflect on the exercise and provide feedback via Feedback was received from four schools, and we cite this where permission has been granted. Given the time pressures on teachers, it was not deemed ethical or logistically possible to solicit interviews after the simulation.

During the exercise, students are allocated into small groups of between two and five, with each group representing a different UNPO member. Before the debate, students research their non-state community and prepare a short speech outlining their position in relation to the debate topic. Each school gave students a different amount of preparation time. Some groups were set the research task as homework whilst other students had devoted lesson time to prepare – typically an hour or so. Students used resources such as the UNPO website to research their communities. The teacher, or a designated student, chairs the debate as the UNPO President. At the start of the simulation the President gives a short introduction and notes the rules of procedure. Each delegation then gives a short (i.e. two-minute) speech with time for questions and points of clarification afterwards. The main part of the exercise is the moderated debate wherein students debate a series of draft clauses that have either been formulated beforehand by the teacher or are submitted by delegations. The aim is to formulate a resolution which – where possible – should be passed through consensus. Students use amendments to alter the wording or order of clauses and students may choose to remove or add a clause. At the end of the moderated debate, students vote on whether to adopt the final resolution. Throughout the exercise, breaks are scheduled with students remaining in character and engaging in informal discussions with other delegations; thereby simulating corridor diplomacy. Across all the schools, students engaged enthusiastically with the simulation exercises, being quick to get into role and enjoying the exercise's debating element. Although the resources outline the structure of the debate, the simulation is adaptable with teachers choosing topics that complement their teaching.

5. Representing the Unrepresented in the Classroom

In what follows we draw on our Model UNPO observations across the thirteen secondary schools to first examine how students draw on their 'known worlds' within the simulations, before turning to the ways that they advocate for a range of possible worlds. In attending to *how* students thereby imagine alternative internationals we then examine both the role of clause writing in the scripting of geopolitical imaginaries, and how role-playing forges empathy and solidarities within these simulations.

5.1. Drawing on 'known worlds'

Given the framing of the simulation in relation to the global governance section of the A-level curriculum, it is to be expected that students drew upon existing knowledge, garnered from both within and outside the classroom, to understand largely unfamiliar geopolitical contexts. Schools used the activity for different purposes within their scheme of work, with some employing it to introduce pupils to their'Global Governance' teaching, and others using Model UNPO as a reflection activity after they had taught the associated topics. As a result, students engaged with the activity with a range of relevant subject knowledge around geopolitics, self-determination, and sovereignty. This was reflected in the different roles adopted by teachers, with teachers actively prompting students and offering scaffolding for cohorts new to the material, and taking a more facilitator role for groups who had completed the global governance topics. In addition to concepts from the global governance part of A-level Geography, students also drew on knowledge of topics from across the Geography course and other A-level subjects, in particular around conflict, development aid, democracy, and migration.

Crucially, the exercise not only enabled students to engage with these topics in grounded, empathetic ways, as we discuss below, but it also provided a platform upon which they could connect concepts to case studies across different settings and scales. This enabled them to push the boundaries of their 'known worlds' and actively produce knowledge about the international. For example, in Queen's School, students had previously studied China's Belt and Road Initiative in the context of South-South development but, during the exercise, discussed it in relation to territorial claims and to violence. Similarly, a teacher facilitating the exercise at Green School recounted to us how, in encouraging them to critically reflect on their 'usual didactic teaching style to teach global governance,' they had to immerse themselves

within the topic:

> [as I'm] unfamiliar with many of the disputed nations the students picked and unfamiliar with writing and creating clauses, I was able to work with pupils and face misconceptions together. For example, when we were unsure how best to relate a clause about independence to various disputed nations they had selected, we worked on applying what we do know and created scenarios, e.g. what would Scotland or Northern Ireland look for? The result was greater dialogue with my pupils and a stronger understanding of the topic (Teacher feedback, July 2023).

In a similar vein of needing to consider 'the social contexts in which geopolitical power is embedded' (Nguyen, 2020: 9), the topic of migration was also frequently debated in draft clauses, both in relation to how it is taught in the classroom, and to media headlines. For instance, at Trinity school the merits of Australia's points-based migration system were discussed in relation to population transfers and the loss of indigenous culture.

> West Papua proposed a clause 'We encourage policies (e.g. migrant quotas) to limit the number of immigrants to West Papua.' There is a long and heated debate. At one stage the Tibet delegation interjects: 'it seems you want people to hate immigrants.' Students then ask 'how do we protect communities who have fled, but stop forced migration into occupied territories? Does this apply to just West Papua – or more broadly to all unrepresented nations?'… West Papua later agrees to change their proposed clause to 'We encourage policies to limit government forced immigration to stateless nations to preserve the culture.' Somaliland responds: 'see how you have improved with a bit pressure from the group' (observation notes, June 2023).

Students here are applying perspectives from often polarised UK media debates around migration control to situations where the movement of peoples has different histories and legacies. Through representing delegates from indigenous communities facing population transfers into their territories, students were able to think through questions of justice and fairness vis-à-vis migration from perspectives that are very different from ones they are familiar with, thereby encouraging the reassessment of stereotypes and assumptions.

The application of existing knowledge and experience to unfamiliar contexts was also apparent in relation to compensation for historical and contemporary wrong doings. At St Faith's school in Bristol students, unprompted, brought up the issue of reparations. Drawing on previous class discussion around Black Lives Matter, they applied this knowledge to the context of whether Georgia is able to pay reparations to Abkhazian communities. Questions asked by delegates during the debate included 'Who can determine if a state can pay?', 'who determines how much a state should pay?' and 'who decides if a problem was caused by colonialism?' As the debate unfolded, the Somaliland delegation questioned whether forcing a state to pay reparations would actually cause more conflict and tensions, and whether a UN body should instead make such payments. Discussion with the teacher afterwards indicated this was reflective of wider conversations in the school following the controversy over Edward Colston's statue in Bristol and wider debates around the legacies of slavery and possible reparations.

This example resonates with Dittmer's observation that MUN is a 'way of engaging with students' geopolitical experiences' (2013: 495), but with the added dimension of students also grappling with the condition of statelessness. For example, as might be expected given geopolitical events unfolding at the time of the exercises being run, the Russian invasion of Ukraine was discussed in multiple groups but, rather than focusing on state alliances, through taking on the role of representatives from the Crimean Tartars students were able to identify and problematise silences within media discourses of the conflict. As one student from the Crimean Tatar delegation noted, despite the conflict's high profile, 'awareness of us is very low' (observation notes, Wood School, June 2023). What we arguably see here is not only gaps in mainstream 'known worlds' being identified, but students relating the polities they are role-playing to wider geographies of conflict, neoliberalisation and racialisation (Nguyen, 2020) and doing so in ways that push at the boundaries of yet-to-be-made-possible worlds.

5.2. Advocating for possible worlds

Through representing stateless communities, students are exposed to tensions between realism and idealism in relation to power dynamics in geopolitics in general, and the responsibilities of international organisations more specifically. Echoing arguments in education studies literature that simulations make visible the complexity and contestations of international politics in ways that challenge student idealism (Schnurr et al., 2014; Starkey and Blake, 2001; Taylor, 2013), across several of the exercises students expressed cynicism about the contemporary power dynamics of global governance. In particular, the dominance of states like Russia and China and their power at the UN's Security Council was cited as an almost insurmountable barrier to stateless polities achieving justice and recognition. The exercise enabled students to work through issues of injustice and inequality at the scale of the international, but also to weigh up the power that these communities have to challenge injustices, and to debate strategies for opening up space for stateless polities, as the following examples illustrate:

> Original clause: 'Urges nations to condemn the occupation and suppression of underrepresented nations'
> Ahwaz delegation: '"Condemn" is not strong enough, just a voice of disapproval. Like today, if we say disapproval of Russia, then what? They don't care. We can include more than "condemn". "Cut ties … cut ties with those that oppress". Let's enforce sanctions. "Actively condemn and enforce sanctions of those occupying states"'
> Tibet: 'We think we should remove "sanctions". We are not legitimate, we do not have power to enforce sanctions. I doubt many countries would be willing to put sanctions on nations suppressing us. [they would be] sacrificing geopolitical ties and alliances for not legitimate nations like us. "Condemn" is as much as we can ask for.'
> Taiwan: 'Difficult to go against larger superpowers … How do you go against China without starting a full nuclear war?'
> [Teacher acting as UNPO President]: 'How many semiconductors do you produce?'
> Taiwan: '94 %. Oh… we could do sanctions.'
> Tibet: 'Once again, let's be realistic it is not going to happen, we are not legitimate… Countries will not put on the line their geopolitical relations based on our claims…. Nations care about their representation. Go back to "condemn"'
>
> …
>
> Students discuss whether to downgrade a clause from "all members states of the UNPO to be allowed a voice on the international stage" to just "the regional stage", with the regional being framed as more 'achievable.'
> Khmer Krom: 'I think we should just keep it as international. I realise there are concerns about how realistic this is, but the UNPO is about fighting for communities without voices – even if it seems farfetched now, we should fight. There's that phrase "Shoot for the moon and if you miss you land amongst the stars". If we aim for the highest level of representation, anything less still be a good thing.'
> Tibet: 'But there is no way of getting to international recognition without progress on regional scale…. We recognise that international recognition is what we want, we all want that. I am not saying that is not a good thing, but I am just saying we need to make progress rather than jump. We should take lots of small steps. …. It is not going to change overnight. First, we have a minor voice – regional, and then a major one – international. It is not an easy journey – we need cooperation… but we can get there.'

(observation notes, Bridge School, July 2023).

Such strategizing as to how stateless polities 'can get there' in terms of having a voice internationally was often framed in terms of the different legal and political statuses held by various UNPO members. The following exchange illustrates how students sought to work out the degrees of recognition and spectrums of statehood across current and former UNPO members:

> Tibet: 'Estonia was recognised. Taiwan is partially recognised. We are not known as "Tibet", nobody recognises us as a sovereign state. It is possible for Taiwan – but for the majority of us we have no shot at the international stage.'
> Taiwan: 'We are still called ROC.'
> Tibet: 'You have ties with 13 states – separate from China.'
> Taiwan: 'Why are we in the UNPO then?'
> Tibet: 'You are under-recognised but you have a government and diplomatic ties. Taiwan is seen as a country, despite not being in the UN. Territories like Tibet, Guam, and East Turkestan – we are not considered a country. It is a lot easier for you to step into the UN' (observation notes, Bridge School, July 2023).

Working out the 'pecking order' (Pouliot, 2016) of stateless communities in this way enabled students to piece together not only how the geopolitical world is organised and divided (Gregory, 1994), but also other potential configurations. In several schools students expressed idealistic optimism about primacy of international law and the 'global policeman' role that the UN can play in upholding human rights, facilitating self-determination, and adjudicating on which polities should be recognised. However, in a move that implicitly acknowledges conventional geopolitical imaginations as imperial projections (Said, 1993), students also made the link between the UN and colonialism in their speeches and interventions. They discussed, for example, the UN's domination by states that were or currently are engaged in colonialism (including China, the US and Russia) and is therefore a 'biased' organisation that does not represent all peoples. Questions of fairness and representation frequently came to the fore in relation to China's role at the UN with, for example, a frustrated exclamation by one student at Trinity school that 'anybody with any power is part of the problem'.[5]

However, in many of the simulations students challenged the notion that prevailing power relations were fixed and, through debate between delegations, sought to work out how alternative – if at times unrealistic – power relations could be carved out:

> Guam: 'We need to hold countries accountable for oppressive laws.'

6. …

> Tibet: 'Could there be a world implemented thing – a space where people can [pauses] where people can check that laws do not break human rights.'
> UNPO President: 'Do we have the power to do this?'
> Tibet: 'Let's get support from a bigger power. Let's fix all the problems at once.'
> President: 'Shall we fix our problems first?'
> Somaliland: 'There needs to be a deterrent – the law alone is not enough. Equally, we need legislation and enforcement so states can be held accountable by groups like the OHCHR [Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights]'
> Tibet: 'We could come together and invade China. We could peacefully invade. A UNPO version of NATO.' (observation notes, Trinity school, June 2022)

Here again we see students trying to work out the boundaries of possibility in international politics with the debate structure of the simulation enabling different viewpoints to be considered. Notably younger students in particular (Year 9/ 13–14 year-olds) were ambitious and optimistic about what could be achieved by UNPO members, for instance securing formal support from the US and other UN members in the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Students also wanted to imagine alternative ways of structuring the international system, often emphasising the need for a more 'independent' organisation and/or a separate body consisting of only formerly colonised peoples. At Wood School and Brook College students suggested that, given their frustrations with the UN, they could turn to organisations like Amnesty International which they perceived to have moral authority to intervene in geopolitics, though when pushed by their teacher students at Wood School struggled to articulate *how* an NGO could 'step up and prevent violence'. Meanwhile students at St Faith's suggested that 'smaller countries' alongside UNPO members could form an 'unbiased' international coalition that would overcome the hierarchical binary of recognised versus unrecognised polities. This was a discussion that, although not explicitly framed as such, has resonances with the role of the Non-Aligned Movement and the emergence of the G77. It was notable that in questioning how geopolitical relations are configured, and how they could, or should, be reconfigured, it was the format of clause writing that was particularly instructive in how the simulations unfolded.

6.1. Scripting geopolitical imaginaries through clause drafting

Model UNPO is an emulation of diplomacy in terms of students engaging in representation, communication, and negotiation, and it is the latter two practices that underpin the editing and ordering clauses that is the focus of the simulation's moderated debate. Students thereby experience first-hand how forms geopolitical of knowledge, in this case resolutions, are produced through amendments and, through negotiations with their peers, they engage with the political work of drafting and bracketing (Riles, 2006). Whilst some groups struggled with the resolution writing process throughout the exercise[6] – a practice often alien to students – others quickly picked up the rhythm and requirements of the task:

> There was significant re-arranging of clauses and editing in the final five minutes. The clause regarding self-determination was strengthened to a 'demand' from an 'ask'. Pressed for time, the group moved to a vote. The resolution passed with five in favour and five abstentions – reflecting the debate's contested final few minutes (observation notes, St. Faith's, June 2023).

This observation captures the sense of urgency in some simulations with students embracing the nature and pace of the task. Whilst here the use of abstentions was indicative that the group's desire to reach agreement was greater than individual delegations wanting to have 'their' wording in the final resolution, in other schools debate was heated around the use of particular terms. In such cases the clause drafting process prompted students to interrogate the meanings of terms that underpin the global governance section of the A-level curriculum, and that are key concepts in political geography more generally, and question the geopolitical work that these terms do within a resolution:

[5] The prominence of China in student discussions is likely due to the high international media profile of UNPO members in the region (Taiwan, Tibet and East Turkestan), and the fact that China features as a case study – to varying degrees – in the A level specifications of all four awarding bodies (OCR, AQA, Pearson, and WJEC).

[6] Instructions on resolution writing are included in the preparatory materials for this task. See: https://www.rgs.org/schools/resources-for-schools/debating-global-governance-model-unpo-role-play.

> Students are debating the draft clause: 'Affirming the importance that all nations and peoples have the opportunity to have a say in the decisions that concern their territory, culture, and heritage.'
> …Tibet: 'Can you add "politics"?'
> President: 'What do you mean?'
> Tibet: 'That nations and people should have governance of their own state, governance over the territory of their own state.'
> Catalonia: Is "governance" not the same thing [as "politics"]? Are "territory" and "state" not the same thing? Are we not adding words for the sake?'
> Tibet: 'No, "territory" and "state" are different. In Tibet we do not have control over our own land.'
> (observation notes, Bridge School, July 2023).

The nature of independence was central to many students' discussions as they debated whether a community needed to have sovereignty to secure their right to self-determination, or if it could be achieved through means like autonomy (e.g. Wood School). Through debating and amending clauses students also worked through the messy politics of decolonisation – in the process recognising that colonisation is neither a binary nor an historical practice – and came up against the politics of categorising stateless and unrepresented communities:

> Guam: 'Add "non-autonomous regions". It should be "decolonised, autonomous and non-autonomous regions"'
> Catalonia: 'If you are not autonomous, are you not going to be listened to? Is it unnecessary? Are we just adding words?'
> Khmer Krom: 'you could just have "decolonised regions" – it speaks to both autonomous and non-autonomous.'
> Taiwan: '"Decolonised" is restrictive. Remove it and just have "region." "Region" speaks to everyone.'
> Khmer Krom: 'It ["decolonised"] is necessary, it emphasises the process from colonised to decolonised – the process to independence.'
> Ahwaz: 'Colonised is not necessarily the same as being governed by. For instance we are governed by Iran, but we are not colonised. So decolonised would not make much sense. "Areas previously governed by" makes more sense.'
> West Papua: 'Where it says "decolonised"… We are not decolonised – so it will not apply to us as we are still a colony.'
> President: 'Are you calling Indonesia a colonial power?'
> West Papua: 'Yes.'
> President: 'What about "decolonised and currently colonised nations"?'
> Somaliland: 'Do puppets states not come under territorial rulers?'
> [Discussion within the delegations].
> Catalonia: 'Oh it could do. Yeah that's fine.'
> Khmer Krom: …'Cannot we just say "unrepresented nations".
> (observation notes, Bridge School, July 2023).

As a larger school, Bridge school had the highest number of students participating in the exercise thus facilitating a wider representation of members and more opportunities for a divergence on wording. It was also through negotiation over language that geopolitical agency was exposed and debated. In several simulations there were lengthy discussions about how 'strong' or 'active' particular verbs were in clauses. For example, some delegates called to amend clauses so that they specified that a state is 'obligated' rather than 'requested' to 'give' rather than 'allow' unrestricted access of independent human rights monitors to investigate violations, whilst at Green School one student argued that 'allow' indicated states had a choice over 'as serious an issue as human rights. You do not want to give them a choice.' Students also used the structure of the resolution writing exercise to work through geopolitical priorities with delegations arguing for particular clauses – for example on superpowers respecting the rights of minority communities within their territories – to be moved up the running order in the resolution (Glen College).

In other simulations students quickly called out the President if they made any mistakes in amending clauses. For example, at Wood School there was uproar when the student President added in words to a clause before voting on it, and the Somaliland delegation asked for their original submitted clause to be read out 'verbatim' so that inaccuracies could be made transparent and their reputation with other delegates restored. Echoing Dittmer (2013), it was apparent that humour was important to the practice of resolution writing to mediate the apparently farcical side of clause drafting. For example, one student representing Barotseland at Bridge School asked 'Can we add a full stop?' to which the President replied 'shall we vote on that?' to the laughter of the group. However, concurrently, students struggled with the scalar jump between discussing crucial geopolitical issues of recognition, long term conflict, and human rights abuses and then negotiating over the wording and punctuation of individual clauses. Reflecting diplomats' juggling of 'bureaucratic' and 'heroic' scripts (Neumann, 2005), the disjuncture between the minutiae of clause-writing and the magnitude of geopolitical events can feel jarring, and students at times wanted reassurance of 'realism' within their simulation questioning whether 'real life' diplomacy mirrored their experiences. Emotions underpin this disjuncture as well, with a tension between impassioned speeches (that on some occasions elicited applause from other delegations) and the formality of negotiations over wording of clauses as student 'step into the shoes' of their communities.

7. 5d. Embodiment, empathy and forging solidarities

In addition to the diplomatic practices of communication and negotiation inherent to clause writing, the simulation also entails students engaging in the third mode of diplomacy – representation – through taking on the roles of 'diplomats' from stateless communities. Prior to the exercise, students develop place-specific knowledge by researching their UNPO member communities before representing them during the debate. The opening speeches were particularly important in enabling students to engage with geopolitics in an embodied and emotional way (Hyndman, 2004; Hopkins et al., 2019). For example, reflecting Kuus' assertion that 'the social processes by which certain knowledge claims come to be considered authoritative' are not pre-given, but instead performed (2014: 3), opening speeches saw students arguing that 'independence will allow us [East Turkestan] human rights, the ability to represent ourselves and freedom from re-education' (Edgewood); 'our state [Washington DC] should be represented in congress. Our citizens deserve voting rights' (St Claire's); and 'We [Somaliland] have better human rights than Somalia, we are more stable' (Wood School).

At times during debates there was distancing through the act of representation with some slippage between 'us' and 'them' during interventions. For example, when knowledge from other contexts – like previous lessons – was drawn upon students often 'broke the fourth wall' and stepped outside of the act of representation. This stepping out of character was usually brief and a reflective question from the teacher or their peers often helped to 'bring back' the simulation. = Indeed, overall students were enthusiastic about getting into role and thinking through how geopolitical structures, hierarchies and relations appear to – and feel like (McIntosh, 2001) – from the perspective of those formally excluded from then. Although some communities might be familiar to students (e.g. Taiwan) many are not and, through embodying these communities within the 'emotionscape' (Jones, 2022) of these simulations of diplomacy, students found that geopolitical processes and concepts became more 'real' and grounded. The resulting emotional responses often manifest in a greater commitment to global justices as evidenced by this teacher feedback:

> 'Their initial speeches were unbelievably passionate, articulate and well-reasoned… students were operating just outside their comfort zones, but they were not alone as every nation/ group/ polity was in

the same situation and this was a great leveller and gave them the confidence to speak and debate at a high level. The students were buzzing afterwards and have been reminded of the complexities and injustices of global governance. The students who participated are now real advocates for the small nations and polities that exist around the world and the experience truly opened their eyes to a whole section of global society that they had previously not considered' (Teacher feedback, St Faith's).

Globalised media communications and transnational migration can facilitate empathy and connectedness for young people which can provide opportunities for them to mobilise in order to tackle global injustices (Hörschelmann and Refaie, 2014). Education also plays a key part in building empathy between communities. In addition to heightened student awareness of the complex injustices of global governance leading to expressions of empathy, through the practice of role-play students also articulated solidarities *between* stateless communities. Solidarities were expressed across all the simulations, and to some extent such commonalities are to be expected as UNPO members are all excluded from formal diplomatic spaces and are rarely in antagonism with one another. That said, the nature of the solidarities did vary considerably. At Long Academy, solidarity was at times surpassed by transaction agreements with the simulation mirroring MUN debates in which states look for quid-pro-quo agreements. This led to an extensive debate about the Crimean Tartars offering Western states space for military bases in the Crimean peninsula. At this stage, the teacher broke the fourth wall and asked 'Why has this not happened in the real world? … you have solved this in three seconds and unanimously decided upon it, but I am asking what is the reason this hasn't happened?' (observation notes, September 2023). In other simulations students relished the ability to build partnerships and, once alliances between UNPO members were formed, they were fiercely contested. Students were also creative in forging solidarities between communities; for example, in one simulation, delegations from Southern Mongolia and Ogaden came together to raise the issue of the forced resettlement of pastoralist communities. We see resonances here with Dittmer's (2015) assertion that games – and particularly simulations – are key sites of the political for, even within the structured format of Model UNPO, each enactment played out differently and students took pleasure in improvisation.

Indeed, by 'living through' (Crossly-Frolick 2010) the motivations and challenges of unrepresented diplomats students played with diplomatic practices like points of order and hallway meetings, and tried out different configurations of power relations and alliances. In several cases students sought to directly present their UNPO member as facilitative in the wider community of unrepresented polities. For example, at Bridge School, Taiwan's delegation stated in their opening speech '…we stand as one of most technological nations, extend our support to other nations as much as possible. We understand others cannot support as much as we can'. Here, the Taiwanese state is being re-envisioned as an agent that could "promote a wider ethic of care" (Hörschelmann and Reich, 2017, p.88). Such expressions of solidarity are reinforced by understandings of how practices of cooperation can alleviate issues of a lack of international representation with, for instance, students reflecting on the future nature of solidarities and cooperation if one of them did join the UN:

> Somaliland: 'We understand it is difficult, but others can make that jump like Somaliland has. If some make it to UN status, then you have allies in UN – and the gap closes.'
> East Turkestan: 'Taiwan is a great example of what can be achieved. We should help Taiwan achieve UN status.'
> Taiwan: 'Then everyone helps each other.'
> [There is a collective "awwwww"].
> … Somaliland: 'If Somaliland becomes a UN member, then we can support you as allies.'
> East Turkestan: 'China will veto Taiwan becoming a UN member. The point is to be irritating, to keep speaking, there is always a chance, being optimistic.'
> (observation notes, Bridge School, July 2023)

Across most simulations students' ability to make comparisons between UNPO delegations in terms of levels of recognition and international standing was enhanced by being 'in role'. By looking around the room and adopting the roles of differently recognised polities they pieced together a spectrum of recognition, and actively questioned what constituted a state and who had the legitimacy to determine the criteria recognition. Through role-playing marginalised geopolitical actors they also perceived the inequalities and the interdependencies of international politics (Dodds, 2016) in both novel and more hopeful ways. Whilst the starting point of Model UNPO is distinctly more radical than MUN, within the constraints of its structure students still experimented with relations and practices, thereby opening up possibilities to think, say, and enact alternative geopolitical realities (Dittmer, 2015; Koopman, 2011).

8. Conclusion

> 'Even though students may have an interest in global politics, they seldom recognize [the] Gordian knot it is and have no sense of the myriad of factors influencing definition and implementation of policies' (Taylor, 2013: 134)

Education is a key component in shaping geopolitical imaginaries, and simulations in particular enable students to develop 'different skills from [conventional] classroom teaching—especially those of being *imaginative* and innovative' (Winham 1991: 417 cited in Starkey and Blake, 2001: 537. Emphasis added). We suggest that observing simulations like Model UNPO wherein students role-play the diplomacy of geopolitical actors beyond the formal state system provides an opportunity for scholars to observe *how* young people make sense of the geopolitical landscape, interpret, and understand political concepts, and forge alternative geopolitical imaginaries.

From observing Model UNPO simulations in English secondary schools it was apparent that young people are critical and creative thinkers about geopolitics. This adds weight to assertions that young people have geopolitical agency, but does so not from the perspective of direct political participation (e.g. O'Toole, 2003) or the navigation of geopolitics in their everyday lives (e.g. Pain et al., 2010), but rather through role-play and simulation. Here, young people are forging geopolitical subjectivity through critically synthesising information from various sources, structured debate with peers, and taking on the roles of representatives of communities that, in most cases, are far removed from their everyday lives. Young people's agency is thus expressed *both* in an ability to imagine alternative geopolitical worlds, and through enacting more just configurations of 'doing' geopolitics.

As with school curricula more generally (Müller, 2011), the revised Geography A-Level curriculum has played a role in the renewed 'cultivation of geopolitical subjects' (Nguyen, 2020: 7) but, as teachers have noted, there are limitations in the subject content which has been 'narrowly focused on knowledge' to the neglect of developing 'the skills and core competences that will help [students] to critically engage with real-world issues', including evaluative decision-making and creative connective thinking (Oakes and Rawlings Smith, 2022: 32). In line with simulations helping critical thinking development, it is precisely the latter skills that Model UNPO seeks to engage students with. In drafting clauses and performing diplomacy, the simulation provides students with the opportunity and space 'in which to try out their political practices and agency' (Skelton, 2013: 130). However, with students role-playing diplomats from *stateless* communities Model UNPO offers additional insights. Model UNPO enables students to see afresh and question the inherent power relations within global governance regimes and colonialism's ongoing legacies, and to intimately consider the

contested nature of both 'global' and 'governance' and how '"global governance" is geographically varied in practice' (Dodds, 2016: 98). Crucially, Model UNPO engages students meaningfully with a key governance gap – that of participation in international politics – and brings to life the twin characteristics of interdependence and inequality that underpin critical understandings of global governance (*ibid*).

In thereby encouraging students to question assumptions about the inter-state system and interrogate how knowledge about such a world is produced, this is essentially an exercise in and of critical geopolitics. Through the role-play, students work through challenges of uneven power dynamics, and question whose voices can be heard internationally. The emergent cynicism about global governance structures – and challenging of the 'inevitability of intergovernmental institutions' (Sluga and Clavin, 2017: 3) – then leads to a desire to imagine more just alternatives. Indeed, we have traced how the space of a Model UNPO simulation is itself a site where geopolitical imaginations that frame both known and possible worlds (Daniels, 2011) are actively produced, through the application of existing knowledge and the working through of 'what if' scenarios. Role-plays enable students to engage with, and construct, alternative geographical imaginaries that are often absent from both the curriculum and media headlines. Thinking about 'internationalism as a form of political consciousness' (Hodder et al., 2015: 1), our observations illustrate how young people are hopeful for alternative and more equitable geopolitical futures, and are acutely aware of contemporary challenges regarding protecting human rights for marginalised communities. Hodder and colleagues (2015: 2) argue that there is an 'important gap in our understanding of how everyday people, in everyday places, through routine and everyday acts have a powerful sympathetic and emotive understanding of internationalism, and invest the international with a global sense of duty, hospitality and openness'. By including unrepresented communities in curricula, the classroom can potentially become a space for these everyday acts. The inclusion, or exclusion, of communities within curricula shapes how knowledge of 'the international' is produced and contested in the classroom. Alternative classroom internationals demonstrate student thoughtfulness and care, and that these internationals are inherently shaped by pedagogy.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Liam Saddington: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Fiona McConnell:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

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