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What are the experiences of education for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors in the UK?

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Abstract

Background: The number of refugees worldwide has increased in recent years, and with this, there has been an increase in the numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (UASMs) in the UK. Refugees have been found to experience notable difficulties upon resettlement, and there is evidence to suggest that education can provide a supportive role for young refugees. Although there has been research that has found that UASMs value education, there has been less research that has directly looked at the experiences of education for UASMs.

Methods: In the present study, six UASMs were interviewed and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as a methodology to analyse the data.

Results: Five themes were identified: education facilitating socializing; education and English proficiency leading to a better life in the UK; the impact of transitions; the impact of external stressors; and a desire for additional resources to learn at one's own pace.

Conclusions: Participants within the present research expressed a strong desire for additional resources that would allow them to learn at their own pace. They also emphasized how transitions between different settings and external stressors had an impact on their experiences of education. The links between coping strategies and the participant's asylum status are also discussed with reference to relevant research in the field.

KEYWORDS
unaccompanied, asylum, seeking, minors, education, experience

1 | INTRODUCTION

With recent increases in the worldwide refugee population (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees[UNHCR], 2017) there has been 'ongoing and increasing international alarm' (Tibbles, 2018) within the psychological community as well as explicit calls to identify how researchers and practitioners can support Refugees (Zamani & Zarghami, 2016).

With this rising population, there has been an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (UASMs) in the UK, with estimates suggesting a 67% increase between 2014 and 2015 (British Refugee Council, 2016), with these higher numbers maintaining throughout 2016 before dropping slightly in 2017 (British Refugee Council, 2017). UASMs represent a unique group within the general refugee population, showing higher prevalence rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than accompanied refugee minors and the

general population (Huemer et al., 2009). UASMs are also more likely to have experienced war-related traumas, severe life events (Jensen, Fjermestad, & Wilhelmsen, 2015), separation or loss of family members and to have personally experienced or witnessed violence (Thomas, Thomas, Nafees, & Bhugra, 2004). Despite these needs, UASMs show a reduced likelihood of receiving mental health support (Sanchez-Cao, Kramer, & Hodes, 2013) and are less likely to receive trauma-focussed interventions, anxiety management and parent/carer training than accompanied refugee children (Michelson & Sclare, 2009). UASMs may experience particular difficulties when applying for asylum, due to the demands the application process places on accurate autobiographical memory and recall (Given-wilson, Hodes, & Herlihy, 2018).

Education has an important role in meeting the academic and social, emotional and mental health needs of resettled refugee children (Rousseau, Mustafa, & Beauregard, 2015). It has been found that refugee/asylum seeker children often prefer to receive mental health support through their school (Fazel, Garcia, & Stein, 2016) and that school-based interventions may be an effective means of reducing trauma-related symptoms (Sullivan & Simonson, 2015). School attendance has also been associated with resiliency (Montgomery, 2010) and 'sense of school belonging' was associated with reduced depressive symptoms and higher levels of self-efficacy among samples of refugee children (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007).

Brownlees and Finch (2010) suggested that education was a priority for 'nearly all' (p. 94) of the UASMs that were interviewed as part of their research and that many participants linked education with future aspirations. Participants in this research also saw education as a way of overcoming loneliness and building enduring social connections. Education and schooling has also been outlined as an important form of social support among a sample of unaccompanied asylum-seeking boys (Mels, Derluyn, & Broekaert, 2008). However, research has found that many UASMs experience barriers to education with up to a quarter of UASMs having to wait over 3 months for a school or college placement (Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018).

Based on the findings outlined above, the present paper aimed to ascertain the experiences of education for UASMs. Although there has been previous research that has looked at the education of refugees, there has been less research, which has exclusively focussed on the education of UASMs. UASMs are a unique subgroup within the general refugee population and may have different experiences within the education system. Research has found that UASMs prioritize and value education, however there has been no research to date that has specifically looked at their experiences of education upon resettlement and how they make sense of these experiences.

> **Key Messages**
> - Unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors (UASMs) found that education gave opportunities to build social connections.
> - Education also provided them with opportunities to develop their English language skills.
> - Participants felt that a combination of education and academic attainment would lead to a better life in the UK.
> - UASMs experiences of education are impacted by external stressors and transitions.
> - UASMs showed a strong desire for additional resources that would allow them to learn at their own pace.

'IPA aims to explore in detail participants' personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that personal experience' (p. 40). In the present study, the personal lived experiences were the experiences of education in the UK. Smith, Larkin, and Flowers (2009) also highlighted how IPA is committed to 'the perspective of particular people, in a particular context' (p. 29). In the present study, the particular people were UASM, and the particular context was their attendance at an English educational setting upon resettlement.

Tuffour (2017) highlights some of the key criticisms of IPA and suggests that IPA can give 'unsatisfactory recognition to the integral role of language'. This is especially important to consider in the context of this research, as many of the participants were bilingual and were interviewed in their second language. IPA is based on the assumption that an individual can accurately express their lived experiences through language and it could be argued that participants may struggle to portray the magnitude of their lived experience through language, particularly if they are not proficient in the language they are being interviewed in. Noon (2018) highlights a similar point and suggests that IPA may 'exclude respondents with weak language skills'. However, it was felt that the participants in this research were able to express themselves clearly enough for the author to gain an insight into their experiences and efforts were made to prompt the participants to provide detail in their accounts. In addition to this, many of the participants actively sought out opportunities to develop their spoken English and wanted to share their experiences of education. As a result, it was felt that the participants provided detailed accounts of their experiences and the transcripts of these interviews provided a rich enough data set to be analysed.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Methodology

It was felt that interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) would be the most fitting research methodology. Smith (2004) states that

2.2 | Participants and procedure

Of the six participants that were interviewed, five were male. The participants were aged between 18 and 19, having entered the UK aged between 13 and 17. The sample included three participants from Eritrea, two participants from Afghanistan and one participant

from Iran. Three were educated in a college, and three were educated in a secondary school prior to attending college. At the time of interviewing, five of the participants were placed in residential homes or supported living, and one participant was placed with a foster carer.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the interview durations ranged between 44 min and 1 h. No interpreters were used in the interviews.

3 | RESULTS

From the data analysis, the following themes were identified: education facilitating socializing; education and English proficiency leading to a better life in the UK; the impact of transitions; the impact of external stressors; and a desire for additional resources to learn at one's own pace.

3.1 | Theme 1: Education facilitating socializing

All the participants linked education with an ability to socialize and form a social support network. This was often linked to feelings of isolation prior to starting education. Many of the participants recounted feeling lonely and bored as exemplified in the following quotes from Daoud and Asmara:

> I was alone here; I was bored, with nothing to do. (Daoud)

> when you have no friends and just locked inside the room in foster care, you know it's really very very tough (Asmara)

Some participants also felt isolated upon starting school due to an inability to communicate.

> Basically it was frustrating, very hard …. Because you don't know how to speak you know, you don't know how to communicate. (Mehari)

The importance of introductory activities and processes provided by the school or college were also described in detail as a good method of socializing at college and allowing the participants to feel welcome. Often these took the form of games but also included tours of the school and introductions to key members of the school community.

> basically they said find someone who has the same eye colour with you and get to know her name his name and I asked where is he from and they give us a sheet to fill all of this. And then … we could get to know each other (Ali)

Many of the participants recounted an initial period where socializing was largely facilitated through nonverbal communication due to their class not having a mutual language. This typically included gestures or physical games, but Mehari also recalled how they came to understand one another without language.

> we could not speak English that much, but we tried to like pantomimes, those kind of stuff to understand each other (Ali)

Other participants recounted that their lack of English acted as a barrier to them socializing, particularly with English students and that learning English better facilitated their ability to socialize.

> (The English students) speed, the vocabulary that they were using like, maybe they could do something simple words you know. Some of them were even like gangster style talking, like informal, they were talking like that and I was saying 'What are they talking about?' (Ali)

Upon starting at school, the participants also had to negotiate the use of their home language. Participants described a period where they had to balance their learning of English, with their desire to communicate with their peers who spoke the same language.

> I knew there were Iranians and we were speaking. But not that not much because obviously we were trying to improve our English (Ali)

> Like we don't really know what to say …, so we just speak our language and when other people come we just tried to communicate but it was so difficult. (Nurah)

All the participants described the positive impact having a social support network and how their friends better facilitated their resettlement to the UK. Peers were often described as being similar to them and allowing them to explore aspects of the environment, like the towns they were living in.

> the situations make it like, very changing, in positive way. We went many places, and we explore many things … we start to personally feel like kind of homey, I feel like home you know. (Mehari)

> But I've got quite a lot of friends there, yeah I think that makes such a difference as well, they shape how you feel about college and school (Nurah)

The social groups they formed at college also allowed them to better facilitate their learning of English. Many participants felt that they could learn English better from other English language learners as shown in these quotes from Daoud. Daoud was an Afghan UASM

who came to the UK when he was 16, was placed in supported accommodation with predominantly English speaking young people, whilst he studied English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) at a college:

> I feel better because in here where I'm living most of them are British and they are speaking very fast. But in (College), most of them are from non UK countries and our English is at the same level. And we are speaking, we are not kidding each other, if we say something wrong. (Daoud)

One participant, Nurah, differed from the other participants in that she did not make friends and was subject to racist bullying when she started school. Nurah was an Eritrean UASM who was resettled in the UK when she was 13. She and another Eritrean girl that she was in transit with were placed with the same foster carer and at the same school. The school was predominantly white British, and she felt that she was not given sufficient language support. However, when she started college, her increased independence and proficiency in English, and the fact that other students started at the same time, allowed her to make friends.

> You feel outside because everybody knows each other and you just came … But in the college .. you start at the same point, like we all start in September … everybody has not got anybody there, so you can build up your friendship and you can start there (Nurah)

3.2 | Theme 2: Education and English proficiency leading to a better future in the UK

Many of the participants perceived their education as a way of learning English and progressing academically, which would lead to a better future in the UK, often characterizing their education as a journey with steps. Some of the participants perceived the end of their education being university and the courses they were attending as a way of getting there, as exemplified in these quotes from Ali. Ali was Iranian and came to the UK when he was 17. Ali was from a middle-class family, and his descriptions suggested that they were very invested in his education. At the time of interviewing, he was completing his A levels and had long-term aspirations of being a dentist.

> I'm trying to reach the second step, and then next year I will be the third step and hopefully I go to university. (Ali)

> I see (Education) as a mountain, how can I reach to the top of the mountain as fast as possible (Ali)

Ali conceptualized his education as a series of steps up a mountain that lead to university, the top of the mountain. This imagery suggests that he is aware of the challenge ahead of him but perceives it as rewarding. This is especially interesting when read alongside the following two quotes:

> Because I feel like I want to be high, I want to be in the top. (Ali)

> I'm trying to be like one of them high people, I'm trying to reach, I'm aiming high and I'm trying to reach that aim. (Ali)

Ali appeared to want to progress socially in society, achieve a high social status and saw education as a way of achieving this goal. It may be that Ali felt that he lost his social status when he was resettled in the UK and saw education as a means of getting closer to his previous social status.

Daoud explicitly, and continually, described how he wanted to go to university and how his education would give him the English skills that would lead him there.

> Because, from my childhood I'd like to be an engineer and when I started here, I was thinking about this and if I improve my English here I can continue to university and continue my education and touch my future. I was thinking about this. (Daoud)

3.3 | Theme 3: The impact of transitions

Many of the participants recounted transition periods as having a meaningful impact on their experience of education. Many of the participants transitioned between different settings and courses. Some participants described having a positive nurturing environment in their first setting as outlined in the following quotes from Asmara. Asmara was an Eritrean UASM who came to the UK when he was 14.

> So, I was part of that team and I used to help others like other Eritreans, some other foreigners, some unaccompanied children who studied there so we used to help each other out … it's really very good school I had really wonderful experience there (Asmara)

Asmara highlights that he felt part of a team, suggesting that he felt very close to the group and appreciated the reciprocal exchange of support.

Hamid, an Afghan UASM who came to the UK when he was 13, was also placed in a secondary school with a support centre and his accounts detailed the level of support he felt whilst there.

every time I was learning and doing things … I was doing it with their help. So when I was finishing, they would be sitting with me and doing it with me (Hamid)

Ali's account of his teacher on the ESOL course also emphasized the positive relationship he had and the support he felt.

I was feeling like I'm having the best teacher in the world, thanks god, I was feeling really happy about it. (Ali)

Moving to a different setting was typically associated with a degree of sadness, loss and stress. Many participants felt unsupported and unknown in their new setting, and this impacted their access to learning. Asmara provided a detailed description of his feelings through the transition.

no one's gonna ask you such kind of thing in college, because they feel like you are British, you know (Asmara)

I feel like I'm not getting the support I need (Asmara).

The impact of this drop in support meant that Asmara dropped out of college and decided to apply as an independent candidate for his A levels. His description of being perceived as British highlights how he felt that the staff at the college were unaware of him or his situation.

Hamid also emphasized the lack of a connection between school and college and recalled how he felt that college staff were less supportive.

When I went to college, I realised college was really different to school, like they are not really linked (Hamid)

Like, nobody said to me or talked to me if there's anything I need help with. (Hamid)

Hamid felt dissatisfied and unsupported at college and as a result dropped out of a number of courses at different settings. His descriptions focus on how he felt unknown by the staff, unable to 'talk' and as though he wasn't being provided with help. Hamid's difficulties during this period may have potentially been exacerbated by his brother being deported, which greatly affected his motivation and caused him a great deal of distress.

Ali described in great detail the degree of stress he felt trying to meet the demands of the A-level curriculum and keep up with the other English students when he transitioned from ESOL to A levels.

It's hard to be like next to the students … I feel like we have same knowledge, but in terms of English, they are

much much better than me. So that they can simplify this, they can understand the questions better than me (Ali)

This was greatly contrasted to his accounts of the ESOL course where he describes the other students as so:

No most of them was like me, they had they had a like same situations. (Ali)

3.4 | Theme 4: The impact of external stressors

Some of the participants highlighted how family issues, housing and asylum processes impacted upon their experience of education. This was particularly prevalent among the participants who had an uncertain asylum status or were in the process of applying for asylum.

Just my asylum process is causing a lot of stress for me. It have an effect on my education because sometimes when I'm studying I don't know if they accept my asylum visa. (Daoud)

If they accept this … it's very clear for me that I have to go to university, I have to go on with my education. But now that a very stand by level. (Daoud)

If they don't accept my application, everything will be destroyed … I have too much stress about this. (Daoud)

Daoud's account highlights the magnitude of the stress he was feeling and the importance he attached to his asylum status. He goes on to describe how it affected his motivation to learn:

But sometimes when I'm doing education, studying some lessons, I don't know if my asylum case, am I getting sent back to my country? Why I have to learn? (Daoud)

A similar account can be found with Asmara, who felt uncertain about his future after his asylum application was initially rejected:

I'm being at home wondering, just thinking, you feel very stressed, just thinking am I gonna go back there, you know? All that kind of thing is going on at school. (Asmara)

Although he did also describe how education acted as a positive distraction to the stress associated with the Asylum process:

So being in school really helps you because you kind of lose that feeling and you focus on a good thing, on

education and that makes you optimistic about life. (Asmara)

Daoud linked uncertainty in the asylum process with uncertainty surrounding his housing.

> If I don't have for example asylum case, they would not give us like a flat. It should be a shared house ... I have stress about this at the moment, when I turn 18 where should I go and live? And all of them has some effect on my education and learning. (Daoud)

Hamid also had an issue with his housing and describes how it impacted upon his experience of education. Hamid was placed with an unsupportive foster family that would demand that he leave the house for long periods of time and stay in his room when he was in the house.

> sometimes the foster carers not nice and they are not happy or like, they are not actually helping you with the staying, you are not feeling welcome to that house ... While you are at college you have the housing issue. (Hamid)

A number of the accounts highlighted how external stressors outside of education blocked them and distracted them from engaging with their education. Anxiety surrounding the asylum process more specifically appeared to affect the participant's motivation for learning as it made them feel unsure as to whether they would be able to benefit from, and progress with, their education.

3.5 | Theme 5: Wanting additional resources to learn at their own pace

A number of the participants recounted a desire for extra learning opportunities or additional resources that would allow them to learn independently at their own pace. Where these were provided, they were viewed favourably as can be seen in this quote from Ali:

> they were helping me with extra lessons. I was going there for like 2 hours English, 2 hours maths per week, they were arranging for me extra lesson (Ali)

Unfortunately, this did not continue when he began studying for his A levels.

> they don't have extra lessons in my new college. I tried very hard to catch some extra lessons (Ali)

Daoud's previous experiences of education in Afghanistan differed considerably to his experience in the UK education system. He described how the school days in Afghanistan were much longer; there were less holidays and more homework. When describing his experience in the UK, his accounts focussed on how he wanted a faster pace of learning.

> But when I go to college, education is very slow and I don't like this (Daoud)

He felt that his experience of education would be enhanced by more differentiated learning experiences and more autonomy in his learning. He frequently emphasized how this would allow him to learn at his own pace.

> I don't like this one, give me like four lessons now and the next week I'm asking you. I can prepare for that, I have dictionary, I can translate to my language (Daoud)

> But at college because this is not private, everyone has right there, I cannot say to my teacher give me ten lessons, I can do by myself education at home. (Daoud)

Within the transcript, he repeatedly uses some variant of the phrase 'I can do it by myself' and describes how he wanted the teacher to guide his own learning. When additional resources were provided for his own independent learning, these were viewed favourably:

> she tell me many websites you can go to these websites you can improve your English like this, she help me. (Daoud)

One participant, Asmara, left college and enrolled as an independent candidate for his A levels and tried to learn the A-level curriculum on his own. As part of this process, he described in great detail how he searched for somewhere to study.

> I used to come there and study at the library, there are a lot of good reference books there, so I used to study there and its quiet there you know. But after 1 month they say like, they say to me you can't renew your membership and I don't know why. (Asmara)

His description of the library as having 'lots of good reference books' and it being quiet highlights how he had found a suitable environment to learn that had the resources he needed. But after 1 month, his membership was revoked, and this caused his some degree of distress and upset.

> Emotionally I feel very hurt and I feel really bad ... because you are not asking for anything you know, just to use the library (Asmara)

He repeatedly uses diminishing language when referring to the resources available such as 'you're not asking for anything', 'just to use the library'. This is contrasted with the emphasizing language he uses when describing his own distress, such as 'very hurt'. This suggests that he did not feel he was making a large request but was being denied access and that this upset him.

4 | DISCUSSION

A key finding from the results was that participants felt a strong desire for additional resources to learn at their own pace. No other research could be found that highlighted this point in reference to UASM's experience of education. Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) identified 'acting independently' as an active coping strategy among a sample of UASMs and therefore it could be suggested that participants were seeking opportunities to learn independently as a means of coping with stress. Brownlees and Finch (2010) stated that 'many of those who did not access a school place immediately spent the time in libraries instead', also highlighting how UASMs often sought out additional resources and opportunities for independent learning.

The results also emphasized the impact of transitions for UASMs, which had not been reported in any previous research. Fletcher-Campbell, Archer, and Tomlinson (2003) looked at how schools supported looked-after children and highlighted the importance of managing transitions for this particular group. The results of the present study suggested that UASMs may also experience similar difficulties when transitioning between different settings.

Within Theme 3, the impact of transitions, some of the participants reported feeling a sense of attachment within their first educational placement. This finding could be seen to be linked with Cairns's (2002) model of trauma, which posits that individuals recovering from trauma go through phases of stabilization, integration and adaptation. The findings of this paper could suggest that educational placements have an important role in the 'stabilization' phase of this process, providing a secure base for the young person. Transitioning from these places was often associated with feelings of reduced support and anonymity. It may be that having to transition during this period was hampering the recovery of these individuals, by reducing their sense of stability.

The results of the present study extend other research that has looked at the experiences of education for UASMs. Nasir's (2012) literature review of qualitative studies that used UASM as participants found that education was a strong theme across all studies. The present study extends this finding by highlighting the different experiences of education for UASMs. Nasir's findings also reported that education provided 'a sense of permanence' (p. 28), however the present study demonstrated how these feelings of permanence can be affected by the asylum process, as many participants that had uncertain asylum status expressed concerns about being deported and being unable to complete their education in England.

Brownlees and Finch's (2010) findings suggested that education acted as a distraction 'from their wider concerns and anxieties'

(p. 107), and Mels et al. (2008) highlighted that 'School was appreciated for its distractive function' (p. 759). Although one participant in the present study suggested that education provided a distraction from his asylum application, a stronger theme within the data suggested that the asylum process distracted the participants from engaging with education. This contrary finding could suggest that different coping strategies employed by UASMs may alter whether education acts as a distraction from the asylum process or vice versa. UASMs employing more emotion-focussed strategies may focus on education to distract themselves from their asylum application, whereas UASMs with more problem-focussed strategies may be more focussed on solving the cause of stress, subsequently impacting on their ability to access education. Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) looked at the specific coping strategies employed by UASMs resettled in Ireland and proposed that 'Adjusting by learning and changing' (p. 229), 'Adopting a positive outlook' (p. 230) and 'Suppressing emotions and seeking distraction' (p. 230) were among a number of coping strategies employed by UASMs upon their resettlement. The findings of the present paper suggest that some participants were able to seek distraction through education and adjust by learning, although others were not able to utilize these coping strategies and instead were distracted by the external stressors.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors of the present paper confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with the production of this paper.

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