Experiences of Displaced Young People Living in England: January to March 2023
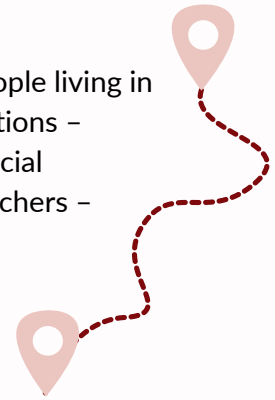
Peer Researcher Reflections

April 2024

About this report

This report is based on a research project "Experiences of displaced young people living in England: January to March 2023", conducted in partnership by three organisations – Office for National Statistics (ONS), the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) and Refugee Education UK (REUK) – and seven Peer Researchers – young people with lived experiences of displacement. The research was commissioned by the ONS.

You can read about the findings of this research here:

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 23 January 2024, ONS website, article, Experiences of displaced young people living in England: January to March 2023

> *This report contains personal views and reflections on the "Experiences of displaced young people living in England" research project, from the perspective of the NIESR and REUK research teams and peer researchers who were involved.*

To cite this report:
Aleynikova et al. (2024), *Experiences of Displaced Young People Living in England: January to March 2023 - Peer Researcher Reflections*, National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

The research team

Peer researchers	Researchers from the ONS	Researchers from NIESR	Researchers from REUK
Aiya Abdalla Haleemah Alaydi Arooba Hameed Diana Nikitina Tahmina Oria Bilal Safi Harneet Singh Baweja	Heidi Smith Amber Jordan Jenny Meadows	Ekaterina Aleynikova Jasmin Rostron Sophie Kitson	Amy Ashlee Divya Jose Catherine Gladwell
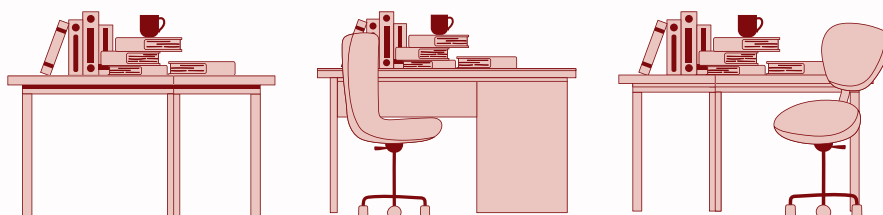
About the Centre for Equalities and Inclusion at the Office for National Statistics

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is the UK's largest independent producer of official statistics and is the recognised National Statistical Institute (NSI) for the UK. The Centre for Equalities and Inclusion within the ONS is a multi-disciplinary convening centre, bringing together people interested in equalities data and analysis from across central and local government, academia, business and the third sector. Their aim is to ensure that data and evidence are available to explore how protected characteristic groups and others at greater risk of disadvantage experience important issues affecting society. Ultimately, they hope to improve the evidence base for understanding equity and fairness in the UK today, enabling new insights into important social and policy questions.

Contact: equalities@ons.gov.uk

About the National Institute of Economic and Social Research

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research is Britain's longest established independent research institute, founded in 1938. The vision of our founders was to carry out research to improve understanding of the economic and social forces that affect people's lives, and the ways in which policy can bring about change. Over eighty years later, this remains central to NIESR's ethos. We continue to apply our expertise in both quantitative and qualitative methods and our understanding of economic and social issues to current debates and to influence policy. The Institute is independent of all party-political interests.

About Refugee Education UK

Refugee Education UK (REUK) is a UK charity working towards a world where all young refugees can access education, thrive in education, and use that education to create a hopeful, brighter future. Their programmes support children and young people to get into school, from primary to university, and to thrive academically and in their wellbeing. Alongside their direct work, REUK provide training, resources and bespoke support to education institutions and education professionals across the country and carry out research to build evidence on issues related to refugee education. Find out more about REUK at www.reuk.org

Contents

Summary

This research explored the lived experiences of young people and their parents or carers, living in England, who have been displaced from their home countries for reasons including, but not limited to, conflict, poverty and experiences of discrimination. The research involved in-depth interviews with 57 young people, aged 14 to 19, and 33 of their parents or carers. The majority of those interviews were conducted by peer researchers – seven young people with lived experiences of displacement.

You can read about the background, findings and methodology of this research in the report published on the ONS website. The research report describes the experiences that participants shared in their interviews, such as their arrival in the UK and their access and engagement with key services: education, healthcare, housing and other support. In this report, you can also read about other participatory research methods that we used, including consulting with an 'experts by experience' group of 14- to 17-year-olds with experience of displacement, in developing this research.

While the purpose of the research report is to centre and convey the voices of the interview participants, this accompanying Peer Researcher Report is a space for the peer researchers themselves to reflect on the research process, themes and findings, from their own perspectives.

The peer researchers who contributed to this report have all chosen their own topics to focus on in their essays:

Bilal overviews the key findings of this research, and how those resonate with his personal experiences. He also draws out what he believes to be important implications for policymakers and schools and discusses how peer research contributed to the relevance of these findings.

Diana draws on her experience to discuss what makes a good peer research project, and to identify tips and lessons for other peer researchers and research teams to consider for their future projects.

Haleemah discusses the strengths and challenges of involving refugees as peer researchers in projects about the communities they belong to, and critically considers her own status as both an insider and an outsider within the researched community.

Another peer researcher, who chose not to be named, reflects on the emotional experience of being a peer researcher, and the ways in which it can prompt re-living and re-considering own past experiences.

This report demonstrates the benefits and challenges of peer research methodology in this research project and highlights aspects of this methodology that can be of interest to other research teams who may be considering this approach. The following introduction outlines the peer research approach used in this project and includes some reflections from the NIESR and REUK research teams on the challenges we encountered and lessons we learnt.

Introduction: Using Participatory and Peer Research Methods

We chose to adopt a peer research approach in this project to address potential power imbalances between participants and researchers, ensuring a comfortable environment for the participants and a greater contextual and cultural understanding among interviewers.[1] It also enabled us to conduct interviews in a range of languages, helping to ensure that young people and their parents or carers were not excluded because of language barriers. In addition to providing valuable insights through interviews, peer researchers were able to further develop their skills, gain work experience, and take a central role in research that is relevant to their own experiences.

Our peer research approach involved several stages:

Project set-up

In participatory research, achieving genuine and meaningful engagement depends on choices that define levels of participation at each stage of the research process.[2] With this in mind, we aimed to design our approach, as far as possible, to include peer researchers in every stage of the research process.

We started by recruiting peer researchers at the set-up stage of the project, so that they could be involved in co-developing the research questions, materials, and participant recruitment. Peer researchers were recruited through REUK's and NIESR's existing networks of young people. The roles were also advertised through networks of young people with lived experiences of displacement. In the recruitment process, we placed emphasis on interpersonal and communication skills, ability to speak in a language widely spoken within refugee communities, and an interest in research.

Peer researchers were employed on freelance contracts, with some flexibility over the hours they could commit to the project, to allow them to balance this work with other commitments.

What were the challenges?

- One limitation of this project was that during peer researcher recruitment we were unable to include individuals who were in the asylum system at the time of the project. As peer researchers were paid for their work on the project, and asylum seekers are subject to the right-to-work restrictions by the UK Government, we would not have been able to fairly reimburse them for their work. The research team considered inviting interested asylum seekers to volunteer their time for this project, but this was ultimately deemed to be inappropriate and unfair compared to the paid peer researchers. As a result, those who were interested in taking part in the project as peer researchers but were unable to do so due to right-to-work restrictions, were signposted to other voluntary opportunities with REUK.
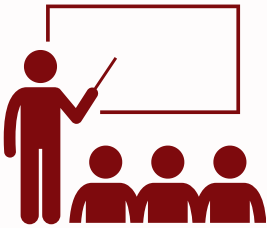
---

[1] https://www.youngfoundation.org/peer-research-network/about/what-is-peer-research/
[2] Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory Research Methods – Choice Points in the Research Process. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 1(1). https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244

Peer researcher training

In preparation for undertaking research, the peer researchers took part in a blended training programme. This training included some online and some face-to-face modules, covering topics such as qualitative research methods, interviewing techniques, research ethics and safeguarding. This training was based on REUK's existing training for refugee youth researchers as part of the Global Evidence for Refugee Education initiative and was adapted to meet the specific requirements and context of this research.

The training on research ethics principles covered informed consent, confidentiality, researcher positionality, mitigating distress and responding to potential safeguarding concerns. This included specialist training from REUK's Educational Well-being Team on how to recognise "green, amber and red" signs of distress and possible techniques for mitigating its escalation. We also discussed the role and positionality of a peer researcher, including strategies for safeguarding themselves from the emotional toll of challenging interviews, and, if necessary, the importance of signposting interviewees to the right kind of professional support instead of attempting to offer counselling or advice.

- To develop and practice interviewing skills, role-playing interviews worked particularly well, as it allowed the peer researchers to take on both the role of an interviewee and an interviewer, and to give each other feedback. We then extended this approach into the data collection phase: some peer researchers found it useful to have an opportunity to observe interviews conducted by others, with the participants consent, in order to progress their learning.
- During the training stage peer researchers were involved in the co-design of research materials, which allowed them to practice interviewing skills while simultaneously providing ideas and feedback to increase the relevance and appropriateness of research questions on sensitive issues.

Interviews, ongoing supervision, and support

Throughout the data collection process, we established mechanisms for ongoing support and reflection: debriefing after each interview, fieldnotes and regular group check ins.

Peer researchers conducted the majority of the interviews for the project, most in a language other than English. A researcher from the NIESR or REUK team was also present during interviews, for support or to respond to any potential questions or concerns. This also allowed peer researchers to debrief with a member of the research team after each interview. Debriefing, and completing fieldnotes, had three main purposes:

1. Identifying the key messages of the interview and anything noteworthy about the interview settings or dynamic.
2. Reflecting on the interviewing techniques: what went well, and what could be changed or improved for future interviews.
3. Reflecting on the impact that the interview might have had on the peer researchers themselves.

Throughout the research process, many of the participants noted that they valued the fact that they had some shared lived experiences with the people who were interviewing them. As a result, we observed participants' openness and engagement during interviews and meaningful connections with the interviewers. For example, some young people were interested to ask the peer researchers about their own experiences of settling in the UK. Other participants noted that they believed the peer researchers would understand their opinions or experiences, because they had the same country of origin.

What were the challenges?

- When matching peer researchers with interviewees, we had to consider the languages they speak, their location in England, and dates that worked for both the interviewees and the peer researchers. Allocating interviews across all those considerations was a challenge. This meant that some peer researchers had more opportunities to conduct interviews than others, for example, if their language was in high demand, or if more interviews were arranged in the areas closer to them. We tried to mitigate against this imbalance by, where possible, allocating the English language interviews to those peer researchers who had fewer opportunities to interview.

- As the data collection process involved continuous learning and development, some of the initial interviews involved less detailed follow-up or probing questions, as the peer researchers were building confidence and developing their skills.
- The shared cultures and experiences between interview participants and peer researchers meant there was risk of assumed shared understanding of certain issues or answers. Our debriefing reflections with the peer researchers involved continuous discussions of the need to probe for interviewee's reasoning even if it may appear to be clear, so that it would be equally clear from an 'outsider' perspective.

What did we learn?

- Having a researcher from NIESR or REUK present with the peer researchers at the interviews was helpful as it allowed debriefing to happen straight after interviews. The importance of allocating time for debriefing cannot be overstated: researchers can never know which interviews may generate highly emotive topics, so spending sufficient time on reflections afterwards is crucial.
- Writing fieldnotes, like many new research techniques, can take some time to get used to. Having researchers prompt the use of fieldnotes and support peer researchers in completing these, worked well as reminder to complete them and to add relevant details.
- We tried different strategies for mitigating and responding to distress during interviews. One way of managing distress was the use of fidget toys. While some participants did not use these, many chose to play with the fidget toys while speaking, which the peer researchers felt was helpful for creating a comfortable environment. Other techniques used throughout the research were: taking a walk around the room together while talking; taking a break before resuming the conversation; getting some water; and, on some occasions, stopping the interview.

Analysis and findings

The fieldnotes which were completed after each interview gave peer researchers an opportunity to immediately reflect on the key themes emerging from the interviews and to record anything significant about the interview setting. These initial reflections were used to inform the development of a preliminary analysis framework, which summarised the key themes across the interviews.

Peer researchers were also involved in analysis through an all-day hybrid analysis workshop. The workshop started with an introduction to the theory behind qualitative data analysis and instructions on how to do open coding. We then spent some time, individually and in groups, coding transcripts and identifying emerging themes. These were then fed-back to further develop the initial analysis framework.

The emerging findings and the research report were peer reviewed by the peer researchers, to ensure they reflected the research participants' experiences accurately. Peer researchers also helped to co-design accessible outputs such as blogs on their experiences of being peer researchers.

What were the challenges?

- Not everyone could attend the analysis workshop in person, so this was a hybrid session. This made some of the group work more challenging.
- Further analysis was conducted in NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software, which the peer researchers were not involved in, due to the tight timescales of the project.

What did we learn?

- We aimed to adapt the analysis workshop to different needs by finding ways in which open coding and analysis framework development could be done both in-person and online. In-person, coding transcripts by hand, with the use of different colours and notes, worked well, while online this was done using Microsoft Word.
- Planning and budgeting for a range of different outputs, particularly peer researcher-led outputs, is important to facilitate genuine participation in the dissemination stages of the project.

In the following sections, peer researchers give more reflections of their personal experiences of this research project.

What Did We Learn About the Experiences of Young People and Their Families?

By Bilal Safi
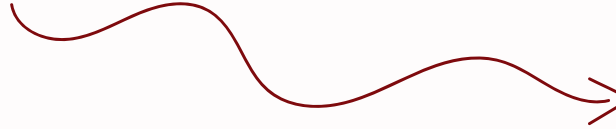
In 2023 I was a peer researcher speaking to displaced young people from the age of 14-19 living in England to better understand the experiences of those young people and their families in terms of education, housing, healthcare, and leisure activities. The research aim was to gain insights into their experiences, the challenges they encounter and identify areas requiring support.

What were the main findings of this research?

Displaced young people and their families face several challenges when they arrive in the UK. One big issue is the language barrier. The language barrier makes it difficult for them to talk with others at school, which makes it hard to make new friends. They often feel left out because they can't join in conversations or activities easily.

> *"I didn't know English. I had an extremely low level of it, so talking was incredibly difficult, so, we communicated with my host family using a translation tool. It was hard, and my mum, she doesn't know English at all. So, I at least tried to speak, but she could only communicate with a translation tool."*
>
> (Young person, female, Ukraine Humanitarian Scheme, living in the UK for one to two years) Office for National Statistics (ONS), Experiences of displaced young people living in England

The language barrier not only affects their social life but also makes it hard to access important services. At school, young people find lessons challenging because they have trouble understanding what's being taught, largely because of the language barrier. In addition, accessing healthcare becomes challenging due to poor English and confusion surrounding scheduling appointments. Many feel the booking systems are too complicated, and there aren't enough translators available. Those staying in temporary hotel accommodation, especially those getting asylum support, often have limited access to basic things. They also feel like they have no say in where they stay and sometimes have to move suddenly to new places far away. Mental health of displaced young people is often affected by their past experiences, like war and leaving their families behind. While many try to stay positive, they said they need more support to deal with their emotions. Therefore, displaced young people and their families do need language support, better housing options, more help with their mental health and easier access to healthcare such as having more translators that could help them book appointments.

Did anything relate to my own experiences?

One aspect of the findings that really resonates with me personally, discovered through my interviews with young people, is the challenge of the language barrier. I vividly recall my own struggles when I first started school; everything seemed like a blur during lessons, and communicating with my classmates felt impossible. However, I was fortunate to find solace in a fellow student who shared my language. He quickly became my closest friend, and having someone to converse with at school made all the difference. The feeling of loneliness that accompanies the inability to communicate effectively can be overwhelming. Yet, the presence of friends with whom you can share a common language not only eases the academic burden but also provides a sense of belonging and support. For me, having a friend like that transformed my school experience and made it infinitely more enjoyable.

What do I think policymakers and the public should learn from this research?

This research offers some clear lessons for both policymakers and the public. Firstly, language barriers are a significant challenge for displaced young people and their families. I think that policymakers should prioritise language support services to facilitate integration and access to essential services. Displaced young people can face challenges in adapting to new educational systems. Schools can help with this, for example, by providing them with specialised language classes or 1-to-1 teaching assistants that can help those young people during lessons. In addition, pairing the young person with a native English language speaking peer can help them with language acquisition and social integration. Accessing healthcare can similarly be made more complicated due to language barriers and complexity in navigating systems, so flexibility in service provision is important. Displacement and past experiences of trauma have a significant impact on the mental health of displaced individuals. Policymakers should prioritise mental health support services tailored to the needs of displaced populations. Furthermore, displaced young people and their families staying in hotel accommodation expressed feeling a lack of choice over their accommodation, describing staying in temporary hotel accommodation for much longer periods than expected, with limited facilities and resources. Some described hotel accommodation being too noisy and not feeling like a home. Therefore, policymakers should prioritise finding sustainable long-term housing solutions for families who are staying in temporary hotel accommodation for extended periods. This could involve working with local authorities and housing agencies to secure suitable housing options.

"We don't have access to a refrigerator. I don't have a microwave...For safety issues... We're putting the milk or the yoghurt, because it has to be, like, in cold conditions, so what we're doing is putting them in front of the window because it's kind of cold. So, yeah, that's what we're doing because we don't have a refrigerator...And this is our status since a year ago. It's enough, it's more than enough, you know? And we're supposed to be, legally, we're supposed to be just for a couple of weeks at the hotel, but now we've been here for a year and two weeks as well. How long more is it going to take?"

(Young person, female, seeking asylum, living in the UK for one to two years)
Office for National Statistics (ONS), Experiences of displaced young people living in England

What is peer research and how did peer research contribute to this project?

Peer research is an approach to research where individuals with lived experience actively participate in the research process as co-researchers and collaborators. This includes collaborating in designing the research questions and actively participating in collecting and analysing data. Being a peer researcher myself was a unique and fulfilling experience. It gave me the opportunity to contribute my first-hand knowledge and perspectives to the research process. Being a refugee myself, I found that I could deeply understand and relate to many of the difficulties and obstacles that these young individuals were facing. Overall, being a peer researcher allowed me to make a meaningful contribution and feel valued for my expertise and experiences.

> *Being a peer researcher myself was a unique and fulfilling experience. It gave me the opportunity to contribute my first-hand knowledge and perspectives to the research process. Being a refugee myself, I found that I could deeply understand and relate to many of the difficulties and obstacles that these young individuals were facing.*

What are the benefits and challenges of doing peer research?

Peer research brings many benefits to the table. By involving people who have first-hand experience or knowledge about the topic, it ensures that different viewpoints are heard, making the research findings more thorough and insightful. Including diverse perspectives makes the research more relevant and useful for things like making decisions. In addition, it gives the people involved an opportunity to develop valuable skills, and a sense of power and ownership over the research, which can be really empowering. Conducting interviews with young people allows you to develop a variety of valuable skills. It enhances your communication skills, including active listening and effective questioning techniques, as you engage with interviewees to gather their insights and perspectives. As well as this, it enhances your critical thinking and organisational abilities as you analyse data and manage the interview process. Working with a diverse team fosters communication and collaboration abilities as team members learn to navigate different perspectives and work towards a common goal. Overall, being a peer researcher is a great way to grow and learn while helping others. Being a peer researcher myself I did not face any challenges, but travelling to different cities in the UK while at university was definitely a significant challenge for me.

What recommendations would I give to researchers who want to set up a peer research project in the future?

To set up a successful peer research project, it's essential to prioritise inclusivity, support, and clear communication. Ensure that the project actively involves individuals with lived experience from the beginning and provide comprehensive training and ongoing support to build their skills and confidence. It is crucial to maintain open and transparent communication channels within the team. For instance, creating a WhatsApp group chat with the research team enables clear and immediate communication for addressing any issues or questions that may arise. To foster a collaborative decision-making process, researchers should encourage reflection and feedback, and be flexible to accommodate the diverse needs and preferences of peer researchers. Ultimately, a good peer research project is one that values the voices and experiences of those involved and contributes to positive social change.

What Makes a Good Peer Research Project?

By Diana Nikitina

The team stems from the individuals

Making a good peer research project great is a challenging task that centres on well-coordinated teamwork. While all participants can be grouped together in a horizontal structure and be perceived as a single unit that moves towards the desired goal, it is still crucial to acknowledge the importance of a work that is performed individually. Therefore, I would like to share my own reflections and findings, gained from my personal experience, on what it takes to be a great peer researcher and how to grow professionally to be able to bring more positive changes to this world.

The range of tools

There are many steps one needs to take to prepare themselves for upcoming research. The very first one is becoming aware of oneself. It is clear from the name that a peer researcher shares some experiences with the studied group of people. However, each one of us has a unique personality that forms our communication style, body language and our perception of the same exact experience. By observing oneself, a peer researcher has an opportunity to neutralise the impact they might have on the interviewees. During one of my interviews, I came across the statement that contradicted my personal beliefs. In a casual setting that would have triggered an instant reaction, but being aware of my own behavioural patterns gave me an opportunity to stay in a position of an observer. This strategy eliminated a possibility of an interviewee taking a step back and shutting down as a counter reaction.

Not all tools are to be discovered by the researcher on their own. The team itself is a great source of knowledge. While working on researcher's personal tasks, listening attentively to all teammates remains crucial as one can learn about specific occurrences that they may not have come across in their own sector of the project. This plays a huge role in a peer researcher's personal development, making them well-rounded and keeping their mind open to all possible challenges.

> *After one particularly challenging interview I was able to use the advice I was given, of taking a walk and talking to a teammate to receive feedback and advice.*

Formal knowledge is another fundamental thing that demands a researcher's attention. Safeguarding workshops taught me important strategies of self-regulation. After one particularly challenging interview I was able to use the advice I was given, of taking a walk and talking to a teammate to receive feedback and advice. At first these things might appear obvious but sometimes it is hard to manage one's emotional response without a certain instruction that was developed by a team of professionals.

Practice makes perfect. With this in mind, a researcher might consider practising their interviewing skills with teammates or even other people to be able to get feedback about their working style and have a chance to correct potential flaws. This is directly connected to the point about staying aware of oneself, but on a more advanced level where one can see if an obtained skill or alteration does work indeed.

Personal findings

To paint a holistic picture of the interviewing process I would also like to highlight certain situations that occurred during the interviews I conducted, which then found their place in my personal journal and later on transformed into bullet points in my working strategy.

Point number one is taking things slow. Sometimes it only takes couple of ice breaking questions to create a desired safe space between a researcher and an interviewee. Other times, it may appear to be the furthest thing from the truth. During one of the interviews the person was keen to share their story but found it difficult to express themselves. That included avoiding eye contact and taking longer time to start answering each question. While it can be perceived as unwillingness to participate, it can also be a preferred style of communication. By approaching this situation with patience and not trying to force the conventional means of communication, like piercing eye contact, I was able to create a safe space that rewarded me with this person eventually opening up and sharing even more than I expected at first.

Point number two is being ready to 'fail'. As a researcher I am willing to go above and beyond to make things work and bring the team closer to the goals we have set. However, we need to remember that we are working with living and breathing people whose mind might change in seconds. During one of the interviews, the person decided to choose to speak in English over their native language, despite having a hard time expressing themselves in their chosen language. Eventually this interview did not give me as much detailed information as I was looking for, but this is an absolutely normal thing to happen. No information is worth the emotional distress that can be caused by forcing things to be done in a certain way.

> " *Eventually this interview did not give me as much detailed information as I was looking for, but this is an absolutely normal thing to happen. No information is worth the emotional distress that can be caused by forcing things to be done in a certain way.* "

The third and the last point is an acknowledgment of personal vulnerability. After another day of working, I found myself deeply affected by the things that I have heard from the interviewees. During the actual interviews I successfully managed my emotions thanks to the guidance that we were provided prior to that. But that did not spare me from reflections and a train of thoughts I had about the information that went right through me. That was the moment when I realised that we, peer researchers, are not as invincible as we might think we are and there is nothing wrong with asking for emotional support. By doing that a researcher will not come across as being unprofessional. Instead, it is quite the opposite - one will display attentiveness and awareness about mental health.

Refugees as Peer Researchers

By Haleemah Alaydi

When I was invited to be a peer researcher on the 'Experiences of Displaced Young People Living in England' research project, I was really excited to be involved. However, I was somehow sceptical about the responsibilities that come with this role and the kind of contributions I will bring to the project. This essay provides reflections on my experience of being a peer researcher on this project, focusing on the strengths and limitations of insider refugee researchers participating in research. The purpose of undertaking the research project was to understand the experiences of young refugee participants along with their parents/carers who have arrived in the UK in regard to their access to a wide variety of services including housing, education and healthcare, which could help government departments and organisations offer better support to displaced young people in the future.

> *Western researchers and organisations working with refugee populations should focus on involving refugees not only in the fieldwork but also at the level of research design, data collection and analysis. Involving peer researchers strives to redress power imbalances, build trust and maintain mutually respectful relations with the communities under study.*

In recent years, there has been a keen interest in the involvement of refugees and people with lived experience of forced displacement as research assistants in research projects about their lives and experiences. The interest in peer researchers' involvement in such research is based on the premise that refugees are the experts of their own experiences. Moreover, including refugees in research projects investigating phenomena within own community is seen as an ethical research practice which could potentially improve the legitimacy and quality of research findings. Peer research is a process whereby the researcher is part of the studied community and has ethnic, cultural or linguistic similarities with that community. Peer researchers actively participate as coproducers of knowledge with the research team by contributing to the planning and design of the research project about the researched community. With a focus on questions of power relations in research, Ulrike Krause (2017) argues that it is crucial to "give people the opportunity to speak, and to provide time and space for them to raise their standpoints beyond research questions" (Krause p. 20). In short, Western researchers and organisations working with refugee populations should focus on involving refugees not only in the fieldwork but also at the level of research design, data collection and analysis. Involving peer researchers strives to redress power imbalances, build trust and maintain mutually respectful relations with the communities under study.

Working closely with refugee participants and displaced young children who had to flee persecution, human right abuses and violence is not an easy task. While peer research offers many benefits for the research project, it also raises important methodological and ethical issues. Saara Greene (2013), for instance, points out that some of the ethical challenges faced by peer researchers when completing research within their communities include "difficulties in separating one's own experiences from the participants', and the significant personal toll that it takes to interview people who are experiencing similar issues and concerns" (Greene p. 143).

In the context of this research project, having a lived experience of forced displacement did not automatically mean that peer researchers were ready to be involved to undertake this research. Fortunately, I had the necessary training and skills to maintain transparency and rigorous methodological and ethical standards as part of my doctoral programme, which equipped me to embark on this type of work. In the first year of my PhD research, I conducted semi-structed interviews with refugees and displaced individuals living in the UK to gain insights into their experiences and meanings. Similarly, other peer researchers employed on this project brought a wealth of skills and experiences which they gained as graduate students, having worked on research projects in the past, or through other roles that gave them transferable skills for this project. To meet the specific requirements and guidelines for this research, peer researchers received training on research methods, interviewing techniques, research ethics and qualitative data analysis, which was based on REUK's existing training as part of the Global Evidence for Refugee Education initiative.

> *My conversations with refugees have left me wondering, what responsibility do I have as a peer researcher to the community I am researching?*

Being a peer researcher on this project enabled me to crystallize some ethical and philosophical questions in relation to the communities under study. My conversations with refugees have left me wondering, what responsibility do I have as a peer researcher to the community I am researching? While the purpose of such research is to benefit the refugee population, it is often the outside researcher teams who "gain the most from such collaborations, bringing in grants, getting new publications, and so forth" (Minkler p. 9). As a result, I was challenged to think about what happens to refugee stories once the research project is concluded and the research findings are published as statistics and data with potential policy implications. What is the insider–outsider tension that emerges for peer researchers in relation to the communities they study and how does it influence the research project as a whole?

Research has highlighted the benefits and limitations of researchers participating in research about the communities they belong to. Researchers who are outsiders belong to a culturally and linguistically diverse group from the community under study, which makes it challenging to connect with research participants and gain rich insights due to cultural and linguistic barriers. One of the benefits of researchers who are insiders to the community under study is the opportunity to connect with research participants and access a community that might not otherwise have been available.

Language was one of the recurring themes highlighted by research participants as one the most challenging factors in their experience of settling and adjusting to life in the UK (ONS 2024). As someone whose mother tongue is Arabic, I was able to get deeper insights into the experiences of refugee children in the UK since some participants felt more comfortable to talk about their experiences in Arabic or to switch back and forth between Arabic and English in certain scenarios. Working closely together with refugees who are native Arabic speakers proved to be ideal, as I could check back with them if I did not grasp a particular expression or aspect of an interview.

When I began my interviews with displaced young people and their parents, I reflected on my role in these interviews. While I was a refugee who shares similar experiences to them, I was also a 'researcher' working on a project funded by the Office for National Statistics, which can be seen as having a link to government. This point adds an important layer to the questions of the potential mistrust of peer researchers and whether researchers can know that the answers they received are an accurate reflection of the refugee experience. Central to ethical research is the issue of the asymmetric power relationship embedded in the relationship between the researcher and the researched (refugees). I became cognizant of the fact that my experience of displacement made me an insider. On the other hand, my affiliation with three UK organisations (The Office for National Statistics, NIESR and Refugee Education UK) as part of this research project and the fact that I was completing a doctoral degree at a reputable university in the United Kingdom positioned me as an outsider. Reflecting on my role as a peer researcher with both an insider and outsider status within the researched community, I was able to move between the two positions fluidly depending on the context of the interview and the type of answers received from the refugee participants. What I found was that some participants, particularly parents, viewed my insider status as a way to assume knowledge on my part and consequently limit responses to particular research questions or answer with 'as you know' or 'you're a refugee, too' since I had a similar experience to them. In order to mitigate this issue, I had to 'play' the role of an outsider by asking follow-up questions and probing for explanations to encourage the interviewees to provide in-depth answers for particular questions related to their experiences in the UK.

> *Most importantly, institutions and research teams should provide peer researchers with the required training to navigate methodological and ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, interviewing and data analysis. Support should also include ongoing counselling and access to relevant support services if the researchers are unable to cope with some horrific aspects of the experiences of research participants.*

In conclusion, crucial to the success of peer research is the establishment of mutual trust and understanding between the researcher and the researched. This way, we begin to view the refugee interviewees as agents instead of passive sources of data. Moving forward, I would encourage refugee researchers to state their positionality and reflect critically on their own status throughout the research project. In particular, they should be aware of their position among those being researched, their understanding of the topic being examined and their responsibility towards the communities under research. Most importantly, institutions and research teams should provide peer researchers with the required training to navigate methodological and ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, interviewing and data analysis. Support should also include ongoing counselling and access to relevant support services if the researchers are unable to cope with some horrific aspects of the experiences of research participants.

Bibliography

Greene, Saara. "Peer Research Assistantships and the Ethics of Reciprocity in Community-based Research." Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics, vol. 8, no. 2, 2013, pp. 141-152.

Krause, Ulrike. "Researching Forced Migration: Critical Reflections on Research Ethics During Fieldwork." Refugee Studies Centre. Working Paper Series, vol. 123, 2017, pp. 1-39, 24 May, 2022.

Minkler, Meredith. "Community-based Research Partnerships: Challenges and Opportunities." Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine, vol. 82, no. 2, 2005, pp. ii3-ii12.

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 23 January 2024, ONS website, article, <u>Experiences of displaced young people living in England: January to March 2023</u>

Journey of Hope

By an Anonymous Peer Researcher
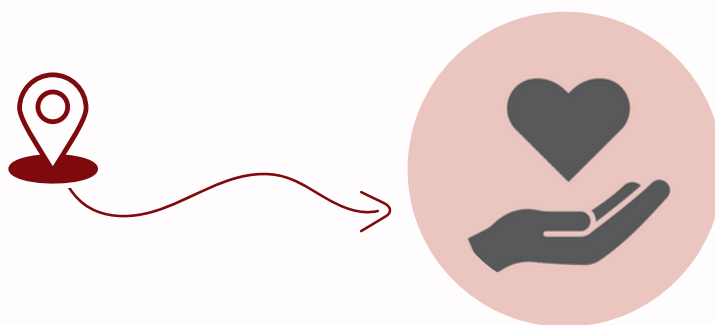
This research project seemed like a trip down memory lane, reflecting on my own experiences whilst listening to participants repeating what once were my biggest concerns, such as completing my GCSEs, having my status approved, or applying for university.

As someone who has had very similar experiences to the participants in the study, being a part of this project has been fundamental in a very emotional manner. A peer researcher is trained to behave in specific ways during interviews, for instance, to remain calm, composed and collected. This can be challenging, especially if I, as a peer researcher, felt the same way as the research participants. Overall, participating in this research study has revived forgotten memories from my time as a young person with inadequate English language skills. While trying to grasp the concerns and obstacles that the young people experienced, I found myself reliving my own experiences.

"They give children tests that need to be finished during a lesson, for example. The time given to a Ukrainian, the same exact time is given to a Brit. The Ukrainian needs additional time to translate this task. He spends half the lesson thinking about the translation before solving or making it."

(Parent or carer, Ukraine Humanitarian Scheme)
Office for National Statistics (ONS), Experiences of displaced young people living in England

My experience was remarkably similar to that of the young people who, unsurprisingly, felt that language was "one of the most challenging aspects of adjusting to life in the UK". Some research participants shared that they "received inadequate language support" – a statement that seamlessly captures their concern and dissatisfaction with the quality of support received. Nevertheless, in my experience, what made a difference was having a translator in the classroom during the first year of my arrival at my school. This has enabled me to have support from someone for my learning, which significantly improved my comprehension of the English language.

"In seven months we were able to speak English. Like, from zero. When I came to England I didn't even know what 'hello' meant. I only knew 'yes' and 'no'. That's it. And then we had a really, really good teacher...We were sat in her class for seven months. We didn't even go to lessons. In these seven months, she taught us everything, literally everything we needed."

(Young person, refugee status, living in the UK for five years or more)
Office for National Statistics (ONS), Experiences of displaced young people living in England

Unfortunately, some pupils have "low GCSE exam results" as a result of a language barrier, which puts refugees at risk for low academic progression. This doesn't seem surprising, as it can be extremely difficult to pass an exam test that asks you to describe a picture, with 40 marks being awarded to that one question only. Therefore, being well-versed in words is necessary and it's a complex journey that only those who faced such obstacles can fully understand. I had forgotten how important it had been to me as a young person to pass GCSE English language and literature. However, as a peer researcher, I have been able to realise that young migrants experience this challenge on a large scale across England.

> *"Well, actually here I was put in the lower set and that was really hard for me. When I was in [my home country]...I was like in the top set there, but here I felt like I was stupid and that it was my fault."*
>
> (Young person, female, refugee status, living in the UK for five years or more)
> Office for National Statistics (ONS), Experiences of displaced young people living in England

One research participant said the following to convey her feelings: "I felt like I was stupid and that it was my fault," because of the language challenges. This really touched my heart because I can relate to how she felt. The advantage of having this research conducted by someone who shares the participants' lived experience is that it facilitated a meaningful conversation, and reliable data collection as a result. This is because the participants felt comfortable sharing difficult stories or saying things that they might refrain from saying in other settings.

> **"**
>
> *The advantage of having this research conducted by someone who shares the participants' lived experience is that it facilitated a meaningful conversation, and reliable data collection as a result. This is because the participants felt comfortable sharing difficult stories or saying things that they might refrain from saying in other settings.*
>
> **"**

As a peer researcher for this study, I gained insights into emotional resilience. Conducting interviews was somewhat difficult for me to obtain data for this project. To such extent that I wanted to cry, some people's comments, feelings, and actions were so genuine and honest. Being tough, maintaining composure, and hiding your feelings are, in my opinion, life skills. A child refugee, a displaced person, and someone who had to flee their home in search of a better life have all gone through many hardships in a short time period. Detaching myself from the emotionally charged stories I heard kept me up at night, and it was challenging to forget after the interview was concluded.

> **"**
>
> *In order for my research colleagues and I to conduct the data-collecting phase of this project, the National Institute for Economic and Social Research and Refugee Education UK have provided excellent training sessions. My skills in managing stress, resilience, and letting participants talk and fully share their experiences were all enhanced by the high-quality training provided.*
>
> **"**

I was able utilise most of the advice and lessons I had learned during my training for this project. In order for my research colleagues and I to conduct the data-collecting phase of this project, the National Institute for Economic and Social Research and Refugee Education UK have provided excellent training sessions. My skills in managing stress, resilience, and letting participants talk and fully share their experiences were all enhanced by the high-quality training provided. It was my objective that everyone who attended an interview felt that there was a judgment-free, secure space for conversation concerning their lived experiences in England.

> *"Well, I have a calm life, I am not scared of anything, and no one bothers me. People mind their own business here. They live their own life. Here it is very calm, and no one interferes in our lives. I don't have that fear, day and night, that someone will catch us and harm us. Here, I am so relaxed. Now I can focus more on my studies and on the things that I love and am passionate about. I am able to do those things. And that is why I see this place as the safest place."*
>
> (Young person, female, other or unknown status, living in the UK for one to two years)
> Office for National Statistics (ONS), Experiences of displaced young people living in England

Despite all challenges, the research participants did consistently express positivity; their optimistic viewpoint on life encouraged me to see things from a new perspective. We frequently forget in life that we once had difficulty reaching a particular goal or position in life. We forget that we are living a blessing that we once prayed or wished for. My data collection trips had different flavours of positivity and a high level of resilience experienced by the research participants.

The process of beginning a new life is unpredictable and challenging. As a result of several remarks I heard from research participants, I did a lot of reflection on my journey and where I am in life with my goals and ambitions. "Young people reported that kindness was offered to them and their families which they especially appreciated after experiencing displacement," according to the report. This highlights the importance of implementing gratitude as a daily ritual. As a peer researcher for this report, I will end by saying that it helped me rediscover who I am. It was an honourable and amazing experience full of multiple learning opportunities and career development.

> *"Keep your head up and follow your dreams and, like, everything's possible, like. Even though, like, you think, like, it's never [going to] happen, it will, like. Just follow your dreams and keep your hopes up."*
>
> (Young person, male, refugee status, living in the UK for three to four years)
> Office for National Statistics (ONS), Experiences of displaced young people living in England